

**Agenda Item 3 Children and Youth**  
**Intervention: World Council of Churches**

**Presented by Peter Smith**

Mr. Chairperson, distinguished members of the Permanent Forum, my sisters and brothers.

I wish firstly to congratulate the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today. I am Peter Smith, a descendant of the Gamilaroi people of Australia. It is my privilege to speak to you on behalf of the World Council of Churches.

I wish to congratulate those of my elders and others who have greeted us in their own traditional language. Sadly I acknowledge that I am unable to greet you in my Mothers language because of past government policy, which prohibited the speaking of our language on the government reserve to which my mother was sent as a small child.

Australia is an environmentally diverse country, with rain forests, desert, snowfields and a vast coastline. Indigenous people adapted to these conditions and lived in all these environments up until the arrival of the British colonizing power 225 years ago, when our people were "dispersed". Some were "dispersed" when they died in massacres and others were forcibly moved to other areas far removed from their ancestral lands.

Because of these past policies, their descendants, children, grandchildren, great grandchildren are still suffering from the loss of this land, language and traditional relationships. This loss caused negative behaviour patterns in many of our children and youth, generations later, including suicide of our young men.

Presently Indigenous Australians are approximately 3% of the total population of Australia and are approximately ten times more per head of the population, of the prison population, the majority of who are our young people. From thousands of years, until 1788 we were 100% of the population with no one in prison. This suggests Mr. Chairperson, my brothers and sisters that there is something wrong with the system, a system, which has claimed to bring us to civilization.

Our Children and our youth are suffering because of past decisions. We are where we are today because of decisions made in the past. In the future we will be where we are then, because of decisions we make today. We as delegates to this forum, have a grave responsibility in making decisions today.

Currently young teenage girls are giving birth to deformed babies, deformed physically and mentally with undeveloped brains, because their mothers are sniffing petrol, paint and other substances, which caused these deformities. These girls have a vacuum in their lives. This vacuum is filled with negative thoughts and negative emotions with devastatingly negative results.

The artistic ability of our young people becomes apparent when they are imprisoned; mostly through alcohol related crime. Their artwork developed in prison is admired by members of the art world and sold at home and internationally. It would be to their benefit and to the benefit of their community if we could find a means of developing our young peoples artistic abilities other than by sending them to prison.

We need to put in place a procedure to reverse the negative trends mentioned above, to bring our young people back on track, with purpose in life, a positive attitude towards the future, pride in themselves, pride in their ancestors and pride in being indigenous peoples of our land.

To help us in achieving this goal I suggest that we support the claims made by Miss Elizabeth Garrett that our children and youth be invited and encouraged to take a more active part in this forum.

Mr. Chairperson, my brothers and sisters, a chasm has developed between our elders and youth.

It is difficult to cross a chasm by taking small steps. It is time for us all, children, youth, parents and elders and government to take a giant leap of faith developing a positive relationship between our indigenous peoples, indigenous organisations, our elders youth and government departments so that we can stand together in the struggle for our children's future.

Mr. Chairperson, my sisters and brothers, thank you.