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# Human Rights Council

Protecting cultural diversity and integration  
for indigenous groups



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## Introduction

'Indigenous groups' are not a monolithic entity, but some 5 000 distinct peoples, each with an independent culture. Indigenous peoples are found on every human-inhabited continent, and in almost every country or territory. They are the descendants of the original inhabitants of the territories that they live in, and they represent about 5% of the world's population ("Indigenous Peoples Overview"). They generally maintain their own distinct cultural traditions, usually form a minority of the population, and are disturbingly often pushed to the fringes of society. About a third of indigenous people live in poverty, making up 10% of the world's poor (*Still among the poorest of the poor* 2–3). They live mainly in isolated areas, regularly face discrimination, have high unemployment rates, and their health is significantly worse than that of non-indigenous groups.

The international human rights regime protects the rights of indigenous groups to self-determination as well as to their unique ways of life. Despite this, indigenous peoples' cultures are constantly threatened, whether by forced integration into wider society or by loss of traditional lands. The improvement of the economic and social conditions of indigenous peoples must therefore not come at the price of losing cultural diversity, but instead both culture and development must be protected for all indigenous groups.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Assimilation

As opposed to integration, 'cultural assimilation' refers to a group adopting the culture of another group. In the context of indigenous peoples, the term usually refers to indigenous peoples' adopting the cultural values of the dominant group instead of their own, often by force.



## Culture

Culture has been defined by UNESCO as “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, [which] encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs” (61, fifth preambular paragraph). Culture is thus not restricted to physical objects, but refers much more generally to “a community’s way of life” (Xanthaki 17).

## Free, prior and informed consent

The right to ‘free, prior and informed consent’ refers to the requirement for indigenous peoples to give advance consent to any project that affects them, free from coercion and in the light of all relevant information (Hill et al. 9). It is usually used in the context of infrastructure projects, such as highways, dams and railways.

## Indigenous

There is no universally agreed-upon definition of the word ‘indigenous’. It is an umbrella term, with very few indigenous peoples actually calling themselves ‘indigenous’. In contrast to terms like ‘aboriginal’, however, the word ‘indigenous’ is politically and culturally neutral. The United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Peoples and the International Labour Organization both advocate the importance of self-identification for indigenous peoples (Corntassel 75): a people therefore falls under the indigenous umbrella if it identifies as such.

## Integration

‘Integration’ can be defined as “[the process of] promoting the values, relations and institutions that enable all people to participate in social, economic and political life on the basis of equality of rights, equity and dignity” (Ferguson 6).

## People

The term ‘people’ is commonly used to mean ‘ethnic group’, which refers specifically to common ancestry as well as to self-identification. Some scholars have, however, argued that a ‘people’ is more than a particular ethnic group, with a ‘people’ being defined by its persistence over time as well as by having a unique culture (Corntassel 91). Effectively, therefore, a ‘people’ is an ethnic group with a distinct and *maintained* culture.

## Right to Culture

Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights guarantees the right “[t]o take part in cultural life”. This includes the right to not only participate in the culture of a nation, but also the right to a person’s own culture (Claridge and Xanthaki 62). It also includes the right for peoples to “protect, maintain and develop their cultural customs, practices and traditions” (65).

## Self-Determination

In the context of indigenous peoples, self-determination refers to the right for a people “to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (United Nations, “A/RES/61/295”). This therefore includes the right for a people to dispose of its natural resources as it pleases, and to enjoy and further its own culture, as well as the right to autonomy within a state (Henriksen 10).

## General Overview

Due to their cultural differences, indigenous peoples have, for centuries, lived on the fringes of societies. ‘Integration’ of indigenous peoples into wider society is thus not a new concept: ever since the earliest days of European colonisation there have been attempts to ‘civilise’ the ‘savage’ native peoples. The laudable goal of improving the socioeconomic prospects of indigenous peoples, however, has historically led to the destruction of cultures and the death of languages, as well as to the deterioration of physical and mental health. It should also not be forgotten that assuming that indigenous peoples aspire to the same socioeconomic status as their non-indigenous counterparts has an “assimilationist tone” (R. Norris 22); ‘integration’ must not mean de-indigenisation.

