



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES & THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: CONSIDERATIONS

There are more than 476 million indigenous peoples in the world, found in all regions of the world¹, from the Arctic to the tropical forests. Indigenous peoples are more than 6 per cent of the global population.

Indigenous peoples, in particular indigenous women and girls are often disproportionately affected by epidemics and other crises. Indigenous peoples are nearly three times as likely to be living in extreme poverty as their non-indigenous counterparts. They account for almost 19 per cent of the extreme poor, irrespective of the region and residence in rural or urban areas² and even across international borders. They are custodians of a wealth of traditional knowledge and practices, languages and culture, which includes time tested responses to crises.

In addition to poverty and underlying health status, many indigenous peoples live in isolated or remote communities, where health-care services are difficult to reach and have limited capacity, or do not exist. The role of elders in indigenous communities is particularly significant as they play a key role in keeping and transmitting indigenous traditional knowledge and culture and practices that can contribute to the health, well-being and recovery of their own and wider communities.

Bearing in mind that the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples establishes the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of indigenous peoples, stakeholders should consider the following:

GOVERNMENTS & REPRESENTATIVE INSTITUTIONS

- Recognize indigenous peoples' representative institutions, authorities and governments as the legitimate representatives of indigenous peoples.
- Include indigenous peoples' representatives, leaders and traditional authorities in emergency and health entities in their communities, overseeing responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Indigenous peoples should be included in both responses to the pandemic as well as to its repercussions.
- Ensure that indigenous women are effectively engaged in decision making related to COVID-19 and in dealing with the socio-economic effects of lockdowns, physical

¹ Implementing the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169: Towards an inclusive, sustainable and just future, International Labour Organization, 2019

² *ibid*



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distancing and other mitigation efforts, recognizing that indigenous women and girls will be disproportionately affected by these efforts.

- Respect the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination, including the right to be or remain in voluntary isolation.
- Adhere to and support indigenous peoples that have imposed lockdowns or limitations to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus in their communities.
- Respect the right of indigenous peoples' free, prior and informed consent in the prevention, development, implementation and monitoring of measures to address COVID-19.
- Prepare public service announcements messages, such as on hygiene, physical distance, quarantine and prevention, in cooperation with indigenous peoples, in indigenous languages.
- Make specific efforts to improve information technology, and other infrastructure, to ensure that all people, including indigenous peoples have access to information.
- Include culturally appropriate responses and traditional indigenous health-care practitioners, training them in all the relevant measures and use of equipment.
- Improve the access and management of clean water and sanitation, particularly for indigenous peoples living in remote communities, to avoid further spread of the virus. This should include relevant indigenous practices such as watershed management.
- Ensure availability of disaggregated data of indigenous peoples, including on rates of infection, mortality, economic impacts, care burden, and incidence of violence, including gender-based violence.
- Engage in effective cooperation with neighboring states where indigenous peoples live in cross-border areas, ensuring that good practices are exercised by all actors in close cooperation with the affected indigenous peoples.
- Consider establishing post COVID-19 reconstruction funds and public resources specifically aimed at indigenous peoples' needs to support and reestablish their traditional livelihoods, economies and sustain their communities.
- Ensure access to education for indigenous children and youth by providing necessary tools for remote learning, in close cooperation with teachers and authorities of indigenous peoples. Support indigenous peoples' own education initiatives.

UNITED NATIONS ENTITIES, PRIVATE SECTOR & NGOs

- Refrain from entering indigenous peoples' communities and only enter with the authorization of indigenous peoples' representative institutions, following clearly established protocols to reduce transmission risks. Entities that are engaged in



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cooperation with indigenous peoples should pursue alternative activities that do not involve physical contact.

- Obtain the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples before initiating any programs or activities with indigenous peoples, or in indigenous peoples' communities.
 - Where contact with indigenous peoples is unavoidable, ensure that staff are competent and informed on reducing transmission of the virus, practice of physical distancing and monitor risk reduction strategies.
 - Ensure that activities and information for indigenous peoples, or communities with indigenous peoples, are available in indigenous languages and are culturally appropriate.
 - Revisit and reconsider ongoing projects, in close coordination with the indigenous peoples involved, taking into consideration the effects of COVID-19 (and related mitigation efforts) on these communities.
 - Consider establishing post COVID-19 reconstruction activities and programmes that are specifically aimed at indigenous peoples that support indigenous peoples' traditional livelihoods, their economies and sustain their communities.
 - Involve indigenous youth in the dissemination of COVID-19 messages within the communities both in mainstream languages as well as in indigenous languages, their command of social media makes them a fundamental player in this situation.
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References:

- COVID- 19 Indigenous Women's Collective Call - The International Indigenous Women's Forum, Enlace Continental de Mujeres Indígenas de las Américas (ECMIA), Alianza de Mujeres Indígenas de Centroamérica y México (AMICAM), Asian Indigenous Women's Network (AIWN) and African Indigenous Women's Organization (AIWO), 2020
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) on indigenous peoples' health and safety at risk due to Coronavirus (COVID-19), 2020
- Implementing the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169: Towards an inclusive, sustainable and just future, International Labour Organization, 2019