

**United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Session**  
**16 to 27 May 2005**  
**United Nations Headquarters, New York**

Agenda Item: 3(a)

Statement of Suhas Chakma, representative of Asian Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Network

Madam Chair,

Can rights be goals? In our view, the MDGs are the disconnect from the rights based approaches to development irrespective of what Mr Brown and many of the UN agency representatives have asserted as to how they consider the MDGs with rights based approaches to development. The disconnect will become clearer when the Forum discusses Goal 2 on universal primary education. It may sound crude but MDG 2 gives the impression that children somehow will have to be herded to primary schools to achieve universal primary education by 2015. Yet, primary education is most crucial for indigenous peoples to learn in their mother tongues. The Committee on the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in its General Comment on the right to education rightly refers to *availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability*. We will discuss further day after tomorrow but what I wanted to highlight is that MDGs as the disconnect put back advancement made in the field of rights based approaches to development.

There is a difference right to food and the right to freedom from hunger. The right to freedom of hunger implies that the state has an obligation to ensure, at the very least, that people do not starve. But the obligation of the State i.e. right of the people to freedom from hunger has become a goal now. At practical level, on 28 November 2001, the Supreme Court of India passed an interim order that provides for the conversion of eight food security schemes into entitlements (rights) of the poor. Since then Supreme Court has been following the implementation of these programmes. Yet, in the implementation of the government of India's programmes discrimination has denied access to these government-sponsored schemes to a large number of indigenous peoples.

Indigenous peoples suffer from hunger because of the denial of access and institutionalised discrimination because of their "indigenouness". How does one reduce the proportion of people living on less than a dollar

a day and people who suffer from hunger without recognising the right to land, resources and free, prior and informed consent on the development projects that affect the people or without properly rehabilitating millions of indigenous peoples who have been displaced?

The MDGs are also presumptuous – the situation in a particular country will remain normal to achieve the goals. But, hunger is caused by war, drought, natural disaster and institutionalised discrimination. Beyond the headlines of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, most armed conflicts in Asia involve indigenous peoples where basic human rights are routinely violated with impunity. As we discuss the MDGs here, indigenous peoples in Nepal descend into further abyss because of the conflict with the Maoists, which has further accentuated because of the *coup de tat* by King Gyanendra on 1 February 2005.

This session of the PFII gives the sense that indigenous peoples are quite there as far the MDGs are concerned but we are actually not there. Most States' mid-term review reports on MDGs do not include indigenous peoples. The question is if indigenous peoples are not specifically referred to or included in the MDGs and Poverty Reduction Strategies of the governments, can we expect that UN agencies to include them in their programmes? How many of the IPs people at this hall have heard of Common Country Assessment or been invited to give comments in the preparation of CCA and UNDAF? That will explain as to what to expect from the UN bodies at national level.

Many of the UN representatives who made the interventions at the Forum are the converted one –the problem lies at national level. In Asia and Africa, most UN agencies are scared to discuss indigenous issues, not to mention about the situation of indigenous peoples in conflict situations. Irrespective of what the enlightened UN representatives may speak here at the Forum, at national level, it depends on the predilection of individual officers. What are required are the instructions from the Headquarters of the UN Specialised Agencies to include indigenous peoples in their policies and programmes on the MDGs. Otherwise, indigenous peoples will be crushed under the latest gravy train – the MDGs – that too with the cooperation of the UN agencies. UN is an institutions and it requires institutional mechanisms to put into practice what their representatives promising here.