

**Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**

**Opening Remarks by**

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Ms President of the Human Rights Council,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Experts,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to open the fourth session of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. I warmly welcome its members, particularly those newly appointed, as well as thank the outgoing members of the Expert Mechanism, whose studies have created an excellent foundation for the future work of the Mechanism. I am also very pleased to see many indigenous representatives from all regions of the world, including the recipients of our Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations.

The final report of the Expert Mechanism on Indigenous peoples' participation is before you. Thirty-four years ago indigenous peoples' groups came to Geneva to make their voices heard at the international level. At that time, they issued the first draft declaration on principles on the rights of indigenous peoples. Among these pioneers was Chief Wilton Littlechild who now joins us as a new member of the Expert Mechanism.

A milestone of indigenous peoples' advocacy is the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which provides a common roadmap and framework for action at both the national and international level. Its value is now recognised globally. Indeed, I am pleased to be addressing you for the first time since all States who opposed the Declaration have changed their position to one of support. The Declaration sets out a blueprint for future partnerships between indigenous peoples, States, and other stakeholders, including the private sector.

Indeed, indigenous peoples have made the United Nations a more inclusive place. They showed that effective human rights advocacy can be pursued in many languages, not only those spoken by States.

However, these positive results must not induce complacency. To be sure, indigenous peoples remain some of the most marginalised groups in the world, frequently excluded from political and economic power. According to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund poverty rates amongst indigenous peoples exceed 50 % in most countries.

In some States, more than 80% of indigenous peoples live in poverty. Furthermore, indigenous peoples live shorter lives and are in worse health than their non-indigenous compatriots and they are also dramatically disadvantaged in education in many countries. Indigenous peoples continue to be disproportionately targeted in conflict situations. Frequently their advocates are not only excluded from decision-making but harassed and silenced.

In the course of some of my missions, I have observed how indigenous peoples – and especially indigenous women – are discriminated and excluded from participating in decisions that affect their lives. Even in wealthy countries, some indigenous peoples continue to live in squalor, destitution and hopelessness. Often they continue to suffer the consequences of colonization and century-long dispossession.

To confront and put an end to such exclusion and inequality, indigenous peoples must be included in decision-making. It is imperative that positive measures and policies be put in place to foster their participation. Yet, this approach meets resistance. A study presented in December at a global conference on indigenous and minority participation, organised by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in cooperation with UNDP and OHCHR, found that 25% of majority parliamentarians consider special measures to ensure indigenous and minority participation in parliaments as discriminatory. We need to counter this ill-informed stance by demonstrating the value and benefits that the knowledge and history of indigenous peoples bring to their own wider communities and entire nations.

In this regard, I would like to stress the value of the studies of the Expert Mechanism, including its final report on indigenous peoples and participation in decision-making, provide guidance to States on how to attain the goals of the Declaration and implement them on the ground. The associated Expert Mechanism's Advice No. 2, annexed to the report, contributes to the growing international jurisprudence on important rights such as States' duty to seek indigenous peoples' free, prior and informed consent, drawing on, inter alia, the jurisprudence of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples and UN and regional human rights bodies.

In addition to its support to the Expert Mechanism's thematic work on participation, my office has sought a variety of ways to promote indigenous peoples' inclusion in decision making. Last May, we launched the UN Indigenous Peoples Partnership (UNIPP), a joint initiative between the OHCHR, the International Labour Organisation, the United Nations Development Programme and UNICEF. Through a multi-donor trust fund, the Indigenous Peoples Partnership seeks to advance the implementation of the Declaration and ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, particularly at the country level. One of its key objectives is the promotion of participation and indigenous peoples' institutions.

Through our country and Regional Offices, from Nepal to Bolivia, from Central America to Central Africa we have fostered or supported indigenous participation, consultative processes with national authorities and the private sector. We have also promoted indigenous peoples' participation in human rights monitoring.

At the international level, we run an indigenous peoples fellowship program and the Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations, which supports indigenous attendance in this Mechanism, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and now also in the Human Rights Council and Treaty Bodies. I am pleased to note that the Universal periodic review carried out by the Human Rights Council has made more than 200 recommendations related to indigenous peoples, many of them concerning the right to participate in decision-making.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In concluding, let me underscore that participation in decision making is not only a human right in itself; it is also crucial to the enjoyment of other rights of indigenous peoples. I am confident that, together we can build societies and a future that are, as the audience before me, truly vibrant, inclusive and peaceful.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you a fruitful and productive session.