

**Indigenous Peoples and COVID-19**  
**A Guidance Note for the UN System prepared by the UN Inter- Agency**  
**Support Group on Indigenous Issues**

As stated by the UN Secretary-General, the COVID-19 pandemic is above all a human crisis with severe health and socio-economic consequences.<sup>1</sup> It is disproportionately affecting certain communities, including indigenous communities and has highlighted the underlying structural inequalities, pervasive discrimination and inadequate health and social protection systems that require urgent attention.<sup>2</sup>

The UN Inter-Agency Support Group (IASG) on Indigenous Issues is deeply concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on indigenous peoples. The United Nations system's actions and support to the pandemic should be responsive to the rights and needs of indigenous peoples, guided by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169).

The pandemic is compounding the precarious situation that most indigenous peoples find themselves in today. The UN system should make every effort to ensure that responses to the pandemic leave no one behind. In this context, responses should address the specific risks and vulnerabilities faced by indigenous peoples; ensure active participation of indigenous peoples; and include targeted measures for indigenous peoples.

It is also important to recognize that indigenous peoples are indispensable partners in fighting the pandemic. They have traditional governance institutions and knowledge for protecting biodiversity, including their own health and food systems, which can greatly contribute to building a successful COVID-19 emergency response and recovery.

This note explains the specific risks, needs and vulnerabilities faced by indigenous peoples and outlines entry points for UN system action

***Specific risks and vulnerabilities faced by indigenous peoples***

- Indigenous peoples are three times more likely to be living in extreme poverty,<sup>3</sup> making it harder for them to buy and store food, or to pay for medicines or treatment, and to sustain themselves whilst they are unable to work.
- Indigenous peoples face limited access to quality and culturally accessible health services, which already affect their health outcomes, such as high maternal mortality rates and lower life expectancy. This lack of access makes it difficult for them to receive the proper care they need to either test and identify cases of infection or treat those who may become infected.

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<sup>1</sup> Statement by the Secretary-General of the United Nations on COVID-19. 8 April 2020.

<sup>2</sup> COVID-19 and Human Rights. United Nations. April 2020.

<sup>3</sup> International Labour Organization, Implementing the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169: Towards an inclusive, sustainable and just future. P. 21

- Indigenous peoples also have higher rates of non-communicable and infectious diseases. Many indigenous communities are also defenseless against new diseases, particularly those in voluntary isolation.
- Poor access to safe drinking water, sanitation and adequate nutrition, and lack of access to public services are a reality for many indigenous peoples. Hence, measures such as washing one's hands with soap is a difficult preventative step for indigenous communities to take.
- The lack of recognition of millions of indigenous peoples in some countries, leads to their invisibility in terms of identification, statistics and therefore access to basic public services, and economic compensation packages. The lack of quantitative and qualitative data prevents an accurate diagnosis on the impact of the pandemic on indigenous peoples and hinders the formulation of an adequate response.
- Public information on prevention and access to health care may not be available in indigenous languages. Indigenous peoples with disabilities may face additional challenges.

### *Ensuring the active and meaningful participation of indigenous peoples*

Indigenous peoples are indispensable partners in fighting the pandemic. To leverage their contributions and ensure that their rights and well-being are secured, the IASG recommends that the UN system engages with indigenous peoples and promotes their participation through:

- **Engaging with indigenous peoples' representative institutions** about the impact of COVID-19 on these communities and assess their needs and requirements to prevent and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring the participation of elders, women, children and adolescents, and indigenous persons with disabilities.
- **Ensuring the inclusion of indigenous peoples' views and needs** in the programmes and aid efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, through their participation and consultation, as envisaged in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- **Promoting dialogue between indigenous peoples and health and science experts** on approaches to isolation, testing, access to health services and access to scientific information, even in remote areas.
- **Promoting dialogue between state and indigenous peoples' institutions on COVID-19 response measures**, including aid efforts, to ensure that indigenous peoples' views and needs are included; and with a view to striking a balance between public health concerns and safeguarding the right of indigenous peoples to be consulted with the objective of obtaining their free, prior and informed consent.
- Strengthening the **inclusion of indigenous peoples' representatives in emergency and health response committees** or other mechanisms dedicated to the COVID-19 pandemic, both during the outbreak as well as in the aftermath;
- Support information campaigns with and for indigenous peoples on the COVID-19 pandemic, providing them with **information on preventive measures** in indigenous languages, and through their own representatives and institutions to ensure information is accessible and culturally appropriate, including for indigenous persons with disabilities.

