COVID-19 and the world of work:
A focus on indigenous and tribal peoples

The COVID-19 pandemic and its social and economic consequences are dramatically altering the trajectory towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including for the world’s over 476 million indigenous and tribal peoples. A combination of century-old marginalization and a set of distinct socio-economic, health and environmental vulnerabilities in the COVID-19 context, expose indigenous and tribal peoples to particularly severe impacts of the current crisis.

Drawing on new ILO data, this brief analyses the vulnerabilities of indigenous and tribal peoples in the COVID-19 context and identifies urgent and continuing actions to ensure their access to decent work and social protection, as part of the unfolding COVID-19 response and recovery. Highlighting relevant international labour standards and the importance of social dialogue for advancing solutions, the brief also underlines that state institutions for indigenous and tribal peoples’ participation and consultation are essential for building pathways to resilience and sustainable development that leave no one behind.

Pre-crisis inequalities translate into disparate COVID-19 vulnerabilities for indigenous and tribal peoples

As the COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic repercussions are evolving, a particularly severe impact is emerging on the world’s over 476 million indigenous and tribal peoples, constituting over 6 per cent of the global population. Factors behind this include their disadvantaged position in the labour market, their high proportion among the poor and those with existing health conditions, their limited access to infrastructure and public services, including health, water and sanitation services, as well as their particular vulnerabilities to climate change impacts. These have particular implications for indigenous women who also tend to face discrimination from both within and outside their communities.

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.

The prevailing social, economic, health and environmental vulnerabilities confronting indigenous women and men are playing a key role in shaping the threats and vulnerabilities emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. Given their disadvantaged position before the emergence of the pandemic, indigenous peoples are now particularly threatened by poorer health outcomes, exacerbation of their poverty, as well as enhanced instances of stigma, discrimination and violence.

1 All population, labour market and poverty data used in this brief are from ILO, Implementing the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention: Towards an inclusive, sustainable and just future, 2019, which was released in February 2020.
2 In this brief, for practical reasons, the term “indigenous peoples” is used as including tribal peoples.
3 It has not been possible to find suitable data sources to estimate the number of indigenous peoples living in the Arab States.
Indigenous and tribal peoples work in sectors hard-hit by the crisis, predominantly in the informal economy and are disproportionately affected by poverty

Tens of millions of indigenous women and men have been working in sectors particularly hard-hit by the COVID-19 crisis, ranging from services, including in domestic work, hospitality and tourism, to commerce, transport, manufacturing and construction. COVID-19 related measures, including mobility restrictions within and across countries, are also affecting agriculture and the food processing industries which in many countries heavily rely on workers from indigenous communities.

As income losses affect workers generally, they have particularly serious consequences for indigenous women and men who are more likely to be found in the informal economy. More than 86 per cent of indigenous peoples globally work in the informal economy, compared to 66 per cent for their non-indigenous counterparts, where they face poor working conditions, including low pay and absence of social protection. Indigenous women are 26 percentage points more likely to work in the informal sector than non-indigenous women. While a majority of indigenous peoples pursue their economic activities as own-account workers, almost one third of them depend on wage employment to make a living. Although over 70 per cent of indigenous peoples live in rural areas, many have migrated to urban centres in search of work and livelihoods.

The largest share of indigenous peoples are in middle-income countries (81 per cent). Nevertheless, based on data from 23 countries representing 83 per cent of the global indigenous population, indigenous peoples constitute almost 19 percent of the extreme poor. Also, indigenous peoples are nearly three times as likely to be living in extreme poverty compared to their non-indigenous counterparts.

Indigenous women in particular, are found at the bottom of all socio-economic indicators.

Economic inequalities are compounded with health and environmental vulnerabilities

Indigenous peoples also tend to suffer from poorer health when compared to their non-indigenous counterparts. Worldwide, over 50 per cent of indigenous adults over age 35 have type 2 diabetes. At the same time, tuberculosis continues to disproportionately affect indigenous peoples around the globe, particularly due to poverty. They also experience high levels of maternal and infant mortality, malnutrition, cardiovascular illnesses, HIV and AIDS and other infectious diseases, with particular implications for indigenous women.

