

Amplifying indigenous voices

IUCN indigenous members' solutions and challenges related to the COVID-19 crisis

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Key messages

- As the coronavirus global pandemic continues, indigenous peoples are voicing urgent concerns about the elevated health risks and exposure faced by their communities. Gaps in access to adequate health infrastructure, clean water, food security and economic stability are pressing issues.
- Indigenous peoples have an intrinsic relationship with nature that forms their cultural and spiritual identity and supports their livelihoods. These communities act as stewards of nature and offer valuable indigenous knowledge that contributes to conservation and can be the basis for solutions to build their resilience to the pandemic.
- To strengthen their resilience to this pandemic, the global conservation and development community should support the work and rights of indigenous peoples and value their unique contributions to the natural balance, food security and health of the planet and its inhabitants.

Indigenous peoples are fighting the COVID-19 pandemic daily, taking strong measures to protect their communities and territories from this virus. In these times, historical exclusions affecting rights to basic services and health infrastructure have become more acute, making indigenous peoples an extremely fragile and vulnerable section of society in this pandemic. In addition, attempts to appropriate traditional lands, territories and resources and open up areas for mining and commercial exploitation continue in certain regions. At the same time, indigenous peoples, through their indigenous knowledge and experience in natural resource stewardship, offer the wider world valuable insights, strategies and solutions for reducing the spread of COVID-19 and enhancing the resilience of communities and nature during the current crisis and beyond.

Foreword

The global spread of COVID-19 has thrown into sharp relief existing patterns of social inequality and vulnerability around the world. Indigenous peoples are among those most severely impacted by and vulnerable to the pandemic, reflecting long-standing disparities in health services, economic access and political power.

IUCN has long recognised that indigenous peoples play a vital role in conserving lands, seas and natural resources across the world's most biodiverse regions. Indigenous knowledge, cultures, governance and economic systems contribute to addressing the most pressing environmental challenges facing the Earth and humanity. In 2016, IUCN took the important step of creating a new category of membership for indigenous peoples organisations (IPOs), in order to strengthen the voice and role of indigenous peoples in IUCN and the wider conservation community.

In order to make visible the impact that COVID-19 is having in their lands, territories and resources, IUCN Member IPOs, together with IUCN's Global Programme on Governance and Rights, present this brief entitled *Amplifying Indigenous Voices: IUCN Indigenous members' solutions and challenges related to the COVID-19 crisis*. With this, IUCN and IPOs aim to increase global attention to the particular situation of indigenous peoples and communities in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and the solutions they are advancing to address it. To this end, IPO Members and IUCN have gathered the information presented here on how IPOs are dealing with the pandemic, their solutions and proposals for further action.

IUCN recognises that indigenous peoples have strongly contributed to the conservation of nature. Today, IUCN IPO Members contribute significantly to our Union and the work we do all over the world. At IUCN we also recognise that if we want to have a healthy planet for generations to come, we must continue to support the health and vital stewardship roles of indigenous peoples. To strengthen their resilience to this pandemic, the global conservation and development community should support the work and rights of indigenous peoples and value their unique contributions to the natural balance, food security and health of the planet and its inhabitants. This support should address the urgent needs that indigenous women, men, children and youth are facing from the pandemic, and also respond to indigenous proposals for the long term resilience of their cultures, livelihoods and environments.



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IUCN indigenous peoples organisation membership

IUCN has a long history of working with indigenous peoples, both to promote the recognition of their rights at the policy level and to engage and support indigenous peoples in the use, management and conservation of their lands, territories and resources.

At the IUCN World Conservation Congress in 2016, the IUCN Members Assembly adopted a landmark decision for indigenous peoples and conservation. Members voted to create a new category of IUCN membership for Indigenous Peoples' Organisations (IPOs), strengthening the recognition of their rights, participation, voice and role in IUCN. The new category was the first time IUCN reformed its membership structure in its 70-year history and it did so to recognise the specific situation and role of IPOs.

