



The Hague International Model United Nations

Forum: Special Conference on Culture & Heritage 2 (SPCCH2)

Issue: Measures to protect indigenous identity, culture, languages, heritage, and livelihood

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Introduction

“A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.”¹ Today, more than 476 million Indigenous Peoples safeguard invaluable knowledge systems² and protect over 80% of the world’s biodiversity,³ yet they continue to face structural inequality, forced displacement, cultural suppression and accelerating impacts from climate change and globalisation.

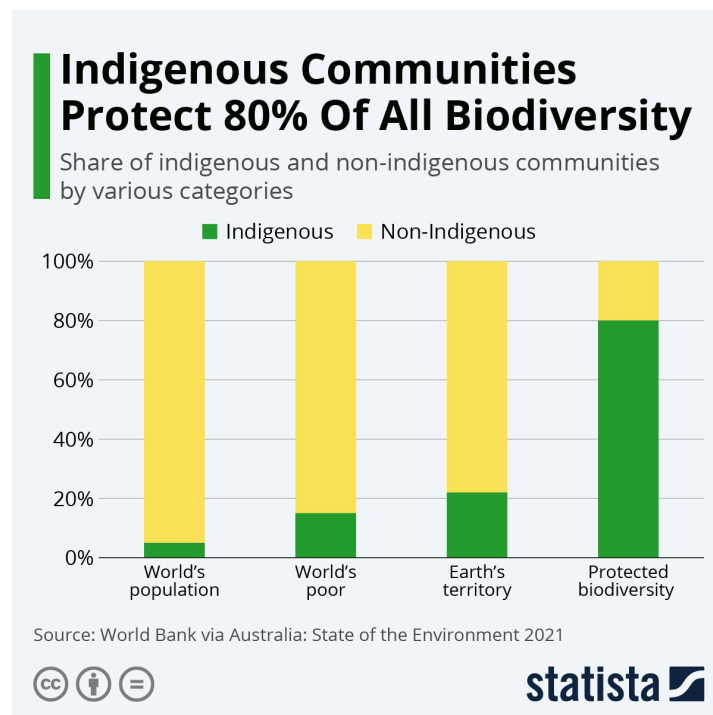


Figure 1: A comparison of the percentage of the world’s population, the world’s poor, Earth’s territory and the protected biodiversity between indigenous and non-indigenous populations.

Such vulnerabilities are inseparable from centuries of colonial expropriation, missionary intervention, coerced assimilation, residential schools, legal marginalisation and forced sedentarisation, the legacy of which continue to manifest today. Within the context of ‘Culture and Heritage’, the consequences of this

extend far beyond indigenous communities themselves. The loss of languages, rituals and livelihoods encapsulates a decline of cultural plurality.

Definition of Key Terms

Indigenous Peoples

Defining indigenous peoples is challenging due to the fact that self-identification is considered a fundamental criterion, but a more general definition classifies them as cultural groups with historical continuity dating to pre-colonial or pre-settler societies, who typically maintain unique languages and traditions.⁴

Cultural Heritage

The cultural legacies that indigenous communities inherit, maintain and transmit across generations. Tangible heritage refers to physical objects, such as sites and landscapes whereas intangible heritage encompasses knowledge, practices and traditions.⁵

Livelihoods

The practices that are utilised by indigenous communities to secure the basic necessities of life, while also reproducing cultural knowledge. For instance, for Maasai pastoralists in East Africa, cattle herding is a means of maintaining both food security and rituals.⁶

Cultural Continuity

The uninterrupted transmission and practice of cultural knowledge, traditions and social structures across generations.⁷

Background Information

Foundations of indigenous marginalisation

The marginalisation of Indigenous people is undoubtedly related to European colonialisation systems that rationalised the appropriation of Indigenous lands through the introduction of the doctrine of terra nullius, which asserted that land was empty if Indigenous populations didn't conform to European governance, economic and agricultural systems. Consequently, this justified the seizure of indigenous territories, and the restructuring of Indigenous societies.