Furthermore, indigenous peoples are on the frontline of climate change impacts, along with being particularly vulnerable to environmental degradation and biodiversity loss, given that they share an important economic, cultural and spiritual relationship with their natural surroundings. Environmental vulnerabilities have severe implications for indigenous peoples’ livelihoods as well as for their access to food and water.

For instance, water scarcity has impacted indigenous women in some communities in particular as they tend to bear primary responsibility for household-related activities and are forced to walk long distances in their search for water.

Cascading impacts of economic breakdowns, with alarming signs of income loss, food insecurity and compounded impacts on indigenous women

With reduced demand for, and possibility to offer, their labour, goods and services due to lockdowns, supply chain disruptions and the prevailing economic crisis more broadly, indigenous peoples’ ability to purchase essential goods, including food, is dwindling, with the spectre of starvation hanging over many indigenous women and men.

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6 In Bangladesh, the ILO as a part of a UN joint programme on social protection has been supporting the tea garden sector to develop rapidly occupational safety and health protocols and use protection equipment to enable continuation of work in plantations thus preventing loss of the harvest.
7 Higher employment rates among indigenous peoples compared to their non-indigenous counterparts while being more likely to be among the poor, similarly suggest that indigenous peoples simply cannot cope without engaging in income-generating activities on a day-to-day basis.
8 See, UNDESA, at https://www.un.org
9 Ibid.
A food crisis is unfolding particularly in areas where subsistence land-based traditional livelihood activities are not an option. At the same time, precarious housing is often further exacerbating the situation wherein physical distancing is not feasible, while poor hygiene conditions and limited access to water and sanitation services are common. Indigenous women, who play essential roles both in caring for their families and securing income through varied economic activities, are particularly affected, while at the same time being exposed to mounting levels of violence and harassment, including domestic violence.

Indigenous peoples living in rural areas have been able to rely on land and natural resources during this time of crisis, engaging in their traditional livelihood activities including cultivation and hunting or gathering of forest produce. However, food insecurity is being reported as a serious problem in rural areas as well, with lockdowns and supply chain disruptions interfering with cultivation and harvesting cycles or resulting in lack of seeds or equipment. Insecure land tenure is creating additional uncertainty, along with droughts, insect infestations and other environmental impacts that are also leading to greater pressures on food security and livelihoods. Many indigenous cooperatives and enterprises producing and commercializing agricultural products, food and handcrafts, and community-based tourism have lost their markets.

**A complex health crisis is unfolding, calling for integrated and culturally appropriate responses for stopping the spread of the pandemic**

In several instances, indigenous peoples living and working in urban centres, who have seen their livelihoods breaking apart, have started moving back to their communities in rural areas. There are reports that indicate that such “reverse migrations” have been impacted by lockdowns, lack of transportation and quarantines. As a result, some people have taken to the road and are walking several hundred kilometres to reach their homes in rural areas.

Indigenous women and men moving to their communities, but also back-and-forth movements of others between urban centres and indigenous areas (e.g. personnel of companies operating there) are raising risks for spreading the virus, particularly in rural areas where the health infrastructure is already very weak in many countries. At the same time, the situation also underlines the impoverishment being experienced by many migrant workers, including indigenous peoples who have lost their sources of income and are unable to sustain themselves in urban centres.

The spreading of the virus to indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation or in initial contact is particularly dramatic as it poses an existential threat to these communities. However, the new health risks introduced by COVID-19 severely affect indigenous communities more generally as they lack access to quality health services. They also face higher risks due to the prevalence of chronic diseases among them, increasing the risk of contracting COVID-19 and also resulting in higher associated mortality.

Several countries have been taking targeted measures to prevent COVID-19 from spreading to and within indigenous communities, and to ensure related protection and support. Such measures have focused on restricting access to indigenous territories, and providing health services, food aid, but also economic support. Public authorities in some countries have developed and disseminated information materials in indigenous languages to prevent COVID-19 infection, including in the form of radio podcasts.

