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**INTERNATIONAL FORUM ON FEDERALISM
WORKSHOP 4. AUTONOMIES AND FEDERALISM**

AUTONOMY AND ETHNIA

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I would like to begin by thanking the organizers of this important Forum for the opportunity they have given me to take part in its discussions and study, for the question of autonomies is today a central factor in the definition of the relationship between the states and national societies, as well as the relationship with minorities in every country. It is in this context that I wish to situate my remarks on the construction of a new federalism in pluri-ethnic societies marked by autonomic practices and demands.

It is impossible today to deny the importance acquired by the debate over relations between the different levels of government that constitute the mainstay of public policies and of the nation's projects of democracy, development and well-being.

Within that framework falls the analysis of the three topics proposed: autonomy and nation; autonomy and region; and autonomy and ethnia, which speak not only of the need to arrive at an agreement as to the significance and impact of autonomic processes and their links to public institutions

and policies, but also require critical reflexion, accompanied by a sort of learning process, regarding the historical and present-day relations between nation, region and ethnia. Viewed from the prospect of a new relationship between the State and indigenous groups, studies and analysis of this type are essential for the building of new, inclusive frameworks giving due attention to the specific cultural traits and autonomic demands and practices of the indigenous peoples themselves.

In the specific context of Mexico, we find ourselves in the presence of two different, but constantly linked settings: on the one hand, the field of activity determined by the different levels of government-federal, state and municipal-and, on the other, the range of the autonomies.

Much of the confusion that marks the debate over autonomies in our country arises from the idea that members of indigenous groups only act and are identifiable at the level of their places of origin, and that ethnic characteristics are only manifested and recognized within the limits of the community. This view is based on a body of concepts that stems directly from the integrationist indigenism that was once a predominant feature of government policy in Mexico and in many other countries of Latin America.

According to that conception, the term *ethnic* is automatically associated with the concept of an isolated, remote, monolingual *community*, stubbornly opposed to change, progress and development. Even today, many of the viewpoints expressed and accepted in discussions concerning the constitutional amendment dealing with indigenous rights and culture oppose integrationist indigenism in words, but echo its notions of the ethnic as a matter of community.

Despite these conceptual and political differences, the truth is that every community actually does function as a generator of solidarity and loyalties, a basic referent of residential identity and of social and cultural participation, which in the relationship of fellow members of the community serves to establish closer ties of belonging and reciprocity among indigenous individuals and groups.

In the case of the Indian peoples of Mexico, the linguistic filiation, the cultural community and the fact of belonging to the same territory are three factors that build ethnic loyalties and determine the way in which autonomic practices

and demands for autonomy are expressed. That too is a referent, although still insufficient to explain the proposals and autonomic aspirations set forth by the indigenous peoples.

Undoubtedly, the explanation for the indigenous peoples' demand for autonomy lies not only in their situation of poverty, neglect and backwardness, but also in their colonial condition—that is, the recognition of a historical heritage of discrimination, dispossession and abuse that no longer can nor should be accepted. A similar factor lies in the recognition of the fact that their own practices of social organization, management of resources, group relations and reproduction of their bonds of identity have been the elements that have permitted the survival of the indigenous peoples as differentiated cultural entities. These mechanisms of social cohesion and identity are what we have called autonomic practices.

Viewed from this perspective, the demand for self-determination and for the shaping of an appropriate framework for the development of autonomic processes, materializes as the eagerness to achieve full exercise of the rights of citizens and collective groups and to attain self-sufficient economic development. In this sense, the indigenous view of autonomy considers that only by breaking with the asymmetric conditions of the past that have perpetuated situations of neglect, poverty, discrimination and vulnerability can the full exercise of autonomy be won.

Thus, autonomous development —according to this broad and, in my opinion, legitimate concept of autonomy—means a substantial improvement in living conditions, full exercise of individual and collective rights and the possibility of material, social and cultural reproduction for indigenous groups.

But within this framework, the geographic area held by the indigenous community is a weak and vulnerable element. Our regional economies and a constructive view of development require that recognition be given to the links between communities and markets, producers and consumers, and diverse areas of the economy. It is there where new prospects open up for regional autonomies, considered not as simply another administrative level—which would be of little use in the management of public affairs—, but rather as an element of integration and linkage between rural indigenous communities

and the macro-spaces of the national and world economy. Diverse forms of association between communities and municipalities, the appropriate management of natural and economic resources for the benefit of the indigenous peoples themselves, the rational distribution of resources and the planning of investments and infrastructure with the participation of all those concerned, etc., which, taken altogether, point to a new definition of autonomic practices that goes beyond the limits of mere community affairs to become a part of the dynamics of regional, municipal, state and national governability. This is a debate that is barely beginning to take shape in Mexico, but which must be openly undertaken if we are to do justice to the legitimate aspirations and human rights of the indigenous peoples.

The other factor to be taken into account in building a new federalism that gives due consideration to multiculturalism and spaces for the exercise of autonomic practices has to do with the establishment of policies that are no longer indigenist, but rather reflect the new relationship between the States and its institutions and the indigenous peoples and organizations.

In response to the demand for building that new relationship, we propose that it be based on the following principles:

1. The promotion of dialogue, consensus and interaction among cultures, as the basis for relations between the indigenous peoples themselves and between them and society as a whole.
2. Respect for the diversity, identity and free determination of indigenous peoples and communities.
3. Equity and equality of opportunities for indigenous peoples with respect to other sectors of the population.
4. Inclusion of the indigenous peoples in national development processes as full and culturally identified citizens.
5. Transparency in governmental decision-making and in the handling of public resources allocated to the development of indigenous regions.

