COVID-19 AND INDIGENOUS AND TRIBAL PEOPLES: THE IMPACTS AND UNDERLYING INEQUALITIES
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Note on terminology

This briefing addresses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on indigenous and tribal peoples, and is focused on the collective dimension of the rights that indigenous and tribal peoples hold, including to the governance and management of their lands and resources. While we use the term ‘indigenous and tribal peoples’ in this briefing, these terms are often not the ones chosen and used locally, where ‘hill tribes’, ‘afro-descendants’, ‘black Colombians’, ‘customary communities’ and other terms are more common. Case studies included in this briefing continue to use the terms most familiar to, and preferred by, local contributing authors.

Photos cover page. From left to right, clockwise:

All across the Wapichan territory (Guyana) masks were sewn by women groups. The SRDC provided the materials and the women sewed voluntarily. Photo: SRDC.

The indigenous community of Kawemhakan, Suriname, has blocked its airstrip to prevent outsiders arriving into the villages and risk taking the virus with them. Photo: Mulokot Foundation/ Kawemhakan.

Aristides, Kichwa of the Tupac Amaru community in San Martin (Peru) receiving a cleaning kit to avoid COVID-19. Photo: Matias Perez Ojeda del Arco.

Indigenous food drive organised by IMPECT (Thailand). Photo: Phnom Thano.

Parabara village gate (Guyana). Photo: SRDC.

The pandemic is exacerbating inequalities for indigenous and tribal peoples

Indigenous and tribal peoples, including the communities who live within and around tropical forests, hold collective rights to the governance and management of their lands, territories and resources. They have a strong connection to, and dependency on, their traditional territories.

Poverty often impedes their access to basic necessities such as health care, water, sanitation and food—all essential for minimising the risks and impacts of COVID-19. But beyond poverty, indigenous and tribal peoples’ resilience to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic is determined by the extent to which their collective rights to lands and self-determination are respected and protected. These rights are the foundation of their livelihoods, their culture, their survival.

Indigenous and tribal peoples have long struggled against the inequalities they experience due to the lack of recognition of these rights. Our research shows that the COVID-19 pandemic, including the measures imposed to curb its spread, are exacerbating these inequalities.

Our study reveals what is driving these inequalities

We analysed the impacts of COVID-19 on indigenous and tribal peoples’ rights, particularly the longer-term impacts on their land tenure rights, which are under-highlighted in pandemic analyses and debates.

We collected stories from peoples and communities in 10 countries—Cameroon, Colombia, Guyana, Kenya, Indonesia, Peru, the Philippines, Suriname, Thailand and Uganda—and conducted a desktop review of news stories and reports on indigenous and tribal peoples’ responses to the pandemic and its effects on their communities around the world. The stories reveal the inequalities that place indigenous and tribal peoples at higher risk of sickness and death from contracting COVID-19 or from other means as a result of the measures imposed to control the spread of COVID-19 (‘direct impacts’), and how measures introduced to manage the virus, such as lockdowns and physical distancing, are leaving them even more vulnerable.

The drivers of inequality and actions

We identified the drivers of these inequalities, categorising them according to their immediacy in terms of the direct impacts of COVID-19:

- immediate
- dynamic
- systemic.

We also recommend actions that governments and other duty-bearers can take to combat these drivers of inequality.

Immediate concerns

The basic preventive measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 are restrictions in mobility, observing proper hygiene, and wearing of masks. For indigenous and tribal peoples, among the most immediate concerns are:

- the lack of access to proper health care, clean water and sanitation supplies
- the lack of language-friendly and culturally appropriate information about COVID-19
- the inability to observe physical distancing
- hunger and access to food.

Recommended actions – immediate

Governments and other duty-bearers should prioritise saving lives and preventing the direct impacts of COVID-19 by:

- supporting any existing community initiatives that aim to improve access to health care, food, water, sanitation and information
- consulting and cooperating with indigenous and tribal peoples and observing their cultural protocols, making sure they receive consistent, culturally appropriate and immediate health care, information on COVID-19, and food, water and sanitation supplies
- carrying out proper COVID-19 testing especially in overcrowded living areas and workplaces; providing immediate health care if necessary; providing food, water and sanitation, and, if needed, a safe journey home to their communities, while monitoring their health status until they are deemed free of the virus.
**Dynamic pressures**

Affecting the overall resilience of communities, the dynamic pressures driving inequality for indigenous and tribal peoples include:

- increased deforestation, land-grabbing and violence
- instability of livelihoods and lack or loss of food security and self-sufficiency
- insufficient government services, including culturally appropriate health care and education
- ineffective information and communication infrastructure.

**Recommended actions – medium term**

States should consistently consider the specific needs and situations of indigenous and tribal peoples during the pandemic and beyond, through:

- transforming government institutions to be more responsive, through good-faith consultation and cooperation with indigenous and tribal peoples’ communities when developing facilities and infrastructure for health care, education, information and communication
- protecting indigenous and tribal peoples’ health and safety by supporting their traditions of self-isolation, while providing specific basic needs such as food, water and sanitation supplies, and protection from intruders, as necessary
- ceasing all business operations and transactions that involve exploitation of indigenous peoples’ lands and territories until the communities are ready and they open their borders for consultation (respecting their rights to free, prior and informed consent)
- giving access to justice and remedy to indigenous and tribal peoples affected by forced evictions, land-grabbing and related attacks and violence.

**Systemic causes of inequality**

The underlying causes of inequality contributing to how the pandemic affects indigenous and tribal peoples are also the most intractable and the least likely to be resolved, or effectively addressed, as the world moves to a “new reality” of living with COVID-19. Yet, they are crucially important for sustained change.

These underlying causes stem, in part, from political systems that generally disregard Indigenous and tribal peoples’ collective rights to land, cultural integrity and self-determination, and which are linked to pervasive discrimination against them.

Systemic causes of inequality exacerbating the impact of COVID-19 on indigenous and tribal peoples include:

- insecure land tenure
- discrimination and lack of recognition of self-governance rights
- forced eviction
- economic recovery that puts profit before people
- a perspective that separates humans from the natural world.

**Recommended actions for systemic change**

Effective and sustained realisation of rights requires more transformative action. Governments and other duty-bearers must start transitioning towards social, political and economic systems that:

- recognise and protect the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples to their lands and territories, recognising also their roles in sustainable use and management of natural resources
- design and deliver culturally appropriate and context-specific programmes that allow indigenous and tribal peoples to fully enjoy and exercise their individual and collective rights, particularly to their lands and territories, cultural integrity, self-determination, food security and food sovereignty
- support the emergence of locally determined development models, reflecting self-determined priorities in land management, food systems and healthcare systems
- choose economic recovery models that aim to equally improve the quality of life and wellbeing for all, while ensuring a universal, equitable balance of economic, social and environmental growth.
BACKGROUND

In June 2020, the Coordinating Body for Indigenous Organizations in the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB) captured the complexity of indigenous peoples’ situations during the pandemic:

“... we are in a daily battle to survive, not only COVID-19, but the dismantling of laws; the halting of the demarcation and protection of our territories; the targeting of our lands and our lives; the assassinations of our leaders; the anti-Indigenous legislative measures of the federal government.”

