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United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization

UNESCO



STUDY GUIDE

Protecting the rights of Indigenous peoples

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Welcome from the Dias and Secretariat

Dear delegates,

We are delighted to welcome you to this year's ATUMUN conference and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization (UNESCO).

At the conference this year you will discuss a topic which is still extremely relevant, even though it might not be foremost on people's minds. Indigenous peoples face many issues in modern society. And even though their rights continually are made better they are still far from perfect. Furthermore, there is a huge discrepancy in different countries' opinions on the topic. Some countries have a history of oppressing the Indigenous peoples, while some countries have populations which were oppressed. In addition some Indigenous peoples might still face oppressions. Thus this debate is likely to be quite complex with such a varying degree of views.

The following Study guide will provide you with an introduction to the committee's topic - Protecting the rights of Indigenous peoples - as well as give a brief overview of the key issues within the topic.

We encourage you to do further research on your own in order to fully comprehend the different aspects of the topic and to be as well-prepared as possible. It is recommended you utilise the resources provided in the Further Reading section.

We hope you found the Study Guide helpful, and are as excited for the conference as we are. If you have any questions feel free to ask us on our email atumunsekretariat@gmail.com. We will make sure to answer any questions in a timely manner.

We are looking forward to meeting all of you and to a fantastic debate!

Sincerely your Dias and Secretariat,

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Abbreviations

IACHR - Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

POC - People Of Color/Person Of Color

UN - United Nations

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Cultural, and Cultural Organisation

Key definitions

Indigenous peoples - due to the fundamental criterion in various human rights documents, the UN strives to identify Indigenous peoples, rather than define them, based on the following:

- Self-identification and acceptance by the community as indigenous.
- Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources.
- Distinct social, economic or political systems.
- Distinct language, culture and beliefs.
- Form non-dominant groups of society.
- Has historical continuity to pre-colonial / pre-settler societies.
- Decide to conserve and reproduce their ancestral environment and systems as particular peoples and communities.

[United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, n.d.]

Introduction to the committee

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) was established in November 1945, a mere month after the official founding of the United Nations. UNESCO was created to strengthen peace, justice, and security through the promotion of education, science, culture, and communication. As such, the committee is a forum to discuss matters of cultural heritage, protection and conservation of knowledge, and to grant countries a foundation on which to be independent.

UNESCO has 194 member states and 12 associate members. A state's membership of the UN grants the right of membership to UNESCO. States that are not members of the UN may be admitted to UNESCO after a two-thirds majority vote in the UNESCO General Conference, after being recommended by the UNESCO Executive Board. All member states have a National Commission for UNESCO to promote cooperation between their governmental and non-governmental bodies and UNESCO. However, UNESCO does not intervene in matters that are under a member state's domestic jurisdiction, seeing as the organisation strives to promote the independence and integrity of member states. [UNESCO 1, n.d.] [UNESCO 2, n.d.] [UNESCO, 2024]

Introduction to the topic

When discussing the rights of Indigenous peoples it is vital to focus on their history, past and present. The violence that is still committed towards these groups has ties with colonialism and the systems set in place by the colonising nations. Despite their treatment being greatly improved in modern times, there is still a looming threat of state violence lurking behind many indigenous communities.

Violence against Indigenous peoples is not solely physical harm, but also to any action committed with the intent of harming their communities. This can be forced assimilation, where the government will forcibly take indigenous children and place them with other families or in specific schools. Blocking Indigenous peoples' access to their native land, healthcare, and public services is another tool which has been used, against these groups, in acts of discrimination.

In 2007 the United Nations finalised and approved The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples in the General Assembly, which has served as an important reference point for bettering the rights of Indigenous peoples. The document declares the right of Indigenous peoples to live, practise their own spiritual beliefs, to create their own educational systems, and other human rights which some states have refused to acknowledge. UNESCO works to protect the culture, language, and knowledge of Indigenous peoples, and promotes indigenous practices in an attempt to better the lives led by the Indigenous peoples of the world. [Amnesty International, n.d.] [Canadian Historical Association, n.d.] [Whyatt, 2023] [Loppie, Reading, and de Leeuw, 2024] [UN, 2007]

The current state

Despite being all over the world, consisting of over 5000 different people, and accounting for 6,2% of the global population, the issues faced by Indigenous peoples across the globe are similar. One of the biggest challenges is violation of their human rights by state authorities. These violations take many different forms, from blocking access to health care, ignoring their right to self-determination, forced assimilation, lack of education in native languages, taking their native lands, and a bias in the criminal justice system. The patterns of colonialism are present throughout the different challenges. [Amnesty International, n.d.] In the following section some of these challenges will be addressed in more detail. It is worth noting, the different challenges are intertwined and connected, most if not all are hard to separate from each other after a certain point. Furthermore, many countries may experience challenges without it being well known, as the challenges have not been uncovered.