Integrating IPOs into the membership of IUCN enables them to play an important role in convening and facilitating indigenous participation in environmental decision-making and playing a critical role in the governance of IUCN as a Union. Currently, IUCN has 23 Members in its IPO category, from different regions of the world. As a distinct and mobilised constituency within IUCN, IPO Members have a self-determined strategy identifying joint priorities for advancing indigenous rights and issues in conservation and within IUCN.

This brief was prepared by IUCN's Indigenous Peoples Organisation Members with support from the IUCN Global Programme on Governance and Rights (GPGR).

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The impact of COVID-19 on indigenous peoples

To date, all of the lands and territories where IUCN Member IPOs are located report positive cases of COVID-19. Transmission has been linked to those who leave communities to work in urban centres, as well as to internal and external migrants. However, national and global reports do not have specific records regarding indigenous peoples, making plans and strategies for medium and long term emergency care for the needs of indigenous peoples difficult to develop.

In all regions, IPOs report that they are facing aggravated health risks, food insecurity, loss of employment and livelihoods, and increased violence against indigenous women. Some leaders in forest rich regions such as the Amazon and certain parts of Asia have also been dealing with social problems such as increased human rights violations and threats from forest fires, mining, excessive exploitation of the forest, land grabbing and aggression against indigenous environmental defenders. All regions identified three main cross-cutting issues and ways their lives are being directly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic: health threats; food security; and economic issues. All of these issues are closely linked to the environment of indigenous lands and territories.

Threats to health and well-being

IPOs report that health systems in their localities are often weak and countries do not have a good system of care for indigenous patients. In most cases, there is no immediate assistance and/or transportation to transfer indigenous patients to care centres; and where health posts or centres exist, they do not have adequate first-aid kits, equipment or basic medicines to care for people with symptoms of COVID-19. Likewise, in many regions there are limited to no tests to detect whether the indigenous peoples are infected or whether they have other health problems. Most countries do not have a culturally relevant health system, do not provide care in indigenous languages, do not allow the use of indigenous medicine in an integrated manner with the public system, do not allow the development and integration of indigenous spirituality into the healing process, or the use of their diet and traditional clothing in hospitals, and do not involve traditional organisations and indigenous authorities in coordinating health care in their communities.



Photo: Brian Adams/ICC

Stressed health systems: The case in Inuit Nunangat

According to a June 2020 publication by [Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami \(ITK\)](#), entitled, [The Potential Impacts of COVID-19 on Inuit Nunangat](#), "Health care systems in Inuit Nunangat already have limited capacity and are more fragile than health care systems in other Canadian jurisdictions. Inuit living in Inuit Nunangat have limited access to physicians and health care compared to other Canadians. There are only two hospitals in Inuit Nunangat, located in Iqaluit and Inuvik. These two hospitals are capable of providing acute care to a combined total of 86 patients and are not equipped to provide long-term in-patient care. All other communities are served by health centers that are not equipped to provide in-patient care. Inuit also have limited access to physicians. For example, 82% of Inuit do not have a family doctor in Inuit Nunangat."



Photo: Shutterstock

IPO responses to health challenges

Indigenous organisations around the world have responded quickly to prevent the spread of COVID-19. One common response has been the increased use of **indigenous medicine**, especially focusing on boosting the immune system using medicine from forests and home gardens; **increased care for vulnerable people**, whose safety has been threatened by the pandemic, is also being addressed:

- Traditional medicine is being collected to ensure its availability in communities. [Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica \(COICA\)](#) notes that many traditional healers are making use of traditional medicine in the Amazon region.
- Protection of the elders in the community is fundamental for indigenous peoples because protecting the elders is protecting the holders of indigenous knowledge. Measures to protect elders are currently being strengthened in Maya communities throughout Mesoamerica.
- Globally, the pandemic has led to increased rates of violence against women. In Guatemala an emergency number has been established for reporting violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 crisis; likewise, in Asia, the [Network of Indigenous Women in Asia \(NIWA\)](#) and [Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact \(AIPP\)](#) have called on states and non-state actors to collaborate in devising a fast track justice system to deal with gender-based violence.