The threats posed by COVID-19 to the wellbeing of indigenous and tribal peoples are multi-faceted and inextricably linked to the threats to their general safety and security, and that of their territories, which they were facing before the pandemic. They also have wider security, livelihood and other implications beyond immediate health and security impacts.

Despite comprising just six per cent of the world’s population, indigenous peoples account for 19 per cent of the extreme poor “irrespective of the region and residence in rural or urban areas and even across international borders.” This makes them three times more likely than non-indigenous people to be living in extreme poverty, and impedes their access to basic necessities, such as health care, water, sanitation and food—all essential for minimising the risks and impacts of COVID-19.

But beyond poverty, indigenous and tribal peoples’ resilience to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic is determined by the extent to which their collective rights to lands and self-determination are respected and protected. These rights are the foundation of their survival, their livelihoods and their culture; these rights define their present and their future.

COVID-19 and the measures introduced to curb its spread have highlighted these longstanding disadvantages, which indigenous and tribal peoples have long been fighting against. The pandemic has underscored the urgency of the UN’s call for “transitions towards living in harmony with nature,” which emphasises the need for systemic changes to address these underlying inequalities.

We analysed the impacts of COVID-19 on indigenous and tribal peoples’ rights, particularly the longer-term impacts on their land tenure rights, which are under-highlighted in pandemic analyses and debates. Our analysis, described in this briefing paper, emphasises the most vital responses to decrease indigenous and tribal peoples’ risk of long-term impacts from COVID-19, and provides a general guideline for use in formulating interventions to address the varying needs of indigenous and tribal peoples and their communities in coping with COVID-19 and its aftermath.

“... WE ARE IN A DAILY BATTLE TO SURVIVE, NOT ONLY COVID-19, BUT THE DISMANTLING OF LAWS; THE HALTING OF THE DEMARCATION AND PROTECTION OF OUR TERRITORIES; THE TARGETING OF OUR LANDS AND OUR LIVES; THE ASSASSINATIONS OF OUR LEADERS; THE ANTI-INDIGENOUS LEGISLATIVE MEASURES OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.”

— Statement by the Coordinating Body for Indigenous Organizations in the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB)
In this briefing paper, we present stories from indigenous and tribal peoples’ communities in 10 countries. Indigenous and tribal peoples, including the communities who live within and around tropical forests, hold collective rights to the governance and management of their lands, territories and resources. They often have a strong connection to, and dependency on, their traditional territories, and it is these collectively held rights, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on them, that are the focus of this paper.

Their stories show how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected and continues to affect their everyday lives, and how they are managing the additional challenges it presents. The stories reveal the inequalities that place indigenous and tribal peoples at higher risk of sickness and death from contracting COVID-19 (‘direct impacts’), and how measures introduced to manage the virus, such as lockdowns and physical distancing, leave them even more vulnerable.

Based on these stories and our desktop review of news stories and reports on indigenous and tribal peoples’ responses to the pandemic and the effects on their communities around the world, we analyse the drivers of these inequalities, categorising them according to their immediacy in terms of dealing with the direct impacts of COVID-19:

• **Current conditions of immediate concern:** These are the most immediate concerns about the direct impacts that COVID-19 will have. They describe the current living situations of indigenous and tribal peoples which need to be addressed to lessen or avoid the direct impacts of COVID-19. Examples include no access to health care and overcrowded conditions at migrant worker sites.

• **Dynamic pressures:** While these concerns are less directly related to the immediate impacts of COVID-19, they affect the overall resilience of peoples and communities and need to be addressed in the medium term. Examples include increased deforestation and illegal land grabs.

• **Systemic causes:** The least immediate, but most intractable, concerns are the underlying causes of inequalities that shape the way in which the pandemic affects indigenous and tribal peoples. They are the least likely to be resolved, or effectively addressed, as the world moves to a “new reality” of living with COVID-19, yet they are crucially important for sustained change. Examples include pervasive discrimination against indigenous and tribal peoples, de-valuing of traditional and subsistence livelihoods, and structural marginalisation.

Tracing the drivers of inequality in a progressive manner illustrates the varying and compounded factors that have led to the current struggles of indigenous and tribal peoples for their rights to lands and territories, self-determination, cultural integrity, and adequate standards of health and of living, among others. Although not necessarily linear, these drivers are all interrelated i.e. as the systemic causes are reinforced, the dynamic pressures and current conditions are worsened.

Following our analysis, we identify the actions needed to combat the drivers of inequality and prioritise them according to the urgency of reducing the risk from the direct impacts of COVID-19. These actions also reflect the stories of indigenous and tribal peoples and their community initiatives presented below.
THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES WHICH ARE AFFECTED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

- The right, without discrimination, to the improvement of economic and social conditions, including sanitation, health, employment, housing and social security.

- The right to access, without any discrimination, to all social and health services; and an equal right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

- The right to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other economic and social programmes affecting them and, as far as possible, to administer such programmes through their own institutions.

- The right to have access to all forms of non-indigenous media without discrimination (state-owned media to duly reflect indigenous cultural diversity).

- The right to self-determination, including right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to internal and local affairs.

- The right to maintain and strengthen distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State.

- Right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, including right to free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them.

- The right to be secure in the enjoyment of their own means of subsistence and development, and to engage freely in all their traditional and other economic activities.

- The right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired.

- The right to the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands or territories and resources.

- The right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for the development or use of their lands or territories and other resources, including free and informed consent prior to the approval of any project affecting their lands or territories and other resources, particularly in connection with the development, utilization or exploitation of mineral, water or other resources.

- The right to not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories.

Source: United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
STORIES FROM THE GROUND
Indigenous peoples draw on spirit of solidarity to cope with COVID-19 and the measures imposed to contain it.
Okani, a community-based indigenous peoples’ organisation in east Cameroon, conducted COVID-19 information sharing and awareness raising with 50 members of the Baka and Bagyeli communities on 8–22 June 2020. The activity also served as a space for the communities to share how their daily lives were being affected by government measures imposed to contain the spread of the virus.

The Baka community in the village of Moangue Le Bosquet in the East Region of Cameroon has experienced a real slowdown in the movements of populations in neighbouring villages and in the forest. They have been restricted in organising their traditional activities that involve public gathering, such as the mythical dance known as edjengui.

Okani says,

"The life of the community is particularly affected as the routine that they are familiar with is drastically changing. Many are no longer organising traditional festivals from fear, not only of being infected with the virus, but more so of being incriminated by the law enforcement who now control all events."

The government’s movement restrictions have also affected their practice of traditional medicine, for which they need access to the forest to gather, for example, seeds of ékoué and the bark of mabé and ngoyo. But Okani says the restrictions will not deter the communities from depending on their traditional plants known to relieve coughs and malaria, whose symptoms are akin to COVID-19.