Indigenous peoples’ limited access to education and the resulting significantly lower educational attainments are not only a source of socio-economic disadvantage for them but also limit the effectiveness of written information for public information campaigns in times of crisis. Globally, 47 per cent of all indigenous peoples in employment have no education, compared to 17 per cent of their non-indigenous counterparts. This gap is even wider.

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15 In India, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued guidelines aiming to relax the provisions of lockdown for collection, harvesting and processing of minor forest produce by scheduled tribes and other forest dwellers; see Order No. 40-3/2020-DM-I(A) dated 16 April 2020.
16 In view of the pandemic, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs of India has written to the government of states with tribal populations asking them to undertake procurement of forest produce from communities at a guaranteed price. See, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Press Bureau.
17 See https://www.thehindu.com
20 For example, the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples in Mexico disseminated information on COVID in 35 indigenous languages, see https://www.gob.mx
for women, with 53 per cent for indigenous women compared to 18 per cent for non-indigenous women.

The Pan-America Health Organization (PAHO) stresses that health information must be culturally appropriate and consider indigenous peoples’ world views and cultural practices, while “the use of traditional medicine in many of these communities must also be considered for decisions that affect their health”. Collaboration with indigenous peoples’ institutions in this regard is essential, as well as for reaching remote communities. Specific attention is needed to avoid indigenous languages and cultures being a source of stigma and discrimination, including in the context of accessing health services.

Tackling intersecting vulnerabilities: in the interest of humanity

The specific and distinct vulnerabilities to the spread of COVID-19 as well as its impacts pose additional risks to the health and livelihoods of indigenous women and men, with multiple and overlapping factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, disability, among others, compounding negative health impacts. Given the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, these risks not only have severe implications for indigenous peoples but for society more broadly. Containing the spread of the outbreak and attenuating its consequences will not be possible without addressing the threats faced by those most vulnerable to it. A meaningful response and enhanced resilience will need to engage indigenous peoples in their critical role as workers, employers and custodians of natural resources – many of whom are vital for the food security of their societies and countries more broadly.

Building an inclusive socio-economic response and recovery: Starting now

Indigenous and tribal peoples have represented, since time immemorial, a rich diversity of cultures, traditions and ways of life based on a close relationship with nature. As distinct peoples, they have their own institutions and aspire to control their ways of life and economic development and to maintain and develop their identities. The rights of indigenous peoples have been internationally recognized in the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007. However, despite this recognition, indigenous peoples in many countries have not benefited from progress in poverty reduction over recent decades, while inequalities and disadvantages have remained, with discrimination and exclusion being among the key factors shaping this situation.

Socio-economic policies targeting the poor have often failed to improve the conditions of indigenous peoples. In this regard, an inadequate incorporation of indigenous peoples’ specific needs and their own priorities in public policies has been a key concern. For instance, despite some advances in Latin America in formalizing the economy, the impact on indigenous peoples has been limited, and they continue to rely heavily on informal work. Yet, several countries have started to take into account the specific situation of indigenous and tribal peoples when building national social protection systems, or promoting and supporting economic activities of local communities.

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21 PAHO, An overview of public health approaches specific for populations living under conditions of vulnerabilities: The case of indigenous peoples, paras. 7 and 8.
23 PAHO, An overview of public health approaches specific for populations living under conditions of vulnerabilities: The case of indigenous peoples, para. 3
25 In Latin America, 85 per cent of indigenous women and 81 percent of indigenous men in employment are in the informal economy, compared to 52 per cent and 51 per cent for non-indigenous women and men, respectively.
27 See e.g. water supply systems contributing to the transition towards livelihoods recovery in Papua New Guinea, see ILO, Papua New Guinea Project Brief: Employment-intensive Recovery and Reconstruction Response (E3R), 2019.
28 ILO Committee on the Application of Convention and Recommendations (CEACR), General observation on Convention No. 169, 2019. See also OECD, Linking Indigenous Communities with Regional Development, 2019 (see Chapter III).
But the identification of lands traditionally occupied by indigenous peoples, and ultimately the recognition and protection of their rights to ownership and possession, continue to be critical issues.

