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Agenda item 3(c): Youth, self-harm and suicide

"Choosing life; ending life"

This matter- "youth self-harm and suicides" is important to us all. It needs to be a forefront consideration for the United Nations, its agencies, programmes and funds and member States and should be treated as an international and State public policy priority requiring concrete plans and actions.

As Indigenous peoples we fight to continue to survive as Indigenous peoples, to support our individual and collective well-being and be able to express pride in our dignity.

I thank the youth representatives who this morning reached out to us- to consider their views, their concerns and their recommendations. You, the young people, are our children and you are our grandchildren. As your parents and as your grandparents we have responsibilities for you and to you- to raise you well, to guide you and to teach you what we know and what we understand and believe about who we are and where we come from as Indigenous peoples with unique cultural identities and ways of life. These cultural identities, ways of life, teachings, beliefs, practices and institutions are the foundations of indigenous civilizations.

A Sami youth said this morning "There are few things more heartbreaking than youth self-harm and suicide". I completely agree. In my own communities we have lost many young people to suicide including two young women who were twins.

Ultimately youth self-harm and suicide becomes a very personal matter...at that moment when one considers options on the bridge to life or the bridge to end life. We do not know for certain what the ultimate, final contributing influences to one path or another. We know though that this matter of youth self-harm and suicide is alarming, becoming more pervasive, more invasive, and ending too many young Indigenous lives.

The intervention by the Global Youth Caucus referred to the 2014 Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues' study on the "doctrine of discovery". What is this concept, the "doctrine of discovery" and how does it fit into this discussion on youth self-harm and suicides? I believe this is one of the underlying, but not well understood, reason contributing to the dire social-economic situation in Indigenous peoples and communities. The premise of the doctrine, established the rationale (during the colonial era) that Indigenous peoples civilizations, teachings, beliefs and ways of life were inferior to those peoples from the colonizing countries.

This doctrine was forcibly applied by colonial era authorities through legal structures, laws, policies and practices which were deliberately designed:

- To eradicate Indigenous identities with consequent prejudices, discrimination and racism towards Indigenous peoples which continue even now;
- To legitimize the unlawful taking of Indigenous lands and territories;
- To embark on the deliberate destruction of Indigenous languages and cultural practices, including Indigenous spirituality and beliefs;
- To undermine and criminalize indigenous political, cultural and legal structures and;
- To destroy connections between Indigenous generations through the removal of Indigenous children from their families, communities and from their underlying cultural ways. In this regard both State and Church were complicit partners.

There continues to be in both developed and developing States systemic and systematic denial of the existence of Indigenous peoples and the existence of their inherent Indigenous rights. This practice cannot and should not be condoned.

Respected Haudenosaunee elder Oren Lyons said "youth suicide is the result of eradicating (Indigenous peoples) identities". The doctrine of discovery and its multifaceted application by colonial States definitely must be considered as a major contributing factor to the underlying causes of youth self-harm and suicides.

In this regard I want to address the matter of Indian residential schools in Canada and boarding schools in the US. This system of schools was a conscious and deliberate act by State established "to kill the Indian in the child". It was a massive failure. But the consequences are still with us today. Many of us who were sent to these Indian residential schools and boarding schools saw or were the victims of violence, of abuse including sexual abuse, of being punished for using our Indigenous languages among other human rights violations. This became a basis for recurring bilateral violence in our families and communities.

The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada called the residential schools system experiment as "cultural genocide".

We now see another dimension of this, which is called the "60's scoop" where Indigenous children, taken from their families and communities, were placed in homes far from their own families and communities. These children, now adults, are impacted in ways very similar to those in residential and boarding schools.

"Do not tell us what is good for us"; but include and involve us. This, from Nathan Abrahams of the Seneca Youth delegation is a very determined and hopeful view.

We need to listen to them, to understand them as we collectively think about these serious matters and determine constructive and supportive actions forward. We cannot afford to be silent or indifferent.

As parents, grandparents and decision makers one of our sacred responsibility is for the survival, the dignity and the well-being of our young people and our children and for those many generations yet to be born. They are our gifts to and hope for our continued survival as Indigenous peoples.

We will continue to re-build and strengthen our peoples and our cultures through our ancient songs, our drums, our spiritual practices, our beliefs, our cultural practices and that we all hope to do this in the safety and security of our families and communities within our respective traditional homelands and traditional territories. This way I am optimistic that we can create that safe space, a strong cultural place with identity, where our youth grow and live in peace inside themselves and celebrate life with others.

In this regard the United Nations and States, in strong collaboration with Indigenous Peoples, have important responsibilities and duties to provide support and assistance to Indigenous children and youth.

Thank you Madame Chair.