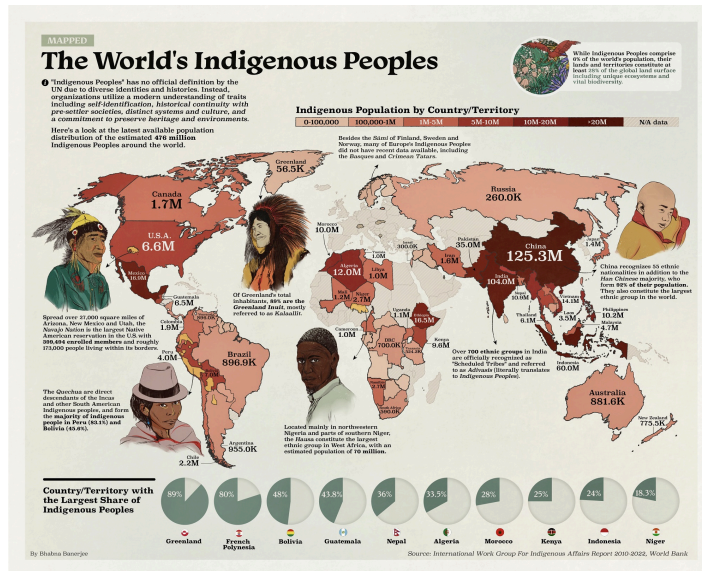


Figure 2: A map of the world, showing the indigenous populations by country and territory.

Forced assimilation was a frequently pursued policy by colonialists, and it consisted of the attempt to replace indigenous cultural systems with those of settlers. In North America, residential schooling systems systematically separated indigenous children from their families and prohibited the use of native languages. Such systems can be a source of intergenerational trauma, social fragmentation and a weakening of intergenerational ties and knowledge. Similarly, the assimilation of Aboriginal children, also known as the Stolen Generations in Australia, into settler societies eroded familial structures and kinship structures.⁸ Such practices established the perception of Indigenous peoples as being inferior, since the logic behind it was that their practices had to be changed to fit it in with the norm.

Structural causes of contemporary vulnerability

Indigenous territories frequently coincide with valuable areas, which makes them targets for logging and mining. Unfortunately, these can act as driving factors for land dispossession and encroachment, which include removing Indigenous people from their ancestral territories. Without effective enforcement of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), indigenous communities can thus face displacement and economic obstacles. For instance, anthropogenic commercial activity in the Arctic threatens Indigenous food systems, landscapes and cultural practices which drives the aforementioned displacement. The loss of territory had severe and long-lasting consequences. Land is the basis of identity, self-governance and biodiversity preservation. The removal of Indigenous people from their ancestral territories leads to entire knowledge systems that incorporate pillars of rituals, oral traditions and ecological management, losing their foundations.

Historical exclusion and segregation has also produced disparities in education, healthcare, employment and political representation, thus producing socioeconomic marginalisation. For instance, 53.3% of working indigenous women have no education at all.⁹ Such inequalities restrict political influence, as communities with little access to formal education may face barriers when attempting to assert their rights.

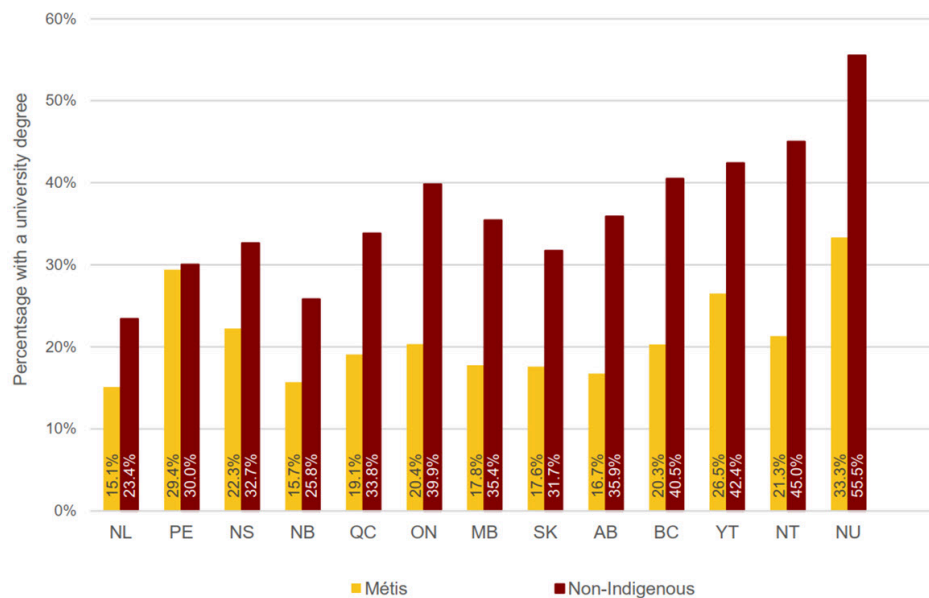


Figure 3: A bar chart showing the socioeconomic gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous groups in Canada.