## Indigenous peoples today

People self-identifying as indigenous are found on every human-inhabited continent, numbering about 370 000 000. Due to the difficulty of determining who counts as ‘indigenous’, there are few reliable figures as to the size of their population. Poverty, however, blights the indigenous, with their communities making up 15% of the world’s extreme poor and ⅓ of the planet’s poor, with their poverty being more severe than that of their non-indigenous counterparts (Hall and Gandolfo). Although reliable statistics are hard to come by, the lower socioeconomic status of indigenous peoples persists in most countries and territories, even where they form a majority of the population (Eversole 29). Poverty is

often caused by racist attitudes, as well as the cultural disconnect between indigenous people and dominant social groups (35–6).

Indigenous culture is hugely vulnerable to the march of Western ‘civilisation’; although eugenicist assimilatory policies are consigned to the past, both low socioeconomic status and the improvement of living conditions threaten their unique cultures. The former causes deteriorating health and the pushing of indigenous culture to the fringes of society. The latter often smothers indigenous culture by forcing the abandonment of their old ways of life in search of better opportunities.

## Employment

Despite a lack of hard statistical evidence, indigenous people suffer a significant barrier to their socioeconomic integration through frequent joblessness. Lower levels of education, higher imprisonment rates, discrimination, and a lower likelihood of retaining jobs all contribute to higher indigenous unemployment rates (Gray et al. 1); in Australia, the indigenous unemployment rate has in the past been five times that of the non-indigenous rate (“The Gap”). Many indigenous people also live in rural areas with scarce employment, with few affordable public transport links (R. Norris 7–8).

## Physical and mental health

Indigenous peoples’ health worldwide today is demonstrably worse than that of their non-indigenous counterparts’. They die younger, they are more likely to become disabled, more of their children die, and they are often afflicted by alcohol and substance abuse. Although primarily correlated with their low socioeconomic status, healthiness is also reduced by cultural and linguistic barriers between medical professionals and indigenous peoples (Durie 510).

The causes of ill-health could fill volumes. Poverty and social exclusion are both linked to feelings of anxiety, stress and hopelessness, which in turn lead to poorer mental and physical health, including greater likelihoods of infection, diabetes and higher blood pressure (Reading and Wien 13). Economic status is also correlated negatively with risk of heart disease, as well as “some cancers, chronic lung disease [and] gastrointestinal disease” (Wilkinson and Pickett 75). Additionally, the poor quality of indigenous peoples’ housing, commonly overcrowded and without proper ventilation, has been linked to higher rates of injuries, further mental health problems and respiratory tract infections: two-thirds of houses in Canadian indigenous reserves are in need of major repairs (Reading and Wien 12).

Feelings of loss and dispossession, whether they arise from separation from land, or from cultural disconnect, lead naturally to mental health problems. In part, this explains the high suicide rates reported in some indigenous communities; one in four Tiwi islanders in Australia has attempted suicide (*Progress can kill* 24). Poor mental health can also cause alcoholism, as well as substance abuse and smoking; indigenous Canadians are twice as likely to smoke as other Canadians (Reading and Wien 11), and indigenous Australians are twice as prone to use illicit drugs as other Australians, and start using them six years younger than average (Catto and Thomson 2).

Even in more developed countries, indigenous people commonly live in isolated, rural areas with little access to primary or secondary healthcare. In areas with access to healthcare, proper care is often hindered by cultural differences: while western culture views healthiness as an individual concern, many indigenous cultures see living in a harmonious community as a prerequisite for good health (Cameron et al. E10). Indigenous people are commonly discriminated against in healthcare, and with poor command of a dominant language being a major barrier to care, they often suffer abusive treatment and non-consented care (Cerón et al. 6–5).