Baka and Bageli community members seldom visit the hospital or the Catholic Sisters Health Centre near their village due to the prevailing discrimination and stigmatisation of indigenous peoples in Cameroon. Others avoid these facilities because they simply cannot afford their services. They are even less likely to access administrative services for the sub-prefecture or at the Town Hall, which are located more than 45 kilometres from their village.

In a rare event where a young community leader, Pascal Kokpa, visited the Town Hall to acquire birth certificates for the children in his village, he was denied access to the premises because he was not wearing a mask. The wearing of masks in public places has been made compulsory by the government but most members of the indigenous communities cannot comply because they cannot afford to buy masks, which cost 500 CFA (or EUR 0.80) a piece. Should they have the money, they deem it is better spent for more indispensable essentials, like food or salt, rather than a mask.

The wearing of masks has become an added burden to the restrictions on movement. Some young members of these communities are not able to pass through checkpoints without wearing masks, which further affects their income from doing small services for the Bantu and other non-indigenous people. The same is true for those who sell products from their fields to the market, products such as plantain and cassava or non-timber forest products such as bush mango.

Children have not been able to complete their school year and Okani is worried this will affect their performance in the coming year. The radio and television classes organised by the government were not accessible to them. Many indigenous peoples’ communities still lack electricity and proper communication infrastructures to provide access to national television and radio. For the government to opt for the use of television and radio in place of attending school, Okani believes the government, yet again, has shown its disregard for the situation of indigenous peoples.

Despite these challenges, some communities have organised themselves and set up monitoring mechanisms. The young people lead in monitoring and motivating other community members to systematically wear masks when travelling outside the communities. They also ensure that everyone abides by the required protocol of physical distancing and that this is also respected by foreigners or outsiders entering their villages. Through this, everyone is resolutely everyone’s guardian. They believe that the best way to prevent the virus from entering their community is through the spirit of indigenous solidarity.
COLOMBIA:

Rays of hope and a ‘March of Dignity’
The Palenke Alto Cauca is a regional governance body of the national organisation that represents the Black Communities of northern Cauca in Colombia. Cauca is among Colombia’s most deadly regions and has also been one of the hardest hit by COVID-19.

Pre-pandemic, Cauca’s Black and Indigenous communities were already in an extremely vulnerable and marginalised situation of day-to-day survival, caught in the crossfire of warring groups. Armed outlaws flock to the area to illegally mine gold, harvest illicit crops, and engage in extortion. Communities confront the land- and water-grabbing impacts of toxic sugarcane plantations that cover the most fertile areas of the valley, and the interests of large-scale miners and hydroelectric schemes.

When COVID-19 hit northern Cauca, communities experienced a magnification of impacts to their lands and safety. Those who could work continued to do so to put food on the table, exposing themselves to the virus. They had no choice. Those who could not work, left without their traditional farms, are going hungry. People are also suffering more acutely the respiratory effects of practices such as burning of sugarcane fields, which continue to be harvested and in full production.

Armed actors have taken advantage of COVID-19, attempting to impose ‘social order’ such as curfews, and instilling fear in people by engaging in ongoing massacres and selective murders, which are far easier when people are staying at home to quarantine.

In protest, Indigenous, Afro-Descendant and Campesino peoples marched from Cauca to the capital, Bogota, over 16 days in June and July 2020, in the ‘March for Dignity’. Speaking as she marched, Francia Márquez, winner of the 2018 Goldman Environmental Award for Latin America, and more recently the first Black woman ever to position herself as a candidate to Colombia’s 2022 presidential race, stated:

“I invite women, I invite the Colombian people to raise their voices to stop this killing. Today we aren’t only dying because of State abandonment in pandemic times. But they’re also continuing to kill us in our territories; they’re also killing our social leaders. Today people are not only dying because of institutional abandonment, but because racism continues.”

In the midst of the onslaught of violence and the pandemic, the unarmed, autonomous Black Communities’ ancestral Guardia Cimarrona made heroic efforts to control their ancestral territories and protect their people, setting up checkpoints to make sure bio-safety protocols were enforced on people entering their communities.

“Everyone was trying to take refuge in our territory, in our communities,” says Guardia Cimarron Javier Peña. “They were coming from the cities like Cali, Popayán and Jamundi.”

The eight checkpoints, at the entrance and exits of Buenos Aires, Suarez, and Santander de Quilichao, helped keep virus infection levels at zero for the three months. The Guardia attended their posts 24/7, often helped by community peoples in disinfecting vehicle tires and making sure anyone who entered followed bio-safety protocols. “It was a sensational opportunity to be supporting our communities,” Peña underscored, noting that many community members would like the Guardia to have checkpoints in place even following lockdown orders.

The Guardia also set up checkpoints in the urban area of Playa Renacientes—one of the Palenke’s Consejos Comunitarios, the state-recognised governance bodies of Black Communities—near the city of Cali. This symbolic exercise of authority has been held up as an exemplar by the Black Governor of the Department of Cauca, and by members of the Cali police who reportedly provided the Guardia with refreshments at their checkpoints in this coordinated effort.

Palenke authorities are certain that these actions have kept the virus at lower levels in their communities. The actions have also helped bring deserved recognition to the institution of the Guardia Cimarrona and the authority of Black People over their collective territories. Rays of hope in an otherwise very bleak landscape of alarming rights violations.

Indeed, land-grabbing, issues around food sovereignty and violence against Black and Indigenous peoples are set to worsen as the Duque government continues to weaken implementation of the Peace Accords; rolls back rights protections for prior consultation and free, prior and informed consent; and looks to large-scale mining as a way out of the economic devastation that the pandemic has magnified.
Wapichan nao (people) stand strong and resilient through the COVID-19 pandemic
The Wapichan people were first informed of COVID-19 via the local radio broadcasts throughout their territory. Little did they know that the dreaded virus would eventually enter their communities and disrupt their livelihoods. With the outbreak of the virus in the capital city Georgetown in March, leaders of the South Rupununi District Council (SRDC – a district council comprised of, and serving, an exclusively indigenous area) quickly met with local health care and security personnel to set out a strategic plan to guide their response in dealing with an outbreak of the virus.

Collaborating with the district hospital and the police, the SRDC embarked on several activities aimed to protect our communities. They worked with communities to educate and raise awareness to ensure that Wapichan people across the 21 villages have up-to-date and accurate information about the pandemic; they blocked 15 illegal border crossings between Guyana and Brazil; and they monitored checkpoints and gates into Wapichan territory. Together with the district hospital and the police based in Aishalton, the SRDC organised training for the health workers and Toshaos of the South Rupununi, an exercise aimed at educating the participants with sufficient knowledge for them to be able to fight the pandemic in their communities.

