

**United Nations
Human Rights Council**

**United Nations
High Commissioner for
Human Rights**



A report on the rights of Indigenous Peoples

**Plain
English**

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About this report

The United Nations (UN) is an organisation made up of many countries from all over the world. It works to make the world a safer and better place. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has written this report about the rights of Indigenous Peoples. These are people who have a special relationship with the area their family comes from and have lived in for a very long time. This booklet is a plain English version of the report.

This report explains:

- The good and bad things happening to Indigenous Peoples around the world.
- What the United Nations is doing to help Indigenous Peoples.

Living a good life

Rights are things that everyone should have by law, like the right to vote or make choices for yourself. All people have the right to have food and water, be healthy, earn money, get a job and live a good life. But some Indigenous Peoples have a hard time getting the rights that they should have. This can happen because they are treated badly and left out. This can lead to Indigenous Peoples being poor, not being able to read, being treated badly, living for a shorter amount of time, and not being able to get good jobs, homes, healthcare, and education.

Big projects can hurt the lives of Indigenous Peoples more than others. We need to get better at collecting and looking at information about Indigenous Peoples to help them better.

In 2023, a group called the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples talked about the rights of Indigenous Peoples to do the things they normally do to live a good life, like fishing. In 2024, a report by the Special Rapporteur talked about the rights of Indigenous Peoples who rely on fishing to get food. The report said Indigenous Peoples are very important for the environment.

We have done a lot to help Indigenous Peoples and their right to do the things they normally do to live a good life. For example, in 2023, we helped the United Nations team and the Government of Guyana look at the rights of Indigenous Peoples in a place called Lethem. We also worked with Indigenous Peoples in Mexico and Russia and at a meeting in Thailand. In 2024, with help from the UN, Indigenous workers in Guatemala started a workers' group, called a union. This was a big step in making sure these workers are treated well.

Speaking up

Indigenous Peoples should be able to say yes or no to things that affect them. This is called **'free, prior and informed consent'**. We are worried that some countries do not guarantee Indigenous Peoples this right. Human rights experts told us that some countries do not allow Indigenous Peoples to say yes or no to things that may affect them.

The experts have also said that Indigenous Peoples have trouble being part of public life in some countries. The experts say that these countries should

change how they do politics and make decisions so that Indigenous Peoples are able to speak for themselves.

We saw reports that Indigenous Peoples were not asked first when big businesses wanted to do something in their lands. This is in places where companies think they can make a lot of money, for example when they want to do a lot of mining. Human rights experts say that there are problems when the army is on Indigenous Peoples' land without asking them.

The Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples talked about the situation of Indigenous Peoples when the army is on their lands. These experts also visited Norway to talk about the rights of the Sami people. The Sami people are Indigenous Peoples who live in Norway. The Expert Mechanism helped the Sami people talk to the Government, businesses, and other groups. They will write a note about what they did and what they found.

We looked at what was happening in many different countries. For example, we looked at a vote in Australia about giving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples more of a chance to speak up. In Chile, we helped Indigenous Peoples talk with authorities to change the rules for prisons. In the Caribbean, we ran a workshop for UN staff about talking to Indigenous Peoples. In Guatemala, we looked at talks between the Xinka Indigenous group and the Government about a mine. In Mexico, we supported the National Council of Indigenous Peoples.

We also helped Indigenous Peoples take part in making decisions. For example, we helped Indigenous Peoples in Argentina and Paraguay talk about their rights and what they need. We also helped Indigenous Peoples in Cameroon to set up ways to take part in politics. In the Congo, we visited and ran workshops for local groups and Indigenous Peoples. In Colombia,

we gave advice to Indigenous Peoples in different parts of the country. We also helped different Indigenous Peoples in Colombia to set up ways to talk to the Government.

Land rights

Indigenous Peoples have land rights. This means they have the right to use and own the land, and the things on it, that they have always used. But Indigenous Peoples often have problems with their land rights. They do not always get the land they should have. Other people sometimes take their lands. Some Indigenous Peoples are forced to leave their homes.

Sometimes, laws about protecting the environment can also cause problems for Indigenous Peoples. This is because the laws are made without asking the Indigenous Peoples. On 9 October 2023, the Special Rapporteur talked about how tourism can cause problems for Indigenous Peoples, who are sometimes forced to leave their homes.

The United Nations has helped some countries to make sure Indigenous Peoples have their land rights. We have helped Indigenous Peoples in Chile, Guatemala, Honduras and Tanzania in different ways. In Guatemala, we have helped the Maya Q'eqchi' Indigenous people talk with authorities about their lands. In Honduras, we have helped the Garifuna Indigenous people. The Government of Honduras has made a group to make sure they do what the human rights experts have asked.

The environment

Indigenous Peoples have a right to a clean, healthy environment that is not going to get worse in the future. But some human rights experts are worried about businesses and projects that hurt the land and environment without asking Indigenous Peoples first. This can hurt Indigenous Peoples' health, and make it harder for them to live a good life.

These projects can:

- Make the air and water dirty.
- Move rivers and cause problems with water.
- Make dangerous waste.
- Cut down forests.
- Hurt animals and plants.

