



DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
Division for Inclusive Social Development
Indigenous Peoples and Development Branch –
Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

**International Expert Group Meeting on the theme
Indigenous Peoples and Pandemics**

7 to 11 December 2020, New York

Concept Note

Prepared by the Indigenous Peoples and Development Branch - Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Division for Inclusive Social Development
Department of Economic and Social Affairs
United Nations

Introduction

Each year, the Indigenous Peoples and Development Branch within the Division for Inclusive Social Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs organizes an international expert group meeting (EGM) on a theme recommended by the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and endorsed by the Economic and Social Council. The Permanent Forum identified the theme for this year's EGM as Indigenous Peoples and Pandemics, in the context of the coronavirus COVID-19 situations around the world.

Indigenous peoples across the world have experienced the introduction of epidemics and pandemics brought to their communities by outsiders. This has only increased with ever increasing global travel, trade and transportation. During the colonial era, epidemics served as a deadly tool of conquest, leading in some cases to the genocide of entire indigenous populations. Epidemics thus came hand in hand with processes of material and cultural dispossession, which are among the historical root causes of the profound inequalities that Indigenous Peoples still face today.

For example, many scholars estimate that the indigenous population of the Americas was over 55 million prior to the initial arrival of Europeans in the late 15th century. Within a century, it is commonly estimated that 90 percent of the hemisphere-wide indigenous population had been decimated by smallpox, typhus, influenza, measles, cholera, malaria, tuberculosis and other diseases for which the America's original inhabitants had no immunity. Similarly, smallpox devastated the indigenous peoples of Australia and North America in the 18th and 19th centuries. The effects of pandemics on Indigenous Peoples continued to be a key factor of morbidity and mortality rates well into the 20th century. Communities were hit hard by the 1918 influenza pandemic and indiscriminate regimes of resource extraction in regions like the Amazon Basin spread contagious diseases among indigenous communities, most notably the measles epidemic that almost wiped out a group of Yanomami on the border region between Brazil and Venezuela in the 1950s and 1960s. Indigenous peoples in other regions have evidenced similar experiences of exposure to disease outbreaks ever since.

Context and Background

More than 476 million indigenous peoples inhabit territories spanning all the regions of the globe, amounting to more than 6.2 percent of the world's human population and representing 5,000 different cultures. Slightly over 70 per cent of all indigenous peoples live in Asia and the Pacific, 16 per cent in Africa, followed by 11.5 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the remaining in Europe and North America.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed pre-existing inequalities where some social groups and peoples have been hit much harder than others. Indigenous peoples are more vulnerable to the direct (health) and indirect (economic, food security) effects of COVID-19 ravages, with generally higher infection and death rates than the overall non-indigenous citizen populations. Indigenous women and girls are even more negatively affected due to gender, ethnicity and scarce economic resources. Some of these causes can be attributed to the underlying cause of extreme poverty and

¹ ILO, 2020.

exclusion, as Indigenous Peoples account for almost 19 percent of the extreme poor, irrespective of the region or location where they may live and they are nearly three times more likely to be in extreme poverty compared to their non-indigenous counterparts.

During the current pandemic, indigenous leaders and organizations have pointed out the general absence of mitigation strategies and social protection policies designed to address their specific needs and situations. Likewise, they have also questioned the absence of effective mechanisms that promote participation of their legitimate representatives in relevant decision-making processes during the crisis, and the insufficient access to culturally appropriate information campaigns about the pandemic in indigenous languages. Moreover, these shortcomings have also raised many concerns about the lack of public qualitative and quantitative data on the health and socio-economic impacts of the pandemic over Indigenous Peoples.

Additionally, during the pandemic the closure of schools has severely affected indigenous children, in particular indigenous girls. Some countries do not have information systems on the number of indigenous students neither if they have disabilities and who require distance education. For indigenous women, “there is an increase in the number of cases of domestic violence resulting from extended cohabitation with the aggressors at home, in both urban environments and communities. This is compounded by the overcrowded conditions of their dwellings and the stress caused by the confinement and economic uncertainty experienced by indigenous families, in the context of the pandemic.”²

Global Responses to the Pandemic

Indigenous peoples are directly affected by the consequences of the pandemic and states are failing to adopt specific policies and at times neglecting even to include indigenous peoples in general COVID-19 responses.³ Indigenous peoples’ organizations around the world have been quick to organize and respond through solidaristic practices to the pandemic, providing health and food aid to remote locations, as key messages through written communiques, social media and radio broadcasts in indigenous languages. Indigenous peoples have also turned to traditional practices to help them during the pandemic, including village closures and voluntary isolation to fight the spread COVID-19.

