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**Statement on MDG2: Achieve universal primary education
Ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling**

by

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Madam Chairperson,
Distinguished Members of the Permanent Forum,
Distinguished Indigenous Representatives, Delegates and Colleagues,

One only needs to look at this room during the sessions of the Permanent Forum to understand the cultural wealth of the communities in which indigenous children grow up. Diversity is an immense source of enrichment, both in our personal lives, and as a means of finding new solutions to the common problems we face, as people and nations.

It is through education that values, history and traditions are transmitted to the next generation. Education embodies the continuity of society, including its cultural diversity. It contributes to children's full development by giving them life skills for the future. It protects them, as children going to school are less likely to be performing dangerous work, be in the street or be sexually exploited.

Yet, many indigenous boys and girls are out of school, and do not complete the primary cycle of education. Indigenous children often grow up speaking indigenous languages and often have no knowledge of the language used at school. The content of the curriculum and teaching methods are in most cases decided by the central government without necessarily consulting indigenous communities. Resources are not always allocated to build schools, and pay and train teachers in remote areas where indigenous children live. Conversely, urbanization and seasonal migration related to the collection of agro-industrial crops continues to prevent indigenous children from having access to culturally pertinent and quality education. Prejudice and inadequacy of the learning environment also represent major barriers keeping indigenous girls from going to school.

Madam Chairperson,

For indigenous children, education means an exposure to different cultures, where they can learn about both their community's ancestral traditions and their country's history, where they can start reading and counting in her mother tongue, and at the same time learn the dominant language of the country they live in. However, intercultural education should also be available to non-indigenous children, so they can learn about indigenous cultures and languages and the positive contribution indigenous peoples make to the overall society. This is not a privilege. This is their right. This is not a matter of policy choice by Governments. This is the fulfilment of the obligations and commitments Governments have subscribed to.

The second Millennium Development Goal is to achieve universal primary education – for all boys and girls. The MDGs give us a picture of the final product. They give us indicators of success. But they do not give us the recipe. Finding the right recipe to obtain the right results is our common responsibility.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is our guide in this regard, and sets the minimum standard we should attain. As you know, it stipulates that indigenous children have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language. The Convention also states that all children have the right to free primary education, on the basis of equal opportunity. It further highlights that education is a powerful way to strengthen democracy and peace, since its aim is to promote "friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin." All of these provisions need to be read in conjunction with one another.

In line with the Convention, UNICEF believes that ensuring quality education for all indigenous boys and girls implies the fulfilment of all these rights in a comprehensive manner, building on their inter-relatedness.

First of all, indigenous communities, including indigenous children, must participate in all decisions regarding their education. That participation must relate not only to the content of education, but also to the management of the education system as a whole, including the school calendar, the training of indigenous teachers, the development of material, and the student government. Towards that goal, UNICEF has supported in Bolivia for example the creation of Indigenous Education Councils that advise the Government on education policies for indigenous children. Local school boards participate in the management of the school, supervise the work of teachers and assess the academic performance of children. Those forms of participation are key, not only to ensure quality education, but also to guarantee that the community as a whole has a stake in sending all of its children, boys and girls, to school.

Indigenous communities will send their children to school, and children will feel comfortable at school, if they sense that the education they receive is in harmony with their culture and traditions, and in a language they can understand. Studies have shown that education conducted in their mother tongue allows children to learn more quickly and to transfer skills to another language. Bilingual education helps develop a sense of pride and self-esteem for indigenous children, and favours continuity with their cultural background. Some studies also demonstrate that girls benefit the most from bilingual education; since they tend to stay at home or within the community, and were it not for school attendance, would be less likely to be exposed to the dominant language than boys. Yet, education should be truly bilingual, and not be only in the indigenous language. The use of languages throughout the education cycle should be carefully planned with indigenous communities. In this perspective, UNICEF supports bilingual education programmes aimed at impacting public policies in education in several countries, including Mexico, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Malaysia and the Philippines.

As you know, education is not only a matter of language but also of pedagogy. Quality education for indigenous children requires culturally appropriate methods of transmission of knowledge, by promoting, for instance, other learning spaces that stimulate children and further develop their capabilities and skills. Such methods can also provide useful pedagogical tools for education beyond indigenous communities.

In the Amazon region of Peru for example, UNICEF has supported the training of teachers with an emphasis on the teacher's role as a promoter of development. Ongoing training of selected teachers enables them to use their classrooms as models to train their peers and ensure that they apply the

methodologies they learned in training sessions. The programme contributes to overcoming difficulties and improving teacher performance.

Madam Chairperson,

The school should not be considered as an isolated infrastructure, but as a point of convergence for the realization of children's rights. Birth registration is essential as a pre-requisite for gaining access to education and to most other rights. Children learn better at school if they are healthy and well-nourished. They are less likely to drop out if the school has appropriate sanitation facilities for boys and girls. The school calendar needs to be adapted to their communities' way of life, including when they are nomadic.

Education enables children to claim their rights and to implement them in practice, by providing health and nutrition information, for example, or by teaching human rights. Education for indigenous children should be seen in a holistic perspective and not be limited strictly to school books and teacher training. That is why when we talk about school, we must include, in our projects and policies, the school environment.

In Mexico, UNICEF has supported "Child-Friendly Schools" for several years. Child-Friendly Schools focus not only on bringing out-of-school children back to the classroom and increasing the quality of education but also on using the school for broader development. Schools are used to promote children's rights, particularly those pertaining to education, health, water and sanitation, nutrition, identity and participation through the consolidation of alternative areas for learning, such as children's interactive mobile playrooms. Material on children's rights is elaborated with communities in indigenous languages, and cultural activities reinforcing children's indigenous identity are carried out. In an effort to strengthen participation, emphasis is placed on local organization and leadership training, focusing on women and young people in the indigenous communities.

All of this requires resources. We know that for many MDGs, a State may reach the goal, while segments of its population remain discriminated against, excluded and marginalized. The MDG on primary education is universal. If indigenous people are currently marginalized in their respective country, then the goal will not be reached. States have the responsibility to double efforts to make sure that every single child is in school and completes the primary cycle of education.

Madam Chairperson,

Education is a right for all children. Education is not an expense – it is an investment. We can keep talking about the all too numerous issues faced every day by indigenous peoples. But if we ensure that each and every child enjoys going to school and receives a quality education, which takes into account their culture and language, they will grow into responsible adults, and be able to make decisions for themselves. So why wait any longer?

Thank you.

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