

**Statement by International Chief Wilton Littlechild, Samson Cree Nation
Fourteenth Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
(20 April to 1 May 2015)
Agenda Item 3(c): Youth, Self-Harm and Suicide
21 April 2015**

Greetings to all delegations. I take the floor as a grandfather who lost an adopted grandson to suicide due to suspected cyber-bullying. For many years, the issue of suicide has been a primary concern of the Maskwacis Cree Nation and now commend and thank the members of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues for agreeing to focus on youth, self-harm and suicide. In the past few months, our community has been particularly devastated by the many members who have chosen suicide over life. You see, Madame Chairperson and Members of the Permanent Forum, our cultural teachings inform us that life is the greatest gift of our Creator, that there are consequences when someone terminates it before his or her time. Indeed, for some faith groups, burial was not allowed within their graveyard.

This is a joint statement with the Samson Cree Nation and we are guided by the questions in the UN Permanent Forum Concept Note in my comments here today.

You will hear about a myriad of root causes of Indigenous youth suicide and self-harm. Recently, in desperation our leaders ask, “What more can we or could we have done? What are some losses that contribute to this situation? The loss of identity and/or a sense of belonging, losses resulting from intergenerational or historical trauma and dispossession? Is it mental health issues contributing, at times compounded by poverty, addictions? Is it the stress, doubt and deep desperation of a loss of hope? Is it new phenomena like cyber-bullying?

The social circumstances that differ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in relation to poverty, domestic violence, addictions and the known rates of disparity in overall socio-economic conditions.

Notwithstanding the dire situations that exist there have been advancements made in the areas of preventing youth suicide and self-harm. There is evidence available that cultural, spiritual and linguistic revitalization, that the provision of healthy, positive lifestyle choices be it arts, sports, recreation and leisure activities, all contribute to prevention.¹ They provide youth an opportunity to choose life.

Unfortunately, the persistent and ongoing obstacles are the lack of political will to dedicate, adequate ongoing financial and human resources to prevention. Even where there is political will the level of resources must be substantially increased.

¹ Hallett et al, “Aboriginal language knowledge and youth suicide,” Cognitive Development 22 (2007) 392-399.

While there is some available data regarding youth self-harm and suicide,² further disaggregated data is needed. In our community's recent epidemic there is no clear, reliable data to provide the exact situation on any given time frame from all sources.

As already mentioned this morning, "culture as treatment" is a good practice. Teaching relevant cultural practices and associated spiritual teachings³ in schools (Kindergarten to Grade 12) and in homes is critical. The provision of mandatory cultural education in all school curricula is required. Asking for help must be viewed as a sign of strength, not weakness.

What does not work is shaming and blaming. Neither does making young people feel they have no value as human beings. Exposure to culture at a surface level is not sufficient – this happens to some of our children in care who are brought to a cultural ceremony once a year without a real opportunity to access their cultural practices on a meaningful level.

We support the Global Indigenous Youth Caucus and other youth statements presented this morning. We add the following recommendations for the consideration of the Permanent Forum. The UN System can help address the issue by:

- Calling on all members states to substantially increase resources for all Indigenous communities dedicated to prevention and holistic treatment and to comply with General Comment No. 11 of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*,⁴ the UN *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and other relevant international laws, standards and norms;
- Incorporate significant allocations during the Post-2015 Development Process, for example, as called for by the International Olympic Committee President Bach here last weekend;
- Ensure direct, meaningful and equal participation of Indigenous peoples at all relevant UN processes and mechanisms to focus on prevention and treatment of youth self-harm and suicide; and
- Provide support to Indigenous youth by ensuring direct engagement and participation in decision-making on matters that directly affect them.

We will submit a full written intervention to the Secretariat.

Hai Hai. (Thank you.)

Appendix - Youth Suicide and Self-Harm Detailed Comments

² National Centre for Suicide Prevention, National Statistics.

³ For example, the Seven Sacred Teachings.

⁴ CRC/C/GC/11.

Samson Cree Nation

#1 – What are the root causes of indigenous youth suicide and self-harm? What other factors contribute to this situation?

There are various causes and many can be contributed to, but not limited to, emotional and mental disorders. Some of the emotions experienced include depression, despair and a sense of hopelessness. Many youth experience feelings of misunderstanding or of being misunderstood and left with the desire to be seen as important or significant. This results in a negative emotional aspect that is further impacted by the lack of positive perspective of what it means to be indigenous.

Other factors that contribute to the situation include but are not limited to:

- *lack of access to family or peer supports, this may be due to the historical negative impacts experienced in many indigenous family units*
- *the issue of lateral violence combined with poverty, a reality in many indigenous communities.*
- *the issue of lack of access to identifiable indigenous mentors as many of our indigenous communities have strong, professional individuals*
- *lack of access and resources for additional positive experiences, in addition to sports involvement, that offer exposure to indigenous youth outside of their home territory*
- *addictions to alcohol or drug use combined with social norms and social pressures*
- *a romanticized view of suicides (such as those seen in Hollywood movies)*
- *threats or admonishment made against the individual and/or their family resulting in fear of judgement*

#2 – How is the situation of indigenous youth different to that of non-indigenous youth?

There are visible differences and include but are not limited to:

- *Lack of access to suicide prevention resources such as councilors, mentors, medical professional help*
- *Safety and confidentiality is lacking in many indigenous communities*
- *There is a need for an indigenous Kids Help phone type of access*
- *There is less of a support network that exists within many communities and it should not be limited to an “individual family problem”*

#3 – What advancements have been made in the area of preventing indigenous youth suicide and self-harm?

Various studies have been carried out by the medical community in the area of Indigenous youth such as the study “Aboriginal Language Knowledge and Youth Suicide” [Darcy Hallett, Michael J. Chandler, Christopher E. Lalonde, 2007]

Indigenous youth involvement in positive activities such as sports and recognizing the decrease in apparent suicides during a youth centered, youth focused event [e.g. North American Indigenous Games]

What are the on-going obstacles?

Some of the ongoing obstacles include the prevailing non-indigenous views about indigenous people globally, lack of resources and lack of access to resources, lack of evolution in social and cultural or traditional thought surrounding suicide and self-harm.

#4 – What data is available regarding indigenous self-harm and suicide?

There is a lack of available and accurate data outside of the nationally lead surveys and studies.

Where is further data needed and how can this be disaggregated in a way that is most useful to understand this issue?

There is a need for further data in various areas and include but are not limited to causes of suicide by studying the view/experience of the survivors of attempted suicide or self-harm.

Long –term studies of 1) survivors of attempted self-harm or suicide, 2) Families of those who survived a family member suicide.

#5 – What are examples of best practices in addressing and preventing indigenous youth suicide and self-harm?

Best practices include those prevention techniques that are base on indigenous cultural context.

What works and why?

Those that are based in culturally appropriate learning models as a sense of belonging is enforced

What doesn't work?

Viewing indigenous children as property; shaming and blaming; the expectation that “indigenous youth will figure it out on their own”

#6 – How can the UN system help address this issue? How can the UN provide support to indigenous youth in this regard?

- *Positive campaigns that focus on the beauty and uniqueness of indigenous identities, indigenous youth and children*
- *Global discouragement of using indigenous children as ad campaigns that promote disrespect and pity*
- *A United Nations year or decade dedicated to the promotion and the increase of the quality of life for all indigenous youth and children*