



REVIEW OF ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM RELATING TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: Health

Statement by Committee on Indigenous Health of the Indigenous Peoples' Caucus ROY LAIFUNGBAM

*"Eikhoigi Ima asi houjikti mawong-maril naidare!
Macha eikhoidi karam toukani"*

(Today, our Mother has become a stranger to us, her children!
What will become of us, her children?)

This lament of Meitei fishing people of the Loktak in Manipur, India finds echoes among all the world's Indigenous peoples and nations today.

Brother Chairperson, sisters and brothers, friends – as we come here at this time on the floor of the United Nations to participate in a dialogue on Indigenous issues, we come with a sense of achievement, with hope and with our visions, asking our ancient spirits and ancestors for blessings, wisdom, inspiration and guidance while we carry our precious responsibilities for our future generations. But our ancient wisdom has also taught us to tread lightly, to exercise care and temperance, and most of all, to be creative – to add something valuable and lasting in our capacity as trustees. This is the essence of this intervention here on this floor, to contribute in the realm of ideas so that something valuable may be added in this generation.

Health of the physical, the mind, in spirit, of the collective and of our Earth is an enduring common thread that binds all Indigenous peoples together. I believe Ingrid Washinawatok, Flying Eagle Woman, expressed this sentiment well at the 1997 Working Group on Indigenous Populations. The Earth is our Mother, she reminded us. "Our responsibilities to the Earth," she said, "*define us as Indigenous Peoples.*" Drawing on these two pillars of indigenous thought, the Indigenous Peoples' Caucus established an open focal body during the same year – the Committee on Indigenous Health – that would continually look at situation of the world's Indigenous peoples' health. In particular, we advocate the following:

- a. Ensuring Indigenous representation and participation in development and planning related to health issues, policy and initiatives.
- b. Assessing the globalisation impact on Indigenous health by environment degradation, rights violation and forced relocation.
- c. Providing a consistent interface with international and intergovernmental agencies and to ensure the dissemination of information to the widest possible extend among Indigenous peoples, national government and other stakeholders.

It is in the spirit of this responsibility and continuing mandate reposed upon this body by the Indigenous Peoples' Caucus that I, on behalf of the Committee on Indigenous Health, congratulate you, and every member of this Forum, as we embark upon this challenging journey. I take this opportunity, too, to emphatically state that we are here to support you and we are committed to travel with you the whole way.

This statement is not a summary of the briefing paper that we have submitted to members of this Forum already for your information (found in E/CN.19/2002/BP.2). The mentioned document will be available in this conference room for everyone and I wish to thank Julian Burger and the Secretariat for their very kind support. Unfortunately, we have not been able to provide versions of this rather long briefing paper in every language but I wish to thank the Indigenous Peoples' Centre for Documentation (DOCIP) for their very valuable assistance in making the Spanish translation.

Now, to the substantive issue of health.

This particular thematic item of the agenda focuses on health. This is one of the very important and explicitly stated issues in the mandate of this Forum. It would be a futile exercise, in this valuable and limited time, to even begin to elaborate on the vast constellations of specific problems and concerns relating to Indigenous peoples and health. Our priorities are to, as quickly as possible, establish a perspective and approach to this issue so as to enable all of us to work constructively together in a close and meaningful partnership.

We have four general recommendations and four specific critical issues with recommendations that we would like to address during our brief intervention.

General:

1. Firstly, the Indigenous peoples' encompassing view of health, its physical, social, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions as we understand and live by, needs to be very earnestly considered and emphasised by this Forum as a basis for defining its approach to this issue. Measures to ensure the health of indigenous people must therefore be seen as a collective and holistic issue involving all members of the indigenous community including the land, water and air, the animals and plants. This fundamental perspective must inform all deliberations, debate, information seeking and sharing, conclusions and recommendations within and arising from this Forum.
2. Secondly, towards the end of the International Decade on World's Indigenous People, we are deeply concerned that some of the key decadal objectives are still to be met. We specifically refer to the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which has encountered considerable opposition from certain States in the United Nations in spite of the call from the General Assembly. Another specific objective that has made very little progress despite all our efforts from this Committee is the business of global plan of action on Indigenous health. We recommend that this Forum should spare no energy and effort to facilitate the successful passage of the Declaration within the Decade. In order to further ensure the successful attainment of the challenges in formulating a global plan for Indigenous health, we also recommend that this august Forum make a distinct call for a second International Decade on the World's Indigenous Peoples to ensure that Indigenous peoples and nations at the end of 2004 do not return to a situation of complete neglect; to also ensure that we are not mere issues but peoples.
3. Thirdly, we would like to bring to your attention the most recent resolution 2002/31 of the Commission on Human Rights establishing a Special Rapporteur on "The right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health." We also remind this Forum of the Commission's resolution 1993/30 of March 1993 that requests all thematic rapporteurs, special representatives, independent experts and working groups to pay particular attention to Indigenous peoples while carrying out their specific mandates. Further, we are pleased that the Special Rapporteur on the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Indigenous peoples has taken up his task with due diligence and has also proposed a plan of action for his future work. We recommend that this Forum pay particular attention to the specialized mechanisms within the UN all of which have a particular obligation to pay special attention, within the framework of their mandates, to the situations of Indigenous peoples.