The SRDC also wrote to the Minister of Public Health requesting the suspension of the mining operations in the South Rupununi, in light of this sector’s contribution towards the spread of the virus in Region 7. Unfortunately, with the government designating mining as an “essential service” at this time of the pandemic, their plea is likely to go unheard.

In early April, the Wapichan people in the South Rupununi learned about a miner testing positive for COVID-19. The leaders then decided to take stringent measures to protect and safeguard their people and their communities. Immaculata Casimero, a Wapichan from Aishalton working with the SRDC, shared that the SRDC again embarked on awareness-raising activities and updating village councils across the district on the situation.

In July, the first five cases of the coronavirus were recorded in three Wapichan villages: Potarinau, Quiko and Sand Creek. Shortly after, two other villages recorded cases. Because of the impact, village leaders decided to lock down the gates and monitor the border to prevent the virus from spreading further. That was a challenging time for village leaders, especially for Toshao Carl Albert of Potarinau who had to self-isolate from his family because he feared that he would put them at risk. The Toshaos attended numerous meetings at the regional level and pleaded for assistance with monitoring of the border by the police and military. Sadly, no support of any sort was given.

As of 4 September, there are no cases of infection in the 5 villages of the SRDC. However, the South Rupununi has 69 positive cases from five villages, 42 of them from Potarinau (South Central Rupununi). Toshao Nicholas Fredericks, SRDC’s chairman, is confident that as long as the border and gates are respected and their measures supported, the 21 villages of the South Rupununi will remain free from infection. If the virus spreads further, he is quite aware that they do not possess the proper facilities to provide the needed health care.
Immaculata Casimero noted that some members of her group, particularly the women, are missing their daily wage now that schools are closed as part of the government’s measure to contain the virus. The women are usually in charge of cooking meals as part of the “hot meal” programme, a government service present in each indigenous community in Guyana. The women would normally cook hearty meals for children aged 6 to 12 years in the primary levels, to ensure that they attend school with proper nutrition. Farmers would usually bring their produce to sell at these “hot meals” but this is no longer happening, stifling the already meagre income of many farmers.

The closure of the schools is an even greater concern for education of the indigenous children, now that the country has moved to virtual learning. Internet service in indigenous communities is relatively new and is of poor quality. With limited access to the internet and other resources necessary for virtual learning, our children are placed at a total disadvantage when compared with their non-indigenous counterparts, who have better access to the internet, located on the coastland of Guyana.

To successfully minimise the further spread of the deadly virus, the SRDC, Village Leaders, local radio broadcasters and everyone must continue to work diligently in educating people and implementing the measures necessary to protect our villages. Our leaders and the SRDC coordinating office must be lauded for the strong leadership and courage in the battle to keep our villages safe. Leaders continue to monitor the entire territory and maintain a curfew system, among other measures.

These actions are vital in keeping our villages safe, especially with the rapid spread of the virus in neighbouring Brazil and the close connection shared by Wapichan communities from both sides of the border. Villagers have also heard testimonies of their fellow indigenous brothers and sisters from the Brazilian Amazon and the Toshao from Potarinau whose village was highly infected as they grappled to come to terms with this new reality.

The world at large is no longer what it used to be. On the positive side, the pandemic has given a rare opportunity to many Wapichan families as a whole to reconnect with nature, moving to the farming areas and the fishing grounds, and spending more time transmitting important traditional knowledge, skills and experiences of the ways of the land.

Angelbert Johnny says,

“This is the first time that I have spent so long with my family on the farm. I have used this opportunity to teach my children about many things, including the different medicinal plants we find in our forests. They are now able to go hunting all on their own.”

Johnny’s statement is a reflection of many families enjoying life away from the village where there is no school or church. The Wapichan people will continue in our collective efforts and support the leaders and the SRDC in protecting our villages from COVID-19.
In response to COVID-19 and the government order of physical distancing, the Community Forest Group (HKM), Talago Bawah Gunuang, in Luhak Nan Duo District, West Pasaman Regency, West Sumatra is restoring their forest through planting fruit tree and timber tree seedlings.

HKM Talago Bawah Gunuang has members from about 1,000 families. For five years, they have been struggling to save the area of natural forest based on customary law which applies to the land owned by this nagari (village republic). This forest is located at the foot of Mt Pasaman, which is being damaged due to rampant illegal logging.

In 2018, HKM Talago Bawah Gunuang obtained a permit to manage a forest area of 2,000 hectares under a social forestry scheme. HKM members have documented almost 1,000 species of animals and birds that live in their forest, some of which are almost extinct, and about 100 streams, some of which were gradually drying up.

After obtaining the HKM permit, the community worked to save their forest and its timber trees by sanctioning the illegal loggers. Now they are enriching the degraded parts of their forest by planting avocado, durian, jengkol, petai, mahogany and meranti trees. They choose timber trees that have large trunks as well as economic value, and that can promote their wellbeing. The HKM strictly prohibits its members from planting oil palm in their forest area.

Forest restoration has helped the community to maintain staple food and nutrition. Many tributaries are protected from drought because the forest grows dense; they nurture spawning fish and young fish that will grow and can be fished by community members. The community also plants tubers, bananas and other food crops.

West Sumatra currently has about 1,140 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 34 deaths. So far, none of the community forest managers in the HKM Talago Bawah Gunuang have contracted COVID-19. However, because of their location, they do not have access to testing facilities or healthcare centres. Luhak Nan Duo District is not easily accessible, even with 4x4 vehicles.

To avoid the spread of COVID-19, the community requires people who enter the community to disinfect themselves. Working together, community members spray their houses with disinfectants that they produce from plants that grow in their forests, which they mix with patchouli and citronella oils. The community also limits its members from travelling outside, to the city, to the market and to other crowded places, and there is a mutual agreement not to hold events that involve many people.

The deliberations of their leaders are written down and community members can follow the discussions by reading an information board in the village. In case someone from the community gets the virus, the HKM Talago Bawah Gunuang community has a simple meeting building with sufficient facilities which they can use as an independent isolation room.

In spite of all these resilience measures, the community's livelihood has been affected and their income has decreased. There is reduced demand for avocado, durian and other forest products because outside West Sumatra consumers have difficulty accessing markets. But, so far, they are still receiving orders from buyers in big cities such as Medan, Batam, Riau and Jakarta.

Anita Williams, chairperson of the Shea Village Women’s group, sewing masks. They did the job voluntarily. Photo: SRDC (South Rupununi District Council)
INDONESIA:

Minangkabau community observes lockdown by restoring their forest in West Sumatra
In response to COVID-19 and the government order of physical distancing, the Community Forest Group (HKM), Talago Bawah Gunuang, in Luhak Nan Duo District, West Pasaman Regency, who belong to the Minangkabau indigenous peoples of West Sumatra, is restoring their forest through planting fruit tree and timber tree seedlings.

HKM Talago Bawah Gunuang has members from about 1,000 families. For five years, they have been struggling to save the area of natural forest based on customary law which applies to the land owned by this nagari (village republic). This forest is located at the foot of Mt Pasaman, which is being damaged due to rampant illegal logging.