Restriction of travel, self-quarantining, social distancing, and self-isolation are also some of the general actions taken by IPOs in an effort to protect their communities. Relevant steps have included closing access to their lands and territories; overseeing the entry and exit of community members; and monitoring cases and adopting health measures that take into account their culture and way of life:

- In the case of Inuit Nunangat, the [Inuit Circumpolar Council \(ICC\)](#) shared that restrictions of all non-essential travel from southern centres to Arctic communities in Canada has been in place since March 2020.
- Territorial leaders in some Latin American countries, especially in the Amazon region, are using indigenous knowledge and practices such as voluntary collective isolation to limit access to their territories and prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- In the Amazon region COVID-19 committees led by indigenous leaders have been established to make lockdown-related decisions, including limiting the entry of outsiders.
- In the Guna territory in Panama, specific areas of the community have been assigned for self-quarantine especially for community members returning from the urban areas where they had been residing.
- In indigenous lands and territories of Asia, including Myanmar, Northeast India (Manipur and Nagaland) and the Central Philippines, as well as in Maya territories in Mesoamerica, 24-hour checkpoints have been set up at the entrance and exit to communities.

- Networks of community monitors are being set up in some areas to track the symptoms of community members and liaise with outside services. In Peru, [Federación Nativa del Río Madre de Dios y Afluentes \(FENAMAD\)](#) has established an epidemiological surveillance system in coordination with their communities, generating alerts at the local level when there are suspicious cases, which are reported to health authorities in order to make the appropriate assessment, and if necessary intervention.
- In the Amazon region, COICA has called for specific protection measures such as the definition of sanitary cordons for highly vulnerable peoples in situations of isolation and initial contact.
- In Mesoamerica, streets and entrances to villages are being disinfected.

Challenges to communal and nomadic ways of life

In Africa, the [Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee \(IPACC\)](#) noted that lockdown approaches cannot be applied by many indigenous peoples in that region because of their nomadic and communal lifestyles.

Key message dissemination through writing, media and radio broadcasts in indigenous languages has been important:

- In Guatemala, the [Asociación Ak' Tenamit \(AAT\)](#) and the [Asociación So'tzil \(So'tzil\)](#) have translated prevention messages on COVID-19 into various indigenous languages, produced culturally appropriate public health materials and radio spots, and disseminated them through social media and community radio programmes.
- Communities in Asia and Latin America have mobilised their indigenous youths to serve as «Prevention Agents» responsible for preparing messages and short videos showing community members how to make protective masks from household materials (old clothes) and handwashing stations from recycled materials and demonstrating proper handwashing technique.
- In Paraguay, the [Federación por la Autodeterminación de los Pueblos Indígenas \(FAPI\)](#) has developed, in coordination with indigenous communicators from its member associations, communication materials in indigenous languages, radio spots, audio-visual spots, information posters on the prevention of COVID-19 infections and traditional sanitation strategies using ash bleach for hand washing and cutlery when soap is not available. Currently, together with public institutions and international cooperation, it is promoting the campaign [#EntreComunidadesNosCuidamos](#).



Photo: IPACC



Photo: SOTZIL

Challenges to food sovereignty and security

As closures continue in many countries, without a clear plan for reopening, indigenous peoples who already faced food insecurity as a result of climate change impacts and ongoing pressures on traditional lands and territories, now also face immediate challenges in terms of access to food. Restrictions and staying at home are causing many communities to be unable to carry out their crop cycles, food gathering and the collection and cultivation of medicinal plants. In addition, food security of communities is being adversely affected by restrictions affecting domestic production and the entry of basic products to the communities. These changes are having negative impacts on many indigenous peoples working in traditional occupations and subsistence economies or in the informal sector. The situation of indigenous women, who are often the main providers of food and nutrition for their families, is even more serious.

