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Forum on Minority Issues

Item 1. Review: Normative frameworks and the mainstreaming of the Declaration at the UN

On the 30th anniversary of the Declaration, it is clear that the UN system has failed minorities. The mechanisms for the protection of minorities are among the weakest in all of international human rights law. The UN dedicated space and funding for minorities is less than 10% of what is offered for indigenous peoples.

Reform is needed in two areas: 1) a legally-binding treaty and; 2) more effective monitoring and coordination mechanisms.

First, there have been protections for minorities developed across many different treaties and declarations, and there is a case for consolidating these in a single treaty. Minorities are the last major group lacking any global, legally binding treaty for comprehensive protection.

Second, the UN needs a space dedicated to the 'coordination of activities related to minorities within the UN system' and better participation of minorities in 'providing expert advice and recommendations on minority right issues'.¹

The Forum on Minority Issues needs to be reformed to better align with related institutions such as the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent. The structure of the Forum should change, to include oversight of a larger panel of members, including representatives from minority groups, and expanding the number of days. The UN agencies in the UN Network on Racial Discrimination and Protection of Minorities could each report annually to the Forum, as they do to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The Forum could rotate between Geneva and New York to ensure that minority rights are included in the human rights, development and peace and security work of the UN.² A UN Year or UN Decade on minorities could stimulate better coordination.

Finally, the UN Secretary-General should appoint a High Level Panel³ to recommend a series of reforms to achieve rights protection, better UN coordination and a stronger voice for minority groups.

¹ Adapted from the Mandate of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

² The Permanent Forum on People of African Descent is mandated to rotate between Geneva and New York. See General Assembly Resolution 75/314, Establishment of the Permanent Forum of People of African Descent (6 August 2021): para. 6.

³ See, for example, the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement <https://www.un.org/internal-displacement-panel/>; High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation <https://www.un.org/en/sg-digital-cooperation-panel/>; and High Level Expert Group on Net-Zero Emissions: <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/high-level-expert-group> as possible models.