Indigenous peoples and the criminal justice system

Currently Indigenous peoples are overrepresented in the criminal justice system - both as the victim and perpetrator. The overrepresentation of perpetrators can be tied to discrimination in the earlier stages of the justice process. An example of this could be, legal texts, only written

in languages, which the Indigenous peoples do not understand. This is prevalent in some Asian countries. [UNDESA, 2009] Other reasons are linked to colonialism, cultural discrimination or racism which have become systemic discrimination. [Department of Justice Canada, 2025]

Over the last couple of decades, countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United States of America have made an effort to acknowledge the problems within their justice systems, regarding Indigenous peoples. In Australia, Indigenous peoples are 10 times more likely to get arrested. This difference is even bigger when it comes to kids, where indigenous kids are 26 times more likely to be arrested, when compared to non-indigenous kids. [Prison Policy Initiative, n.d.] [Department of Justice Canada, 2025] [Amnesty International, 2022]

In Canada Indigenous peoples accounted for 32% of prison inmates, in 2023, a rise from 23% in 2013. This is compared to the roughly 5% of the population the Indigenous peoples account for. To help combat this, in 2019, the legislation for the jury selection process was amended, eliminating the possibility to object to a juror without stating a reason. [CBC News, 2025] In the United States the picture is similar. A report, from 2023, by the *John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation* shows incarceration rates for Indigenous peoples, in states with high native populations, are close to 7 times higher when compared to white people. Additionally, they are sentenced harder compared to white, african americans and hispanic individuals. An additional key finding from the report is the increased likelihood of native youth being tried as adults, especially in regards to drug-related crimes. [Davis, 2023]

Indigenous peoples, in countries such as India and China, are typically the last to be protected from the law. The challenges they face often lack addressing from the official side, whether by law or otherwise. This combined with the already established laws not being enforced or crimes not being reported at all, can result in statistics being misleading and not showing the true numbers. [IWGIA, n.d.]

Rights to self-determination

Self-determination is understood as, “*an ongoing process of ensuring that people are able to make decisions about matters that affect their lives. Essential to the exercise of self-determination is choice, participation and control.*” [AHRC, n.d.]. This includes choices regarding their political choices, as well as those regarding their economic, social, and cultural development. Compared to what is commonly thought of as human rights, self-determination is a collective right to be exercised by the people, rather than being concerned about the individual members of society. However, it is also strongly tied to all other indigenous rights. [AHRC, n.d.]

In general, there has, on the international stage, been positive strides towards, and advancements regarding, the acknowledgement of Indigenous peoples’ rights. One of the major actors, besides the UN, with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples, has been the IACHR (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights).

IACHR monitors and promotes human rights of indigenous and tribal people. The Inter-American and the African human rights protection systems have often been at the forefront when it comes to advancing the rights of Indigenous peoples, even outpacing UN treaties. Their systems have been developed, not only on the individual dimension regarding self-determination, but also on a collective dimension. This is in stark contrast to Asia, where there are no regional systems to ensure the protection of rights regarding Indigenous peoples. [Fielitz and MacKay, 2025] The challenges tied to the rights to self-determination are often intertwined with political crises, authoritarian rule, and democratic movements. Especially in Asia this is prevalent, where Indigenous peoples align themselves with general struggles for justice and democracy, by challenging the state's power. [Shimray, 2025]

Some countries, like Australia, have acknowledged that they historically did not respect Indigenous peoples, and their rights. Most of these have been trying to remedy this, while working towards a better future for Indigenous peoples. One of the key areas being choices regarding health care. In doing so they have seen positive progression. [AHRC, n.d.]

