**“Indigenous People in COVID Era”**

A Webinar of RCEs of Asia-Pacific Region to mark

**The International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples**

Monday, 10th August 2020 13:00-15:00 hrs Japan Standard Time

**Some Background Reading Material**

Indigenous peoples live in all regions of the world and own, occupy or use some 22% of global land area. Numbering at least 370-500 million, indigenous peoples represent the greater part of the world’s cultural diversity, and have created and speak the major share of the world’s almost 7000 languages. Many indigenous peoples continue to be confronted with marginalization, extreme poverty and other human rights violations.

A significant proportion still lack basic rights, with systematic discrimination and exclusion continuing to threaten ways of life, cultures and identities.  Worldwide, over 50% of indigenous adults over age 35 have type 2 diabetes. At the same time, tuberculosis continues to disproportionately affect indigenous peoples due to poverty. These and other diseases make them even more vulnerable in times of COVID-19.

According to an organization, 281 human rights defenders were murdered in 25 countries during 2016 for defending the rights of indigenous peoples, land and the environment, which implies a significant increase compared to 185 of 2015 and 130 of 2014. Despite this, the world organization called on States to transform words into action to end discrimination, exclusion, lack of protection, and conflicts over their lands and resources. Likewise, the organization called for compliance with the norms for the survival, dignity and well-being of indigenous peoples throughout the world, as well as guaranteeing the safety of those who defend their rights.

This is contrary to the intent of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its promise to leave no one behind. The countries and their governments need to engage and support indigenous peoples in determining their own development through policies that are inclusive, equitable and accessible. The UN stands ready to support all initiatives aimed at realizing the rights and aspirations of indigenous peoples.

By resolution 49/214 of 23 December 1994, the UN General Assembly decided that the International Day of the World's Indigenous People shall be observed on 9 August every year during the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995-2004). In 2004, the Assembly proclaimed a Second International Decade, from 2005–2015, with the theme of "A Decade for Action and Dignity", with the goal of continuing to strengthen international cooperation in these areas, including economic and social development.

The date 9 August commemorates the holding of the first meeting, in 1982, of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. Likewise, the General Assembly in its resolution A/RES/45/164 proclaimed 1993 as the International Year of the World’s Indigenous People, and the first International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People, which began on December 10, 1994, proclaimed in resolution A/RES/48/163, with a view to strengthening international cooperation for the solution of the problems faced by indigenous peoples in areas such as human rights, environment, development, education and health.

People world over are encouraged to participate in observing the day to spread the UN’s message on indigenous peoples. Activities include educational forums and classroom activities to gain an appreciation and a better understanding of indigenous peoples. The objective of celebrations is to strengthen international cooperation for the solution of the problems faced by indigenous communities in areas such as human rights, the environment, development, education and health. The activities undertaken for the celebration of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoplesdirectly meet SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities the issues of Human Rights & [Indigenous Peoples](https://sdg.iisd.org/issues/human-rights-indigenous-peoples/), [Stakeholder Participation](https://sdg.iisd.org/issues/stakeholder-participation/).

**COVID-19 is devastating indigenous communities worldwide**

COVID-19 pandemic is having a devastating impact on indigenous peoples beyond the health threat. States of emergency are exacerbating the marginalisation of indigenous communities, and in the most extreme situations, militarisation of their territories is taking place. Indigenous peoples are being denied their freedom of expression and association, while business interests are invading and destroying their lands, territories and resources. In some countries, consultations with indigenous peoples and also environmental impact assessments are being abruptly suspended in order to force through megaprojects relating to agribusiness, mining, dams and infrastructure.

Indigenous peoples who lose their lands and livelihoods are pushed further into poverty, higher rates of malnutrition, lack of access to clean water and sanitation, as well as exclusion from medical services, which in turn renders them particularly vulnerable to the disease. But in the face and in the midst of such threats, the indigenous communities that have managed to best resist the COVID-19 pandemic are those that have achieved autonomy and self-government, which allows them to manage their lands, territories and resources, ensure food security through their traditional crops and traditional medicine.

Governments worldwide should support indigenous peoples to implement their own plans to protect their communities and participate in the elaboration of nationwide initiatives to ensure these do not discriminate against them.

