I. INTRODUCTION

This practice report deals with the 8th session of the United Nations Working Group on Minorities (UNWG), which was held in Geneva from 27 to 31 May 2002. The report first addresses the aim and mandate of the UNWG in general. Subsequently, the main agenda items of the 8th session are discussed. The emphasis is, however, on two proposals: first, the drafting of a Code of Conduct on the Implementation of the Declaration on Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (hereinafter ‘Code of Conduct’), and, second, the establishment of a United Nations Special Representative on Minority Issues. Finally, the last part of this report focuses on the recommendations made concerning the future role of the Working Group.

II. AIM AND MANDATE OF THE UNITED NATIONS WORKING GROUP

The adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities\textsuperscript{1} (hereinafter ‘Minority Declaration’) in 1992 created a normative framework for the United Nations (UN) approach to minority issues. In addition, the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights established a Working Group on Minorities in 1995, which is authorized to examine ways

\textsuperscript{1} The Declaration was approved by consensus in UN Resolution 47/135 of 18 December 1992.
and means to effectively promote and protect the rights of minorities as set out in the Minority Declaration.

Each year the Working Group organizes a one-week meeting in which non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academics, governments, and international agencies discuss issues of concern and seek solutions to problems involving minorities. At these meetings, NGOs or minority associations can make oral statements or otherwise submit information about the situation of minorities in a specific country. Subsequently, government observers are given the opportunity to respond or provide additional information. Usually, governments tend to make statements about their efforts in terms of constitutional arrangements, national legislation and other measures for protecting and accommodating minorities. However, as discussed later, the overall approach in the Working Group has thus far been thematic rather than country oriented.

Members of the Working Group have played an active role in deliberations by seeking clarifications, concrete proposals and responses from speakers at the successive meetings. In this way – rather unusual for a UN meeting – they have sought to promote fruitful exchanges and actual dialogue between the participants in accordance with the mandate. This makes the Working Group a forum for dialogue, aiming to achieve the following goals:

- achieve greater awareness of the differing perspectives on minority issues and, consequently, to increase understanding and mutual tolerance between minorities and majorities, and between minorities and governments.
- act as a mechanism for arriving at peaceful and constructive solutions to problems involving minorities and for the elucidation and elaboration of the principles contained in the Minority Declaration.

The work of the Working Group, however, goes beyond organizing an annual meeting in Geneva. Throughout the year, the Working Group members organize as well as attend

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2 UNWG is a subsidiary organ of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights from which it draws its five expert members. The five expert members represent the five geographic regions the UN uses to distribute seats on UN bodies. The current members of the Working Group are: Mr. Asbjørn Eide (Chair, Norway), Mr. José Bengoa (Chile), Mr. Vladimir Kartashkin (Russian Federation), Mr. Soli Sorabjee (India) and Ms. Leila Zerrougui (Algeria). Since 1995, the Working Group has convened annually for one week in Geneva.


4 Each year Minority Rights Group International invites several representatives of NGOs to participate, a week before the UNWG session, in a one-week course in which lessons on minority rights, as well as on preparing presentations, are organized. Also because of this training, the quality of the interventions is very high.

5 Minority groups, their representatives, NGOs and scholars can participate in UNWG meetings without the consultative status granted by the UN Economic and Social Council.