In 2018, HKM Talago Bawah Gunuang obtained a permit to manage a forest area of 2,000 hectares under a social forestry scheme. HKM members have documented almost 1,000 species of animals and birds that live in their forest, some of which are almost extinct, and about 100 streams, some of which were gradually drying up.

After obtaining the HKM permit, the community worked to save their forest and its timber trees by sanctioning the illegal loggers. Now they are enriching the degraded parts of their forest by planting avocado, durian, jengkol, petai, mahogany and meranti trees. They choose timber trees that have large trunks as well as economic value, and that can promote their wellbeing. The HKM strictly prohibits its members from planting oil palm in their forest area.

West Sumatra currently has about 1,140 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 34 deaths. So far, none of the community forest managers in the HKM Talago Bawah Gunuang have contracted COVID-19. However, because of their location, they do not have access to testing facilities or healthcare centres. Luhak Nan Duo District is not easily accessible, even with 4x4 vehicles.

To avoid the spread of COVID-19, the community requires people who enter the community to disinfect themselves. Working together, community members spray their houses with disinfectants that they produce from plants that grow in their forests, which they mix with patchouli and citronella oils. The community also limits its members from travelling outside, to the city, to the market and to other crowded places, and there is a mutual agreement not to hold events that involve many people. The deliberations of their leaders are written down and community members can follow the discussions by reading an information board in the village. In case someone from the community gets the virus, the HKM Talago Bawah Gunuang community has a simple meeting building with sufficient facilities which they can use as an independent isolation room.

In spite of all these resilience measures, the community’s livelihood has been affected and their income has decreased. There is reduced demand for avocado, durian and other forest products because outside West Sumatra consumers have difficulty accessing markets. But, so far, they are still receiving orders from buyers in big cities such as Medan, Batam, Riau and Jakarta.
Forced evictions in the middle of COVID-19 pandemic leaves Sengwer community with no homes
Despite the Kenyan government declaring a moratorium on all evictions for the period of COVID-19 in May 2020, the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) guards have been conducting a series of violent evictions in the Sengwer community. On 10 July, they burned 28 homes in Kapkok Glade, leaving dozens of members of the Sengwer community in the cold, with no shelter, and particularly vulnerable to the spread of the coronavirus. And, at the start of September, they burned 31 more homes.

The KFS has long been conducting violence against the Sengwer community to force them to abandon their ancestral lands. The violent evictions have escalated with the establishment of the EU-funded Water Towers Protection and Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Programme (WaTER).

“What is happening now is so dangerous, especially during this COVID-19 pandemic,” says Elias Kimaiyo, a Sengwer community leader in Embobut.

Forced evictions are prohibited by the Kenyan Constitution and, yet, despite the moratorium and calls by UN Special Rapporteurs, the KFS continue with their evictions without any consequence or accountability. The UN has repeatedly condemned the KFS’s treatment of the Sengwer.

The evictions also leave the forest more vulnerable to degradation and exploitation by outsiders, including by the KFS, which has a history of exploiting and destroying indigenous forest. The Kenyan government’s own logging taskforce judged KFS to have been exploiting and destroying the very forests it is supposed to protect. Evictions and harassment of the Sengwer are part of the KFS approach to removing indigenous communities who wish to protect their ancestral forest lands.

The Sengwer have been fully supportive of the resumption of the EU WaTER project, which was suspended due to the increase in the number of forced evictions, attacks and shootings of the Sengwer since the project’s inception in 2016. But they were calling for the KFS and the Ministry of Environment and Forestry to first end their human rights violations against them and to respect their human rights. These rights include their community land rights, the recognition of which would enable them to remain on their ancestral lands, living in the three natural glades, able to protect and restore their forests and their way of life, which helps protect the forests. The Sengwer have documented their traditional rules and regulations and they have been proposing to use them as the basis for conserving their forests, with support from KFS.

The EU WaTER programme negotiations between the Ministry of the Environment and the Sengwer community were being handled by the United Nations Development Programme, which has been failing in its role, particularly because it appears to be supportive of the Ministry’s eviction approach, a clear contradiction of the UN’s indigenous peoples policy and safeguards.

Elias Kimaiyo says,

“The recent burning of houses in July when negotiations were ongoing and in September is a way to force and intimidate the Sengwer to lift the suspension of the EU funds to the WaTER project without the Kenyan government addressing the root causes.”

He identified the root causes as the utmost disregard of the government to Sengwer’s human rights, particularly the right to their ancestral forest, and the continuing impunity of the KFS.

On 24th September the EU’s contractual deadline (for enabling the WaTER project to proceed) passed without the government having agreed to a clear rights-based approach to forest conservation. The EU therefore cancelled the project, but held out the prospect of renewed programmatic funding under its Green New Deal initiative if such a programme can learn from the WaTER project experience.
A Kichwa family, hungry and exposed to COVID-19, in eternal exodus
Aristides Shupingahua, a member of the Kichwa people in the Tupac Amaru community in the region of San Martin, is now safe with his family in their rural home. But getting there was an ordeal he and his family are unlikely to forget. Aristides, his wife, and their four children were among the 167,000 Peruvians who migrated from the urban areas when the pandemic hit. Dubbed a “reverse exodus,” the lockdown imposed on 15 March 2020 resulted in thousands of people being forced to sleep on the streets of Lima while waiting to return home to their communities. The lockdown shut down all businesses and schools, which gravely affected day labourers. With no daily income, paying rent and buying food became harder with each passing day. The capital slowly became hostile and uninhabitable.

Aristides and his family had travelled to Lima in December 2019 to visit his eldest daughter for the holidays. He also needed to be in the capital to process his pension claim from his military service during the Peru-Ecuador war in 1995, a claim he had been pursuing for years. He ended up working at a Chinese restaurant where his daughter was working as a waitress until the government declared a state of emergency due to COVID-19 and implemented the lockdown. His job at the restaurant did not earn his family the additional income that they so badly needed. They eventually decided to leave their rented home and head to Military Base Number 8, in the hope that they could join one of the few humanitarian flights travelling to San Martin.

After spending several days in the streets outside the military base, Aristides was able to get his wife and two younger children to a testing centre; they needed a negative test in order to board the flight. His wife and children managed to fly to San Martin on the same day they got tested; they then had to observe the obligatory 14-day quarantine in Chumia in Chazuta district before finally heading to their community.

Along with thousands of others, Aristides and his two older children remained on the streets of Lima and survived on food donated by volunteers and friends. These people had no money and were unable to charge their phones to communicate with their families. They needed to get tested and to find the means to get home, otherwise hunger would have taken them before the virus. Out of desperation, many of those living in the streets skipped getting tested and decided to travel home on foot. This was particularly the case for those whose ID cards indicated they were Lima residents—they didn’t trust the regional government to get them on an available flight or bus.