Some companies keep hurting the environment, even when they are told to stop. There are not enough good rules about protecting the environment. Governments and businesses do not give Indigenous Peoples enough information about the environment. Some new laws might make things worse for Indigenous Peoples. There need to be checks on projects that could hurt the environment, to see if they will affect Indigenous Peoples.

We have done a lot of things to help Indigenous Peoples to live in a good environment. We have helped Indigenous People to take part in a meeting called the United Nations Environment Assembly and in other meetings

about the environment. We have also done things to help protect the environment for Indigenous People in different countries. This includes:

- Talking about how climate change is affecting the right to food in Asia-Pacific. This is an area of the world that includes East Asia, South Asia, South-East Asia and Pacific islands.
- Helping to check new laws in Cambodia and Ecuador about protecting nature.
- Talking to Indigenous Peoples in Cameroon about the environment and how they can help.
- Checking how climate change is affecting Indigenous Peoples in Ethiopia.
- Looking at the impact of mining on Indigenous Peoples in Honduras.
- Helping to look at a project in Nicaragua about which Indigenous Peoples were not asked. On 7 March 2024, the Green Climate Fund said that they had stopped giving money to a project because it was not following the rules to protect Indigenous Peoples.
- Helping Indigenous Peoples in Peru to learn about business and human rights.
- Training people in Venezuela about the human rights of Indigenous Peoples and the environment.

Justice

Justice means being treated fairly by the law, including police and courts. We are working hard to make sure that Indigenous Peoples get justice in the right way. Sometimes, Indigenous Peoples do not get justice, because:

- The police and courts in their country are slow or do not work well.
- The police do not investigate crimes against Indigenous Peoples properly.
- People who do bad things to Indigenous Peoples do not get punished for it.
- People who defend the rights of Indigenous Peoples are treated badly.
- Indigenous Peoples are put in jail unfairly.
- There are not enough services in Indigenous languages, so Indigenous Peoples cannot understand them.

We check if justice is happening for Indigenous Peoples around the world. In Brazil, we trained lawyers who work with Indigenous Peoples. In Chile, we held a meeting about Indigenous Peoples and the legal system. In Colombia, we went with the Supreme Court to check on Indigenous communities. The Supreme Court is the highest court in the country. In Guatemala, we followed a legal case about soldiers killing Indigenous men. In Honduras, we followed a case about land rights for an Indigenous community.

Indigenous human rights defenders

Indigenous human rights defenders work to protect the rights of Indigenous Peoples. We have heard about bad things happening to Indigenous human rights defenders. This includes violence, killing, threats, and being followed. It also includes using the law in the wrong way against them. This can happen when Indigenous human rights defenders speak out about big projects or illegal activities on Indigenous land. They are also treated badly when they speak up to get their rights. People also hurt them when they worked with the United Nations. In many cases, these bad things were not investigated. This means the people who did these bad things did not get in trouble. This made the human rights defenders feel unsafe.

In 2023, at least 42 Indigenous human rights defenders were killed in 11 countries. For example, in Peru, between June 1, 2023 and May 1, 2024, there were 111 attacks on human rights defenders. 148 people were hurt, and 101 of them were Indigenous persons. Almost all of these cases were about defending land rights and the environment.

We have worked to help protect Indigenous human rights defenders. For example, in Honduras, we helped the Tolupán Indigenous community of Locomapa with a meeting about ways to keep safe. In Peru, we helped to train human rights defenders and Indigenous groups to be better protected. We also helped to design a plan to protect human rights defenders in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In December 2023, we started a 3-year project in Peru. We wanted to help the Government to better protect human rights defenders. In May 2024, we

made and gave out information, called a toolkit, to help human rights defenders in Peru protect themselves.

In some countries, like Brazil, Chile, and Mexico, we looked at some cases where Indigenous human rights defenders were attacked. This included going to the place where the attack happened, being there during the trial, and helping the police understand human rights laws. We also looked at Indigenous protests, like the 106-day-long peaceful protests in Guatemala. Protests are when a group of people speak up about an issue to try and make a change.

Indigenous women and girls

Indigenous women are very important. They do a lot to keep their traditions alive, share their knowledge, and make sure their society can keep going. But Indigenous women and girls are often not treated fairly. They do not get the same chances as other people to go to school, get jobs, and stay healthy. Many Indigenous women and girls die when they have babies. Many Indigenous girls have babies when they are still teenagers. Many are treated unfairly and do not get a chance to take part in:

- Schools, or universities.
- Healthcare.
- Jobs.
- The legal system.

Indigenous women often do not get to be in charge or make decisions.

Many Indigenous women and girls are treated badly because of their gender. They are hurt by violence, including violence in their homes. Sometimes, Indigenous women and girls are made to leave their homes, and this affects them a lot. Some people hurt Indigenous women who speak up for their rights.

We had a meeting to talk about the rights of Indigenous Peoples. This meeting talked about how development projects affect Indigenous Peoples' rights. In 2023, the Special Rapporteur visited Peru. They met with Kukama women who are fighting for the Marañón River. The Marañón River has been harmed by oil spills. A court decided that the river has rights, and that the Kukama women are the river's protectors. In Cambodia, we supported a group that helps Indigenous women who have been hurt by violence. They did things to help these women get justice.

