



2nd SESSION OF THE PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

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High-Level Panel on "*Indigenous Children and Youth*"

INDIGENOUS ADOLESCENTS - A FUND OF OPPORTUNITY

Statement by Ida Nicolaisen

Member of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Distinguished chairman, fellow members of this high-level panel, ladies and gentlemen - dear youth present here today.

At its first historic session in May 2002 the Permanent Forum decided to make indigenous children and youth a focal point of its work to come. This was in tune with concerns and recommendations expressed by the Indigenous Caucus, and let me assure you all of the continued long-term commitment of the Permanent Forum to work for the rights of and a decent future for young indigenous people. As an expression of this commitment we have put the young generation up front on the agenda of this session, and we are most grateful for the positive response we have received across the board from UN agencies to collaborate with us on this panel, during the past year and for the distinguished panelists for so willingly giving us of their time.¹

Willie Littlechild told me recently that young indigenous men in youth detention centres in Saskatchewan refused being talked about as failures, drop-outs or right out criminals. "We are a '*Fund of Opportunity*', they told Willie - and they are right.

In his message for the International Day of the World's

Indigenous peoples on August 9, 2000 Secretary-General Kofi Annan was in line with their view stressing that the: "...protection of Indigenous Children and Youth is an investment in the future of humankind." I am hopeful that today's debate will produce a string of useful recommendations that can be used as tools for intervention

The young see themselves as resourceful, as a 'Fund of Opportunity' - it is up to us here: States, UN Agencies, the Permanent Forum and indigenous leaders and NGO's to do likewise and remove the structural barriers which limit their possibilities to make use of this resourcefulness. These barriers are considerable, as we all know, issues of discrimination, poor health care and subsistence conditions, structural unemployment and trafficking, sexual abuse and lack of cultural rights to mention some.

Indigenous Youngsters are like the *black holes* of the Universe, those centres of energy - of matter and gravity out of which stars are born and light up, but at the same time forces of destruction and selfdestruction. We must offer this next generation a decent childhood and adolescence, materially and spiritually, lend it pride in its rich cultural heritage, and empower it to make informed choices and tackle adulthood constructively. Or put differently - if we cannot create reasonable living conditions and put 'the Fund of Opportunity' to good use, engaging the young generation in the ongoing process of creating a blooming and prosperous diversified world - not only indigenous peoples but all of us are at unimaginable loss.

As intimated the issue of children and young people cut across all of the mandated areas of the Permanent Forum, be it socio-economic development, health, environment, education, culture or human rights. For this reason it calls for close cooperation between UN agencies. Also States must take this fact into concern and not compartmentalize their policies and strategies on indigenous peoples. The current global mobility may well

place indigenous youth at unexpected doorsteps.

We are gathered here to pool our knowledge, use our imagination and vision and stretch ourselves to address the wide spectra of problems facing IP and to come up with advice to UN agencies and States on how to address indigenous children and youth. In the short time at my disposal I shall address some cross-cutting issues, which I find of imminent significance.

Disaggregated data on Indigenous Children and Youth

Let me first point to the need for reliable data on indigenous children and youngsters. We all realize that disaggregated data on Indigenous Peoples is fundamental to the successful outcome of the work of UN agencies and States. We desperately need such data in order that policies can be soundly founded, targets of intervention properly identified and appropriate strategies of action developed, that is strategies which are socially balanced and culturally sensitive. The Permanent Forum is grateful for all the steps taken during the past year to speed up the process of amassing disaggregated data on Indigenous Peoples - and for the overview of this complicated task presented to the Forum by the Interagency Support Group. This work and the establishment of an Integrated Database on Indigenous Peoples was warmly recommended by a great number of observers at the last session, recommendations fully supported by the Permanent Forum. The Forum did also recommend the UN to organize a three-day workshop to consider the findings of the data-collection exercises - a recommendation aired again this morning by the Special Rapporteur.² It is my sincere hope that the World Bank, which possesses a treasure of disseminated data on Indigenous Peoples will take the lead and in cooperation with other UN agencies such as UNICEF, WHO and UNDP take a major step forward this coming year. In line with this work is the creation of the Innocenti Digest on the Rights of Indigenous Children. This will be a useful review on indigenous children and advocacy tool.