### *Targeted measures to address the rights and needs of indigenous peoples*

There are multiple entry points for the UN system to give specific attention to indigenous peoples' rights and well-being as an integral part of the systems COVID-19 response, including by:

- Supporting **access to safe drinking water, nutritious food, and sanitation facilities** for indigenous peoples, being respectful of indigenous peoples' food systems during the pandemic.
- Promoting the rights of **indigenous women** who risk being disproportionately impacted due to their prominent roles in the informal economy and as care givers. Particular attention should be paid to: ensuring that indigenous women benefit equally from social protection and stimulus interventions; preventing and responding to **violence** which is escalating as result of stay at home policies; and ensuring that already burdened health systems do not result in an escalation of the existing alarming rates of maternal mortality among indigenous women and adolescent girls.
- Supporting projects to make **accessible mental health and psychosocial support** available to indigenous persons, particularly adolescents and young people.
- Ensuring **access to remote learning opportunities**, including low tech and no tech options, for children and young people affected by school closures.
- Ensuring that the rights of **indigenous peoples particularly at risk**, including elders, women, indigenous peoples with disabilities, children and adolescents, sexual minorities based on sexual orientation and gender identity, indigenous people living with HIV and other underlying health conditions, are addressed in measures to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic.
- Strengthening **indigenous peoples' livelihoods and local economies in the context of relief and recovery** policies and programmes, (for instance through facilitating supply-chain management including for crops, ensuring access to markets, and support for indigenous entrepreneurship and cooperatives), as means for sustaining their communities and securing resilience and self-reliance.
- Promoting and supporting indigenous peoples in **data collection** on the impact of COVID-19 by ensure that data is disaggregated by ethnicity to allow an analysis of the impact of the pandemic on indigenous peoples.
- Encouraging the **media** to produce **non-discriminatory and culturally appropriate** content on COVID-19.
- Support the right of indigenous peoples to be or remain in **voluntary isolation**. Several Indigenous Peoples communities have self-imposed quarantine and have established controls to limit access to their communities.
- Condemning attacks on **indigenous human rights defenders and land and environmental defenders** that are happening under the pretext of or with the excuse of COVID-19 response

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*The Inter-Agency Support Group (IASG) on Indigenous Issues: The Inter-Agency Support Group (IASG) on Indigenous Issues was established in 2002 to support and promote the mandate of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues within the United Nations system. The IASG comprises of 44 members. For more information on the IASG please visit:*

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/about-us/inter-agency-support-group.html>

## Annex

### **Resources from Members of the IASG**

#### **Food and Agriculture Organization**

- FAO statement on COVID19 and indigenous peoples: <http://www.fao.org/indigenous-peoples/news-article/en/c/1268353/>
- FAO dedicated web to COVID19 and indigenous peoples: <http://www.fao.org/indigenous-peoples/covid-19/en/>
- FAO policy briefs on COVID19 impact on: <http://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/resources/policy-briefs/en/>

#### **Indigenous Peoples Development Branch / Department of Economic and Social Affairs**

- COVID-19 and indigenous peoples: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/covid-19.html>

#### **International Labour Organization**

- Understanding the Indigenous and Tribal People Convention, 1989 (No. 169): Handbook for tripartite constituents [https://www.ilo.org/global/standards/subjects-covered-by-international-labour-standards/indigenous-and-tribal-peoples/WCMS\\_205225/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/standards/subjects-covered-by-international-labour-standards/indigenous-and-tribal-peoples/WCMS_205225/lang--en/index.htm)
- Excerpts from reports and comments of the ILO Supervisory Bodies: Applying the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), [https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/indigenous-tribal/publications/WCMS\\_714341/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/indigenous-tribal/publications/WCMS_714341/lang--en/index.htm)

#### **Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights**

- OHCHR COVID-19 Guidance: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/COVID19Guidance.aspx>
- COVID-19 yet another challenge for indigenous peoples: Statement by the Expert Mechanism: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/IPeoples/EMRIP/Pages/EMRIPIndex.aspx>
- Free, prior and informed consent: a human rights-based approach, Study of the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/245/94/PDF/G1824594.pdf?OpenElement>

#### **Pan American Health Organization**

- Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19): <https://www.paho.org/en/topics/coronavirus-infections/coronavirus-disease-covid-19>

#### **UNAIDS**

- Rights in the time of COVID-19 — Lessons from HIV for an effective, community-led response: <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2020/human-rights-and-covid-19>

- What people living with HIV need to know about HIV and COVID-19: [https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2020/HIV\\_COVID-19\\_brochure](https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2020/HIV_COVID-19_brochure)

#### **UNFPA**

- Protect Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Promoting Gender Equality: <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/covid-19-gender-lens>
- Indigenous Women's Maternal health and maternal mortality: <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/indigenous-womens-maternal-health-and-maternal-mortality>

#### **UNICEF**

- [Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children. Protecting the most vulnerable children from the impact of coronavirus: An agenda for action COVID- 19 Guidance Note on Programming Approaches and Priorities](https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/agenda-for-action) (for UNICEF staff only)  
<https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/agenda-for-action>

#### **UN Women**

- Making indigenous women and girls visible in the implementation of the UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19 and in accessing funds under the Multi-Partner Trust Fund.  
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2020/04/Prioritizing-indigenous-women-in-the-MPTF-April-2020.-UN-Women.pdf>
- Strategy on inclusion and visibility of indigenous women: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2016/12/strategy-for-inclusion-and-visibility-of-indigenous-women>