On behalf of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, I would like to thank President Lennart Bäge for inviting me to speak before all of you, today. It is a great pleasure to have this time to briefly share with you the achievements and challenges in the work of the international community on indigenous peoples’ issues. Since IFAD is actively working with indigenous peoples not only at the international level but more importantly, on the ground, we are eager to hear your judgement and decisions as members of the Executive Board in terms of how to bring forward and strengthen the work in this area in the future.

At the outset, let me thank you, President Bäge, for the commitment you have shown all along for indigenous peoples and for your efforts to mainstream indigenous peoples’ issues not only in-house but also internationally. Your designation of an Assistant President on Special Assignment for Indigenous and Tribal issues and your inclusion of indigenous peoples issues as an agenda of the UN HLCP (High Level Committee on Programmes), of which you are the Chairperson, are just some of the most relevant actions you took which demonstrates this commitment. IFAD has invested money, human resources and technical assistance in indigenous peoples’ communities in Latin America and Asia.

At a policy forum which was held here last May, Mr. Bäge stressed that IFAD should also pay more attention to Africa as indigenous issues are also relevant in that region. At the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD), which was held in March this year in Porto Alegre, he highlighted the importance of responding to the continuing marginalization of indigenous peoples. These pronouncements coming from the highest official of IFAD are important for indigenous peoples and for a new body like the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues which is mandated to provide advice on indigenous issues to the UN ECOSOC and to coordinate UN bodies, agencies and funds on their work with indigenous peoples.

I also would like to thank several groups of countries which have been playing very active roles in helping achieve the gains for indigenous peoples within the United Nations. The Nordic countries, Latin American countries and Canada have been our main allies in the establishment of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the adoption of the Second International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People (2005-2015) and its Programme of Action.
The most recent victory was the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the UN Human Rights Council in June 29, 2006 at its first session. After more than 20 years of experts, governments and indigenous representatives formulating and negotiating this text, we are finally seeing light at the end of the tunnel. The adoption of this by the Human Rights Council in which 30 member-countries voted for it and only two voted against is a manifestation of the increasing commitment of governments to indigenous peoples’ issues.

Being an Asian indigenous person, I am happy to report that 9 Asian countries came on board to support the adoption. The full support of almost all the Latin American countries and the active role played by Mexico in organizing and paying for a meeting between governments and indigenous peoples to discuss the sticky issues, also played a crucial role in making this happen. Of course, the EU decision to vote yes was equally crucial. Africa, also delivered. We are looking forward to the adoption of this Declaration at the General Assembly before the year ends.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples contains the international minimum standards for the protection of indigenous peoples’ rights and the framework which should underpin the way development should take place in their territories. This major gain is directly related to the growing strength and importance of indigenous peoples’ movements in various parts of the world and globally. The increasing assertion of indigenous peoples to get governments and the dominant society to respect their basic human rights and to ensure that development is done in a more culturally sensitive manner, significantly contributed to these achievements. This includes constitutional reforms to recognize the multicultural and multi-ethnic composition of nation-states. Evo Morales’ election as the President of Bolivia is another evidence of this growing strength. We are very proud of the achievements gained so far, but we are also very much aware that there is still a long road ahead.

Let me return again to IFAD and other intergovernmental bodies. The designation of an Assistant President on Indigenous Issues in IFAD, as I mentioned earlier, is a very important milestone within the UN System. It is only IFAD, so far, which has managed to put a senior management person to deal with indigenous peoples’ issues. This has, of course, raised expectation within indigenous communities and leaders. It is a pity that Mr Roy is retiring soon because he has shown a very strong leadership and has been able to build a small team of committed people. He also managed to link with global and national networks of indigenous peoples’ organizations and other institutions that support indigenous peoples. We hope that these achievements will not be lost within IFAD with his departure and that the special assignment on indigenous issues will be transferred to another Assistant President. We hope that his successor will build upon what has been achieved, so far, and strengthen even further the partnership with the Permanent Forum that Mr. Roy and his team have been able to establish.

Since the UN Permanent Forum had its first session in 2001 I can say that IFAD has been a leading light within the Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues (IASG). The IASG now has a membership of 30 UN programmes, agencies and funds
which also includes other intergovernmental bodies like the European Union. IFAD is the chair of this body for this year. In 2004, the Fund provided support for the evaluation by indigenous experts of some of its projects which are implemented in indigenous territories. This is an innovative approach as what is usually done is to pay consultants who are not so familiar with indigenous realities to do such evaluations. I think, getting indigenous experts to assess the impacts or effectiveness of projects or policies directly affecting them is a good practice. An evaluation done from the lens and perspectives of indigenous peoples, themselves, can provide different results which can inform future thrusts and development programming.

There is another IFAD-supported ongoing initiative which is the evaluation of the achievements of the First International Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples in 10 Asian countries. The results of this, which will be presented in a workshop in November 2006, will be used to help make the Second International Decade more responsive to indigenous peoples. Another new area of work being supported by IFAD is the development of indicators on poverty and well-being by and for indigenous peoples. This has been identified as a priority by the Permanent Forum and IFAD has come forward to provide some funds for this to happen. The workshop in Latin America took place last week and the ones in Asia and Africa will take place before the end of the year.

I would also like to thank the World Bank for transferring the Grant Facility for Indigenous Peoples to IFAD. The UN-PFII strongly supports this move because it arose as a result of a demand from indigenous peoples and we want it to continue and grow. The PFII will support IFAD and the WB in their efforts to get support from other donors so that this can be a sustainable and long lasting operation. It is our hope that this fund will grow and will be used to assist implementing the Programme of the Second International Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples and beyond. This can be the seed of an indigenous peoples’ development fund which will help achieve one of the objectives of the Second Decade which is to redesign development to become more indigenous peoples’ friendly and more culturally sensitive. I am happy that the Board of the Grant Facility is composed of indigenous persons.

Finally, let me conclude by expressing again my heartfelt appreciation to IFAD for the work and commitment it has shown, so far, in working with indigenous peoples. While most of us still belong to the most discriminated and marginalized sectors in many countries, we are the ones who still live and sustain most of the world’s remaining 5,000 diverse cultures which definitely makes this world more interesting and sustainable for all of us and for future generations. The challenges which governments face in ensuring that indigenous peoples’ individual and collective rights are respected and their own development with culture and identity is pursued are still enormous. But the work started in IFAD can provide some answers on how to face head-on these challenges. We, in the Permanent Forum, are committed to enhance further this partnership we have forged with you and make a reality the theme of the Second Decade which is “Partnership in Action and Dignity.”
Distinguished members of the Executive Board and President Bäge, thank you for giving me this chance to speak before you and I hope this dialogue is just the beginning of a continuing process.

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