After a month and a half on the street, Aristides and his two older children finally made it to Chumia quarantine centre on 26 May. He recalls the centre offered them not “a single grain of rice to eat” or a proper place to sleep. In general, Peru’s regional government doesn’t have the resources and facilities to receive the wave of people returning to their communities.

Aristides will be growing cassava, plantain and beans in his family plot. His farm and the proximity of his relatives make his hometown a far safer place than Lima. He and his family will stay in Tupac Amaru tending their crops as they brave the pandemic together.
PHILIPPINES:

The Dumagat’s fight against the Kaliwa dam amid the pandemic
We’re generally strong and healthy because we grew up sleeping with our bare back to the earth and swimming in the river,” says Kakay Tolentino, a member of the semi-nomadic, indigenous Dumagat people who occupy the Sierra Madre, the Philippines’ longest mountain range. She shared her community’s long-time practice of going to their river to “wash off” their illness. If they feel any symptoms akin to malaria and/or if they suffer from a cough that lasts for more than a week, they seek shelter under a banyan tree by the riverbank. They stay there until they feel better while taking traditional medicines made from forest herbs.

Kakay explains that this practice has always worked with other illnesses; she’s confident that it will work with COVID-19. There are currently no cases of COVID-19 among the Dumagat, but she says that they lost about 20 people during a dengue outbreak in 2017. Kakay knows that her community has no access to proper health care, and the government has not assigned any permanent medical workers in their barangay health centre. The nearest hospital is 20–35 kilometres away, depending on the Dumagat village. Those who can’t travel by road must hike and cross large rivers; the trip can take a day and a half.

The Dumagat were in the middle of a struggle against the Kaliwa dam when the pandemic hit the Philippines. Kaliwa dam is part of the Kaliwa-Kanan-Laiban dam project which was initially proposed in the 1980s. The Duterte administration revived the project under his Build, Build, Build programme.

The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), an institution with the mandate to support and defend indigenous rights, has failed to protect the Dumagat’s right to their land and refused to endorse their unanimous decision against the dam. The community felt the process of free, prior and informed consent organised by the NCIP was divisive and deceptive; it merely caused conflicts between the members of Dumagat. Despite the threat of COVID-19, the community is seeing ongoing road construction from the main highway of Tanay, Rizal, to the interior areas of General Nakar, Quezon.

The Dumagat’s source of information used to be ABS-CBN, the Philippines’ largest broadcast network and the only channel that reaches their remote homes. But since the government ordered the network’s shutdown, their main source of information on COVID-19 and beyond is Lodema dela Cruz Doroteo, fondly called Teacher Diday. Teacher Diday is the first of the Dumagat community to acquire a bachelor’s degree. With the lockdown, she could only go to town to sell produce and buy basic necessities once a week. It was also her time to catch up on the news and access the internet. But a Facebook post expressing her dismay over the devastation of their rice produce due to military operations in their communities caught the military’s attention. Teacher Diday, her family and the rest of the community were harassed and accused of being members and supporters of the armed group, New People’s Army.

Kakay now lives in Metro Manila but she still frequents her community. Due to the government’s lockdown—locally known as a modified, enhanced, community quarantine (MECQ)—her visits are restricted, which has affected her work as an activist and indigenous rights defender. She grew up with the presence of the military in her community. At 62, she says neither the militarisation in Sierra Madre nor the harassment and human rights violations of the military to the Dumagat have ever stopped. With the Kaliwa dam an ongoing issue, the military is ever more present in all Dumagat villages.

With the Dumagat’s access to their rivers and forest restricted further due to COVID-19, they depend on the local government to provide food packages. They received a food package with 3 kg of rice and two large cans of sardines only once. NGO relief operations, which Kakay helps coordinate, were blocked by the military despite the NGOs having all the necessary MECQ passes and permits. Regardless of these challenges, Kakay believes the Dumagat will survive this pandemic; they have to, for they still have the ongoing fight against the Kaliwa dam and other government projects that aim to plunder their territory and natural resources.
SURINAME:

Indigenous village leader becomes teacher during pandemic
Before the pandemic, indigenous children in the interior of Suriname, South America, faced multiple education inequalities. Education in Suriname is hugely city-biased; the educational model is set up for schools and children from the capital and urban coastal region, but applied without modification to the remote schools in the interior, where indigenous and Maroon children are confronted with a language barrier (lessons and materials are in Dutch) and a curriculum that is not adapted to their local context. These have proved to be the main factors in their lagging educational success.

Teachers working in the interior require fewer qualifications and less training than those employed in city schools. Urban teachers are often temporarily stationed in the villages, and are not well-versed in indigenous culture and ways of learning. School buildings and classrooms are often basic, ill-equipped and poorly maintained. These inequalities have become painfully visible during the pandemic, which is putting indigenous children at greater risk of falling even more behind.

Village leader (‘chief’) Muriel Fernandes of the Lokono village Casipora (Kashipuri) describes the impacts of COVID-19 on the education of the children in her community:

**Two weeks before Easter all schools in the country had to close. Our children go to primary school in the neighbouring community, Redi Doti. For secondary school, they go to Paranam or to Paramaribo. Immediately after schools closed, WhatsApp groups for parents were created by the school staff. The teachers posted the assignments in this group and, the next day, also the correct answers to help parents go through the lessons with their children.

In our village, there are many people who don’t have a smartphone and can’t use WhatsApp groups, so I joined all the groups. I noticed how far ahead pupils attending a school in the capital were, compared to pupils the same age going to the village school. We, as the village council, decided to take on the schooling of the pupils from grades 3 to 6. The school in Redi Doti, encouraged by this initiative, took on grades 1 and 2.”

Distance learning was a problem. Not all children have a laptop or a smartphone with internet, and following lessons on a smartphone doesn’t work well anyway. Chief Fernandes approached Telesur, the national telecom provider, who installed a Wi-Fi device within two days. This is managed by the village Board, who give the password only to those who need it. This has made it possible to work on laptops.

On 1 October 2020, schools will start again in adapted form. Practical vocational schools have announced that all children should have a PC, as they will physically attend school two days per week and will have to follow lessons on their computers on the remaining three days. Many parents can’t afford this; they work in the tourism sector and haven’t had an income for months. They hunt and fish for food, but still have to pay for school fees, uniforms, hand sanitiser and other hygiene products. They are supported by a village fund as much as possible.

Muriel Fernandes says:

"For other villages the challenge is even greater. Think of villages where there is no electricity, where they depend on a diesel generator, such as Pikin Saron. Children who go to school in Paranam must take the school bus. However, the bus driver does receive hand sanitiser, mouth and nose cover, gloves. What about the safety of the children? Education authorities take measures without any communication with the parents in the interior. You must have TV or radio to hear the news and to know what measures are being taken. Otherwise you don’t know.”

