



# Social protection for indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities: Overcoming discrimination and geographic isolation

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A shared history of exclusion and discrimination based on identity has led to higher levels of poverty and disadvantage among many ethnic minority and indigenous groups than among dominant ethnic groups.<sup>1</sup> While recent years have witnessed improvement in the situation of many ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples, others continue to be left behind.

## Social protection coverage and impacts

As the *Report on the World Social Situation 2018* (United Nations, 2018) notes, there are significant gaps in the social protection coverage of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities. Because of the difficulties they face in the labour market, members of these groups are not as well covered by contributory social insurance schemes as members of the ethnic majority. Such schemes, however, constitute the predominant form of social protection in Northern America, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific—regions with numerous indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities. Moreover, members of these groups receive lower benefit amounts from contributory pensions, on average, than members of the ethnic majority, mostly due to higher unemployment and lower wages across the life cycle.

Universal, tax-financed social protection measures offer a way to improve the coverage of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities. In Latin America, members of these groups frequently participate in conditional cash-transfer programmes. In some regions of Mexico, Panama and Peru, the percentage

of indigenous persons that benefit from them is higher than that of non-indigenous people (Juárez de Díaz and Alvarado, 2013; Ham, 2014; Quinones and Roy, 2016; Hall and others, forthcoming).

However, the cash benefits received from these programmes are often too low to significantly alter the ethnic poverty gap. In Guatemala, for instance, the scale of the conditional cash-transfer scheme *Mi Familia Progres*a is too small to make a meaningful difference in the poverty gap between indigenous and non-indigenous communities (Cabrera, Lustig and Morán, 2015).

## Extending social protection to indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities

The historical legacy of colonization, slavery and dispossession of lands, territories and resources is at the root of the disadvantage experienced by indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities. These forces also serve to exclude indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities from social protection.

Geographic isolation presents an obstacle to social protection coverage for indigenous peoples and some ethnic minorities. Some countries in Latin America have expanded conditional cash transfer programmes to areas where indigenous people live in significant numbers. In Panama, for example, the *Red de Oportunidades* scheme was initially rolled out in predominantly indigenous regions and subsequently extended to indigenous persons living in urban areas and non-indigenous people living in

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<sup>1</sup> The term ethnic minorities here is used to refer to a group of people within a national state who meet one or more of the following criteria: numerically smaller than the rest of population; not in a dominant position; having a culture, language, religion, or race that is distinct from that of the majority; whose members have a will to preserve their specificity; are citizens of the state; and have a long-term presence there.





poverty (Robles, 2009). The proportion of indigenous beneficiaries rose from 36 per cent in 2007 to 58 per cent of all beneficiaries in 2012 (Robles, 2009; Juárez de Díaz and Alvarado, 2013). There is a limit to that approach, however, given that not all indigenous peoples or ethnic minorities may be concentrated in specific areas of a country.

An alternative to the geographical approach is to target indigenous peoples or ethnic minorities categorically in order to improve social protection coverage. Categorical targeting, however, also has drawbacks, including the possibility of further stigmatizing members of minority groups. Universal social protection schemes are more inclusive than categorically targeted programmes and less likely to stigmatize beneficiaries. They have also worked in favour of expanding coverage of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities. In India, for instance, the spread in coverage under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme has seen enrolment among members of the Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes rise faster than that of the general population (Dutta and others, 2014). Similarly, national tax-financed schemes have narrowed the ethnic gap in health insurance in many countries. Also in India, the National Health Insurance Programme has led to a reduction in out-of-pocket health expenditure for members of Scheduled Castes and Muslims living in poverty in two states.


Discrimination based on race or ethnicity acts as one of the key drivers of social exclusion of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities and affects access to services and social protection, even when a programme is universal in name. A profile of Adivasi households in the Barind region of Bangladesh documents that over 97 per cent are technically eligible for support from social protection programmes, yet less than 3 per cent receive any benefits. This low coverage is not only due to a lack of information, but also to corruption and overt discrimination (Hossain, 2011). Lower rates of birth

registration and a lack of legal identification documents also hinder access to social protection by indigenous persons and members of ethnic minorities. In some cases, they are even denied citizenship. Discriminatory treatment and the lack of identity documents results in a denial of rights, including the right to social security and basic social services.

Furthermore, even if indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities benefit equally or more so from social protection schemes than the ethnic majority, the education and health of children will not improve if appropriate and good-quality services are not in place. The potentially positive impact of social protection on the well-being of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities is also curbed by differential returns on education and skills in the labour market according to ethnicity and gender.

Intercultural dialogue and participation in decision-making by representatives of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities on matters that affect them are the foundation of normative legal frameworks on the rights of members of those groups, such as the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In Colombia, the active role played by indigenous autonomous governance structures in the Familias en Acción programme was key to better meeting the needs of indigenous communities (Robles, 2009). To reach consensus on the implementation of the Red de Oportunidades programme in Panama, including on the conditions the programme imposes on beneficiaries, beneficiary families have been consulted on a range of issues, including land ownership and barriers to education and health services (ibid.). Conditions and services are tailored to the identified needs of beneficiary families. Given the social, cultural and historical contexts that influence the well-being of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, their involvement in the design and implementation of social protection schemes is paramount for surmounting barriers to





access and ensuring that the schemes reflect their priorities and needs.

## Conclusions

Social protection programmes can reduce inequalities between ethnic minorities and the ethnic majority and improve the well-being of indigenous persons and members of ethnic minorities. Universal, tax-financed social protection measures are needed to boost coverage for those groups, but other barriers must also be addressed, including spatial disadvantage, the lack of legal identification and discrimination. A combination of universal and categorical targeting approaches to social protection may be needed to increase coverage. Overall, targeted and other special measures should complement—rather than replace—universal policies.

The extent to which social protection programmes benefit indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities also depends on whether they address the needs of these groups and the challenges they face. Involving their representatives in the design and implementation of programmes is one way of ensuring that they better address their needs and reflect the reality in which they live. Social protection programmes alone, however, are not the solution to the structural causes of chronic poverty and disadvantage among indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities. Promoting social inclusion for these groups requires a broader set of economic and social policies and government action to combat prejudice and discrimination.

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