

# COVID-19 and Indigenous peoples in Russia. Statement for the UN Expert Mechanism session

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The Russian Federation is a vast country that has weak and expensive transport linkages between regions. That prevented the virus's quick spread in remote territories of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East, where most of small-numbered indigenous peoples live. Later it appeared in these regions for different reasons, including the shifts of the extractive companies' shift workers and summer vacations of the northerners who visited south regions of Russia during the summer vacations.

Over some time, the virus had come to remote indigenous territories. However, there were no mass disease outbreaks in indigenous communities (except the Ulchi community in the Khabarovsk region), in particular, because of their remoteness and the implemented quarantine measures.

At the same time, the health care system in Russia was not prepared well for the virus spread as it was reformed recently, which resulted in a catastrophic reduction of the medical facilities, especially in rural and remote regions that are home to indigenous peoples. The response measures developed by the Russian authorities in a top-down manner with no consultations with affected communities put some indigenous peoples in a stressful situation because of the cut connections between different parts of the society. For example, some reindeer herders were not available to visit urbanized areas to buy supplies and sell traditional economy's products.

The state's economic support for Russian citizens during the forced quarantine downtime was not adequate. Its receiving was hampered by numerous bureaucratic obstacles that were especially difficult for vulnerable groups, including indigenous peoples, considering that many indigenous persons are involved in traditional economies. They have no official employment and are not familiar with bureaucratic procedures of filing the documents.

The COVID-19 quarantine measures significantly influence indigenous peoples' right to free, prior, and informed consent and their ability to participate in decision making. More and more public hearings regarding the new projects on indigenous lands are organized now online, making it difficult for indigenous peoples to participate, considering the low access to online services in remote communities. The same difficulties experience indigenous students who have limited access to the web in remote villages. In Russia, this is complemented by the regional economic inequality. Authorities of some regions can provide digital services for the local population (for example, free laptops for school students), and others have no financial potential for such assistance.

It is difficult to estimate the real scale of COVID-19 influence on indigenous communities in Russia as it is no disaggregated data on indigenous peoples in the Russian medical statistics. The only geographically oriented official report on the Covid-19 Pandemic in the Russian Arctic prepared by the National Research University for the Arctic Council this summer is not available for the public.

We are receiving today fragmentary information about disease spread in indigenous communities through social networks, but nobody in Russia, including medical authorities, has a full picture. There is a possibility that remoteness and transport isolation of indigenous communities, which became an advantage during the first phase of the COVID-19 spread, could be an aggravating factor during the next virus waves like it was at the beginning of the 20th Century during the Spanis Influenza pandemic.

We consider that the Russian Federation government must urgently elaborate a package of measures to strengthen indigenous communities' health care system and restore the medical facilities in remote indigenous villages. Authorities should also provide economic support for all indigenous peoples during the quarantine restrictions, including personal benefits and programs for small businesses as it was organized this year in some regions, such as Yamal okrug.

To implement such actions, the government must include indigenous peoples into the elaboration process with full respect for their right to free, prior, and informed consent. To effectively implement such measures, authorities must gather all necessary information about indigenous peoples' development in a disaggregated manner and provide adequate, timely, and accurate information to indigenous communities.