

Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Economic and Social Council

Second session, 12-23 May 2003, New York

Agenda Item 3

CENTRE FOR ORGANISATION RESEARCH AND EDUCATION (CORE)

Manipur

Anna Pinto

Respected Chairman, members of the Permanent Forum

**Respected members of the High level panel, who have presented an
illuminating discussion before us,**

My brothers and sisters, my children,

**I should like to commend the Forum for taking this bold stand to focus on a
challenging thematic, provoking introspection, providing the opportunity to
look again at the well worn rhetoric and sentiments about children that**

tend to impregnate all discourse about their rights. I will also call to mind that this year the Committee on the Rights of the Child has taken a decision to hold the General Discussion Day on the issue of Indigenous Children in response to this Forum's recommendation last year. We hope and believe that this prioritization of our children demonstrates this Forum's seriousness regarding this critical issue as the response of the Committee on the Rights of the Child demonstrates the willingness of the international community advocating for children to accord this issue of indigenous children the concern and commitment it deserves.

I am honoured to have the privilege of speaking regarding this most important and critical issue facing indigenous peoples, today, around the world: the situation and future of our children.

Indigenous children whether they come from rich or poor countries, whether from economically better or poorer communities and families all face the same situation of discrimination and disregard of their rights as children, as individuals and as members of the indigenous community.

I should like to briefly bring up a few of the aspects which we, being privileged to present in this forum, should keep in mind.

First of all, as children, indigenous children suffer the same problems in this increasingly difficult world that all other children face. They are bewildered by the fast pace of change, they see the world they know, its comforting familiarities disappear in large chunks. There is little stability in their lives and this has terrible consequences for their present and also for their future. For our future.

The increase in atrocities against children, trafficking for sexual commerce, sexual abuse, the use of children in war as targets, as soldiers or other active participants, or as "collateral" victims, their deliberate or "incidental" exposure to and engagement in violence in the streets, in their homes, increasing violence against children in homes, schools and in communities, these must stop and we must not be content with fine words and magnificent policies, with erudite and shocking studies. These must stop now.

More and more of our children each day are being exposed unnecessarily to hunger and thirst, to deprivation of basic health care. Globalization with its glamour has done nothing but aggravate their lot, with shiny advertisements for fast foods and cheap gimmicks replacing a value system based on healthy discipline, compassion and love. We need to take action on this now. Corporations must not be permitted in the name of free trade to turn our children into receptacles for their output, engines for their

profit making and greed. Neither may this drive for wealth be permitted to deprive our children of their rightful inheritance: an earth which is still clean, beautiful and productive for all of us.

The targets set by the UNGASS for Children cannot be achieved in isolation to what is happening in the rest of our world. As I was forcibly told by one of the young delegates a few weeks ago: "You put away say 1 million dollars for doing something good, like cleaning up a river or providing food for children, but then the rest of the world is spending billions of dollars on wars and building polluting factories which outweigh the good by many multiples". As the young man pointed out, patchy relief work and sporadic interventions are simply and grossly inadequate, mere tokenism, and our children know it, even if we pretend not to. The entire approach to development and to material equity must be reviewed and rationalized, made consistent, for it to work at all; for our promises to our children made repeatedly at the highest forums, to be meaningful and implementable rather than purely rhetorical.

The targets of the UN commitment ("A World Fit for Children") are not therefore merely a question of reductions of poverty, eradication of childhood diseases and infant mortality, availability of clean drinking water and sanitation, and so forth. What good is all this in a world increasingly polluted, a rapidly changing climate, and the relentless raping of our planet

for non-renewable resources? Can these targets be actually possible or practical under these stubbornly rigid aggressions?

There is no question that there must be stringently imposed, if possible self imposed, limits to what is commonly called growth. Those cultures, societies and countries which consume disproportionately and waste enormously must discipline their appetites before they consume the whole world including us and themselves out of existence.

We face tremendous challenges and our children will face greater ones.

Freshwater is running out and lands are becoming submerged.

Destruction of biodiversity and pollution of natural resources continue unabated, and it is getting worse every day. The very breaths we take corrode our lungs. And this is what we take away from our children: collectively and individually, we are reneging on our responsibilities, stealing our children's rights to clean and free air and water, clean, pure and plentiful food, adequate shelter and the beauty of the world. I should like to ask those in power and those who are busy acquiring the millions: is this really worth it? Have we not an obligation to manage our children's world better than to poison it out of disregard and greed? When are we going to start righting these wrongs in earnest? How shall we start making payments on this colossal debt we are incurring? When shall we stop pretending that we will give drinking water to our children when we are

lands, cultures, languages, to our very survival. Indigenous children have the right to know their own cultures.

