

**Houston Area
Model United Nations
Standard Committee**



SOCHUM

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**Standard Committee Background Guide
Houston Area Model United Nations 47
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SOCHUM Background

SOCHUM, like the other main GA committees, was established in 1947 as the Social, Cultural, and Humanitarian committee, and it deals with humanitarian rights and social issues going on across the world. This agenda includes the major goal areas: advancement of women, protection of children, indigenous issues, refugee treatment, and the elimination of racism. However, while this committee can implement and suggest standards, said standards cannot be enforced without the agreement and backing of the other nations.

Executive Summary

Indigenous populations have always experienced struggles and been at the bottom of priority lists for nations across the world, but in the COVID-19 crisis, their across-the-board susceptibility to disease has increased exponentially. Worse still, their access to healthcare and education on the diseases that affect them is subpar, to say the least. Indigenous populations have been found to be becoming infected with and dying from the COVID-19 virus at higher rates than non-indigenous populations, and their access to quality healthcare or education on the virus is minimal. With such conditions plaguing indigenous population, this poses a humanitarian crisis that needs to be addressed.

History of Problem and Past Action

According to the official United Nations definition, indigenous peoples are defined as “inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to people and the environment” .¹ Indigenous peoples are often part of cultures and traditions that are entirely separate from the dominant community, and they usually only make up a small percentile of the overall nation’s population. Because of the struggles indigenous peoples have, especially in light of the influence the dominant cultures often have over resources and land, indigenous populations have been recognized a population that requires protection. However, because of the nature of indigenous populations and the disparities between these peoples and the dominant populations, indigenous populations experience discrimination and wide gaps in care.

Indigenous Populations and the United Nations

Complete Timeline

- 1923-25: First International Involvement

¹ United Nations. (n.d.). *Indigenous peoples at the United Nations for Indigenous Peoples*. United Nations. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/about-us.html>.

- 1981: Martínez Cobo Study
- 1982: Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP)
- 1989: International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169
- 1993: International Year of the World's Indigenous People
- 1994: International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples
- 2000: Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
- 2001: Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- 2005: Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples
- 2007: Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP)
- 2007: UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)
- 2014: World Conference on Indigenous Peoples (WCIP)
- 2020: A Call to Action on Building an Inclusive, Sustainable and Resilient Future with Indigenous Peoples

(Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations on un.org/development)

There is a vast history of indigenous population interface with the United Nations, dating back to its League of Nations days, but unfortunately, much of their initial contact with international governing bodies was met with little success. However, following the Martínez Cobo Study (1981), a Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) was established as a subset to the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.² The WGIP created a forum for indigenous populations to be able to interact with the United Nations, and people were allowed to “share their experiences and raise their concerns) during these meetings.³ Finally, after an eventful twenty years in the development of rights for indigenous populations, the 2014 World Conference on Indigenous Peoples took place.⁴ This was a forum for discussion about indigenous experiences and a forum for establishing more concrete rights for the

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

populations.⁵ Now, in 2020, there was a call to build a more “inclusive, sustainable and resilient future with indigenous peoples”.⁶

However, while all of these were fantastic strides in the development of indigenous peoples’ rights, the pandemic posed a major threat to their survival. Indigenous populations already “experience poor access to healthcare, significantly higher rates of communicable and non-communicable diseases, lack of access to essential services, sanitation”, and even proximity to fully staffed healthcare facilities.⁷ Beyond that, even traditional practices posed a threat to their survival because of the big gatherings that would happen as a result of cultural celebrations.⁸ Furthermore, the populations would also experience adverse economic effects, as those who engage in the traditional land-based livelihoods or subsistence economies would experience scarcity.⁹

Communication is a major barrier to helping improve indigenous peoples’ conditions in the pandemic-ridden world as well, considering much of the educational resources and information that majority populations have access to are not usually shared in indigenous languages or in ways that can be easily understood by indigenous populations.¹⁰

A Beacon of Hope

According to Forbes, indigenous populations generally have a life expectancy “around 8 years less than non-Indigenous populations and overall worse health outcomes”.¹¹ And in most nations, indigenous populations were dying at disproportionately high rates. However, indigenous Australians were “six times less likely to contract Covid-19” and this was because of the Australian government’s work alongside their indigenous populations.¹² They did this by using flexible grant funding in 110 remote communities and encouraging “local Indigenous controlled health agencies to run a culturally aware response” and funded the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO).¹³ They also placed even more money into specific measures to support the indigenous communities and businesses.¹⁴ The

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ United Nations. (n.d.). *Covid-19 and Indigenous Peoples for Indigenous Peoples*. United Nations. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouseoples/covid-19.html>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Haseltine, W. A. (2021, May 6). *Protecting indigenous populations from covid-19: The Australian example*. Forbes. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/williamhaseltine/2021/05/05/protecting-indigenous-populations-from-covid-19-the-australian-example/?sh=6f04416b801f>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Australian government had learned from the major wreckage that had followed the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic, and their approach was purposeful and targeted.¹⁵

However, Australia, just like many other nations, still has unresolved history and a lack of strong communication with indigenous populations under normal circumstances, and there is still more to be done.

Building Back Better

Across the world, many indigenous people were lost to the COVID-19 virus, and while the phrase “build back better” was mentioned in a UNHRC meeting, this simply cannot happen without indigenous populations having their right to participation protected.¹⁶

Megan Davis, Chair-Rapporteur, Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, spoke on the importance of the right to self-determination for indigenous populations, and how it could play into their survival.^{17, 18} In the same report, Jose Francisco Cali Tzay, Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, noticed that some indigenous populations had applied their right to self-determination to close the borders to their territories in order to protect their communities from the virus, but they experienced negative repercussions for this.¹⁹ Anne Nuorgam, Chair of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, noted that some key issues for indigenous peoples were “the digital divide, autonomy and participation”, and that indigenous-led plans were vital to the survival of indigenous populations through the pandemic.²⁰

In light of all of these factors, how can the rights of indigenous peoples be protected during this unprecedented pandemic?

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ United Nations (n.d.). *Indigenous peoples have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 – senior United Nations official tells Human Rights Council*. OHCHR. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=27556&LangID=E>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Self-determination, as defined by the Charter of the United Nations, is the “right [of States to] freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development”.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Questions to Consider:

- How can resources be allocated differently to help indigenous populations?
- What is the place of the United Nations in this discussion?
- What are some effective strategies for helping indigenous populations that other nations have implemented? Could they be effective when applied to an international stage?
- How can the right to self-determination be policed for indigenous populations?
- How can indigenous people have their basic human rights be protected in a pandemic, when many are suffering internationally?

Helpful Resources

- United Nations documentations, meetings, and conclusions on indigenous populations in COVID-19
 - [OHCHR | Indigenous Peoples Have Been Disproportionately Affected by COVID-19 – Senior United Nations Official Tells Human Rights Council](#)
 - [COVID-19 and Indigenous peoples | United Nations For Indigenous Peoples](#)
- General United Nations directives and declarations on indigenous rights
 - [Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations | United Nations For Indigenous Peoples](#)
 - [fs9rev.2.pdf \(ohchr.org\)](#)

Sources

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