



FIRST SESSION OF THE PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Opening statement by Ida Nicolaisen

It is a great honour, an extreme pleasure, and I dare say a major challenge to have been asked to serve on the Permanent Forum and hence be given the chance to be part of our joint endeavours to improve the situation of indigenous peoples around the world and give them their rightful place in the international community. Personally, I must confess, there is no cause to which I more willingly and wholeheartedly devote myself. I have had the great privilege to spend a considerable part of my life among some of the tiniest and most empowerished peoples in the world. Like hundreds of others on our globe they have so far had no way of expressing their concerns to the wider society, not to speak of the international community. They cannot even imagine that an opportunity like the one we have here may exist. It must be a key goal to do all we can to empower these marginalized fellow human beings and ensure that they too get a chance to speak up for themselves.

We all know that it is high time to speed up efforts to improve the living conditions of the hundreds of millions of indigenous peoples, who must fend for their rights to live where their forefarthers did and in accordance with their own values. The establishment of the Permanent Forum lends us a historic window of opportunity to suport them in doing so. We are getting a unique chance to work in true partnership: representatives of indigenous peoples, Governments, UN agencies, and we, the members of the Forum.

It is a challenging task which lies ahead of us. We must address pressing issues facing indigenous peoples: Poverty, cultural and spiritual expression, degradation of their environment, low life-expectancy and healthproblems, failing education, and lack of basic human rights. We must set up

priorities and define our short term, middle term and longterm goals, and not the least find both practical and visionary ways of cooperation to achieve these. I am sure that we can do so. There is a lot of good will and we all know that it means a lot of hard work and that it will take time. I am hopeful that we will be able to solve the immediate and pressing financial issues to make the Permanent Forum capable of working effectively between sessions with the assistance of an independant secretariat.

We must succeed in the years to come - we simply have to. We cannot fail indigenous peoples who so desparately need support and new opportunities, need empoverment to be able to stir their course in global society, need to experience improvement in their daily life and respect of their rights. If we do not - it is not only indigenous peoples who lose out - we all do.

We have talked for a long time, and rightly so, about biodiversity - about the necessity to keep the natural environment varied and sustainable for future generations. It is as if we have not truly realized and appreciated the equally pressing necessity of sustaining our own cultural diversity and the great potential it holds to world community. We are unique among the biological species in that we have developed an incredible richness in cultural forms, ways of perceiving the world, expressing ourselves, and organizing our communities. We have created valuable systems of knowledge and spiritual insights, and found ways of giving these expression in a rich variety of languages, rituals, art, wonderful literature, fascinating myths and fairytales. It has taken us millions of years to do so, and we must not throw it all overboard. We must remember that each of us is formed by our culture. It influences the way we think and make sense of the world around us. It shapes our values, our notions of appropriate behaviour between old and young, between men and women. It influences our notions of what is right and what is wrong, of what we consider violence and justice, and ultimately, what we think of life and death itself. It is not the least by exposure to other ways of thinking, other valuesystems, other forms of art - that each of

us may get a helping hand to open up our minds and think new thoughts and hence enrich our lives.

Indigenous cultures are the life and spirituality of hundreds of millions of peoples around the world, but they are also a treasure, a gift to humankind at large - a treasure of insights, knowledge, spirituality and cultural expressions, a treasure of immense significance to the rest of us. We do not only have a moral obligation to do all we can to empower indigenous peoples and improve their situation in order that they can live in accordance with their values. We must realize and make the world understand, that we are all to lose, if we do not.