

## 9<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues:

### **“Development”, and the Connection with Historical Trauma and Current Health Disparities for Indigenous Peoples**

Delivered by  
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Hau, Mitakuyapi, My name is Theresa Gutierrez, and I am a member of the Oglala Lakota and Northern Cheyenne Nations. I am descended from the Oglala leader, Red Cloud, and I am the daughter of seven generations of Lakota women who have taught me to believe in, and defend, my people.

The conventional view of development from the western paradigm is that development is assumed to be positive, inevitable and integrally interwoven with the separation of humans from other aspects of the natural environment. Indigenous peoples offer a distinctly different view of development from our historical perspective. For me as a Lakota woman, “development” has often meant the destruction of our territories – especially through operations of extractive industries (gold, uranium and coal mining). It has also meant the obliteration of our culture and language through the taking of our children and their indoctrination in government or religious schools – with the deliberate intent to “civilize” and “educate” them in a competitive, individualistic and Christian/European mode. Finally, “development” has often meant that we, as indigenous peoples, must adopt the western view that the natural environment, including human labor, is a commodity, to be exploited with disrespect for our indigenous spiritual and cultural traditions.

The consequences of the imposition of the unsustainable, western development model on indigenous peoples have been widespread and profound. My intervention will focus on one particular aspect, that is, the adverse impacts of this development model on the physical and mental health of indigenous peoples.

American Indians in the United States, and the Lakota in particular, experience the worst health conditions of any people in the United States. Indigenous women and children in the United States suffer the worst rates of sexual violence of any group, and 86% of the perpetrators of the violence are non-Native men.<sup>1</sup> American Indians experience the worst infant mortality, the worst incidence of avoidable diseases like diabetes, heart disease, substance addiction, and worst of all – a youth suicide rate that is higher than any other group. Indigenous health conditions are not the result of accident, they are not the result of happenstance, or of the natural predisposition of Native peoples. As the recently released UN Study on the State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples’ states: “Youth suicides in indigenous communities takes place in the context of contemporary discrimination and marginalization and historical trauma related to colonization, assimilations and the loss of traditional livelihoods. The suicide rate for American Indian and Alaska Native youth aged 15 to 24 is [300%] higher than the national average.”<sup>2</sup>

These horrible conditions are the direct result of deliberate policies of the United States, religious denominations, corporations and private individuals, that have stolen our territories, contaminated our lands, destroyed our languages and familial structures, and supplanted our traditional mechanisms for

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<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International. *Maze of Injustice: The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Sexual Violence in the United States*, 2007. p.4.

<sup>2</sup> Alaska Injury prevention Center, Critical Illness and Trauma Foundation and American Society of Suicidology (2006), p.12.

governance, food production, dispute resolution and economic self-sufficiency. Our people have been driven, often by economic despair and deliberate government policies, from their traditional territories, into impoverished urban environments. Today, nearly 70% of American Indians in the United States live in urban areas, far from their homelands, and far from any opportunity to embrace simultaneously their traditional identities and their right to development and self-determination.

My relatives, you have heard time and again the record of genocide, ethnocide and ecocide against my people. I am not going to recount the details of those crimes here, today. Instead, I am going to tell you that these issues are not hypothetical, they are not theoretical, they are not abstract, they are not merely statistics, they are real, and they affect our lives every day. Our children are dying, being killed, and are more and more frequently making the desperate and tragic decision to leave this life at their own hand.

As do many indigenous mothers, I know the pain and sorrow of these events personally. My own son could no longer withstand the social, political and economic forces around him that would seek to squeeze the last essence of indigenous identity out of him. His territory had been stolen, the treaties with his nation had been consistently violated, his ability to sustain himself economically had been destroyed, and the expectation that he would abandon his indigenous identity was made to him daily, and unambiguously by the invader society around him. He paid the ultimate price for the imposition of western “development,” resulting in indigenous youth despair.

Sisters and brothers, and members of the Permanent Forum, I implore you not to allow the ways in which development is destroying our people, and especially our youth, to be ignored, or to be relegated simply to items on an agenda. Our children are dying, I mean really dying, being killed, being murdered, committing suicide, abandoning their families and culture and identity because western modes of development demand it.

Brothers and sisters, self-determination, if it means anything, means the right to **live**, the right to live with hope, without fear, without having to reject their values and their spirituality and their people. Self-determination and development mean nothing if our children are dead, or if they remain alive as mere shadows of their ancestors. Toward this end, I extend the following recommendations to this Ninth Session of Permanent Forum:

1. I call on the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous Peoples and the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to engage in a specific investigation on the condition of indigenous youth suicides and deaths at the hands of police forces of the colonial system in the United States.
2. I call on the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to investigate, report and submit recommendations addressing the health disparities of indigenous peoples around the world.
3. I call on the Permanent Forum to advance recommendations to the General Assembly and other specialized agencies of the United Nations to move states toward implementing the recommendations of the 2009 *State of World's Indigenous Peoples* report to recognize the health crises that face indigenous peoples, to take responsibility for their role in the creation and continuation of those conditions, to respect and support indigenous health systems and to promote the establishment and operation of intercultural health systems in indigenous communities, both urban and rural – especially to address the epidemic of youth suicides and violence against indigenous women and children.

Pilamiyapelo. (I thank you)

Mitakuye Oyasin (For all our relations)