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Review of the activities of the United Nations system  
Theme: Education & Culture

Joint Statement presented by  
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Australia

On behalf of:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC)  
Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA)  
Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action (FAIRA)  
National Aboriginal and Islander Legal Services Secretariat Australia (NAILSS)  
National Secretariat of Torres Strait Islander Organisations (NSTSIO)

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on the next theme, *education & culture*.

As we all know, the preservation and maintenance of Indigenous cultures of the world is a recognised priority across the UN system and clearly a position that all member states ascribe to without prejudice.

We also know that the ways to transmit cultures from generation to generation is through living and practising long-held traditions that adhere to a specific worldview and that, for Indigenous peoples, is connected to the land we live in.

And we know, as well, that when those connections are broken through the imposition of colonial regimes it inevitably leads to the erosion of our traditional practices – the very basis of a community of people as well as our culture and our identity.

The presence of colonial regimes on our lands has led to a complex intersection between:

- Indigenous peoples and folks from the West;
- Indigenous connections with the land and Western connections with a Supreme God and a material world;
- Cultures and traditional practices and Western economic practices;
- Traditional languages and global languages like English, French, etc.

The formal education provide by the state has had to contend not only with these complexities but also with contesting priorities from Indigenous communities for an education system to preserve and maintain cultural traditions and an education system to access and participate in a global marketplace.

Some in New Zealand, for instance, have opted for an education system based in the Maori language and cultures.

Others like Canada, Australia and others have opted for bilingual as well as monolingual education systems to address some of the contesting demands although the Australia government recently withdrew their support for bi-lingual programs.

Whilst state based education system have been troubled with the various propositions to deal with the contesting priorities, monolingual programs have continued to be the basis for many Indigenous peoples who seek a formal education.

But what of the other countries who have been overrun by colonial regimes?

How are they dealing with Indigenous priorities for education and the maintenance of traditional cultures in their schools system?

How are they dealing with Indigenous learners who speak traditional languages when the elected classroom language is in English?

How are they dealing with urban Indigenous peoples who speak English?

I suggest to the Permanent Forum members here today that these are the type of questions that should be asked of member states.

Mr Chairperson, the reason for our intervention today is to also direct your attention as well as your colleagues on the Permanent Forum to the role of the member states.

Member states should be asked very specific questions like: 'What progress is being made to prioritise Indigenous education: in Indigenous languages and cultures, as well as in Western programs in order to tool-up Indigenous learners for global agendas'?

We see your role as a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to not just monitor progress with UN programmes but to proactively seek progress reports from member states in their agendas to guarantee standards of education that fulfils the wishes of Indigenous peoples.

Just as we have recommended to you in the past week, pathways for accountability regimes in the UN programme areas, we would now recommend in the same sense your surveillance of member states' activities and their agendas to progress the education of Indigenous peoples across the globe, and to preserve as well as maintain Indigenous cultures through formal education processes.

For instance, Australia, like many other countries that have been colonised by the West, is very much a country that continues to have Indigenous learners at the lower end of the achievement spectrum.

And though we have a national policy prioritising equal access, participation and outcomes in formal education, why is that we are still a long way from realising this end?

Mr Chairperson, it is not enough for Indigenous peoples to continue their arguments alone.

Indigenous peoples need to see clear commitments from member states to deliver outcomes that everyone desires.

Indigenous peoples need to know that their cultures, traditions and languages will be preserved and maintained in the formal processes of state education programmes.

Indigenous peoples need to function effectively in the new times and contend successfully with elements of the emerging global marketplace.

Indigenous peoples need to stand proud in their various achievements so that examples can be set for the next generation.

Mr Chairperson, we are sick and tired of constituting the bottom of the education ladder and member states can do something about this.

It is incumbent on member states to set some standards when dealing with Indigenous education and to set agendas within their own countries to stop the ongoing feature of Indigenous learners as obtaining only the lowest achievement levels.

I ask you and your Colleagues Mr Chairperson, indeed I challenge you all with this question: 'do you wish to see a continuation of the existing low levels of achievement and the subsequent erosion of Indigenous cultures around the world'?

No?

Then we recommend that the Permanent Forum makes it its business to effect an agenda that enables reportage from member states on progress made (a) to preserve and maintain Indigenous cultures across the world and (b) to prepare Indigenous learners to participate successfully in these new times of a changing global agenda.

I thank you Mr Chairperson.