Forced assimilation and education

Forced assimilation is defined as *“the process where individuals or groups from one cultural or ethnic background are compelled to abandon their native culture, language, and identity to adopt the customs, norms, and practices of a dominant group.”* [The OR Briefings, n.d.] Historically, forced assimilation has been widely practised by different governments. Residential and boarding schools have often been a used tool to achieve the goal of assimilation. By taking, often young, children away from their parents, children lose nearly, if not all, access to where and what they come from. This loss includes things such as language, cultural norms, beliefs, and religious practices. [UNESCO, 2023] Sometimes children have also been renamed, another method of cutting ties with their background. [Chavez, 2023]

Within the past 60 years, countries such as Canada and the United States have closed their boarding and residential schools focused on Indigenous peoples, acknowledging the harm done by the assimilation. [Chavez, 2023] [Parks Canada, 2025] China, on the other hand, has been under criticism due to its education reform in the Tibetan area. The reform expands on the use of boarding schools and pushes the use of Mandarin Chinese, reasoning that it is the language of their adult lives. Along with expansion of boarding schools they have closed village schools as well as private schools offering Tibetan. [Bristow, 2024]

Indigenous peoples and land ownership

The Indigenous peoples land ownership rights are largely ignored. While international law clearly states that relocation of Indigenous peoples cannot happen without their free, prior informed consent, their lands are often plundered and polluted by the private and public sector. This may be due to their land containing 35% of the global intact forests, as well as being rich in minerals and fossil fuels. While trying to protect their land, Indigenous peoples have faced physical harm as well as murder. Moreover, discriminatory policies and armed

conflicts consistently uproots Indigenous peoples. The first uprootals can be traced back to the colonial-era. [Amnesty International, n.d.] In response to this there has, in recent years, been movements growing, demanding the land, which was taken from their ancestors, back. Especially, in the United states the topic has been widely debated, with decisions changing from case to case, and year to year. [Kaur, 2020]

The question of land and access to its resources can in and of itself be hard for the governments of countries to answer. In cases where the land of the Indigenous peoples are spread across three different countries this becomes even more tricky. This is exemplified by the Sámi peoples in northern Scandinavia. Norway, Sweden and Finland have different degrees of responsibility and different ways of handling and respecting the cultural differences. This also ties into how self-determination is handled, even after the establishment of the Sámi Parliament in 1973. [Minority Rights Group, n.d.]

Overall many of the challenges seen today tie back to colonialism in one way or another, just like much of the modern world today is shaped by it, whether intentionally or not.

Timeline of events

- 1492 The age of exploration begins, as Columbus reaches the Americas, leading to indigenous resistance and devastation. [U.S. Mission Argentina, n.d.]
- 1500 The Portuguese arrive in Brazil. [Brown University, n.d.]
- 1510s-1530s The Spanish conquer most of South America.
- 1600s Native Americans face forced labour, displacement, and disease.
- 1600 British East India company founded. [Ruth, 2022]
France colonises parts of North America.
- 1700s The British Empire dominates North America and India.
Indigenous resistance in the Americas started. [Wolpert, 2025]
- 1776 US independence, but continues expansion into indigenous lands.
- 1788 The first fleet of British ships arrive in Australia. [Australian War Memorial, 2021]
- 1800s Peak of European imperialism, globally. [Surun, Pešta, and Metzler, 2023]
The Berlin conference divides Africa between European powers. No African rulers were invited. [Larson, 2023]
The UK has complete dominance in India. Introduction of railways, plantations, and devastating famines.
- 1900s Anti-colonial uprisings in Africa. [Fiveable Content Team, 2025]

- 1914 – 1918 The first World War weakens the European empires.
- 1947 British rule ends in India, with the British empire dividing India and Pakistan, leading to the death of one million people and the displacement of 15 million people. [BBC, 2022]
- 1948 Apartheid begins in South Africa. [AAM Archives, n.d.]
- 1950s – 1970s France leaves Indochina and Algeria. The UK leaves most of its African colonies.
- 1988 Brazil's new constitution recognizes land rights of the Indigenous peoples. [Chau, 2023]
- 2000s Ongoing debates about reconciliation, reparations and recognition of colonialism,
- 2007 UN declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples. [UN, 2007]

Key issues

The protection of Indigenous peoples' rights remains one of the most urgent and complex issues on the international agenda. Across the globe, Indigenous peoples continue to experience the consequences of centuries of colonisation, forced assimilation, resource extraction, and structural discrimination. The colonial period created infrastructures of dispossession and inequality that can be still seen today. It shaped the harsh economic, political, and cultural realities of Indigenous communities. While the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples establishes international norms on self-determination, cultural preservation, and land rights, its principles are often ignored or inadequately implemented. [UN, 2007] To safeguard the rights of Indigenous peoples, the international community must, not only officially recognize the global legacies and consequences of colonialism, but also work actively to dismantle the harmful ones.

