Welcome and Opening of the 10th Nordic Symposium on Human Rights

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We – the industrialized countries – tend to emphasize the tangible civil and political rights rather than economic and social rights. The majority of the developing countries take the opposite view.

In my view, time has come to try to find a common starting point for the discussions. The common starting point can be found in the concept “the right to development” which is becoming increasingly accepted among industrialized countries, after initially being regarded as an attempt to derail the process of promoting and protecting human rights.

The World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna was also in this respect a turning point. After Vienna, the right to development figures prominently on the international human rights agenda, and it is our task to give the concept real content so that it may serve as a common starting point for debate.

The World Conference on Human Rights reaffirmed the right to development, as established in the Declaration on the Right to Development, as a universal and inalienable right and an integral part of fundamental human rights.

In the words of the Declaration on the Right to Development “the right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized”.

As an integral part of fundamental human rights the right to development must be defined broadly. Sustainable economic development is important, but the concept of development also includes social, cultural, political, technological and environmentally sound development.

Democracy, good governance and the full enjoyment of human rights – be they characterized as civil and political rights or economic, social and cultural rights – are at the same time indicators of and prerequisites for development in the broadest sense of the word. True development requires that individuals and groups – including the most vulnerable ones – are able to take an active
part in decision-making and development processes and programmes in their own country.

The central subject of development is the human being. Every individual has the right to enjoy the fruits of development. Every government has the obligation on behalf of its citizens to strive towards the realization of this right – in its internal policies as well as at the international level, where a concerted effort must be made to eliminate the obstacles to development.

If such a view of the right to development is accepted, it follows that this right is not merely a right for the developing countries to receive development assistance and a corresponding duty for the industrialized countries to give such assistance. Rather, it also confers responsibilities on the developing countries vis-à-vis their own citizens.

If we succeed in reaching some sort of understanding along the lines I have just described, the right to development might become the way out of dead-lock with regard to the futile debates about what rights are superior to others.

Let me now turn to another of the main topics: The rights of indigenous peoples.

This is a topic that is of particular interest to Denmark and the other Nordic countries. First of all because of our own indigenous populations, but also because the rights of indigenous peoples figure more and more prominently in our bilateral development assistance programmes.

Denmark, for example, has formulated a strategy for our support to indigenous peoples. The objective of our aid to indigenous peoples is to contribute towards creating realistic possibilities of development on their own terms, based upon their own culture and feeling of belonging – especially to a given piece of territory.

Let me add in this connection that Denmark is in the process of ratifying ILO Convention No. 169 which among other things recognizes the right of indigenous peoples to continue to use and possess land which they have traditionally occupied.

Questions relating to indigenous peoples are now firmly inscribed on the international human rights agenda. Denmark and the other Nordic countries maintain a high profile in this work.

The International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People is taking place within an ongoing process of international political action on indigenous issues. We cannot and should not see the Decade in isolation from that process. Moreover, without steady progress in the general process of international action on indigenous issues, it will not be possible to achieve the stated goal of the Decade: The strengthening of international co-operation for the solution