

I am grateful for the opportunity to address the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues today, on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and refer to the right of indigenous peoples to full and effective political participation. Indeed, my remarks are premised on the belief that **political participation** of minorities and indigenous peoples must be a key element to any strategy on equality and inclusion.

For much of 2009 and 2010, the IPU carried out an investigation into the representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament. At the end of last year we presented seven findings that emerged from this process at a global parliamentary conference in the State of Chiapas in Mexico.

The first finding is that it is very difficult to gather precise **data** on the number of minorities and indigenous peoples who are members of parliament. Only half the world's parliaments responded to a survey undertaken by the IPU and less than half of them provided this kind of data.

There are obvious ethical reasons why it is difficult to gather this data. Everyone has the right to choose their own identity and it is not acceptable to categorize people on the basis of their name or origins. Self-identification must be the norm. This principle can make it more complicated for parliaments to provide the data, but it should not be an insurmountable challenge. There are also unspoken political reasons. Some parliaments clearly didn't want to answer the question.

It is also true that many parliaments simply do not know how many minority and indigenous parliamentarians there are in their country and, if they leave it at that, under-representation is likely to continue unchecked. The Conference in Chiapas agreed that parliaments must collect better data on the representation of minorities and indigenous peoples, while balancing privacy concerns and the right to self-identification.

The second finding is that the issue of **recognition** of minorities and indigenous peoples is challenging in many countries. Recognition of the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples is an important precondition for their effective participation in politics, yet few countries have taken this step. The task of recognizing minorities and indigenous peoples and defining their legal status ultimately rests with parliaments. We therefore urge parliaments to take action (if they have not already done so) to recognize diversity in their societies and the importance of reflecting it in public institutions.

Third, we found support from parliamentarians from all backgrounds for **special electoral measures** to ensure the presence in parliament of minorities and indigenous representatives. But there is a lack of awareness of the range of possible options that are available to parliaments. In countries where special measures have been put in place, parliaments should consider a periodic evaluation of their effectiveness, in partnership with minorities and indigenous peoples, and adjust them where necessary.

Fourth, **political parties** need to act. Even in the absence of special provisions in electoral laws, parties can pursue inclusive recruitment and promotion policies, by establishing dialogue with minority and indigenous communities and identifying and preparing candidates for office. Inside parliament, we found that many minority and indigenous parliamentarians have faced considerable obstacles when trying to advance their legislative agenda. Political party leaders exercise considerable influence over which pieces of draft legislation are able to move through the legislative process, and which get stuck or simply dropped. The small number of minority and indigenous parliamentarians present a structural challenge in terms of the amount of influence they are able to have.

Fifth, there is a clear need for **resources**. Inside parliament, this means that parliamentary committees with a mandate for minority and indigenous issues should have trained staff to support their work. These committees need to have the means and the will to organize public hearings with minority and indigenous communities, which are often the most marginalized in society and less likely to be engaged in the political process. Outside parliament, representative organizations of minorities and indigenous peoples require resources so that they can assume fully their role as partners for parliament and other institutions. The counterpart to these resources should be the requirement for greater transparency and strong internal democracy with these organizations.

Six, parliaments need to hold government to account for the **implementation** of laws and other measures intended to fulfil minority and indigenous rights. We all know of situations where laws have been passed, for example to fight against discrimination, but their effect is not felt by citizens on the ground. Successful implementation requires resources and political will, as well as a sustained commitment within the State administration. Implementation remains a huge challenge in many countries. Parliament's oversight role has to include monitoring and enforcing the implementation of the laws that it passes. That oversight role also extends to the implementation of international commitments entered into by States. However, all too often parliaments absent from, or not even aware of, interactions between government and international human rights treaty bodies. That state of affairs is no longer tenable in our globalized world.

Seven, and finally, we must address the concerns and opposition of the **general public**. Public support for minority and indigenous inclusion is a driver for change, just as public opposition renders any political progress difficult. Parliaments can help secure public understanding of minority and indigenous issues. Parliamentarians hold enormous individual responsibility. They can foster greater tolerance by engaging citizens in debate on minority and indigenous issues, but they must also avoid exploiting these issues for short term electoral advantage. Training to raise the awareness of all parliamentarians on minority and indigenous issues is therefore important to help create a more favourable political environment.

The outcome document from the Conference in Mexico last year – **The Chiapas Declaration** – suggests a strategy to address these seven findings based on three elements.

First, Parliaments should hold a public debate on the situation of minorities in their country, recognize the diversity in society and adopt a plan of action to make the right to equal participation and non-discrimination a reality for minorities.

Second, Parliaments should address discrimination through the legislative and oversight process and make sure that minority and indigenous women are not excluded from the process. They should also ensure the transparency of the process.

Third, it should be easy for minority communities to get information about the work of their representatives in parliament, and to hold them to account.

To support this strategy, the Chiapas Declaration mandates the IPU to take the lead in collecting data on the representation of minorities and indigenous people in parliament, monitor the implementation of the declaration and convene a conference two years down the road to evaluate progress.

I think we could make a very considerable step forward if we could ensure that every parliament, within the next two years, undertake these first steps and that we invest energy in mapping well the participation of minorities in every parliament in the world. If we can do this, then I think we will be able to demonstrate tangible progress two years from now.