## Education

Education is inherently rooted in culture, and is one of the key means by which a culture is passed onto another generation. Western education is often focussed on improving an individual's job prospects, a concept alien to indigenous cultures that are often less individualistic. Formal education for indigenous peoples has usually aided language death, and has often taken on an assimilatory 'civilising' tone (Dean).

Indigenous children commonly complete significantly less schooling than non-indigenous children. In Australia, only 59% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders complete the final year of secondary school, against 85% for other Australians. In rural areas there are fewer schools, and opportunities to access higher education are limited. There is also a 'culture clash' between indigenous students and states' education systems: indigenous peoples' history and culture is rarely taught in schools, and education is usually not conducted in indigenous languages ("Indigenous Peoples and Education").

## Racism

Alienated and usually a minority, it is not surprising that indigenous people face widespread racism. This can include societal prejudices against indigenous people, most notably the idea that they are inherently lazy, the persistent belief in the inferiority of their

cultures, and the use of racial slurs (*Discrimination against Indigenous Australians 2*). This racism commonly manifests itself in discrimination in employment and by government officials or public service workers (Medrano 21). Despite laws that attempt to prevent anti-indigenous racism, this form of prejudice is mostly unconscious and caused by prevailing attitudes, rather than by conscious decisions to be racist.

## Land and resource extraction

Although their societies usually do not see ‘ownership’ in the same way that Western capitalism does, indigenous peoples were the original ‘owners’ of land. In many cases land was simply removed from indigenous control, often violently; sometimes it was taken by treaty; and sometimes by the legal fiction of *terra nullius*, the idea that indigenous lands belonged to nobody. Whichever method was used, today indigenous groups’ rights to their traditional lands are vulnerable, both due to inadequate legal protections, and because of threats such as infrastructure projects. Without the land from which wealth stems, indigenous peoples are inevitably consigned to poverty.

Globally, 18% of land is formally recognised as indigenous (*Who Owns the World’s Land? 9*). This is considerably less than the roughly 50% of the planet’s land that shows a history of indigenous use and ‘ownership’ (*Common Ground 27*), and goes against Article 26 of the UNDRIP, which protects indigenous rights to the lands “which they have traditionally owned, occupied, or otherwise used” (8).

In many states, it is a very difficult process for indigenous people to claim ownership or control over their lands. Rulings by courts in indigenous groups’ favour are often ignored, or are nullified by new legislation (*Common Ground 31*). In the absence of any legally recognised claim, their lands are extremely vulnerable to commercial exploitation. Indigenous peoples also have the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent before developmental projects take place in their land (Hill et al. 8), but this right is often not carried out in practice.

## Biopiracy

Biopiracy, which has nothing to do with swashbuckling, is the exploitation of the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples – a form of communal intellectual property that includes methods of plant cultivation and medicinal remedies (Garcia 7). Although laws in most states protect intellectual property, traditional knowledge usually exists outside patent law. It is thus piratable by the life science industry, depriving indigenous people of the right to use their traditional knowledge without being required to pay royalties (*Biopiracy: A New Threat 3*).

## Indigenous languages

Language is a key means of transmission of culture, and as such the decline and death of languages plays a significant part in the decline of indigenous culture. There are around 7 000 languages spoken in the world today, with one dying about every fortnight. Of those that survive, many are spoken only by a handful of elderly speakers and are not passed onto children (Lutz). Indigenous peoples' rights to "revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their ... languages" are protected by Article 13 of the UNDRIP (7). Although this right exists, knowledge of a region's dominant language is required for a better quality of life. Increased bilingualism thus gradually leads to the replacement of indigenous languages, as the younger generation uses the new language more and the minority language less (Crystal 337–8).

