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Third United Nations Forum on Minority Issues  
“Minorities and the Effective Participation in Economic Life”



Opening address by Ms. Navanethem Pillay  
High Commissioner for Human Rights

Geneva, 14 December 2010

Madam Chair,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Participants,  
Colleagues and Friends,

I welcome all of you to the Third United Nations Forum on Minority Issues. I am especially pleased to see here today so many participants representing minorities from all over the world.

First, I wish to congratulate Prof. Gita Sen for her appointment as the Chair of this 3<sup>rd</sup> session of the Forum. We will greatly benefit from the wealth of your experience in the area of economic and social rights and development. I would also like to thank Gay McDougall, the Independent Expert on minority issues. I know that Gay has worked tirelessly with my Office for the past three years to guide the work of the Forum and prepare its sessions. I wish to express my gratitude to Gay for her invaluable contribution to making this important Forum such a success and for her work as Independent Expert.

The Forum provides a unique venue for dialogue, exchange of experiences and constructive cooperation in bolstering minority rights and promoting implementation of the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. Previous sessions focused on the challenges that minorities face in the fields of education and political participation, proposing concrete recommendations to counter such obstacles. I was therefore very pleased to learn that this third Forum will address the issue of “Minorities and Effective Participation in Economic Life”, a theme of fundamental importance to minorities in all regions.

The positive experiences of many countries show that when minorities have the opportunity to contribute their work, their energy and creativity, and their entrepreneurial skills, societies benefit immensely, not least from the creation of new and diverse businesses, jobs and wealth for all. All too often, however, many people from minority groups are excluded from full and effective participation in economic life.

This reality has a heavy impact on the lives of millions of individuals and families and whole communities. For some, it is manifested in discrimination when they seek to find a job or access credit but are rejected because of prejudice, perhaps due to their colour or ethnicity, their religion or their name. The challenges that minorities face in access to employment may be deeply rooted in discriminatory attitudes and perceptions and women may face particular problems caused by multiple discrimination. For others, lack of effective economic participation may mean that large scale economic development projects or commercial activities are carried out on their lands and territories, often without prior consultation with them, or adequate compensation when they are forced to relocate.

While the experiences of different minorities who do not enjoy their right to participate in economic life are diverse – the impact of that exclusion is nearly always devastating. The results are seen in poverty, displacement from land or homes, disintegration of communities and families, loss of distinct minority cultures and identities, and in some cases, even violence and conflict. It is important to note that the negative consequences of economic exclusion of minorities are also felt by States. They

fail to benefit from the contributions to wider society that members of minorities can make.

In these times of economic hardship and uncertainty, members of the most disadvantaged groups, frequently minorities, risk suffering the most. They are likely to be the first to lose their jobs and the last to regain them. They are exposed to stigmatization and singled out as the cause of economic or social problems. It is of critical importance as countries face the global challenges of financial crises and recession that efforts to combat discrimination and achieve effective and full equality for all does not lose momentum.

The Independent Expert and others have helped to establish that minorities have been neglected or utterly failed by development and poverty alleviation processes that did not recognize their unique needs and circumstances. These unique conditions are often created and fueled by discrimination and exclusion which, in turn, exacerbate poverty. In recent months attention has once again been focused on the Millennium Development Goals and how to achieve them, most recently last September at the global summit held in New York. While progress has been made and many countries are on track to reach some of the Goals, I am among those who emphasize that we must strive to achieve the Goals for all, especially the poorest of the poor and those who are left on the margins of society - many of them minorities. The effective economic participation of minorities is essential for them to emerge from poverty and for States to meet MDG commitments.

Let me conclude by thanking you all for being here for this important Forum and offering your experiences, knowledge and energy to these proceedings. I am confident that your active participation will contribute to further promoting policies and strategies towards a better and more effective participation of minorities in economic life.

I wish you a fruitful debate and a successful session.

Thank you.