At the same time, the crisis also offers opportunities. For years the traditional authorities have advocated for more culturally appropriate education for indigenous children, in line with their international rights. In the past months, they have encouraged parents and community members to spend time with their youth, talking and practising knowledge, language and skills related to the forest and its resources. “We did ‘official’ schoolwork every weekday, and on Saturday did practical learning work, more aligned with life in the village, such as planting”, says Muriel Fernandes.
THAILAND:

Highland indigenous communities on self-sufficiency, food security and land tenure
When Thailand’s nationwide lockdown was imposed on 26 March 2020, the highland communities were less anxious than those in urban areas. The Inter-Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association (IMPECT), an indigenous organisation based in Chiang Mai province that works closely with indigenous communities in northern Thailand, shared how the abundance of food in these communities made them self-sufficient, and even with a surplus for sharing.

Together with the communities, IMPECT helped coordinate food relief drives to share food supplies outside their villages. They distributed rice, vegetables, dried foods, and fruits grown on their lands to both urban and rural areas, including Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Bangkok. They reached out to those hardest hit by the lockdown, particularly the indigenous people who had lost their jobs and/or were unable to return home from the city. IMPECT and the Indigenous Media Network (IMN) also helped monitor the conditions of the elderly from Hmong, Lisu, Lwua/Lua, and P’gakenyaw communities, among others.

Many indigenous communities have observed rituals and ceremonies to lessen the anxiety brought on by the crisis. These practices helped ease their initial worries about people returning from the cities, and the increased possibility of the virus spreading. They knew they didn’t have the proper facilities for the mandatory 14-day quarantine for the returnees. But with support from the community leaders and the Village Health Volunteers, they were able to set up their own strict quarantine areas in the fields, orchards and forest. Other communities opted to practise a strict lockdown with a limited number of people allowed to leave and enter their village, such as in the P’gakenyaw community in Ban Mae Jok.

Further away from Chiang Mai city, Ban Mae Jok is home to about 50 indigenous P’gakenyaw households. It is surrounded by dense, natural forest, and a stream passes through their terraces. The majority of the households have paddy-fields, while a few families practise rotational farming.

When schools were shut down, Suphalak Musuloy (or Ae Thoo), a Grade 11 student in Chiang Mai city, returned home to Mae Jok. She knew the richness of her village and was not bothered when a padlocked gate was constructed at the village entrance. From March to May, nobody was allowed to leave the village unless it was essential. Suphalak says, “Mae Jok villagers need not worry about food for they can gather abundant food from the forest as well as from far lands. There are different kinds of vegetable, bamboo shoots, mushrooms and fruits, including freshwater fish, shellfish, crabs and shrimps.”

The villagers of Mae Jok applied for land title registration in 2011 for a total area of 1,714 hectares which includes farmlands, conservation areas and community forests. They have yet to hear the results of their application, but records show they have inhabited the area for more than a century.
UGANDA:

Hunger and poverty on the rise among the dispossessed Batwa
When the Batwa’s traditional lands in southwestern Uganda were demarcated as national parks in 1991, they lost access to the forests that had been their home for millennia. Dispossessed of their land, the majority of Batwa people now live in extreme poverty. Their situation has pushed them to become dependent on aid from the government and NGOs.

The United Organisation for Batwa Development in Uganda (UOBDU) is a Batwa organisation that aims to support their struggles on land rights and on sustainable alternative livelihoods. UOBDU believes that the current food relief as part of the support in the time of the pandemic is not sustainable and that the relief will very likely be discontinued even before the lockdown is lifted.

Most of the Batwa community depends on cheap labour for survival. But the lockdown as a measure to contain the spread of COVID-19 prevented people from leaving their homes to look for work, and businesses that would normally require their labour are also shut down.

Before the lockdown, the Batwa would sell used bottles on the roadsides, work as potters, clean and pick up rubbish around homes and hotels. With their source of income cut off, hunger is an evident concern; they can only eat when they have worked. Even for Nyiransenga Aisha, a Mutwa, who has more stable work as an office attendant of UOBDU, finds it hard to get by. Although she still gets a salary despite not working on a daily basis due to the lockdown, she still finds herself unable to provide food for her family which can last for two days. It doesn’t help that prices of basic commodities are increasing. She does some cleaning work to get additional income.

Farming could have offered another means of livelihood but the Batwa have been left with little to no land to grow food, even just for their own consumption. The pandemic has made the survival of the Batwa absolutely uncertain and precarious. It is particularly hard for Batwa women and girls as they are more vulnerable to domestic violence, including insults, beatings and rape by their own husbands and to threats of rape and sexual assault by non-Batwa men.

Due to limited transport, the Batwa don’t have proper access to medical services. They live in very remote areas where they have to walk long distances to get treatment. Some who cannot walk remain home without getting medical help, leaving the matter in God’s hands. They also do not have access to information in general, and that’s no different at this time of the pandemic.

UOBDU knows it will take a while for society to stabilise and go back to a time where the Batwa are free to leave their homes and look for work. They can only brace themselves for the exacerbation of the Batwa’s hunger and poverty during the pandemic and any long-term impacts of this current difficulty.

Ultimately, the Batwa are demanding land for resettlement.

“Since we were evicted from our traditional forests in the 1990s to make way for national parks, we have been marginalised and landless. We also seek renewed access to the forest for our cultural practices”

say the community representatives from five districts who submitted a declaration to the government demanding land for resettlement in 2009. But since its submission, the Batwa community has never been given their land back or been resettled. This has not discouraged them from filing a petition in the constitutional court in 2013. The case is due for hearing. Since the petition was filed in the court, the government has tried to provide some interventions and is slowly trying to involve the Batwa in some of their interventions, an act that has never been seen before.
ANALYSIS: DRIVERS OF INEQUALITY PLACING INDIGENOUS AND TRIBAL PEOPLES AT HIGHER RISK FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

CURRENT CONDITIONS: IMMEDIATE ISSUES OF GREATEST CONCERN

The basic preventive measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 are restrictions in mobility, observing proper hygiene, and wearing of masks. The most immediate concerns for indigenous and tribal peoples are:

- the lack of access to proper health care, clean water and sanitation supplies
- the lack of language-friendly and culturally appropriate information about COVID-19
- the inability to observe physical distancing
- hunger and access to food.

Lack of access to proper health care, clean water and sanitation supplies

Indigenous and tribal peoples’ communities in rural areas often have very limited access to medical facilities; in areas where medical facilities are more accessible, they are often under-equipped and under-staffed (see stories from the Philippines and Peru. While not in the case study, also raised by Suriname contributors). In other cases, stigma and discrimination against indigenous and tribal peoples discourage them from accessing basic services. In some areas, wearing a mask is a requirement when attending a clinic, which further discourages indigenous and tribal community members from accessing these facilities (see Cameroon). These conditions exacerbate health risks for indigenous and tribal communities in pandemic situations.

Lack of language-friendly and culturally appropriate information about COVID-19

The lack of accessible information on COVID-19 means that indigenous and tribal peoples’ communities may not be aware of how they should protect themselves and what the real risks are. Such information is crucial for people to avoid contracting the virus and/or unknowingly spreading it within and outside of their territories. Information and updates on the virus are often communicated in national languages that many of indigenous and tribal community members do not speak, especially their elderly (see Suriname, Guyana).

