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FF/05/05, #3(a)

## Indigenous Children and Poverty

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What data are available show that indigenous peoples often rank among the poorest of the poor wherever they live. Poverty is a clear violation of human rights. All of UNICEF's work is geared towards reducing poverty and addressing its root causes, among them, discrimination.

As UNICEF has argued, there is much more to poverty than income. According to the definition agreed by 117 countries at the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen and included in the 1995 *Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action* (United Nations, 1995), absolute poverty is defined as "a condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to social services." This is particularly true and relevant for children and women.

Several problems arise with using income-based poverty measures for children:

- First, children need adequate care, including access to health services and education, to avoid experiencing poverty. However, a household's financial resources may not guarantee access to these services if they are not available. This is particularly so in rural areas where many indigenous people live.
- Secondly, boys and girls do not share equally in the household's fortunes (or misfortunes), but this is not captured by income-based poverty measures.
- Thirdly, when children work, their families' income often rises above the poverty line. These children are deprived, yet they would not be considered poor with the traditional income approach.
- Fourthly, social exclusion, discrimination, lack of protection and other issues that cause children to live in poverty are not captured by income measures of poverty. These factors are seldom considered and integrated in a common framework of analysis.

Children experience poverty in a dynamic and multi-dimensional way. Thus, UNICEF proposed a working definition of children living in poverty, which builds on the interdependency principles embraced by the Convention on the Right of the Child and follows a human rights based approach. In the State of the World's Children 2005, we read:

**"Children living in poverty (are those that) experience deprivation of the material, spiritual and emotional resources needed to survive, develop and thrive, leaving them unable to enjoy their rights, achieve their full potential or participate as full and equal members of society"**

Statement by: Ms. Elizabeth Gibbons  
Chief, Global Policy Section, UNICEF

Over one billion children -- **more than half** of the children living in developing countries - suffer from severe deprivation of basic human rights<sup>1</sup> and income poverty systematically underestimates the number of children living in poverty.

Indigenous children are among those who are most **deprived** of many minimum basic material conditions and services, the rights which constitute poverty. Lack of access to health, education, adequate shelter, water, sanitation and information are common among indigenous populations. Moreover, indigenous children, like their parents, are also discriminated against and **excluded** from social participation and citizenship, instrumental rights for poverty reduction. Many of them live in a highly **vulnerable** economic, social, political and natural environment. However, many of these problems are hidden from policy debate and action due to lack of data, in particular disaggregated data.

With respect to indigenous peoples, UNICEF's actions are multidimensional, and aimed at promoting and supporting the fulfilment of all the rights of indigenous children and women. UNICEF's interventions include, in particular, advocacy and social mobilization activities aimed at increasing awareness of the situation of indigenous children and women, as well as their participation in public policy.

For instance, in the report prepared by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean regarding the achievement of the MDGs, UNICEF was responsible for raising awareness and stressing the impact poverty has on indigenous children. Moreover, UNICEF has been a strong advocate with all stakeholders to ensure that issues such as migration, and vulnerabilities related to natural disaster's impact, are taken into consideration in the policy debate.

Let me illustrate this with one country programme example. In *Mexico*, several projects have been initiated to increase the visibility of indigenous children. A project with the Commission for the Development of Indigenous People and UNDP has been undertaken to obtain disaggregated data on indigenous children. It is conducted in preparation for the next publication on fulfilment of rights in the series 'Situation of Economic and Social Development of indigenous population in Mexico'.

Significant progress has also been made in the academic context. UNICEF has initiated collaboration with the National Autonomous University of Mexico, which is generating a curriculum with the objective to integrate the issue of indigenous children in its courses and research. Moreover, several distinguished academics have committed themselves to participate in the formulation of a conceptual framework to analyse the fulfilment of rights of indigenous children. In addition to achievements in the area of knowledge generation in this project, public initiatives are being undertaken to increase the visibility of indigenous people and highlight the cultural diversity of Mexico.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the first ever measurement of child poverty in the developing world, commissioned by UNICEF. See Gordon David and Townsend Peter (2003), *Child Poverty in the Developing World*, The Policy Press, UK,

Children, and in particular indigenous children, living in poverty suffer from many deprivations. Their rights, including the right to survival, health and nutrition, education, participation, protection from harm, exploitation and discrimination, are violated. This results in the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next. Fulfilling the rights of children is the best way to break the cycle of poverty. This is an opportunity we cannot miss, because indigenous children, as all children, have rights, and they are the agents of a more prosperous and equitable society.