The Forum should call on all these mechanisms to carry out these responsibilities in earnest and with diligence.

4. We further call upon all the experts of this Forum to join together in consensus and support each other on each and every recommendation that is submitted to the ECOSOC. Short of this Mr. Chairman, I believe we cannot proceed with any impact at all.

Specific recommendations

1. As a possible constructive beginning, we view positively the establishment of the Inter-Agency Support Group (ISG) earlier this year, which is mandated with supporting the objectives of the Permanent Forum by facilitating coordination between the various UN agencies. However, there are critical aspects of the ISG that needs to be considered. The ISG, as an institutional response from the specialised bodies and agencies of the United Nations to this newly established Forum, clearly needs to rapidly develop and evolve into an innovative and institutional arrangement that is at once sustainable and responsive to the Indigenous peoples' needs and this Forum's encompassing mandate. Also, we note that this present ISG does not have the participation of UNAIDS and the Global Fund to Fight against AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM), two initiatives that have a great role to play in indigenous health issues.

The specialised agencies themselves would contribute to such a forum by initiating projects related to Indigenous peoples in their own area of expertise. Moreover, given that some UN agencies and bodies do *not*, at present, have a clearly designated focal points that deal particularly with Indigenous issues or thematic, the ISG, in cooperation with the Permanent Forum, should facilitate the establishment of an Indigenous peoples' focal point or group within every UN agency and body.

I want to stress that this is a key contribution that the Permanent Forum can make to the future direction of the UN specialized agencies and bodies, much closer to a meaningful partnership. We envision a mechanism through which these disparate institutions not only work within their respective mandates, but also take a more holistic and interconnected approach to the problems of the world. Indigenous peoples are clear that the cross-cutting questions, as suggested in the ISG paper submitted to this Forum in (E/CN.19/2002/2), such as "policy guidelines or technical cooperation" puts the cart before the horse. Any deliberations concerning policies and technical aspects of specific themes must be preceded by a thorough discussion and review, in close and meaningful partnership with Indigenous peoples and organisations, of the themes themselves and the linkages between them.

We propose therefore, that this Forum recommend that the Inter-Agency Support Group be, first, established as a formal ongoing institution within the United Nations and, second, involve the full participation of all specialised bodies and agencies of the UN system, including innovative global initiatives such as the GFATM. It may be necessary for the UN and these specialized agencies to review their current finance budgets and consider a more streamlined funding to each where coordination of activities becomes possible.

2. During the recent UN General Assembly Special Session on Children, we noted that there has been very little attention given to the situation of indigenous children. Consequently, the Outcome Document entitled "A World Fit for Children" has no substantial reference to indigenous children's needs. As one of our indigenous sisters said recently, "We can have all the land and territories we want but without our children, what is the use." In view of the precarious status of indigenous peoples and their children and the critical situation in terms of health and survival we recommend that this forum prioritises indigenous children on its agenda as an important permanent focus. The nodal UN organisation for children's rights (UNICEF) must give indigenous children special attention by not only coordinating the

implementation of the programme of action decided during the Special Session but also involving other agencies and indigenous peoples in a meaningful and effective concerted effort to address indigenous children and their situation. We propose that this Forum recommends UNICEF to organise a special technical meeting as a first step and consult with other agencies and indigenous peoples.

3. We express deep concern that the momentum generated by the First International Consultation on the Health of Indigenous Peoples, Geneva 1999, in placing indigenous health issues and meaningful partnership on the agenda of the WHO and other UN agencies, has died an untimely death. We recommend that this Forum make every effort to re-engage the WHO with Indigenous Peoples organisations in line with the excellent recommendations adopted at the consultation. This could be done in the form of a follow up consultation or technical seminar that focuses on priority areas, jointly identified by WHO, this Committee and other indigenous peoples' organisations, such as effective and meaningful partnership mechanisms, capacity enhancement within a partnership or guidelines for data collection and research. The Forum must strongly highlight the urgent need for the Indigenous Health Advisory Group within WHO and recommend that this must be established as recommended by the consultation, with immediate effect and with a clear mandate and operational support.
4. And lastly, Mr. Chairman, we draw the attention of this Forum to the crucial issue of Indigenous women and health. Indigenous women have spoken eloquently and with great collective strength; and they continue to do so. Their concerns regarding the insidious impact of globalisation, deprivation and impoverishment need no further emphasis. These concerns are founded upon the tremendous responsibilities to not only their families and communities but to their peoples, nations and to Mother Earth that Indigenous women recognise. We propose that this Forum recommend that newly established Inter-Agency Support Group urgently convene a meeting with Indigenous Women under the joint auspices of Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to identify the priorities for urgent attention and to begin the urgent task to addressing the health of Indigenous Women as Indigenous Women perceive and understand it.

Thank you for your very considerate attention