

# Opening

Chair of the Forum, Professor Tone Bleie, University of Tromsø

On behalf of The Forum for Development Cooperation with Indigenous Peoples I greet you all. A special welcome to our dignitaries and honourable speakers, both those of you who have had exhausting journies from distant lands in Asia, South America, Africa and elsewhere, and those of your who travelled here from less faraway places. A similar warm welcome to all other conference participants, from abroad and from Southern and Northern Norway. Some of you we welcome for the very first time, others amongst you we have been fortunate to have with us as our valued participants in earlier conferences.

The Forum Advisory Board is composed of the following institutional members; the University of Tromsø (UiT); Galdu the Resource Centre for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; the Sami Council; the Rainforest Foundation; the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs (Nupi); and the International Working Groups for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA). UiT hosts the Secretariat function with a Coordinator. The board members from our institution constitute the Forum's Working Committee. UiT and Galdu are the lead partners in planning this year's conference: "*Indigenous participation in policy-making: ideas, realities and possibilities*".

This is the 11<sup>th</sup> year the Forum hosts this international conference, a meeting venue for indigenous and other indigenous rights-based organizations, scholars on indigenous issues and the Norwegian authorities responsible for development cooperation. This conference always takes place in late October, a transitional Arctic season when the towering *Sálašoaivi* in Sami or Tromsdalstinden, in Norwegian, the Sami's sacred mountain, gets its white robe back, and the people of Tromsø retreat indoors. In our homes we collect around open crackling fireplaces and in public spaces and our conferencing and festival season starts in earnest.

The conference themes have over the years collected concerned indigenous and non-indigenous researchers and other experts, civil society leaders, bureaucrats, and aid practitioners around debates on a range of topics of high importance to the global indigenous movement, but also of importance to indigenous nations and indigenous communities. The very existence of this Forum is in itself an expression of a significant breakthrough in international law for indigenous rights and of course, heralds progress for humanity as such. The topics we have debated over the years have all in their own right addressed rights violations, claims, progress, and obstacles to making those rights living realities that end discrimination, inhuman practices and dispossession of indigenous peoples, and improve the lives, safety and respect for indigenous women and men, for young and old in different regions, and in the global south in particular.

Last year's conference addressed violent conflicts, and their pathways through ceasefires, peace accords- and beyond - when the guns have silenced. In addressing the background for the civil war in Guatemala, Ambassador Leon argued that among the main causes are closures of public and democratic spaces, institutional exclusion and state unwillingness to address the

structural causes which hinder full participation in public life. The fundamental failures to enable participation ran like a red thread through most of the conflicts we addressed last year. This year we focus on participation in policy making in general. First, we anchor indigenous participation in normative ways, as ideals, be that thorough international and national laws or in everyday concepts of morality and action. Keeping in mind these ideals, we intend to debate the enabling and constraining realities in different regions and in some selected countries. In keeping with the Forum's mandate, which stresses our role in making relevant use of Sami experiences, recent decades' developments of establishing forms of self-governance in Sapmi is particularly highlighted in this conference. We may say the Norwegian Sami experience runs thorough this year's programme. We have already heard the President himself speak of these experiences.

The first session aims at setting the agenda by examining the principals of peoples' right to participation, how they relate to citizen rights and their interplay with state sovereignty, different models of democracy, including the right to self-determination and the right to free prior and informed consent (FPIC). We are fortunate to have the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples' with us, and we will be exposed to two vastly different cases, the Norwegian Sami parliament as a model and also we will be fortunate to hear a minister from the Guatemalan government share his experiences with his government.

In the second session, starting this afternoon and running until late tomorrow morning, we will be presented with very interesting cases from Kenya, Sápmi, the people of Mindoro Island and the Janajati nationalities of Nepal.

We will then end by a roundtable debate on the urgent priorities for the main stakeholders present in this conference: the civil society organizations, the academic institutions and also policy makers, as to how we can contribute to making a living reality out of the phrase "full participation". Following this is the separate Forum Update, a regular item in our conference programme, which will start tomorrow and be followed by the summing up.

Before I end, I would like to mention that this year we are doing a broader evaluation of the conference. As part of that evaluation we have developed a questionnaire and we urge all of our participants to take ten minutes of your valued time to respond to it.

I wish to conclude by again extending my warmest welcome to you all, both those of you that I have had a chance to greet and those of you I have yet to meet!