



FINLAND

**United Nations Working Group on
Indigenous Populations
Fifteenth Session
28 July - 1 August 1997**

THE CONCEPT OF "INDIGENOUS PEOPLES"

**STATEMENT BY
THE OBSERVER DELEGATION
OF THE GOVERNMENT OF FINLAND
29 JULY 1997**

MR. EERO J. AARNIO

Madam Chairperson,

As it is the first time we take the floor, we would like to congratulate you, on behalf of the Finnish Government, for the re-election as the chairperson of this Working Group. It emphasizes the continuity of the work of the UN to promote the rights of indigenous peoples. On the other hand, the impressive and unforgettable 20 years celebration in which we had a pleasure to take part yesterday, indisputably proves the necessity of a permanent institution for indigenous issues within the UN system in future.

In your supplementary note on the concept of “indigenous people” you have repeated your conviction, that no single definition can capture the diversity of indigenous peoples worldwide. The indigenous representatives have categorically rejected the attempt to define indigenous peoples. We too, are prepared to live with the pragmatic solution, not to legally define this concept at present in the international law, but to leave the question to solve by the indigenous peoples themselves, in cooperation and consultation with respective governments on the basis of the working definition of the Special Rapporteur Mr. José R. Martínez Cobo.

We remind you also that there is no officially recognized definition neither of the term “minority” nor of the term “people” in the international law.

In this working definition both the self-identification and the acceptance by the group are pertinent.

Madam Chairperson,

After having said that, we would like, however, to remind, that on the national level, there might be needs to find to define the indigenous peoples who live on the territory of the country concerned.

We have had in Finland elections to the Sami Parliament since 1973. For us - and it means the Sami people, too - it is utmost important that only persons really belonging to the Sami people participate in these elections. That is why we have had a together agreed definition of Sami in Finland. In 1995 the definition was extended which showed later on to cause that persons who have no knowledge of the Sami language and no more ties with the Sami people, could now vote and stand as candidate in the elections of Sami Parliament. Last spring the Minister of Justice has promised, that the definition of Sami shall be retightened on a linguistic basis and brought closer to the definition used in the other Nordic Countries.

The Bill to amend the Sami Act should be presented to the Parliament before the end of this year.

This solution has been strongly supported by the Sami community.