COVID-19 impacts on food systems

There is a great impact on indigenous agriculture, fishing, tourism, handicrafts and therefore on food sovereignty due to the establishment of compulsory social isolation. There has been a problem of shortage of food supplies as a result of the closure of access roads to the communities. Another impact on agriculture is that basic products grown by communities cannot be sold. In addition, the migration of indigenous people who are returning from urban areas to their communities creates pressure on the food resources available in the territories. This pressure on local food systems has been reported by the Guna People of Panama, where 50% of the population lives in Panama City and due to the pandemic, many have returned to the Guna territory.

In Hawai'i (USA), the pandemic has also highlighted the island state's food systems vulnerabilities. While Native Hawaiian peoples are concerned about the likelihood of disproportionate impacts on their communities, the situation has also brought more attention to the value and contributions of local and indigenous agriculture and aquaculture.

In Bangladesh, the villages in the Chittagong Hill Tracts face a major food crisis. Many families of Mro, Khumi, Chak, Tripura and Marma communities in remote villages are in dire food crisis since the lock down has disabled them from moving to produce their food.

IPO responses to food security

Initial responses by indigenous peoples and their organisations have focused primarily on the **strengthening of traditional systems** of agricultural and medicinal plant production. In addition, traditional systems of exchange and reciprocity – collecting and sharing maize, beans, other grains and produce to ensure that everyone has access to food – is also a common practice being strengthened during the pandemic.

- The Mayan people of Mesoamerica are practicing their ancient «vuelta de mano» barter system to gather traditional foods and make exchanges between communities to ensure food security in times of crisis.
- In the Guna territory of Panama and in many other South American countries, where communities share food with each other, bartering has also grown in importance.
- In Latin America and Africa, IPOs have reported that their territories have organised market hours and that increased consumption of products and items produced in their communities has been promoted.

- In Myanmar, the Karen indigenous peoples in the Salween Peace Park have demonstrated strong indigenous governance and food sovereignty in the face of COVID-19 pandemic including practicing their traditional knowledge about diverse indigenous agricultural systems that integrate biodiversity conservation aspects.
- In Guatemala, [Asociación de Desarrollo Productivo y de Servicios \(TIKONEL\)](#), AAT and Sot'zil are mobilising resources to develop local productive activities – such as fish farming and planting local and organic seeds – in order to promote a short food growing cycle that will improve food availability and the health of indigenous families during the pandemic.
- FENAMAD in Peru has been promoting strategies to ensure food security in communities through the revitalisation of traditional agricultural and forest management practices and knowledge since March of this year.
- In Paraguay, addressing the food and health emergency brought on by the pandemic, FAPI is organising food kit donations to more than 500 indigenous families in critical situations.

Economic adversity

The economies of indigenous populations have been severely affected by the restrictive measures taken by governments and communities as a result of the pandemic, since the agricultural, craft, tourism, fishing and service activities that they participate in have been curtailed. Without these commercial activities, economic income is severely limited. In general, many communities are dedicated to growing traditional produce, and buy other necessary but non-local products with the income they obtain from the sales of what they produce. As the commercialisation of agricultural products has been diminished by the closure of access roads, conditions of poverty are rapidly deepening.

Unemployment has also increased, since work centres are closed and public transport has been paralysed in different communities, making mobility difficult. With lockdowns and business closures there has also been a sharp decrease in remittances from family members working in cities or internationally, thus compounding the economic difficulties in indigenous communities. The natural and cultural resources that underpin indigenous economies are also being negatively impacted due to ongoing threats from forest fires, extraction of forest and sea resources and the advance of plantations and monocultures, coupled with new constraints on community monitoring due to the pandemic.

