**Expert Workshop on possible ways to enhance the participation of Indigenous Peoples in the work of the Human Rights Council**

**Opening speech by Ms. Peggy HICKS,**

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**21 November 2022**

“It takes a challenge to be successful”. This was the concluding comment of one of our former recipients of the UN Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples at the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples and then returning to her country to organise a grass-roots consultation.

Consultations were held with 34 of the 114 villages of her community and a submission made on that basis to the Presidential Commission to ensure her community would be recognised as Indigenous Peoples in the national constitution under review.

The right to take part in the conduct of public affairs applies not only at the national level, but also in regional and international policy making. Yet, the workings of international organizations continue to be opaque and difficult to access, including for indigenous peoples. This needs to change.

Today, I would like to renew our call for more space and opportunities for Indigenous Peoples to participate in the work of the United Nations, including in the Human Rights Council.

Indigenous Peoples are entitled to participate fully, effectively and meaningfully in the principal inter-governmental body responsible for human rights protection, particularly in processes that affect them directly.

We are not extending courtesies, favours or making concessions. We are simply upholding existing norms and standards, such as the United Nations Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples that, in 2014, recognized their right to self-determination, self-government and the right to participate in decision-making matters that affect their rights, through representatives they choose in accordance with their own procedures.

We affirm that Indigenous Peoples have inherited rights and that it is our duty to help ensure they are able to occupy that participatory space that belongs to them.

Increased participation by Indigenous Peoples will bring added legitimacy and sustainability to the decisions adopted by the United Nations, in line with Our Common Agenda, which calls for “new approaches to proactively support the participation in public affairs of those who have traditionally been marginalized, including minority and indigenous groups“.

Obstacles to the participation of Indigenous Peoples in the political processes and decision-making on issues that affect them have severe consequences in terms of discrimination and marginalization, undermining access to land, water, housing, education, health, justice, the rights to use their native languages and to protect and make use of their traditional knowledge.

The results of this discrimination are tangible and quantifiable. While Indigenous Peoples represent over 6.2 per cent of the world’s population, account for almost 19 per cent of the extreme poor. Their life expectancy is on average 20 years lower than the life expectancy of non-indigenous people worldwide.

Indigenous women and girls face multiple forms discrimination, both in their communities and by the States, and are at heightened risk of gender-based violence: they are three times more likely to experience sexual violence compared to non-indigenous women. They have unequal access to and control over land, territories and natural resources, as well as access to justice and decision-making power in the household and the community. Particular attention should be paid to increasing the participation of Indigenous women as well as Indigenous women-led organizations and associations in the work of the United Nations mechanisms.

Difficulties in expressing their voice result in Indigenous Peoples being disproportionally affected by nature or human-made disasters as the COVID pandemic and the adverse effects of climate change have demonstrated.

Attacks on defenders of the human rights of indigenous peoples, including indigenous environmental human rights defenders, have increased dramatically in recent years. Indigenous Peoples leaders are victims of reprisals and targeted for defending their collective rights to lands, territories and resources.

Yet, Indigenous Peoples are on the forefront of the defence of the environment, rainforests and biodiversity, deriving strength from their collective ancestral ties to the land and the resources. While they own, occupy or use only a quarter of the world’s surface area, those lands comprise 80 percent of the world’s biodiversity. Their ancestral knowledge can offer solutions to many of our common challenges, if we are willing to listen to their wisdom.

**PROCESS OF IPs PARTICIPATION AT UN /GA LEVEL**

It is time to address the legacy of historical injustices, discrimination and assimilation that indigenous peoples have been subjected to over centuries. Indigenous peoples must participate in international decision-making.

Since the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2014, the United Nations has worked to facilitate the participation of Indigenous Peoples’ representatives and institutions in its bodies and mechanisms.

In 2018, the General Assembly started a process of consultation with Indigenous Peoples’ representatives on their enhanced participation in the work of the United Nations. To date, two out of three informal interactive hearings took place.

**THE WORKSHOP**

The expert workshop, that opens today, represents a significant opportunity to continue that process of consultations. It aims at maintaining the focus on the commitment that States and the United Nations made to consult and engage with Indigenous Peoples on matters that affect them.

During the next four days, the insights of the Indigenous Peoples representatives and institutions should be the ones to guide the work on the four key topics identified for discussion.

I invite all participants to consider this expert workshop as a space for innovation, to exchange experiences and ideas to strengthen the full, effective and meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples in the work of the Human Rights Council. I call on all to collaborate and seek common positions so that this process can be brought forward by an incremental and paced approach.

Indigenous Peoples’ participation should not increase their potential vulnerability to intimidation and reprisals. On a daily basis, important concerns continue to be raised relating to individuals, whether victims, witnesses, civil society representatives, who engage and cooperate, or attempt to cooperate, with the United Nations. Increased participation by Indigenous Peoples to the work of the United Nations, including the work of the Human Rights Council, should come hand in hand with increased and sustained attention to possible reprisals against them.

**OHCHR CONTRIBUTION**

In the meanwhile, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights will continue to build the capacity and expertise of Indigenous Peoples’ representatives on the United Nations system through the Indigenous Fellowship Programme so that they can be trained and empowered to participate in the human rights work of the Organization. Since its launch in 1997, 463 indigenous women and men from 70 countries all over the world have been trained; of these 19 have been trained during the current year.

OHCHR will also continue to administer the UN Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples which, since its establishment in 1985, has offered financial support in the form of grants to more than 3,000 Indigenous Peoples representatives; 124 during the current year, many of whom are participating in this expert workshop. These grants aim to help representatives of indigenous communities and organizations to participate in United Nations mechanisms and processes most relevant to indigenous issues.

I look forward the practical recommendations that will stem from your important discussion on the way forward. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights stands ready to support you in their implementation.