



Inter-Parliamentary Union  
For democracy. For everyone.

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## Opening address by IPU Secretary General, Anders B. Johnsson

### International parliamentary conference "Parliaments and the rights of indigenous peoples"

Santa Cruz de la Sierra, 7 April 2014

Mr. Evo Morales, President of the Plurinational State of Bolivia,  
Mr. Marcelo Elio Chávez, Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies of the Plurinational  
State of Bolivia

Honourable Members of Parliament

Representatives of national and local authorities and of national and international  
organizations,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to welcome you to the Inaugural Ceremony of this International  
Parliamentary Conference on "Parliaments and the rights of indigenous peoples".

On behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, I would like to thank most sincerely the  
President, Government and people of Bolivia for hosting us in the magnificent  
department of Santa Cruz. Their generosity and hospitality augur well for the  
success of this Conference.

The fact that we have gathered to discuss the rights of indigenous peoples and their  
participation in parliament here in Bolivia, where the indigenous population  
represents two thirds of the total population, carries special significance. Thank you  
for making this possible.

I would also like to extend my thanks and appreciation in particular to the  
Plurinational Legislative Assembly of Bolivia for its invaluable support. Thanks to the  
close cooperation with both chambers of parliament, we have been able to jointly  
organize this event. Allow me also to single out Deputy Agripina Ramírez and her  
team for their tireless efforts over the past months to make this event a success.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The effective participation of indigenous peoples in politics is crucial for democracy,  
which requires that the voice of all citizens be heard equally and without distinction.  
Discrimination and exclusion weaken democracy and sow the seeds of conflict in  
society.

Parliament is the national forum where conflicts of interest in society are resolved.  
That is precisely where the major problems facing society can be solved through  
dialogue. Parliament therefore has a vested interest in guaranteeing that all citizens  
participate on an equal footing in politics and in redressing any cases of exclusion.

The presence of representatives of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament is both symbolic and substantive.

In symbolic terms, it sends a clear message that they are part of the national community and that they participate in decisions affecting the future of the nation.

In substantive terms, indigenous members of parliament can provide a direct relay for influencing parliament's work, promoting the interests and tending to the concerns of their communities.

That is not to say, however, that issues related to indigenous peoples are their exclusive responsibility. They are the responsibility of all parliamentarians and of all of us.

Greater involvement in politics produces a positive effect on the social and economic well-being of minorities and indigenous peoples; it also reduces their level of marginalization, poverty and exclusion.

Yet up to very recently, members of parliament were in the majority made up of men belonging to dominant sectors of society.

We have studied this at the Inter-Parliamentary Union. In cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme and other organizations within and outside the UN system, we conducted a study over several years.

The results of that study were evaluated at the first Parliamentary Conference on the topic held in Chiapas, Mexico, in November 2010. We were forced to acknowledge that we were very far from attaining the goals of equality and inclusion and that much remained to be done. The Chiapas Declaration, which was adopted by consensus, recognized that genuine change was needed to achieve that.

This Declaration contains a number of recommendations first and foremost for parliaments. Among them, it urges parliaments to hold a special debate on the situation of indigenous peoples, to adopt a plan of action to make their rights a reality, to pass laws to end discrimination and ensure that the legislative process is transparent.

The Chiapas Declaration also includes recommendations aimed at securing the effective participation of indigenous women.

Our Conference today has a triple purpose. First of all, it offers us an opportunity to gauge progress made in parliaments since the Chiapas Conference.

Three and a half years on, what has become of the Chiapas Declaration? What debates have we held? What laws have we passed and what impact have they had? What is the national legal framework for the rights of indigenous peoples in place today?

Second, we will be discussing something which is fundamental and must be central to any efforts aimed at securing full respect for the rights of indigenous peoples: their right to free, prior and informed consent.

What are the mechanisms in place today to ensure the application of this right and what has been the experience in this area? Can we already propose models to

ensure that this fundamental principle is enshrined in the national and international legal frameworks?

Third, our meeting in Santa Cruz de la Sierra provides us with an opportunity to formulate proposals for the Conference that will be held in New York later this year on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

While it is true that neither the UN Declaration nor the UN World Conference on Indigenous Peoples convened to examine its implementation is binding, all States have made commitments obliging them to end discrimination against indigenous peoples and guarantee their inclusion in State institutions and policies.

This is our opportunity to showcase, based on good practices, how to make these rights a reality and ensure the effective inclusion of indigenous peoples in the State's political processes.

We want to send a strong and overarching message: where there is political will, it is possible to advance towards a more egalitarian and inclusive society that is free of discrimination.

In conclusion, I wish to appeal for greater political tolerance and more inclusive parliaments. I am convinced that strong parliaments make for strong democracies, and the effective participation of indigenous peoples in parliament is an essential ingredient of any democracy.

Thank you.