States must ensure that indigenous peoples have access to information about COVID-19 in their languages and urgent special measures should be taken to ensure availability and access to culturally appropriate medical services. It is a major challenge that public health facilities are often scarce in indigenous communities. Governments worldwide should support indigenous peoples to implement their own plans to protect their communities and participate in the elaboration of nationwide initiatives to ensure these do not discriminate against them.

The rights to development, self-determination and lands, territories and resources must be ensured in order for indigenous peoples to manage these times of crisis and to advance the worldwide goals of sustained development and environmental protection. The pandemic is teaching us that we need to change: we need to value the collective over the individual and build inclusive societies that respect and protect everyone. It is not only about protecting our health.

Furthermore, indigenous peoples already face food insecurity as a result of the loss of their traditional lands and territories or even climate change effects. They also confront even graver challenges accessing food. With the loss of their traditional livelihoods, which are often land-based, many indigenous peoples, who work in traditional occupations and subsistence economies or in the informal sector, will be adversely affected by the pandemic. The situation of indigenous women, who are often the main providers of food and nutrition to their families, is even graver.

Yet, Indigenous peoples are seeking their own solutions to this pandemic. They are taking action and using traditional knowledge and practices such as voluntary isolation, and sealing off their territories, as well as preventive measures.

While the exact origins of COVID-19 have not yet been confirmed, the link between environmental damage and pandemics is well known to leading research organizations. But there is yet another group of experts, who have been worrying about the threat of a pandemic even before COVID-19: indigenous peoples. Thanks to their traditional knowledge and their relationship with the natural world, they have long known that the degradation of the environment has the potential to unleash disease.

As we fight the spread of the pandemic, it is more important than ever to safeguard these peoples and their knowledge. Their territories are home to 80% of the world’s biodiversity and they can teach us much about how to rebalance our relationship with nature and reduce the risk of future pandemics. But their communities already face a host of challenges, and the unfortunate present reality is that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are worsening these challenges further still.

Indigenous communities already experience poor access to healthcare, significantly higher rates of diseases, lack of access to essential services, sanitation, and other key preventive measures, such as clean water, soap, disinfectant, etc. Likewise, most nearby local medical facilities are often under-equipped and under-staffed. Even when indigenous peoples can access healthcare services, they can face stigma and discrimination. A key factor is to ensure services and facilities are provided in indigenous languages, as appropriate to the specific situation of Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous peoples’ traditional lifestyles are a source of their resiliency and can also pose a threat at this time in preventing the spread of the virus.  For example, most indigenous communities regularly organize large traditional gatherings to mark special events e.g. harvests, coming of age ceremonies, etc. Some indigenous communities also live in multi-generational housing, which puts Indigenous peoples and their families, especially the Elders, at risk. Especially now, Indigenous peoples need us. Especially now, we really need Indigenous peoples.

The theme of the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples has not been designated yet. The themes of the past years were following:

2005 The Cause of Indigenous Peoples is Ours

2006 Indigenous Peoples: human rights, dignity and development with identity

2007 Urgent need to preserve indigenous languages

2008 Reconciliation between States and indigenous peoples

2009 Indigenous Peoples and HIV/AIDS

2010 Celebrating Indigenous Film Making

2011 Indigenous designs: celebrating stories and cultures, crafting their own future

2012 Indigenous Media, Empowering Indigenous Voices

2013 Indigenous peoples building alliances: Honouring treaties, agreements and other constructive arrangements.

2014 Bridging the gap: implementing the rights of indigenous peoples

2015 Post-2015 Agenda: Ensuring indigenous peoples’ health and well-being

2016 Indigenous Peoples’ Right to Education

2017 Tenth Anniversary of the Adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

2018 Indigenous Peoples’ Migration and Movement

**The International Days and Why Do We Mark Them?**

International days are occasions to educate the public on issues of concern, to mobilize political will and resources to address global problems, and to celebrate and reinforce achievements of humanity. The existence of international days predates the establishment of the United Nations, but the UN has embraced them as a powerful advocacy tool.

Each international day offers many actors the opportunity to organize activities related to the theme of the day. Organizations and offices of the United Nations system, and most importantly, governments, civil society, the public and private sectors, schools, universities and, more generally, citizens, make an international day a springboard for awareness-raising actions.

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