

Gay McDougall
Opening Remarks

Mr. President

Madam Chairperson,

High Commissioner,

Excellencies,

Distinguished colleagues and experts,

Representatives of civil society,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hereby call to order the first meeting of the 3rd session of the Forum on Minority Issues. It is a pleasure to welcome you all, some familiar faces and many new participants, to the third annual session of the United Nations Forum on Minority Issues.

I would like to thank, in particular, H.E. Ambassador Sihasak Phuangkitkeow, President of the Human Rights Council and Ms. Navanethem Pillay, High Commissioner for Human Rights for their presence here today. At the outset, I would also like to thank Prof. Gita Sen, the Chair for this year's session.

The aims and objectives of this annual and unique Forum were established in Human Rights Council resolution 6/15, which established the Forum to:

1. provide a platform for dialogue and cooperation on issues pertaining to persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities;
 2. provide thematic contributions and expertise to the work of the Independent Expert on minority issues;
 3. identify and analyze best practices, challenges, opportunities and initiatives for the further implementation of the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Minorities;
 4. produce thematic recommendations to be reported to the Human Rights Council;
- and
5. contribute to efforts to improve cooperation among UN mechanisms, bodies and specialized agencies, funds and programmes on activities related to the promotion and

Gay McDougall
Opening Remarks

protection of the rights of persons belonging to minorities, including at the regional level.

The Independent Expert on minority issues is required to guide the work of the Forum and prepare its annual meetings, and I have the honor to carry out these tasks as the current mandate holder. Over the course of our work in previous sessions of the Forum we have established some working procedures which have proven fruitful and effective, and so will be adopted for this third session. A limited number of presenters have been asked to introduce each agenda item. Discussions under each item will then be open to all participants.

We have an intensive programme ahead of us over the coming two days. The session will cover 6 different topics, as outlined in the programme of work which has been made available to all, and additional copies of which are available on the tables at the back of the room. Each meeting will cover two thematic discussions.

You can register to speak for all thematic discussions by adding your names to the speakers list which will be open at the Secretariat tables at the side of the room. All stakeholders, including NGOs and National Human Rights Institutions, State Representatives, International Organizations, United Nations mechanisms as well as individuals, academics and experts are encouraged to inscribe in the relevant list at the Secretariat's list of speakers' desk as of now. Each list will close some 15 minutes after the beginning of the meeting in question.

In line with past practice, the list of speakers for each segment will be drawn so as to favour an inter-active debate and wide representation of views since the Forum on Minority Issues has been established by the Council to provide a platform for promoting dialogue and cooperation on issues pertaining to persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities. May I take this opportunity, at the outset, to emphasize that all views are welcome, in particular on best practices and on-going challenges and opportunities. I encourage everybody to show respect for others' views while inviting all participants to exercise decorum, avoid abusive language and uphold

Gay McDougall
Opening Remarks

UN standards when referring to countries and territories. Time management will be challenging and I count on the cooperation of everybody to that end.

In order to allow the largest possible participation and to have a more inter-active format, we ask that your interventions during the discussion period be limited to no more than 3 minutes and be focused on the draft Recommendations as well as:

a) the identification of challenges and problems facing minorities and States; b) the identification of good practices; and c) the consideration of opportunities, initiatives and solutions.

Once again, this Forum will seek to provide concrete and tangible outcomes in the form of thematic recommendations of practical value to all stakeholders. Therefore, a set of draft, action-oriented recommendations has been made available to all participants and will constitute the basis for discussions during the two-day session.

Given that the principal nature of this Forum is to be a platform for dialogue, as in previous years we will not seek to negotiate or adopt the final content of the Recommendations. Rather, all contributions will be collected and considered in detail and, the final thematic Recommendations will be reported to the Human Rights Council during its Sixteenth session in March 2011.

Distinguished participants,

The Forum on Minority Issues offers a unique and essential opportunity to come together in a spirit of cooperation and constructive endeavor to address some of the key minority issues that continue to challenge States and minorities in all regions. This third session of the Forum will focus on an issue of considerable importance to minorities and States around the world: “Minorities and Effective Participation in Economic Life”.