It is important to acknowledge that colonialism was not a singular phenomenon but a global system that operated over centuries. Its most common features included displacement, economic exploitation, suppression of languages and cultures, mistreatment of natives, and the imposition of foreign governance structures. Indigenous peoples were often forced into marginal lands, subjected to taxation systems designed to enrich colonial powers, or pressed into coerced labor. Colonial violence also manifested in atrocities such as massacres, mass famines, and systemic attempts to erase Indigenous identities through residential schools, forced relocations, and bans on cultural or spiritual practices. [Dartmouth Libraries, n.d.]

While formal colonial rule has ended in much of the world, its legacy endures in multiple forms: mass displacement, mild to extreme poverty, depletion of resources, stolen artifacts never returned, poor health outcomes, political exclusion, and lack of recognition for traditional governance and knowledge systems. Many governments argue that colonial

injustices belong to the past, yet contemporary inequalities reveal their enduring influence. Protecting Indigenous peoples' rights therefore requires addressing these structural injustices, not only symbolic recognition.

The events leading up to this debate and disagreement on the acknowledging of the Rights of Indigenous peoples stems from diverse global experiences. While some colonial successors would argue they are not responsible for something that happened long ago, the Indigenous peoples of that country might disagree, having experienced the long-term consequences of such a violation and the ongoing challenges to their rights.

Central to the debate are countries such as France, The United Kingdom, Portugal, and the Netherlands. These large colonial powers have had a significant impact on Indigenous peoples all over the world. France remains implicated in Indigenous peoples rights debates through its overseas territories. France was the colonial power with the second most colonies right behind the United kingdom. France still has a few colonies left and some of them, like French Guiana, have recently spoken out to ask the French government for a constitutional revision to provide local governments more autonomy. [Guibert and Marot, 2024]

The United Kingdom is central to the history of colonialism. Across its former empire, Indigenous peoples were displaced, exploited, and subjected to cultural suppression. In India, for example, British policies devastated local industries, extracted wealth, and contributed to famines such as the Bengal famine of 1943, which killed up to 3 million people. India's share of global GDP fell from around 25% in the early 18th century to 3-4% by their independence in 1947. [Wikipedia 1 2025] Such devastation exemplifies how colonialism transformed once-thriving societies.

In total, the British colonial rule killed 100 million Indians over a span of 40 years, which is 1.75 million more per year than the deaths in the holocaust. [Sullivan and Hickel, 2022] Furthermore the British experimented with weapons on Indian soldiers. One of these experiments being the Rawalpindi experiments carried out by the British on Indian soldiers. Here Indian soldiers were locked in gas chambers for days and exposed to mustard gas, which caused burns and pains. [Evans, 2007]

A country like Serbia, that often goes unnoticed, carries its own history of ethnic and cultural suppression within the Balkans. The marginalization of the Romani people and other minority groups highlights how issues of cultural recognition, exclusion, and land rights resonate beyond the classical colonial context. Other European countries such as Austria and Lithuania also illustrate another key issue: seeing other empires thrive due to colonialism and not face repercussions might influence other states to try it out for themselves. While the Austro-Hungarian empire did not last long, it did manage to rule over Bosnia and Herzegovina for a short while. It also managed to become a threat to the British, Dutch, French, and Portuguese with the Ostend East India company. [Wikipedia 2, 2025]

Colonialism's enduring legacies are powerfully evident across Africa, the Asia-Pacific, and the Americas. In many regions of Africa the corruption, never-ending conflict, the rise of

violent non-state actors, elitism, poverty, and inequality has emerged, even as the end of colonialism was celebrated. [Mlambo, Masuku, and Mthembu, 2024] Additionally, the process of reclaiming a new identity after colonialism was not without external involvement with the metropolises (parent of a colony), who intervened in the state affairs, and thus had an impact on the state-building, as well as the military and economic systems. [Nigusie and Ivkina, 2021] One of the major challenges for African countries was effective self-governance. The transition from colonial rule led to power struggles, coups, and authoritarian regimes. Countries such as Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, and South Africa are such examples. Around one in five African countries, approximately 10% of the African population, is under highly democratic regimes. Countries such as Botswana, Cape Verde and Mauritius are designated as the least corrupt countries on the continent. [Atiah, 2023]

