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Statement by UNESCO

respect to Oronoia
Nation

16/05/05, #3(a),
Member of the Panel Forum.
Distinguished indigenous delegates
rep's, govt rep's;
colleagues - ladies + gents

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Indigenous Peoples and the MDGs
Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger (MDG 1)

UNESCO joins the growing number of voices being raised of late that draw attention to the shortcomings of the MDGs, their targets and indicators, as vehicles for addressing the needs and aspirations of indigenous peoples. These shortcomings are multiple, intervene at several levels and, as they are interconnected, must be addressed in a unified manner in order for the current state of affairs to be turned around.

To begin, it is obvious that, from the beginning of the MDG process, indigenous peoples have been left on the sidelines. This situation has persisted despite data available that make it clear that indigenous peoples figure prominently among the world's most impoverished. Ironically, where the MDG process has impacted upon the lives of indigenous groups, this has, more often than not, been negative. Indigenous lands, often rich in renewable and non-renewable resources and low in population density, have always been targeted for development. Such development continues today, under the banner of achieving the MDGs, with limited benefit to indigenous populations who not only lose access to resources they depend upon to fulfil basic needs, but may also suffer displacement and be constrained to enter into relationships of increasing dependency.

But even if indigenous peoples were to become the focus of concerted national and international action to achieve the MDGs, grave shortcomings in the latter's conceptual underpinnings must be urgently addressed in order to ensure that such action would be beneficial and not detrimental. While inaction is to be lamented, the destructive capacity of misguided development has already been repeatedly demonstrated.

In the case of the MDG 1 and its targets and indicators, it is the inadequacy of the definition of poverty – as economic poverty - that has been increasingly debated and criticized. UNESCO participates actively in these reflections, notably through its Social and Human Sciences sector and its project entitled 'Poverty as a Human Rights Violation: Developing a New Paradigm'. This project postulates that situations of poverty derive from the

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responsibility of particular individuals, collective agents or governments and that this responsibility can be understood as a violation of human rights. A series of international seminars with experts from all world regions is underway, with the objective of producing a 4-volume publication on poverty as a violation of human rights from philosophical, legal, economic and socio-political perspectives.

But even from a strictly economic viewpoint, the MDG targets and indicators are inadequate for indigenous peoples. They focus only upon monetary income and completely ignore the informal, subsistence economies that are so important for the fulfilment of many of their basic needs. The fact that most indigenous peoples today are, in one way or another and to varying degrees, tied into the cash economy, does not diminish the continuing importance of these subsistence activities within their mixed economies.

The MDGs, targets and indicators, as presently defined, completely ignore these alternative lifeways and their importance to indigenous peoples, not only in the economic sense, but also as the underpinnings for:

- social solidarity - the social capital that allows indigenous communities to live through adversity in unity;
- for cultural identity – the sense of self-esteem and belonging that is vital to both the group and the individual; and
- worldview – that defines the unique relationship between a people, the living world that surrounds them and the space that is their territory.

As presently defined, the MDGs guide development action towards an increasing involvement of indigenous peoples in wage labour and market economies. Where a degree of autonomy and security may have been maintained, indigenous peoples are becoming increasingly dependent on external market forces, which they have little hope to influence, let alone control, given the small scale of their operations. Such change is all the more alienating because it shifts a people with a high level of skills in their own unique lifeways, to the very bottom of the social hierarchy, to become the 'lumpen proletariat' of a system that has no use for their sophisticated traditional knowledge and know-how. Pressures on indigenous peoples to abandon customary land tenure in favour of private ownership, as the only pathway to 'development', are equally misguided. Ironically, such action under the guise of achieving

