

## PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Second Session  
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THEME DISCUSSION: YOUTH AND CHILDREN

Statement by Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action (FAIRA)  
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**RECOMMENDATION:** That UNICEF and UNESCO assist States, particularly Australia, to develop plans of action to reduce racial stereotyping through the media and other institutions, and to promote greater awareness of the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders suffer higher mortality and morbidity from all causes as a direct consequence of our economic and social disadvantage.

The suicide rate among Indigenous youth has risen to alarming rates. The causes of youth suicide go well beyond issues relating to mental health alone, and are linked to youth unemployment, alienation and powerlessness.

Further the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has recently produced figures showing the number of children removed from their parent's home rose last year to nearly 19,000 children. The rate of Indigenous children in care is six times the general population.

In the August 1996 Federal Budget, the Australian Government cut the allocation to ATSIC by \$470,000 million. At the same time the government required that ATSIC maintain its expenditure on certain programs such as the Community Development Employment Projects and the Housing and Infrastructure program.

This government directive meant that ATSIC was forced to terminate important initiatives, especially the Community and Youth Support Program.

ATSIC Regional Council plans reveal the need for many important services to children at risk, such as outreach programs, juvenile justice and diversionary initiatives.

The experience of Indigenous youth is permeated by the experience of discrimination, negative and low expectations and social stereotyping.

Many young Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders today have to come to terms with 'who are they'. These challenges are the result of the overt racism which our youth continually face because they are not 'mainstream' Australians, because they are subject to constant and intense public scrutiny, because they are accused of

receiving favourable treatment and because of the need for Australians to control and limit Aboriginal identity.

Our youth are continually exposed to racial physical and mental abuse at school, social functions, shopping, walking down the street. Indigenous youths in rural towns are particularly open to racial abuse. There are rural towns where the white populations are quiet open about racial abuse and tension.

Australian governments have done virtually nothing to counter this racial discrimination and abuse of human rights. The governments often have actually initiated, encouraged and fueled the discrimination.

While recent high profile debates, such as our continued 'native' title over lands, have forced many journalists to gain some knowledge of Indigenous issues, in the main the majority remain ignorant regarding the real issues that affect Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia. They persist in portraying Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders in stereotypical form.

The cultures of Indigenous peoples are not respected or recognised by the media industry, and there is a resulting lack of any media coverage on our cultural identity and existence. Considering especially that the greatest percentage of the Indigenous population in Australia is under the age of 25, the disregard by the media of our people as an important target audience is unacceptable.

The lack of recognition of the our cultures impacts negatively on how Indigenous Australian children and youth perceive themselves, our cultures and our relationship with Australian society. This results in a loss of self-esteem, cultural identity and self worth.

It is clear that our youth and children will continue denied their future wellbeing as Indigenous people as long as our Indigenous rights are not able to be exercised.

Finally, I repeat our recommendation, that UNICEF and UNESCO assist States, particularly Australia, to develop plans of action to reduce racial stereotyping through the media and other institutions, and to promote greater awareness of the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

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