

Mr. President
Madam Chairperson,
High Commissioner,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,

It is a pleasure to welcome all of you to the inaugural United Nations Forum on Minority Issues. The aims and objectives of this annual Forum on Minority Issues are established in Human Rights Council resolution 6/15 which requires that under the guidance and preparation of the Independent Expert on Minority Issues, the Forum shall:

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

We have chosen to focus this first session of the Forum on an issue of utmost importance to minorities in all countries around the world: “Minorities and the right to education”.

Education is a fundamental human right of every man, woman and child. And yet in all regions of the world minority children suffer disproportionately from unequal access to quality education. Failure to ensure equal opportunities and equal access to education robs people of their full human potential and their ability to contribute fully to their own communities and to the wider society. Education provides a gateway to the full enjoyment of a wide array of other rights, without which individuals and societies remain economically, socially and culturally impoverished. Lack of access to education perpetuates the cycle of poverty that is experienced most acutely by minority communities facing discrimination and exclusion. Conversely, education provides a vital key to sustainable poverty alleviation. Ensuring equal access to education is one of the most serious challenges for minorities and States alike.

Equal access to education must be understood in the holistic sense of the rights to non-discrimination and equality. Minorities often face systematic discrimination which creates blockages to their full enjoyment of their rights, including their right to education. To fully protect the right to education for those who have been subjected to historical systematic discrimination, we must go beyond issues of physical or economic accessibility to focus on the

ultimate goal of equal access to quality education and to equal achievement outcomes. Disproportionate educational outcomes along racial, ethnic or religious lines must be considered evidence of discrimination that implicates state responsibility for the promotion and protection of these rights.

The Durban Programme of Action adopted in 2001 urged States “to ensure equal access to education for all in law and in practice, and to refrain from any legal or any other measures leading to imposed racial segregation in any form in access to schooling”.

We have also learned that enforced segregated schools not only violates the rights of minorities but also robs the entire society of its best opportunity to foster social cohesion and respect for a diversity of views and experiences.

Distinguished Participants,

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. It will constitute the basis for discussions during the two-day session.

Nearly 40 experts, most of whom are themselves minorities, selected on the basis of their expertise in the field of education for members of minority groups and their regional representation, will make presentations under the various agenda items.

Discussions under each agenda item will then be open to all participants according to requests to be placed on the speakers list. Interventions must be limited to 3 minutes and be focused on the draft Recommendations and:

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

Given the principal nature of this Forum and a platform for dialogue, we will not seek to negotiate the provisions of the Recommendations with a view toward adoption of the Recommendations by this Forum. Rather as called for in resolution 6/15, the thematic Recommendations will be reported to the Human Rights Council in my upcoming annual report.

Finally, I would like to extend my appreciation to all of you, experts, government officials, representatives of the Treaty Bodies, UN Specialized Agencies and civil society representatives, for participating in this inaugural session of the Forum on Minority Issues.