Existing policies and measures to promote access to education, training, employment and social protection for indigenous peoples are insufficient, particularly given the expected economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the absence of dedicated strategies and actions addressing the situation of indigenous peoples, the job and livelihood losses, and foreseeable increase of poverty because of COVID-19 are bound to affect indigenous women and men disproportionately. In Latin America for example, incomes of those working in the informal economy are expected to fall by 80 per cent, with a forecasted 29 million people falling into poverty in 2020 alone. Workers’ and employers’ organizations have a key role to play, through social dialogue, in building a social and economic COVID-19 response and recovery that includes indigenous peoples and is respectful of their rights.

**International labour standards provide specific guidance**

The Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) is the only international treaty specifically and comprehensively protecting the rights of indigenous peoples. Reflecting a consensus among ILO constituents, Convention No. 169 contains specific guidance that governments, workers’ and employers’ organizations, indigenous and tribal peoples, the UN system and international development actors can rely on throughout the response and recovery process. Convention No. 169 seeks to protect indigenous peoples’ rights, integrity and well-being and, to this end, provides for their right to consultation and participation. Indigenous peoples’ knowledge, perspectives and contributions are crucial for responding not only to the immediate health and humanitarian emergency, but even more so for building resilience and durably securing sustainable development that leaves no one behind. Amongst a range of other relevant ILO instruments (see box below), the Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 (No. 205) calls for all crisis response measures to be developed and promoted through gender-inclusive social dialogue and for Members to recognize the vital role of employers’ and workers’ organizations. It also provides that States, when taking measures for preventing crises, enabling recovery and building resilience, should ensure that indigenous and tribal peoples are consulted and participate directly in the decision-making process.

**Prioritizing both: urgent and continuing action**

As highlighted in this brief, COVID-19’s socio-economic consequences have a profound impact on indigenous and tribal workers, entrepreneurs and communities. Action to ensure a COVID-19 response and recovery that is responsive to indigenous and tribal peoples’ needs must advance their access to decent work and social protection. Promoting green jobs that contribute to resilience and sustainable enterprises and livelihoods is a key strategy in this regard. Action must start now, but will need to continue in a sustained manner, with social dialogue as an indispensable tool for advancing solutions. Though national contexts and circumstances, including the size and diversity of indigenous peoples vary, common entry points and areas of action that should be considered include the following:

**Meeting urgent protection needs**

- Together with indigenous peoples’ representative institutions, develop and disseminate culturally appropriate information in indigenous languages for preventing the spread of COVID-19, including information accessible for persons with disabilities.
- Support prevention measures taken by indigenous peoples themselves based on their cultures and traditions, such as “community closures”, in coordination with the State’s preventive measures, and taking action against unauthorized intrusion upon indigenous peoples’ lands or territories.
- Undertake rapid assessments of the economic impacts of COVID-19 on indigenous women and men in the informal economy, both workers and entrepreneurs, for developing support measures, targeting sectors and occupations in which indigenous women and men are engaged or certain geographic areas.
- Ensure that measures taken to enhance the availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality of health services also benefit indigenous peoples, are

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30 Paragraph 15(g).
33 Convention No. 169, Art. 18.
culturally appropriate and ensure effective access to health care, including COVID-19 testing and treatment.  

- Ensure effective inclusion of indigenous peoples in social assistance, cash transfers or in-kind benefits, as well as in income support during sickness and self-isolation particularly in the context of extension of insurance coverage as an emergency measure.  

- Develop occupational safety and health measures for facilitating back to work transitions that are culturally appropriate and responsive to the needs of indigenous workers and entrepreneurs, both in the formal and informal economy.

**Continuing support and protection for indigenous workers, entrepreneurs and communities**

- Support for small enterprises and cooperatives of indigenous and tribal peoples, with a focus on local and rural communities and facilitating transitions to formality and access to markets.  

- Promote indigenous women’s empowerment, including through access to jobs, entrepreneurship support, access to land and credit, protection against violence and harassment, and developing culturally sensitive policies that address care needs amongst indigenous groups.

- Boost indigenous youth employment, with a focus on skills and vocational training and green jobs.  

- Support employment intensive investment programmes (community works and community contracting).

- Recognize and protect indigenous peoples’ rights to land and natural resources.  

