

The thirty-ninth session of the United Nations
Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination
and Protection of Minorities

Bahá'í International Community Statement
to the fifth session of the
Working Group on Indigenous Population

Geneva

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Agenda Item 5: Standard-setting
activities: evolution of standards
concerning the rights of
indigenous population

WGIP 87/UN1/19

The Bahá'í International Community is pleased that the Working Group has resumed its important work after a regrettably long two-year hiatus. We welcome the work accomplished by the Working Group to date in identifying and discussing the various problems afflicting indigenous communities around the world. We are also pleased that the Working Group has emphasized the importance of elaborating standards for the rights of indigenous populations, and has begun to develop draft principles for eventual incorporation in a declaration. We believe that these draft principles serve as a useful point of departure for future consultations.

In our statement today, we would like to offer a few comments on the three topics chosen by the Working Group for particular emphasis at this session: first, the right to self-government; second, the right and responsibility of indigenous populations to respect universally-recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms; and third, the right to health, medical care, other social services and adequate housing.

First, the right to self-government. In our view, indigenous populations, like all citizens, must have a voice in their own governance. They have a right to express their views about policies that will affect them, and to offer input into the decision-making process. Moreover, they have a right to participate actively in programmes designed to meet their needs and safeguard their interests. Such programmes can be successful only if they enlist the full participation of the indigenous peoples themselves and utilize their own talents and ingenuity.

and way of life of the indigenous community concerned. In the areas of medical care, housing and social services, programmes may be able to incorporate and successfully adapt certain indigenous practices.

For example, in the field of health care, governments should focus on training members of indigenous populations to become doctors and health professionals, so that they can return to their own communities and provide long-term health care that is sensitive to the needs of their fellow community members. Medical professionals in indigenous communities--like all medical professionals--may be able to employ certain indigenous practices relating to natural forms of healing as a supplement to modern medical techniques. The Bahá'í Writings indicate, for example, that in the future medicine will turn increasingly to the use of foods as a means of healing.

In conclusion, while it is essential that everyone--governments and the international community as a whole--rise up to promote the rights of indigenous populations, indigenous peoples themselves must be allowed to play an active role in designing solutions to their problems and governing their own affairs. Both indigenous populations and their governments must consult with open minds and a spirit of good will in order to achieve appropriate solutions. These solutions can harmonize with the unique needs, culture and spiritual heritage of the indigenous populations concerned.

We hope that these brief comments will assist the Working Group in developing standards in these areas, and we assure the Working Group of our continued support for its vital work.