



**UNFPA INTERVENTION IN THE TENTH SESSION OF THE PERMANENT FORUM ON  
INDIGENOUS ISSUES – DIALOGUE WITH UN AGENCIES**

**MONDAY, MAY 18<sup>TH</sup>, 2011**

*Luiz Angela Melo*

**Mme Chair,  
Distinguished members of the Forum,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Dear indigenous friends,  
Ladies and gentlemen,**

UNFPA is continuing its efforts to mainstream indigenous issues throughout its strategies and programmes. We are pleased to announce that following an extensive participatory process that included members of the UN Permanent Forum, indigenous leaders, and civil society organizations, among others, UNFPA elaborated and finished its Corporate Strategy on Indigenous Issues. This strategy provides guidance for our country offices on how to work to promote the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and how to support governments and indigenous organizations to advance sexual and reproductive health of indigenous peoples, including addressing the high rates of maternal mortality among indigenous women, how to work on gender equality and how to collect data, and produce evidence base and research for advocates and policy makers.

This year, we have included in our report to the Permanent Forum information on some of our programmes which support indigenous peoples in around 19 countries from Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia-Pacific and Africa. We are happy to report that our Office in Congo has supported the government in its efforts to adopt a law to protect indigenous peoples. We would like to invite you to a side event that will take place on 18 of May at 1.15 pm with the presence of His Excellency the Minister of Communications and Government Spokesperson of Congo and the UNFPA Deputy Executive Director.

It is also our pleasure to inform you that, in line with the recommendations of the Forum, UNFPA has continued to intensify its efforts to promote and mainstream a culturally sensitive approach to its programmes at the global, regional and national levels. This approach - which furthers human rights principles through the understanding and respect of different traditions, cultural backgrounds, religious and ethical values - is central for UNFPA's work in dealing with indigenous issues.

In the area of health, UNFPA is aware that there are aspects which are particularly relevant to indigenous peoples. Providing pertinent and effective health services depends on the ability of medical and social services to accommodate cultural understandings, perceptions and practices.

As you know, indigenous peoples, and particularly indigenous women, have the worst socio-demographic indicators and the largest inequalities in terms of access to social services in many parts of the world. Indicators of poverty as well as maternal and infant mortality are systematically higher among indigenous peoples than non-indigenous populations. Among indigenous peoples, women face triple discrimination linked to gender, ethnic and socio-economic factors.

In Latin America, this situation has started to change and empowered indigenous women leaders, organizations and networks are playing an influential role. Today, in many countries in the region, empowered indigenous women leaders have organized and are networking using their own life experiences as part of their advocacy efforts in order to demand their right to health.

In some countries of the region, more effective social and health policies are starting to address the conditions of poverty and discrimination that indigenous women face, although they must still be scaled up. Policies that support indigenous women's reproductive rights have the goal of making reproductive health services more accessible, available financially and geographically and also culturally acceptable.

Culturally sensitive reproductive health policies, programmes and norms are starting to be enacted and enforced in health systems, especially at the sub-national levels. Health services are being adapted and expanded with the inclusion of symbolic and meaningful cultural elements and practices that, without jeopardizing quality of care standards, contribute to enhance indigenous women's access to adequate health care.

For indigenous peoples, the concept of health is a complex one; not only does it consider an individual's physical and mental well-being but also his or her balance with nature, with the collectivities of which he or she is a part and with the rich and complex spiritual realm to which he or she is connected. The world view of indigenous peoples is intrinsic to their well-being and their concept of health needs to be understood within a social and cultural context.

Governmental health systems are beginning to understand and engage indigenous peoples' notions of health and illness, and the traditional medicinal knowledge that links their biological, spiritual and emotional lives. Nevertheless, it will require concerted negotiations to find a true common understanding between Western health principles and practices and the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples. In order to carry out the changes that will definitively enhance indigenous women's access and use of reproductive health services, health systems need to recognize indigenous peoples' rights, including their right to cultural continuity, health and particularly to life.

We sincerely believe that the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues provides a great opportunity to discuss how UNFPA can further contribute to improving the lives and promoting and protecting the human rights of indigenous peoples throughout the world. We look forward to continuing to build on the recommendations that will be made by this Forum.

Thank you.