It is my personal view that in no field is knowledge more wanting and needed than in respect to children and youth. What is lacking, I argue, is not only disaggregated data on child and youth mortality, health and state of nutrition, or education, labour, social responsibilities, sexual abuse and trafficking, in short the kind of elementary information which bespeaks the human rights' situation of the young. What is needed are also country specific in-depth studies which can provide insights into the interplay between structural conditions, political initiatives, and indigenous perceptions and goals as think pieces for action and best practices. We must realize that the presence of indigenous peoples makes a difference at the policy level for the entire population. It is fundamental to the improvement of the situation of Indigenous Children and Youth, in my view, that the hardcore data on the situation of indigenous adolescents are supplemented by such deeper understandings of Indigenous Peoples' perceptions and expectations of their children and young people and, equally significant - of how the young themselves perceive of their life, their community and future. If we have a clearer understanding of their dreams and aspirations, of how they would like to go about things, and of how their views tally with or are at collision with the expectations of the adult generation and the wider society, both UN Agencies and States will be better equipped to change structural barriers to a culturally sensitive social development, and make use of the 'Fund of Opportunity' represented by Indigenous Youngsters. I urge UN Agencies and States to support the creation of such a wider knowledge base and to draw on Indigenous Experts in doing so. I want to stress that we can get a lot done for small means entrusting and enabling indigenous peoples themselves to provide such urgently needed evidence. Why do we not do that? In this way policies and action plans based on the insights and wishes and with the active participation of Indigenous Peoples would much more easily become standard procedure of programme formulation. We must conclude, however that at the moment our insights are too often pitiful inadequate for most indigenous communities.

Urban Youth and 'Street-Kids'

Secondly I wish to draw attention to the fact that we are witnessing a massive exodus of Indigenous Youth to cities, smaller as well as bigger, around the world. This is part of an overall pattern of urban migration which currently represent a challenge to development policies. Young people are drawn to cities in great numbers, pushed by lack of income in their home environment and pulled by the attraction of cities - the wish to be 'where it happens'. However, to indigenous adolescents cities are highly alien environments - social and cultural habitats short in social support and family networks, ripe in discrimination, economic hardships, sexual abuse, temptations, drugs etc. At the moment 75% of the Mapuche in Chile live in cities, for instance, and we will witness a growing number of Indigenous communities in the same situation in the year to come.

The imminent problems of city youngsters, many of whom are left to fend for themselves as best they can calls for immediate and sustained action. They are victims of widespread discrimination, deprivation of basic needs, education, sexual abuse, violence and trafficking. Yet they have a hard time hitting media headlines and get the attention of those in power, except when it comes to sad records of prominence in the legal system. I urge UN Agencies and States to address this issue, and recommends that the World Bank and UNICEF conduct an in-depth comparative study of legal frameworks and social programmes addressing Indigenous Urban Youth in selected countries. The study should assess key problems and best practices as well as provide recommendations for the refinement of policies and strategies for future action.

GOOD-WILL AMBASSADOR OF INDIGENOUS CHILDREN AND YOUTH

In view of the difficulties of raising public awareness of the many problems facing Indigenous Peoples all over the world, and in particular of the imminent need to safeguard the life,

health, education and general living conditions of the young generation, so that they can live a life of their choice, I would welcome the appointment by UNICEF of a Good-will Ambassador of Indigenous Children and Youth. I believe that the attention such an ambassador might draw to Indigenous Issues would spur political interest and hopefully speed up the formulation of needed policies and programmes targeting the urgent needs of Indigenous Adolescents.

CONCLUSION

All of us gathered here today are acutely aware that the living conditions offered indigenous youngsters, the opportunities they are given and the choices they make at this moment are crucial to the continued existence of indigenous societies. Ultimately the young are the ones to recreate and develop indigenous cultural heritage or let go of it. However, the choices they make will influence our joint global society. It has taken mankind thousands of years to create the present wonderful puzzle of social and cultural diversity which so enrich our lives. A considerable part of this treasure of knowledge, insights, craftsmanship, artistic skills and ritual and symbolic expression are held in trust by indigenous communities so richly represented here today. But it is only if indigenous adolescents choose to live in accordance with their cultural heritage and to recreate this in innovative ways to cope with global developments that a multi-faceted global culture will prosper. It is up to us here to make this possible and offer the young a viable choice. We have a 'Fund of Opportunity' - let us put it to use.

1. We noted with gratefulness that the Committee on the Rights of the Child declared 2003 'The Year of the Indigenous Child'.

2. Incidentally the Forum did also recommend the UN to establish a repository for historical data on Indigenous Peoples, a recommendation which I like to call attention to.