Globalisation, urbanisation and the expansion of industrial economies also exacerbate indigenous vulnerabilities through market pressures, mass tourism and media influence, which portray indigenous traditions as incompatible with modernised societies. Urban migration exacerbates this cultural fragmentation, since, as younger indigenous generations move to cities in search for education and employment, traditions decline.

Threats to identity, culture, heritage and language

The UN's International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL) stresses that languages are "gateways to worlds of cultural diversity", but states often fail to recognise indigenous languages in public life, which has led to the rate of Indigenous language loss now being considered to be a global emergency.¹⁰ Such a loss disrupts worldviews, weakens community cohesion and removes the means of guiding intergenerational transmission of values.



Figure 4:

The Australian language loss, showcased by the comparison of language abundance before and after colonisation.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Canada

Canada implemented Bill C-15 to align domestic law with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which mandates cooperation with indigenous nations, and mandates annual public reporting on this progress. In addition, British Columbia's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act requires FPIC for major resource projects.

New Zealand

New Zealand aims to preserve language and culture through the Treaty of Waitangi Act and Māori settlement frameworks which formally recognise Māori land rights and, the Te Reo Māori revitalisation programs.¹¹

Brazil

Brazil protects indigenous land through constitutional recognition of Indigenous land. In fact, 13% of Brazilian territory is legally recognised as Indigenous land.¹²

United Nations

The United Nations is a heavily involved international IGO when discussing the issue of protecting indigenous identity, culture, languages, heritage, and livelihood. In order for effective long term reform to be made diplomacy through the UN must be conducted. Delegates acknowledge and consider the following important UN documentation already on the matter:

- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 13 September 2007 (A/RES/61/295): Establishes international standards for Indigenous rights, including land, culture and self-determination.¹³
- International Decade of Indigenous Languages, 23 December 2019 (A/RES/74/135): Promotes the preservation and revitalisation of endangered Indigenous languages.¹⁴

Cultural Survival

Cultural Survival, works to protect Indigenous rights through research, media campaigns and legal advocacy. In over 20 countries, they have assisted indigenous communities to secure land recognition, protect languages and prevent forced evictions.¹⁵

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
June 26 th , 1957	Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention was adopted, which recognised the rights of indigenous and tribal populations. ¹⁶

August 9 th , 1982	First meeting of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) which became the basis for indigenous-rights advocacy at the UN. ¹⁷
December 23 rd , 1994	The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopts Resolution 49/21 which proclaimed the 9th of August as the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples.
September 13 th , 2007	UNGA adopts the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which established global standards for Indigenous rights. ¹⁸
2019	The International Year of Indigenous Languages raised awareness of linguistic diversity. ¹⁹
December 9 th , 2022	The IDIL 2022-2032 begins by the release of the Global Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. ²⁰

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Greenlandic Language Act

The Greenlandic Language Act declared Kalaallisut (Greenlandic) as the sole official language of Greenland, and mandated its use in government, education and public services. Following the Act, over 70% of schools adopted Greenlandic as the primary language of instruction.²¹ Nonetheless, challenges remain in higher education, where Danish remains the dominant language.

National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI)

INALI was created to protect, preserve and promote all indigenous languages of Mexico through enabling bilingual education and public administration. However, the implementation of INALI was uneven across regions, meaning that smaller communities had limited resources.

Possible Solutions

Community-based digital archives

Indigenous communities can create digital archives of traditional knowledge, to allow this knowledge to be preserved and shared with younger generations through digitalisation.

Cross-community mentorship

Through the establishment of such programs, elders would be able to mentor youth in cultural practices, such as traditional crafts and storytelling, in order to build intergenerational connections and

ensure that traditional knowledge is actively used. Indigenous communities can also connect regionally or internationally to share techniques and management strategies through peer-to-peer learning.

Traditional knowledge mapping projects

Through collaboration with experts, communities can map sacred sites, fishing zones, medicinal plants and seasonal migration patterns, in order to maintain a detailed record of traditional knowledge.

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