Item 7:   URBAN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND MIGRATION

OPENING STATEMENT

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1. By way of introducing this topic, I wish to briefly touch on three issues – they include:

   - Some of the push and pull factors that prompt Indigenous Peoples to migrate to the urban areas;

   - Indigenous Peoples' identity in the cities;

   - And other issues that exists within the urban Indigenous communities.

2. Policy makers today often think of Indigenous Peoples as living in the countryside, jungles, forest, mountains, on the plains, or in small remote villages in the middle of no-where. It often comes as a big surprise when they discover that huge numbers of Indigenous Peoples reside in the major cities. What many people don't realize is that urbanization has been around since time immemorial for many Indigenous Peoples – for example, think about the ancient urbanization of Central and South America and Michu Pichu in Peru comes to mind.

3. The push and pull factors that prompt Indigenous Peoples to migrate to the cities are complex. Hence, I just want to mention them very briefly. The privatization of Indigenous Peoples' lands and territories results in the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples and therefore, having to move to the cities. This, as well as seeking employment, and access to health care and education and also wanting to find a better life are some of the factors why Indigenous Peoples migrate to the cities. Migrating across national borders presents a whole range of issues. In particular, the reliance on networks that enable Indigenous Peoples to find employment, usually in the unskilled labor market and the need to send remittances home to improve the lives of family at home. Hence, networks are not only developed between the urban, rural and remote Indigenous communities but also among long distance international networks.

4. Identity issues among Indigenous Peoples residing in urban areas, is extremely important. The urban area and the urban experiences are contexts that contribute to defining identity. Within Indigenous lands and territories, identity is embodied in the land and the stories and songs that tie personal reality to time and place. Urban Indigenous communities are often not situated in an immutable, bounded territory, but exist within a fluidly defined region with niches of resources and boundaries that responds to the needs and activities of the peoples. For example, the formation of indigenous

organizations such as community centres and friendships centres etc. are all intimately tied to identity. Hence, the programs and guiding values of these organizations are under constant scrutiny by Indigenous Peoples themselves.

5. In much of the social science literature and in government policies as well, there is a dichotomy between the remote, rural and urban, based on the lingering stereotype that the authentic Indigenous person lives in the remote or the rural and that the urban is not genuinely indigenous. Hence, early programs to relocate Indigenous Peoples from their homelands was, and still is, tied to the idea that once Indigenous Peoples become urbanized, then they would no longer exist as Indigenous Peoples.

6. This is in contrast to the way Indigenous Peoples see themselves. Indigenous Peoples in the urban areas visualize themselves as an extension of the home territory. For those living in the city, even those who have lived in the urban areas for a few generations have strong linkages to 'home' and for most part, these links are unbroken. Indigenous Peoples simply extend the sense of territory and are keenly aware for example, that sacred or spiritual places are found at home and after death they will likely be buried there. Urban indigenous communities are often characterized by geographical mobility as people move in and out of the cities, make return visits to their homelands and territories, or return there for good: a

transmigration , and indeed for some its about the portability of Treaties and Treaty rights.   There are also many Indigenous Peoples living in the streets who are homeless and who follow an annual seasonal route between various cities and the rural areas.   Hence, the homelands and territories are extended to the cities and vice versa.

7. I now want to briefly turn to some of the issues that exist for Indigenous Peoples living in urban areas.   In many cases, urban Indigenous communities do not have the same levels of access to information, or the skills to fully participate in the emerging knowledge economy.   Information about available services themselves are often controlled by external agencies as opposed to empowering local communities to have some input and control and as a result Indigenous Peoples continue to be marginalized in the cities. Specifically, for example, the disabled and challenged Indigenous Peoples.

8. Often, when delivering services for Indigenous Peoples, all Indigenous Peoples are classified under the one label as 'special needs' and there is no undertaking to understand the complexities of difference and the need to provide services in a different way, based on the experiences of the various Indigenous groups residing in the cities.

9. Involving Indigenous Peoples in decision making affecting their communities in the urban situation is extremely important as it creates an environment where Indigenous Peoples feel they are on an equal platform and that they have a 'say' in things that affect them. I note, for example, the ongoing jurisdictional debates that go on in municipal governments that unfortunately usually end up in exclusion.

10. Indigenous youth and children residing in urban areas are often portrayed in a way that sensationalizes problems such as destructive behaviour, or risk-prone lifestyles. There is often very little understanding of the communal and kinship ties that often exist in these settings. Meaningful activities that achieve positive outcomes for youth are empowering and need to provide opportunities for the development and affirmation of cultural identity, and cultural knowledge and skills. For example, cultural activities in the form of drama, music and art and film is being used increasingly to raise awareness about relevant social concerns and to help youth to speak out on issues that affect them. Another example, is physical activities and their many positive benefits; specifically traditional games, sports and recreation. Many gang members who I had chance to visit in prisons and interviewed stressed the importance of such activities for promotion of wellness.

11. In closing, despite a few benefits of living in urban area, such as proximity to social facilities (but even that has its problems), in most cases Indigenous Peoples have substantial difficulties. The underlying racism and discrimination towards Indigenous Peoples is felt every day despite the increasing multicultural nature of cities; one only needs to look at the incarceration rates. The lack of employment and income generating activities, limited access to services, and inadequate housing continues to be the main challenges that Indigenous Peoples face living in urban areas. In general, there is often disrespect for Indigenous Peoples' basic human rights: Inherent and Treaty rights and can be seen to be the underlying cause for persisting poverty among urban Indigenous communities. As a result, many Indigenous Peoples struggle to deal with their economic and social conditions in an often hostile environment.

12. Finally, I encourage the United Nations Permanent Forum, Canada, other States and UN–Habitant to continue their interest and work in this very important area and to consider urbanization as a permanent agenda item in its future work.