## Major Parties Involved

### Amnesty International

Along with other non-governmental organisations such as Survival International, Amnesty International aims to work with indigenous peoples to protect their rights (Tryon). It does not claim to represent indigenous people, but rather campaigns for the involvement of indigenous people in decision-making, and against their marginalisation (Tryon).

### Australia

Although its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is comparatively small, Australia is in the rare position of being a developed country with many different indigenous ethnic groups, who live on the fringes of society and remain subject to discrimination and abuse. There are around 735 000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, making up 3% of the country's population, up to half as few as before European colonisation (Vinding 274). Although they have undergone a "significant cultural revival in recent decades", compared to their non-indigenous counterparts, indigenous Australians have 11 years' less life expectancy, suffer three times the infant mortality rate (Henry and Kurzak 3), and have a higher unemployment rate by 12 percentage points (4).

### Bolivia

With 41% of its adult population being indigenous in origin (Tamburini 222), the Plurinational State of Bolivia is one of the few states that has not only signed the UNDRIP, but has also incorporated it into domestic law (Aylwin 47). Its President, Evo Morales, is indigenous; the country has taken steps to grant autonomy towards some of its major





indigenous groups (Tamburini 225); and its constitution is recognised as one of the most progressive for indigenous rights in the world (Watson). Bolivia thus offers some of the most progressive legal policies for indigenous peoples in the world. However, the incidence of poverty in indigenous Bolivians remains 15 percentage points higher than in non-indigenous Bolivians, and 37% of indigenous Bolivians are extremely poor (Gigler 7–8).

## Norway

Norway is one of the few European countries with a distinct indigenous population, the Sámi, and is notable for its generally progressive policies towards them. Although the area where the Sámi live extends across much of northern Scandinavia, Norway is the only Sámi-inhabited state to have ratified ILO Convention 169, a framework for protecting indigenous labour rights, and has also implemented an agreement for consultation between its Sámi Parliament and national government regarding matters affecting the Sámi (Strömngren and Vars 68). Despite this, the government has restricted the extent to which Sámi are allowed to herd reindeer (69–70), has granted mining permits in Sámi land (71), and does not consistently respect Sámi land rights (“Norway”).

## United States

1.5% of the population of the United States identify as Native American or Alaska Native (T. Norris et al. 4). Although they suffer the same unemployment, health, and substance abuse issues that their counterparts in many other countries do, indigenous groups in the United States are allowed partial exercise of sovereignty within the land granted to them by the federal government, and their relationships with the United States are governed by treaty.

Despite this historical policy, the doctrine of ‘manifest destiny’ – the belief in the destiny of American settlers to settle the West of the country – caused the forcible removal of Native Americans out of their native lands and into modern-day Oklahoma in the 1830s. While indigenous Americans have equal political rights, and the United States government has expressed support for the UNDRIP, it has ignored the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent, for instance in relation to the Dakota Access Pipeline (Ferrer).

## Timeline of Key Events

Date	Description of Event
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<b>1500s</b>	The first western colonists settle in the Americas. The introduction of European diseases, as well as warfare against the indigenous peoples, caused their population to decline tenfold (Rivera 23).
<b>23 March 1832</b>	In <i>Worcester v. Georgia</i> , the Supreme Court of the United States rules that “the Indian [sic] nations have always been considered as distinct ... communities retaining their original natural rights as undisputed possessors of the soil”.
<b>1910–1970 (approx.)</b>	‘Assimilation’ is an Australian government policy: many indigenous children were forcibly removed from their parents and placed with white foster parents. These ‘stolen generations’ received little education. They were often subject to abuse (Korff) in an attempt to “inculcate European values” in them ( <i>Bringing them Home 2</i> ), in order to eliminate indigenous cultures.
<b>27 May 1967</b>	In a referendum, 90% of Australians vote in favour of granting citizenship to indigenous Australians (Daley).
<b>1981–1983</b>	During the Guatemalan civil war, the government leads a campaign to eliminate the indigenous Maya population, with around 70 000 being killed and up to 1 500 000 becoming refugees (“Guatemala”).
<b>27 June 1989</b>	The International Labour Organization adopts Convention 169, which aims to protect the rights of indigenous peoples through giving them control over their own process of development (Feiring 1).
<b>3 June 1992</b>	In the <i>Mabo v Queensland (No 2)</i> case, the Australian High Court recognises the rights of the Meriam people to their islands in the Torres Strait. This nullified the ‘ <i>terra nullius</i> ’ doctrine, which held that indigenous lands could be claimed by white settlers without compensation (“Case Summary”).
<b>1994–2015</b>	Two successive International Decades of the World’s Indigenous Peoples are declared, recognising a new focus on indigenous issues at the UN (“Indigenous Peoples at the UN”).
<b>13 September 2007</b>	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is adopted by the General Assembly.

## UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Since its establishment, the United Nations has been actively involved in promoting the rights of indigenous peoples, engaging with indigenous peoples rather than claiming to represent them (“Background”). In recent years it has given their rights a greater priority, with the General Assembly declaring 1993 as the International year for the World’s Indigenous

People; two separate International Decades of the World's Indigenous People were also declared. ("Indigenous Peoples at the UN"). Additionally, in 2001 the former Commission on Human Rights appointed the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, to promote the advancement of indigenous people and report on the human rights situation of indigenous people ("Indigenous Peoples at the UN").

In 2014, the General Assembly held a high-level plenary meeting known as the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, to "share perspectives and best practices" on indigenous rights. Focussing on the rights of indigenous women as well as sustaining traditional knowledge, the "action-oriented" Outcome Document of the Conference aimed to balance the goals of Member States and indigenous peoples, while ensuring that indigenous issues were a priority in the post-2015 development agenda ("Two-Day World Conference").

- International Year for the World's Indigenous People, 18 December 1990 **(A/RES/45/164)**
- International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, 21 December 1993 **(A/RES/48/163)**
- Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, 20 December 2004 **(A/RES/59/174)**
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 13 September 2007 **(A/RES/61/295)**
- Organization of the high-level plenary meeting of the sixty-ninth session of the General Assembly, to be known as the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, 17 September 2012 **(A/RES/66/296)**
- Outcome document of the high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly known as the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, 22 September 2014 **(A/RES/69/2)**

## Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

There has never been a comprehensive attempt to integrate indigenous people into society while preserving their cultural traditions. Most attempts to 'integrate' indigenous people have been assimilationist, while even the most progressive ones have still not allowed indigenous groups the control over their future that the UNDRIP theoretically affords to them.

Separation, rather than assimilation, is also no answer. In the United States, indigenous tribes have been considered as "distinct political communities" since time immemorial ("What is Sovereignty"), and are protected by treaties with the government (Kalt and Singer 9) and by court cases such as *Worcester v. Georgia*. Federally recognised tribes thus have a great degree of self-government over their reservations (Kalt and Singer 1). This has not, however, alleviated the poverty faced by indigenous Americans: a quarter of their

children who live in their reservations live in poverty, and they suffer twice the normal rate of abuse and neglect (Horwitz).

Legal attempts to resolve the issue have included International Labour Organization Convention no. 169, which aims to protect the rights of indigenous groups, especially through ensuring indigenous participation in decisions that affect their lives (Feiring 1). It thus rejects previous assimilationist attitudes, which hold that indigenous peoples should be ‘integrated’ into mainstream society without their consent (4). It is not, however, universally applicable: only 22 Member States have ratified the Convention (5), most of them in South America.

The adoption in 2007 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) by the General Assembly by 144 votes (Mitchell and Enns 4) signalled a broad consensus in favour of the rights of indigenous peoples. Although non-binding, not legally enforceable and mainly symbolic (5), the weight of opinion in favour of the Declaration lends it a great deal of moral authority. Additionally, the four states that voted against the Declaration – Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the USA – have all reversed their positions (4). From a practical perspective, however, ILO Convention no. 169 is a more effective instrument for protecting indigenous rights.