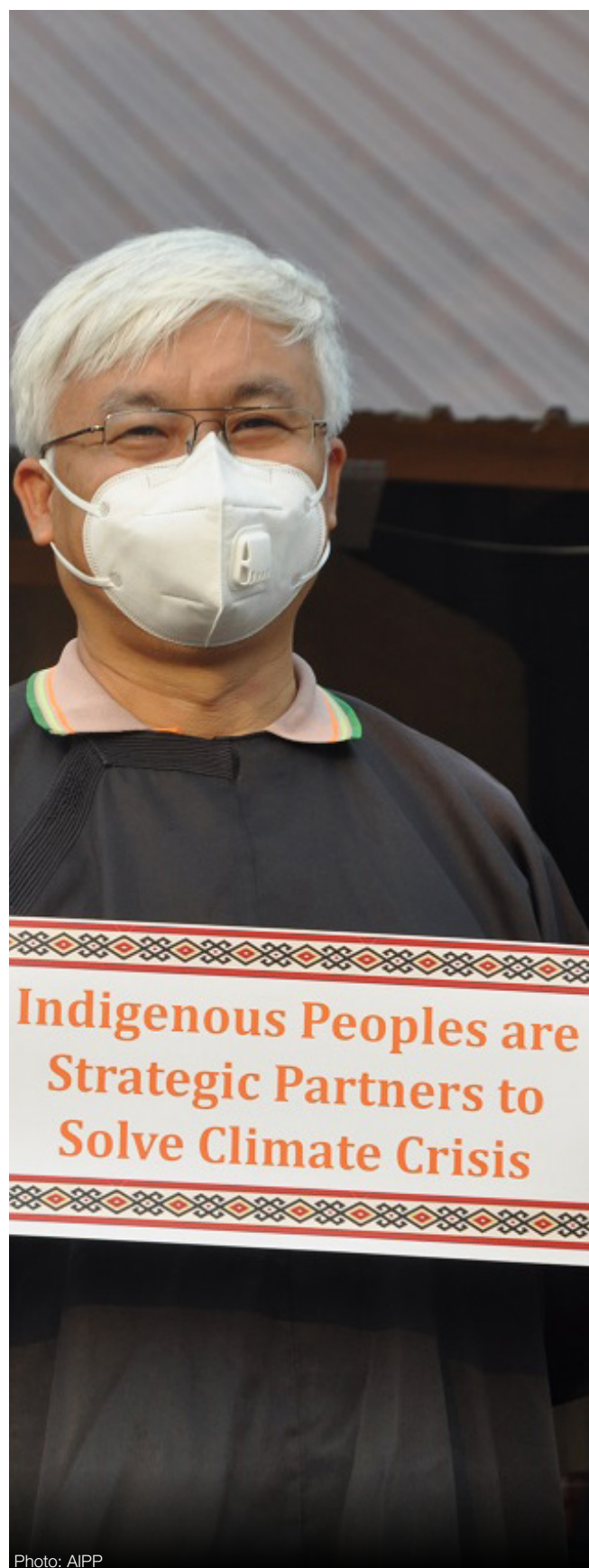


Photo: AIPP



Photo: FPCI

Economic adversity linked to the pandemic is heightened by persistent gaps in basic infrastructure and investments in indigenous communities. IPOs stress that there is an urgent need to close the infrastructure gap that they have been facing for decades. For example, the ICC highlighted that there is an urgent need to improve the poor infrastructure situation that all Inuit regions are facing, even in first world countries, through major new investments in communities. This should prioritise the basic infrastructure investments that underpin economic development and human well being, such as housing, water, and sewer and broadband connections. Similar demands are being echoed by other Indigenous peoples across the globe, voicing the urgent need to address social and economic equity as critical for the survival of indigenous peoples to this pandemic.

Cracks in economic and infrastructural systems: Reflections in North America

COVID-19 has led to reflections on the inequitable and unsustainable systems that many societies are built upon. For many indigenous peoples, these foundational problems have become threats to their well-being and economies. As ICC Chair Dr. Dalee Sambo Dorrough highlights, “The issues we have been working to overcome for decades, such as overcrowded housing, lack of proper sewage and potable water systems, high rates of TB, and poor broadband connectivity become starkly evident during a pandemic, and increase the risks of spreading the disease.” In Hawai’i the pandemic has forced the island state to re-evaluate the impacts of mass tourism and the type of tourism it can or desires to accommodate in the future. Almost 25% of Hawai’i’s population is now unemployed. This has furthered discussions that revolve around increased resilience and economic opportunities that produce and capture local income and create liveable wages for the island economy.