In Latin America, colonialism impacts lead to displacement, exploitation, and cultural suppression. Today, these consequences are highlighted through cultural suppression, where the indigenous cultures are still marginalized, and some of their history has been altered or erased by European colonizers. Spanish and Portuguese became the dominant languages, and the culture experienced a loss of their native language. While Indigenous peoples are reclaiming and trying to revive their ancestral languages, this long and considerably impossible process might never bring back what could have been. The traditional way of life was also disrupted, and Indigenous peoples had to work in plantations and mines. This led to many deaths and multiple injuries in the population, which could have had lasting effects on the descendants of the Indigenous peoples. [Bourke, 2023]

Brazil's colonial legacy is it being the largest slave colony in history, as well as the last country in the western hemisphere to abolish slavery. This has led to social, economic and racial inequality. Still, oligarchies continue to rule the state, diverting resources as well as shaping laws, even under left-leaning governments. POC (People of Color) remain underrepresented in various sectors, such as political and corporate leadership, elite high schools, higher education, and high paying jobs. The economic growth of the country is also undermined due to inequality, which not only keeps productivity low, but also threatens democracy and leads to more crime. Furthermore, environmental issues in Brazil are also vastly prevalent. Illegal gold miners, loggers, and land squatters are specifically targeting the Amazon rainforest. This is possible due to the weak standing of democracy and large inequality in different sectors. [Rodrigues et al., 2024]

Colonialism's consequences on Indigenous peoples are visible in several interconnected ways, such as land rights: many Indigenous communities remain dispossessed or face new threats from development, extractive industries, and conservation projects. It is also visible in cultural survival: languages, traditions, and spiritual practices remain endangered, ridiculed and stereotyped due to centuries of suppression and ongoing assimilation pressures. In structural inequalities: Poverty, poor health outcomes, systemic racism, and political exclusion disproportionately affect Indigenous peoples. This is especially true in slum areas and in countries with disproportionately divided wealth; accountability and reparations: few colonial powers or successor states have issued meaningful apologies or reparations for

colonial injustices, and several injustices are classified information according to the successor states, such as the rawalpindi experiments. Another way is neocolonialism: new forms of exploitation risk repeating colonial patterns under a different guise, where the consequences of allowing such cannot be fully considered without considering and thus acknowledging the consequences of similar actions committed in the past. [OHCHR, 2023] [Echo Media, 2025]

Protecting the rights of Indigenous peoples requires not only legal frameworks, like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples, but also genuine structural transformation. States must commit to land restitution, recognition of traditional governance, reparations for past wrongs, and meaningful participation of Indigenous communities in decision-making. As this issue demonstrates, globally, colonialism was not a single historical moment but a system whose structures persist today. This structure has caused alienation of and harm to Indigenous peoples. Addressing these injustices is therefore not an act of revisiting the past and pointing fingers, but rather of ensuring justice, equality, and sustainable futures for Indigenous peoples worldwide.

Major bloc positions

Countries with a history as colonial powers and perpetrators of colonial systems

The countries with a history of creating and/or upholding the systems set in place by colonialism often participate eagerly in the conversation of bettering the rights of Indigenous peoples. However, when it comes to making reparations for their own violent histories the countries in this bloc, such as the UK, USA and France, are still hesitant, but willing. Generally, these countries' governments are transparent in their decisions which include indigenous groups, but are still found lacking in many areas, especially when it comes to holding their own sovereign state accountable for its violent history. [Crawford, 2023] [Bruekers, 2025]

Countries whose Indigenous peoples have been violated

This bloc is made up of countries who champion for reparations for violence committed by other countries against their people, such as India, Brazil, and Nigeria. These states are vocal about their history, and often start the dialogue of making reparations between states and indigenous groups. Despite many members of this bloc having experienced a violation of human rights against their peoples, complications arise as some governments have a history of enacting violence towards Indigenous peoples within their own territories. [Amnesty International, 2023]

Questions a resolution could answer

1. How can a middle ground between the accountable and the wronged parties be found?
2. How much blame and responsibility can countries be held to, if they were not directly the decision makers, but rather their ancestors were?
3. Should the earlier colonalising powers pay reparations to their former colonies?
4. How can the rights of Indigenous people be protected?
5. Should the rights of Indigenous people be furthered?
6. Should Indigenous people be protected further from social and societal inequality?

Further Reading

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