That means first of all that their cultures must be respected, preserved, allowed to develop and be promoted. Indigenous culture is not static. Like every other genuine culture, it is dynamic and fluid, like the rivers of the lands, changing to meet the demands and opportunities of changing temporal landscapes. There is the frequent misconception that when we talk of indigenous cultures we are looking for a return to earlier times. We are quite aware that this is not either possible or desirable, any more than a river in mid-course can or should return to its sources. What we are talking about is the natural growth of our cultures to fit the realities (many of them unpleasant or hostile) to enable us to survive as peoples, today, with our world view and traditions respected, our histories celebrated and our ancient knowledge including our languages, developed and made useable to ourselves and to the world. When this is so then we can educate our children to know themselves and the rest of the world and they will surely find their true and rightful places.

In much of the discourse we have engaged with at many of the processes at the UN and at other processes, we refer frequently to our lands and territories as being in trust for our children. I should like to suggest that not only are they a sacred trust for future generations, but that our children

destroying the sources of this water? Or are we to say: "let them drink coke"?

Our children have the right to develop and grow as individuals and as members of their own communities and the world. For this to happen, they must be provided a good education. Perhaps some of us are not very clear as to what that is. This does not mean merely entry into the existing schools system, which has repeatedly proven itself destructive to our cultures, and which has been acknowledged by experts of many persuasions to be as damaging to the minds and bodies of children as it is to society as a whole.

What our children have a right to is a true education defined by the urgent needs for a world that is founded on authentic sustainability, an access to learning of information and values that will stand them in good stead for their life's work, as productive and self determined adults as well as give them the grace to live well and humanely. This is no doubt a difficult task especially in this world where teaching of children is not a job which is well respected, where salaries are the measure of status, training and expertise, and where teachers get precious little of any of these.

Secondly, in addition to all these challenges, indigenous children face all the issues that are faced by our communities as a whole: threats to our

We cannot allow this to continue. If this is the only thing we do: if we can ensure that each of our children grows well, then if we do nothing else we have done well.

Governments have made promises as governments do. Once more they have made promises last year, in the week before this Forum sat for its very first deliberations, at the General Assembly Special Session on Children, in this very building. We must insist that they honour those promises, every last one, in full, in spirit and in truth.

These are some of the challenges before this respected Forum and before the august panel. How do we realize the global conditions that will ensure that every child's rights, the rights of all our children collectively, the rights of indigenous children, are respected? What can this Forum do to ensure that the world does indeed become a world fit for children?

There are some children here, mine among them. Some of them have a lot to say and some have said it, in the exhibition outside. Then there are the other children, so many more, the ones who could not make it here. We recognise those who have come as having come in all seriousness to represent the issues on which their brothers and sisters, their friends, playmates, school friends, work friends and neighbours cannot be here to raise their voices.

depend on these now for their survival, their identity and their culture.

Rarely is it recognised that children have rights to lands except as inheritance which is held in trust. Perhaps we should re-think this.

Perhaps we need to recognise more completely that it is as children and not as potential adults, that our children have needs and rights regarding lands.

Children need their lands as children: for play and leisure, for learning their cultures and livelihoods, for developing a value system and world view.

These lands of ours, these are theirs, now and by right. When these are taken away their rights are violated; their rights to healthy food, clean water and pure air to breathe, their rights to space to learn and to live, in their own cultures and with their own people. To deny them these is the denial of their lives as indigenous children, frequently it denies them survival.

We all know the problems, most of us at first hand having watched our own children as I have watched mine, struggle to grow and to bloom, watching our children put out strange and exotic flowers, watching our children become crippled physically mentally, emotionally and spiritually, and for some of us watching our children die, sometimes in terrible pain.

One of these issues is the fact that so few of them are able to be here, in this meeting which so closely concerns them, which will help determine the environment into which they are born, live and grow. Many of our children participate in public forums, and are quite competent to participate and should be here. It is a mark of the neglect, discrimination and lack of respect our children suffer that they are not.

In concluding I should like to thank each of them for being here, most of all for their persistent and creative efforts to make us hear them, despite our tendency to convenient and consistent deafness, despite our determined efforts, demonstrated only yesterday in this very building, to keep them out. In spite of this opposition and these obstacles they are here, we must acknowledge their grace, their courage and their persistence. They have faced today the same response at the gates of this institution that those who have gone before us here, faced over 20 years ago.

We recognize our history in the experience of these children, applaud their determination and stand with them in their struggle for the rights and dignity of all children to be respected.

Thank you