This topic constitutes an essential referent for the debate, as the indigenist policies of past years left their mark on

both the general strategies of state intervention and on the architecture of institutions and exclusion zones.

As Rodolfo Stavenhagen has said, "the indigenist policy, with its integrationist approach, actually signified the disappearance of the indigenous peoples of Mexico...What neither the Colony nor the independent Republic nor the Reform nor the Porfirian era had succeeded in achieving would be achieved by the governments of the Revolution by means of their adoption of an integrated anthropological approach aimed at cultural change. For a long time, the moral or philosophical justification for that stand was never questioned. Everything was justified in the name of progress and development, national unity and the welfare of the indigenous groups themselves, but, in the final instance, for reasons of State. Years later, that position would be called ethnocide, a term that is used today in referring to any policy deliberately tending to destroy the ethnic and cultural identity of a people and its ability to reproduce itself as such."

Another factor that must be taken into account in this debate is the number of variables contributed by diversity, and by its links to present-day world, national, regional and local dynamics. It is clear to all that we are living today in a world—and a country—in which diversity is a consequence of pluri-culturality.

There are, of course, other types of diversity linked to national or regional development, to the respective potentials of federative entities, and to the wealth or poverty of municipalities. We have diversities associated with the development of the north and the underdevelopment of the south; state or regional diversities arising from proximity to the border or to zones in which the country's strategic resources are located, and still others that are the direct result of historical situations, geographic conditions or special relationships between the State and its peoples. All these diversities have a differential effect on the indigenous world, which in its national dimension therefore appears to be pierced through and through with particular regional or local features, generally in ways that do not work to its advantage.

In the International Conference on Federalism, organized by this very Forum in Mont Tremblant, Canada, in 1999, the topic of de-centralization was studied by focussing on such aspects

as equity, and it was concluded that strategies for the re-conversion or restructuring of the State must take specifically into account their differential impact, in view of the diverse nature of the social groups and strata encountered within the framework of the different nations.

As regards the building up of a new relationship between the State and indigenous peoples, the foregoing entails the need for the policies that are implemented to that effect to take into particular consideration the pluri-ethnic composition and specific local and regional characteristics of those peoples.

If we refer to a study of the performance of Mexico's different federative entities—at their different levels of government—a study carried out by representatives of both public agencies and indigenous organizations, it will be found that their performance appears to be decidedly uneven.

Consequently, de-centralizing and restructuring federal institutions, achieving the transfer of programs or projects, determining the allocation and priorities of funding or furthering the ability to make independent decisions at the town or city council level depends to a considerable extent on those same historically constituted variables mentioned previously.

In saying this, I am referring not only to the manner in which each state or municipality views and gives attention to the condition of its indigenous peoples, but also to a more far-reaching, structural problem, to which the Indian peoples contribute their respective forms of organization, social networks, production strategies, cultural matrixes, lags and lacks, and potentiality.

The debates of this International Forum on Federalism coincide with a stage in which the Mexican government is exploring new paths to political, economic, social and institutional change within the framework of the democratic process. Its efforts are aimed at reconstructing and redefining, in conjunction with the nation's indigenous peoples and organizations, indigenous development and its priorities, as well as ensuring the full effectiveness of the political, economic, social and cultural rights of the Indian peoples. We are, beyond any doubt, facing up to the challenge and task of opening up new routes that will give the State a new policy in dealing with indigenous peoples

that will incorporate differences, remedy inequalities and respond to the aspirations of the indigenous peoples as citizens to the exercise of autonomy in conducting their lives.

To that end, the new federalism must establish certain operating principles:

Transversality, understood as the cardinal factor of a policy for the inter-sectoral incorporation of indigenous problems.

Multiculturalism, understood as another crucial guideline for the design of differentiated and specific state actions that will give all due attention to the diversity, difference and inequality presented by the indigenous peoples.

Plural inclusion of indigenous peoples and organizations in the design of those actions and, especially, in ensuring that space is provided and recognition accorded to the individual and collective exercise by the indigenous peoples of their rights as citizens.

Nevertheless, in the context of the new relationship that we are trying to build between the State and national society and indigenous peoples and organizations, what still remain to be determined are the respective spheres of competence of the Federation, the states and the municipalities, so as to facilitate the transfer of functions and promote support and recognition for the autonomic processes.

In the national context, the direction taken by recent events centering on the amendment of the Constitution as regards indigenous rights and culture underlines the urgent need to consider those problems within the framework of a new national project.

An in-depth study of the concepts of State, nation, autonomies, ethnicities, peoples and identities is far from being a mere exercise in speculation or rhetoric. Conversely, it forms a necessary part of the definition of positions and instruments for the recognition of autonomic processes and their spheres of action, as well as the federal sphere of competence in the interlocution with indigenous peoples and organizations.

The new and necessary federalism cannot ignore this debate. And this debate cannot ignore any of the social actors.

Let us, then, think of this new and necessary federalism with generosity and a thorough sense of history. Not to do so would mean the repetition of sterile formulas, periodic victories and exclusive institutional practices. And that would be to continue turning our backs on the legitimate demand of the indigenous peoples for their inclusion.