In August 2023, we held training sessions in Cambodia for Indigenous Peoples. The sessions were about reporting violence against women. In Ecuador, we helped 11 groups of Indigenous women talk about their problems and what they want. In March 2024, we held a meeting in Guatemala about the rights of Indigenous women and girls. The meeting helped come up with ideas to support women and girls better. In Malaysia, we held an event about how important it is to protect Indigenous women's rights to help the environment.

Indigenous children and young people

Indigenous children and young people do not always get the same rights as other children. They are sometimes treated badly, and not given the same chances as other children. Indigenous young people are more likely to be put in jail than other young people. Indigenous young people can have a hard time keeping their traditions and culture. This is because they are treated badly and left out.

A UN group called the Committee on the Rights of the Child looked at how problems with the environment affect Indigenous children. This included how pollution and climate change affect them. Pollution is harmful chemicals that make the air, water, or land dirty. Climate change is big changes in the weather, that have been caused by pollution. The group found that the environment affects Indigenous children very badly. They said that we need to keep the land where Indigenous young people live safe.

In September 2023, the Special Rapporteur visited Denmark and Greenland. After the visit, the Government of Greenland made some changes to the way they decide where Inuit Indigenous children live. They will now think about Indigenous culture and language when they make these decisions. He also visited Canada, and after the visit Canada made changes too.

In November 2023, the Government of Canada made a plan to follow the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This is a set of rules to make sure Indigenous people are treated fairly. The Manitoba Government agreed to give some information to a group called the National Center for Truth and Reconciliation. This information is about children who

went to residential schools. Residential schools are schools where Indigenous children were forced to go and not allowed to see their families. From 1 to 10 October 2023, the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples visited Australia. They gave advice about how to stop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from being taken from their families and communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are Indigenous Peoples in Australia. The Expert Mechanism talked to different people and gave them advice.

We did lots of things to help Indigenous young people and children. For example, in September 2023, we helped to train Indigenous young people in Burundi about their rights. In December 2023, we trained students from an Indigenous school in El Salvador about their rights. In December 2023, we helped to set up a group called the Nab'il Youth Council in Guatemala. This group is for Mayan and Mestizo young people to have a say in their communities. In June 2023, we helped to run a training session in Russia for Indigenous young people.

Indigenous languages and knowledge

Countries should do more to protect the languages of Indigenous Peoples. They should be able to protect and speak their own language. This helps them to take part in their own traditions and culture. The United Nations is also helping to make sure that Indigenous Peoples can use public services, like schools and health care, in their own languages. For example, in the past few years, the United Nations has helped to translate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into different Indigenous languages.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a document that explains the rights that all people should have.

We worked with Bolivia to hold a meeting about protecting and bringing back Indigenous knowledge and values. The meeting was called the “Plurinational Meeting on Vivir Bien (Living Well)”. It was about how Indigenous Peoples' knowledge can help to sort out global problems.

In 2024, we took part in a workshop in Geneva. The workshop was about making sure that Indigenous Peoples agree before areas in Indigenous territories are chosen as **world heritage sites**. A **world heritage site** is a place that is important to the whole world. The workshop was also about thinking about the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the land.

The UN and Indigenous Peoples

We want to help Indigenous Peoples to take part in our work. We have done a lot to help this happen. We have been running a program called the **Indigenous Fellowship Programme**. This program helps Indigenous Peoples know about the United Nations. It is the biggest training program for Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations. In 2023, 47 Indigenous persons from 30 countries took part in the program.

We also run a program called the **Senior Fellowship Programme**. This program helps Indigenous persons who have already been in the Indigenous Fellowship Programme get jobs at the United Nations. In 2023, 15 Indigenous persons got jobs through this program.

We also have some money, called a fund, to help Indigenous Peoples take part in meetings. In 2023, the fund helped 126 Indigenous persons from 47 countries take part in 14 meetings. These people included 52 Indigenous young people, 5 LGBTIQ+ Indigenous persons, and 5 Indigenous persons with disabilities. The fund also ran training courses for the Indigenous Peoples it helped.

We have also been giving help and running training courses for Indigenous Peoples around the world. This is part of our work with human rights. We have been helping Indigenous leaders take part in events in different countries. This includes helping Indigenous leaders from Guyana take part in meetings about the environment and the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

What should change

All countries need to work hard to make sure that Indigenous Peoples get all the rights they should have. Indigenous Peoples can help with big problems in the world, like climate change. Countries should:

- Make sure that Indigenous Peoples get land rights and protect these rights.
- Make sure that Indigenous Peoples can say yes or no to things that might affect them.
- Before countries and businesses start projects, they should check to see how things might affect Indigenous Peoples.
- Let Indigenous Peoples be part of making decisions that affect them, including decisions about the environment.

- Protect Indigenous human rights defenders who speak up about their rights.
- Write rules to make sure that Indigenous women and young people have rights.
- Help Indigenous Peoples take part in the United Nations.