Gay McDougall
Opening Remarks

The Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities is clear that persons belonging to minorities have the right to participate effectively in cultural, religious, social, economic and public life. It states that ensuring that persons belonging to minorities are “an integral part of the development of society as a whole” is essential to harmonious relations among a society’s various components. Additionally, the Declaration highlights that States should consider appropriate measures so that persons belonging to minorities may participate fully in the economic progress and development in their country. Our challenge over the coming two days is to provide concrete recommendations to assist States and other actors to fulfill the requirements of the Declaration.

As has been stated in the background materials for this Forum and the draft recommendations that are before you all, disadvantaged minorities in all regions of the world face discrimination and exclusion from equal participation in economic life. In the course of my work as Independent Expert, I have seen first hand the effects of economic exclusion on minority communities and seen the damage caused to the lives of individuals who face discrimination, for example, when they seek employment. Many may face barriers in accessing credit or loans to begin small businesses, to break the cycle of poverty that traps them. Others may live in the poorest or most remote regions of their country, areas that offer limited prospects for economic development. During my country visits, I have encountered all too often the impact on minority communities of large-scale economic development projects or commercial activities that may be carried out on the traditional lands and territories of minority communities, but without prior consultation with or the consent of those communities. In some countries where minority communities have traditionally owned resource-rich territories, there have been broad-scale thefts of ownership rights and land-grabs, leading to massive displacements, a deepening cycle of poverty, environmental degradation, and in some cases, violence against minority communities.

In some countries, problems exist in the unequal regional distribution of resources and services and a lack of basic infrastructure in regions where minorities live. These often

Gay McDougall
Opening Remarks

have the effect of preventing them from fully exercising their economic and social rights and restricting their opportunities to participate fully in economic life. In each case the solutions may be different and finding sustainable solutions requires a detailed understanding of the challenges and the daily lives and circumstances of members of specific communities. We will learn about positive practices that can help to guide us - efforts by States and others who have recognized that discrimination and exclusion exist, and that have put in place measures, legislation and practical initiatives to promote non-discrimination and inclusion of minorities in economic life.

Some fundamental principles underpin our work to address the exclusion of minorities from full and effective participation in economic life. Firstly, the right to non-discrimination and the obligation of States and others to combat both direct and indirect discrimination in order to ensure the enjoyment of a range of economic and social rights. A second essential principle is the right to effective participation of minorities in decision-making and in decisions that affect them and the regions in which they live. Thirdly, I wish to highlight the need for implementation of special measures or affirmative action to address the effects of long-standing and entrenched discrimination on certain minority groups.

Previous sessions of this Forum have focused on two issues that are highly relevant to economic participation of minorities, namely education and political participation. The recommendations emerging from those sessions provide an important resource to draw upon and will inform our work, while allowing us over the next days to move beyond those issues and focus our attention towards shaping our recommendations clearly in the area of minorities and effective participation in economic life.

In addition to many distinguished delegates from Member States, whom I warmly welcome and thank for their participation, we are joined at this session by experts in the field of economic participation who are themselves from minority communities in every region of the world. They bring with them a wealth of experience across the spectrum of issues that we will discuss during our work together. I am also happy to see

Gay McDougall
Opening Remarks

representatives of numerous Non-Governmental Organizations and thank you for your participation and continued support to the work of the Forum. I also welcome representatives of the UN Treaty Bodies and UN Specialized Agencies who help to ensure that the work that we do in this Forum contributes to the wider objectives of the United Nations in the field of human and minority rights.

Once again, I would like to thank the Vice President of the Human Right Council for joining us this morning and for his encouraging words to us as we begin our deliberations. Equally, I want to thank the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Navi Pillay, for taking time from her busy schedule to be with us and to lend her support once again to the work of the Forum.

Helping to guide us in our deliberations is the Chair of this third Forum and I am delighted to now introduce to you our Chair, Prof. Dr. Gita Sen. Many of you will know that Professor Sen is an internationally celebrated development economist currently Professor at the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore and Adjunct Professor at Harvard University School of Public Health. Prof. Dr. Gita Sen combines a distinguished academic career with policy advocacy and NGO activism. Her work, including in the area of gender and development, has been an inspiration to a generation of researchers and policy-makers of South and North, and non-governmental organizations. I know that we will benefit immensely from Professor Sen's experience and guidance and I warmly welcome her to the Forum.

I now have the pleasure and the honor to give the floor to our Chair, and to invite Professor Sen to make a few introductory remarks.