## Possible Solutions

A society inclusive of indigenous peoples is one that respects and preserves their culture, while never consigning them to living parallel lives, as well as correcting the historic injustices they have suffered. To solve the issue, there are three major dimensions that must be considered. The first is land rights; the second, poverty and its cousin, ill-health; and the third is the preservation of their culture. Effective solutions to the issue are focussed around the key theme of increasing indigenous capacity for self-determination (Kugelmann 259).

### Land rights

Arguably the root cause of the issues faced by many indigenous people is lack of access to their lands. In part, solutions to this must be legal, through states changing their laws to ensure adequate legal protections for indigenous land rights, such as automatic legal rights over customary land (*Closing the Gap* 29). This is, however, complicated by there being no consensual definition of ‘customary’. Additionally, the acquisition of indigenous land without consultation must be prevented, both through legal measures as well as through ensuring proper recording and transparency with regards to land deals (“Land Grabbing”).

Land rights, however, are useless without the free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) that must accompany them. Again, here, legal protections are necessary, with FPIC rarely being codified in states' laws; in particular, the right of communities to withhold their consent for infrastructure projects in their lands must be legally codified. A final legal measure can be the integration of ILO Convention no. 169 into states' laws (*Common Ground* 44), which will further ensure the protection of indigenous rights.

## Poverty and health

One of the most important means of increasing indigenous employment is through the improvement of their 'human capital' – their marketable skills, knowledge and experience. This can commonly come through adult education and formal training (Gray et al. 20); it must, however, be accompanied by assistance for indigenous people who face specific barriers to finding employment, such as substance abuse, mental health issues, and a lack of literacy and numeracy (20). Treating greater rates of indigenous employment as an end in itself, however, falls into the assimilationist trap: if such schemes are to take place, they must be indigenous-led.

Independent schemes can also be put in place to improve indigenous health. These can include improved maternal and child healthcare, as well as vaccinations, and health education (Stephens et al. 2006). Due to indigenous groups' common perception of health as more than an absence of disease, as well as cultural differences and mistrust of western medical systems (*Progress can kill* 36), their capacity to solve their own health issues must also be improved. In particular, physical and mental health care services owned and managed by indigenous groups are often better suited to their own needs, being both physically closer to the remote locations where they commonly live, as well as being 'culturally safe' (Davy et al. 7). This can also come through increasing the number of indigenous healthcare practitioners (Macaulay 335), as well as through healthcare programmes not only implemented, but also designed, by indigenous people (Chino and DeBruyn 596). In the absence of such services, the training of non-indigenous health practitioners to work across cultures can be improved, as can the provision of interpreters for indigenous people unable to describe their health conditions in the dominant language (Macaulay 335).

## Preservation of culture

Preservation of culture cannot be imposed from above, but is rather inherently a grassroots-oriented process. On the physical level, culture can be preserved through documentation, for instance museums, libraries, oral recordings, and pictographic records.

This can also include the strengthening of the capacity of institutions such as museums to preserve culture, such as increased staffing and staff training, as well as increased funding and use of technology in such institutions (Jorgensen v).

A major aspect of preserving culture is keeping indigenous languages alive. This can take place through governmental action, such as promoting the teaching of such languages in schools, in particular reading and writing in those languages. It is, however, difficult to ensure the language is passed onto children, who often see little need for a language associated with a culture they have all but left behind.

Culture, however, is considerably more than a collection of objects and words. Although the concept is ill-defined, allowing a greater sense of identity for indigenous people will greatly increase the capacity of indigenous peoples to pass on their own cultures. This includes combatting the stigmatisation of indigenous cultures: education about indigenous heritage can, for instance, be incorporated into curriculums, both for indigenous and non-indigenous children.

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