



STATEMENT BY UNESCO

PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES  
FOURTH SESSION (16-27 MAY 2005)

**Statement on Indigenous Education dedicated to MDG2 "Achieve Universal Primary Education" (thematic approaches of language, cultural perspectives and indigenous knowledge)**

Thank you Madam Chair.

UNESCO is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

UNESCO's contribution to Millenium Development Goal 2 – achieving universal primary education for all boys and girls by 2015 – is being pursued as part of a refocus of its education programme in order to place the priorities and outcomes of The World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal in April 2000 at the heart of its work. The Dakar Forum was the first and most important event in education at the beginning of the new century. The 1,100 participants in Dakar adopted the Dakar Framework for Action reaffirming their commitment to achieving Education for All – quality education for all – by the year 2015.

Regarding the undeniable right to education of indigenous peoples and in line with the Dakar goals to achieve universal Primary Education for all, UNESCO has emphasized the need for culturally and linguistically pertinent curricula in which indigenous peoples' histories, values, languages, oral traditions, knowledge, know-how and spirituality are recognized, respected and promoted.

UNESCO takes an active part in indigenous education through the preparation of publications, information materials, support to regional conferences and the organization of expert group meetings and seminars. The latest publication under the title: "*The Challenge of Indigenous Education: Practice and Perspectives*" (2004) provides a succinct overview of current thinking and practice in the area of indigenous education.

UNESCO co-organized *the expert seminar "Indigenous Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century"* jointly with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights from 18 to 20 October 2004 at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris.

The expert seminar brought together sixty participants from ministries of education, indigenous peoples organizations, experts who have direct involvement in indigenous education issues, and non-governmental organizations. Representatives of indigenous people from Brazil, Canada, Australia, India, Guatemala, Chile, Norway, Thailand, New-Zealand, Mexico, Kenya, Greenland, Russia and Ecuador together with experts on indigenous education made presentations under four different themes, which were followed by discussions. These themes were:

- Indigenous Peoples and access to quality education at all levels
- Culturally appropriate quality education: Learner centred approaches  
Under this theme, language issues, bilingual education, mother tongue literacy, national and local curricula, textbooks and learning materials and teacher training were discussed
- Participatory approaches
- Higher education for indigenous peoples

The expert meeting concluded its seminar with the following observations:

- Although the right to education is universally recognized, indigenous peoples still do not exercise it fully. The degree of illiteracy, poor academic achievement and poor school attendance, especially at the middle school and higher levels, tends to be higher among indigenous peoples than in the rest of the population. While some countries are making a major effort to improve education levels among indigenous peoples, many obstacles continue to impede indigenous peoples' access to education.
- The demographic dispersion of indigenous peoples and the lack of adequate transport often makes it hard for children to attend the few schools that do exist in indigenous areas. Economic, social and cultural factors can make it hard for children to take part in educational activities. Schools in indigenous areas generally lack adequate facilities and resources, and budgets and teaching resources are insufficient. Various types of discrimination against indigenous education persist in the education administration systems of many countries.
- The main obstacle to full enjoyment of the right to education has been assimilationist models of education and education systems' ignorance of or failure to appreciate indigenous languages and cultures. In recent years this situation has begun to change, and there are now several countries that officially recognize indigenous cultures and agree on the need for bilingual and intercultural education. Indigenous peoples are demanding recognition of their right to education that is taught in their own language and is adapted to their own culture.
- Intercultural bilingual education faces many hurdles, from the small number of inadequately trained bilingual teachers to problems in developing appropriate teaching materials and methods, and the need to involve indigenous communities in the designing and running of their own education centres at all levels. Progress is being made in this area in many countries, from pre-school to higher education, albeit with mixed results. There is a tendency to focus on continuing education as an alternative in the area of indigenous education.

- Indigenous education, adapted to indigenous peoples' cultures and values, is the best way of ensuring the right to education; it does not mean shutting out the outside world or ignoring the challenges posed by national societies or the global economy, but is in fact viewed by indigenous communities themselves as a necessary tool for the full personal, social and cultural development of aboriginal peoples.

Madam Chair, I will now briefly refer to just some of UNESCO's recent local, national and international education activities that recognize indigenous languages, cultural perspectives and indigenous knowledge.

Through its cross-cutting LINKS project on Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems, UNESCO is working with indigenous groups to ensure that their knowledge and worldviews get into the classroom. An environmental encyclopaedia based upon the knowledge and worldview of the Marovo peoples was recently launched, with assistance from Norway, for use in classrooms in the Solomon Islands. Similar pedagogical materials are under development with the Mayangna in Nicaragua and the Mapuche Pewenche in Chile.

To strengthen ties between indigenous elders and young people, UNESCO is also using new information technologies as vehicles for traditional knowledge transmission. A second interactive CD-ROM in the LINKS (Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems) series will be released later this year. It focuses on the vast knowledge and know-how of Pacific Islanders about the ocean environment, canoe construction and navigation.

An experts workshop on 'Safeguarding the Transmission of Local and Indigenous Knowledge of Nature' was recently held in Aichi, Japan, (April 2005) to better understand the impacts of environmental and social change on indigenous knowledge transmission.

In addition, UNESCO has continued its collaboration with Ministries at country level to promote education policy reform in favour of indigenous peoples. To give one example, Vanuatu's Ministry of Education and the Vanuatu Cultural Centre are working with UNESCO's LINKS (Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems) project to reconfigure the education system from a colonial model to one that better accommodates indigenous language and knowledge.

In addition to this work in collaboration with Ministries at country level, UNESCO has also further continued to play its role in providing an international framework for education policy and practices. A brochure on UNESCO's Work on Indigenous Education highlights work at the country level around the world.

UNESCO has also developed over the decades, principles and guidelines on education in our multilingual world. These reflect UNESCO's strong commitment to the inherent value of cultural diversity. In summary UNESCO supports mother tongue instruction,

bilingual and/or multilingual education at all levels and supports language as an essential component of inter-cultural education.

Finally, UNESCO has also produced a “World encyclopedia for traditional sport and games” to raise awareness of this important part of indigenous heritage. In the context of follow-up to the MINEPS IV (International Conference of Ministers and Senior Officials Responsible for Physical Education and Sport), UNESCO is preparing an International Charter for Traditional Sports and Games. The objective is to establish a normative instrument for the preservation and promotion of traditional sports and games.

Thank you Madam Chair.