- Build inclusive social protection systems, including floors, which guarantee at least effective access to essential health care and a basic level of income security for all.

- Promote payments for ecosystem services as a policy tool addressing social and environmental objectives.

- Strengthen access of indigenous people to health services, including community-based services taking into account their cultures and conditions, as well as their traditional preventive care, healing practices and medicines.

- Promote dialogue and collaboration between employers’ and workers’ organizations and indigenous peoples’ organizations.

**Pathways to resilience and sustainable development in partnership with indigenous peoples: A call for institution-building**

Several countries with dedicated public institutions in charge of indigenous peoples’ affairs, for example Canada, Colombia, India, Mexico and Peru, have been able to take measures to prevent COVID-19 in indigenous communities and provide targeted support to them. However, in many countries such institutions are still absent or in need of further strengthening to be able to ensure effective coordinated and systematic action for protecting the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples as provided for in Convention No. 169. The COVID-19 crisis has brought these weaknesses to light, with governments often unable to respond adequately to the protection needs of indigenous communities, with their full and effective participation.

Getting back on track towards achieving the SDGs, building and ensuring sustained and meaningful climate change action and building resilience for future crises will require effective and appropriately funded state institutions that take the lead on indigenous affairs, including coordination across government. Such state institutions are also key in promoting institutionalized

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36 Ibid.  
37 Convention No. 169, Art. 20(3)(b).  
38 Convention No. 169, Part II.  
39 Convention No. 169, Art. 25.  
40 For protection and support measures for indigenous communities in Canada, see [https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca](https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca). For Colombia, [Circular 0015 of 13 March 2020](https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca) on health related matters concerning indigenous peoples and COVID was issued. As regards Peru, see [Legislative Decree No. 1489 of 9 May 2020](https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca). As regards India, see [https://pib.gov.in](https://pib.gov.in).
dialogue, trust and peace. Experience has shown that progress with the inclusion of indigenous and tribal peoples in public policies and their participation and consultation on matters that affect them directly has been made where such institutions exist.41 While workers’ and employers’ organizations have a key role to play in advancing policies and institutions in line with Convention No. 169, it is the responsibility of governments to establish them. Institutions for indigenous peoples’ participation, and making sure indigenous women are fully involved, are indispensable for social cohesion and building a common vision for inclusive and sustainable development for all.

Indigenous and tribal peoples and COVID-19: relevant ILO instruments

The Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) requires governments to:

- Adopt special measures for safeguarding the persons, institutions, property, labour, cultures and environment of the peoples concerned (Art. 4)
- Develop, with the participation of the peoples concerned, co-ordinated and systematic action to protect the rights of these peoples and to guarantee respect for their integrity (Art. 2)
- Consult with them concerning legislative and administrative measures which may affect them directly (Art. 6)
- Protect the right of indigenous workers not to be subjected to working conditions hazardous to their health (Art. 20)
- Ensure equal rights of indigenous women, including their protection against violence and harassment (Art. 2 and 20)
- Ensure that indigenous peoples have access to adequate health services, to the extent possible, community-based ones (Art. 25)
- Recognize and protect indigenous and tribal peoples’ rights to land natural resources (Part II)
- Support indigenous peoples’ local economies (Part IV)

Other relevant ILO standards include:

Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111)
Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) and Recommendation (No. 206), 2019
Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202)
Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204)
Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 (No. 205)

Related briefs, notes and documents:

ILO Standards and COVID-19 (coronavirus)
COVID-19 crisis and the informal economy: Immediate responses and policy challenges
COVID-19 and the impact on agriculture and food security
A cooperative way for empowering indigenous peoples
Social Protection for Indigenous Peoples
ILO Policy Brief: Indigenous People and Climate Change: From Victims to Change Agents through Decent Work
Promoting decent work for indigenous and tribal people through employment and investment programs
Sustainable Development Goals: Indigenous Peoples in Focus
Why indigenous peoples' knowledge matters to a green future of work
The need for social dialogue in addressing the COVID-19 crisis
Joint Statement on COVID-19 by International Organisation of Employers and International Trade Union Confederation
A UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19