The response from civil society has been fundamental to face the innumerable challenges presented by the pandemic. For instance, some universities and researcher groups has been helping to map the pandemic in indigenous territories, studying its specific impacts and consequences for Indigenous Peoples, as well as performing COVID-19 testing campaigns for populations located in remote locations and assisting governments in policy design.

United Nations responses

The United Nations has recognized the direct and indirect threat that COVID-19 poses to indigenous peoples, considering that many indigenous peoples are already vulnerable, with

² Available at <http://www.fimi-iiwf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Informe-COVID19-ECMIA.pdf>

³ OHCHR, 2020.

limited access to healthcare, reliance on the informal economy and ongoing discrimination. In April 2020, UN-DESA issues a brief document⁴ highlighting considerations relating to indigenous peoples and the COVID-19 pandemic, stressing the need to recognize and include indigenous peoples' own institutions and authorities in all relevant responses to the pandemic. UN-DESA and FAO⁵ issued policy briefs on indigenous peoples and COVID-19 and the Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues disseminated a guidance note⁶ on indigenous peoples and the pandemic for the UN system.

WHO/PAHO has paid attention on indigenous peoples and is working with indigenous peoples' organizations and Member States to fight the pandemic. In July, WHO highlighted⁷ the urgent situation in the Amazon region and PAHO issued an epidemiological alert⁸ urging Member States to intensify efforts to prevent further spread of infection in indigenous peoples' communities.

Normative Framework

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples⁹ adopted by the General Assembly in 2007, explicitly mentions the right to life, physical, mental integrity and other health related rights in articles 7, 21, 23 and 24.

The ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), articles 5, 6, 7 and 24 refer to indigenous peoples' rights to the social, cultural, religious and spiritual values and practices; the right to be consulted through appropriate procedures and participate in all levels of decision-making; to participate in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of plans and programmes which may affect them; and the social security and health schemes to be applied without discrimination.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and World Health Assembly (WHA) have issued several declarations to protect and promote the right of Indigenous Peoples to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health. The WHA resolutions include 54.16, 53.10, 51.24, 50.31, 49.26, 48.24, 47.27, all of which are specific to the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples.¹⁰

⁴ Available at https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2020/04/COVID19_IP_considerations.pdf

⁵ Available at <http://www.fao.org/policy-support/tools-and-publications/resources-details/en/c/1307959/>

⁶ Available at https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2020/04/Indigenous-peoples-and-COVID_IASG_23.04.2020-EN.pdf

⁷ Available at <https://www.paho.org/en/documents/epidemiological-alert-covid-19-among-indigenous-peoples-america-15-july-2020>

⁸ Available at <file:///C:/Users/brodd/Downloads/2020-jul-15-phe-epi-alert-COVID-19-indigenous-peoples.pdf>

⁹ Available at https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

¹⁰ WHO two-page information sheet outlining WHO's mandate, priority activities and relevant WHO publications regarding Health and Indigenous Peoples. Available at <https://www.who.int/gender-equity-rights/knowledge/indigenous-peoples/en/>

Recently, in November 2020, the Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural) approved a draft resolution entitled *Rights of indigenous peoples*¹¹, which contains specific references to the current COVID-19 pandemic and Indigenous Peoples.

Objectives

- Assessing the challenges that indigenous peoples face in addressing pandemics and their effects.
- Documenting and disseminating good practices of indigenous peoples, Member States and other stakeholders in combating the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Identifying concrete programmatic and policy responses to address the specific situation of indigenous peoples in addressing the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic.
- Raising awareness and action to address the concerns and challenges faced by indigenous peoples regarding the adverse impacts of the pandemic on their well-being.
- Drawing lessons from actions taken by governments, NGO's and academia to engage with indigenous peoples to respond to the consequences of the pandemic.
- Preparing policy recommendations.

The meeting will result in a report that will form part of the official documentation for the 2021 session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

Proposed themes for discussions

- Indigenous peoples, pandemics and the right to health.
- Socio economic impacts and consequences of pandemics on indigenous peoples.
- Self-determination, participation rights and access to information.
- Indigenous peoples' innovations, responses and traditional knowledge.
- Building back better: opportunities and challenges for indigenous peoples, States, academia and civil society to lay together the foundations of a different future.

Organization of the meeting

- The international expert group meeting will take place online on 7-11 December.
- The meeting will consist of a number of different sessions over the course of 5 days.
- Translation will be available in English, Spanish, Portuguese and French.

¹¹ UN General Assembly Third Committee, Agenda Item 69 (b) (2020), document A/C.3/75/L.20/Rev.1.

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https://undocs.org/A/C.3/75/L.20/Rev.1?fbclid=IwAR1J6Nly2ckwOGDuwpR1omSf_IxsId7_-veEC07DHTMnudn9mFkbqhv-KqU