IPOs responses to build economic resilience

- In Hawai’i, indigenous communities impacted by mass tourism are taking a breath, **observing and monitoring the recovery of their resources** in hopes they can establish a new baseline.
- The ICC in Alaska is considering how to bring forward the lessons learned from this pandemic to ensure future infrastructural preparedness, and identify strategies and priorities to fully **close the existing gaps** and end the disparities that have been deepening during the pandemic.
- Around the world, indigenous peoples are **strengthening their traditional governance systems** to manage access to natural resources and build more resilient economic systems. Now more than ever, indigenous rights to self-determination are fundamental, as the direct managers of the crisis and its impacts in their communities.



Photo: Waimānalo Limu Hui

Proposals from IUCN IPO Members on strengthening the resilience of indigenous peoples during the pandemic

The experiences highlighted in this brief make visible how indigenous communities are positioning and empowering themselves as a source of solutions to build their resilience to this crisis. At this time, indigenous communities are working hard to create self-directed and purposeful solutions to the impacts and post-COVID-19 actions.

IUCN IPO Members, together with their national and regional organisations, are reaching a consensus and putting forward the following proposals from different regions, as alternatives for solving the crisis and recognising their rights and participation. Their proposals – which focus on strengthening health information systems and access to needed materials and services, promoting community economic revival, and ensuring environmental resilience – are as follows:

Information flow on COVID-19 and support to indigenous peoples:

- Raise awareness among indigenous peoples of the dangers of COVID-19 and advise them on the safety mechanisms they can adopt
- Adopt proactive and appropriate approaches to safeguard indigenous peoples against COVID-19 and ensure access to necessary health services
- Provide immediate special assistance and practical support, such as the provision of food, clean water and other basic health needs, to indigenous communities
- Provide biosecurity materials (mask, soap, alcohol gel, thermometers, etc.) for leaders, security guards, health promoters, indigenous teachers and indigenous communicators so that they can continue developing their community work with the necessary protection
- Strengthen telephone and internet access for early warning, telemedicine, online education and communication with different indigenous groups where communication is limited due to mobility restrictions due to the pandemic

Community economic revival:

- Strengthen food security during the pandemic by revitalising traditional knowledge and practices in early food production
- Promote the marketing of traditional indigenous products by taking advantage of online marketing as the main way of selling at this time
- Generate indigenous, agricultural, aquaculture and artisanal value chains to ensure that indigenous artisans and farmers are still able to commercialise their products during the pandemic
- Promote and encourage service companies to accompany and support indigenous peoples in an effort to boost the indigenous economy
- Generate investment programmes through indigenous cooperatives and companies that will promote investment by individuals, families and indigenous communities
- Create conditions for mobility and production logistics for access to markets
- Strengthen indigenous community-based tourism and gastronomy initiatives as an alternative livelihood
- Over the longer term, strengthen community-based tourism initiatives focusing on the domestic or national tourism market

Natural resources, biodiversity and climate change:

- Carry out educational campaigns to protect the environment from increased pressures during COVID-19 pandemic
- Promote the conservation of water sources and their importance in combating COVID-19
- Increase awareness on the need for the conservation of nature for the overall health of the environment during this crisis
- Strengthen traditional indigenous land tenure for the governance of lands and resources
- Enact or strengthen laws that empower indigenous community governance and management
- Increase direct investment in indigenous-led conservation, reforestation and agroforestry initiatives in communal lands
- Facilitate indigenous community involvement in forestry and carbon incentives
- Promote the creation and recognition of indigenous protected area categories
- For indigenous communities impacted by mass tourism, use this time to monitor and establish new environmental baselines

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