Inability to observe physical distancing

Physical distancing is a challenge for communities living in close proximity, which is often the case for indigenous and tribal peoples. In addition, those living in urban areas are unable to practice their tradition of self-isolation because they are often living and working in crowded areas. Some people are forced to continue working in unsafe conditions with no support to observe the basic preventive measures of COVID-19. People who have lost their jobs and are left unable to pay their rent may be forced into crowded spaces, even sleeping rough, as they seek the means to travel back to their rural villages (see Peru).

Hunger and access to food

People who are hungry and malnourished are less healthy, which makes them more susceptible to COVID-19. Even before the pandemic, hunger was one of the greatest impacts on the mortality rate of indigenous peoples. Oxfam estimates that “12,000 people could die per day by the end of 2020 as a result of hunger linked to COVID-19, potentially more than could die from the disease.” Particularly vulnerable to hunger are members of indigenous and tribal
communities who do not have access to their lands and territories, and those who depend on their daily wage to buy food (see Uganda and Thailand). Hunger is also more of a risk in the medium and longer term, as food systems and food security are impacted by the pandemic.

**DYNAMIC PRESSURES: ISSUES OF CONCERN IN THE MEDIUM TERM**

The dynamic pressures, which are closely linked to the current conditions, are:

- increased deforestation, land-grabbing and violence
- instability of livelihoods and lack or loss of food security and self-sufficiency
- insufficient government services, including culturally appropriate health care and education
- ineffective information and communication infrastructure.

**Increased deforestation, land-grabbing and violence**

While most of the dynamic pressures existed before the pandemic, they have been exacerbated by the lockdowns implemented by many governments. Statistics have reflected, particularly in the Amazon, that while indigenous and tribal communities have been locked down, deforestation rates have increased, demonstrating pressures being brought to bear on communities already living in fear. In some cases, laws have been passed during lockdown that facilitate the economic exploitation of fragile ecosystems and the territories of indigenous and tribal peoples.

Some governments, or corrupt interests within them, have used the pandemic as an excuse to clamp down on fundamental rights and freedoms. Governments, businesses and invaders have exploited restrictions on mobility to continue their operations (see Philippines) or encroach further onto community lands, disregarding indigenous and tribal peoples’ right to free, prior and informed consent (see Colombia). Instances of killings of, and attacks on, indigenous rights activists also increased during lockdown.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, indigenous and tribal peoples were already responding with resistance to violence and intimidation on their lands, including through movements such as the Zero Tolerance Initiative. As violence intensifies and levels of incursions into forested lands by companies and primary crop producers linked to international supply chains rise, it becomes more important than ever to scale up support for initiatives such as the Zero Tolerance Initiative, and for the moves in Europe towards mandatory due diligence whereby companies would be regulated to take action on human rights (and environmental) abuse in their direct supply chains.

**Livelihood instability and food insecurity**

Because many of the lockdowns, and other government directives to restrict movement, were imposed without considering the implications for people’s livelihoods, or for access to food and other basic services, they have therefore negated the very reason for such directives: to protect people’s wellbeing and save lives.

Unlike the government-imposed lockdowns, the tradition of some indigenous and tribal communities of observing self-isolation within their lands and territories does not leave them hungry or without clean water and basic traditional medicines (see Thailand and Indonesia). But for many indigenous and tribal communities, their lands and territories have long been compromised due to development, and they are no longer able to provide these basic needs and securities. In some cases, indigenous communities have been made landless prior to, or even during, the pandemic, having been forcefully evicted from their lands which were demarcated as protected areas (see Uganda and Kenya).

The lockdowns have sharply illustrated how many traditional food systems have been weakened by the shift to cash-based crops such as cocoa and coffee. Communities who were historically self-sufficient are now no longer able to feed themselves and must travel, often many miles, to reach markets in larger villages and towns. This is not possible for communities who have sealed themselves off and who are now concerned about how long their food supplies will last; some have already become dependent on food aid, for instance in Suriname. In Peru, Kichwa communities have taken steps to close off their villages to outsiders, but basic commodities such as salt and oil are rapidly becoming scarce. More positively, the pandemic has reignited discussions about the need to restore and strengthen traditional food production systems and traditional medicines.
Insufficient government services

The pandemic has further exposed governments’ lack of understanding, if not outright disregard, for the importance of culturally specific health care. Indigenous and tribal peoples in nearly all countries have reduced access to proper health care despite falling into the most ‘vulnerable’ health category because they generally (especially in the Americas) have lower immunity to diseases. During the colonial period, diseases brought by the colonisers wiped out indigenous communities and nations; COVID-19 poses a similar threat. Some communities require specific consideration of their susceptibility to viruses. In addition, indigenous communities are raising the alarm about the increasing vulnerability and number of deaths of their elders.

Ineffective information and communication infrastructure

The lack of effective and functioning information and communication infrastructure, including telephone coverage and internet, makes it harder to share information and conduct contact tracing. The failure to disaggregate data by ethnicity for people contracting COVID-19 conceals the number of indigenous deaths, and the particular challenges and needs that indigenous and tribal peoples face in such a crisis.

“WHEN AN ELDER DIES, IT LEAVES AN ENORMOUS VOID IN THE COMMUNITY. HERDS IN THE JUNGLE HAVE A GUIDE AND WITHOUT THAT GUIDE, THE HERD DISPERSES... IT’S WHY [WHEN AN ELDER DIES] WE INSIST ON THEIR PROTECTION.”

— Nelly Kiuru of the National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia (ONIC) is a member of the Amazonian Murui Muina people.
Systemic Causes: Longer-Term and Persistent Concerns

The current conditions and dynamic pressures described above can be traced back to systemic causes, which are primarily political systems that generally disregard indigenous and tribal peoples’ collective rights to land, cultural integrity and self-determination, and which are linked to general discrimination against them. With economic systems having considerable impact on how lands are managed, controlled and/or exploited, it is worth exploring how an economic recovery model that prioritises profit over people, taking no account for the conflicts over land rights and damage to the environment, would contribute to these systematic causes.

The systemic causes are:

- insecure land tenure
- discrimination and lack of recognition of self-governance rights
- forced eviction
- economic recovery that puts profit before people
- a perspective that separates humans from the natural world.

Insecure land tenure

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on poverty has land tenure as one of its indicators. Although the SDG uses the GDP global poverty line standard of US$1.90 a day, it also clearly recognises the importance of land to addressing poverty, as well as its potential for addressing other SDGs. Progress on the land tenure indicator can bring considerable benefits to indigenous peoples especially, as they account for 16 per cent of all people living in extreme poverty. But securing land tenure will do much more than simply increase income, and this is where the US$1.90 a day standard falls short in capturing the value of land and territories for indigenous and tribal peoples. Secure land tenure, in accordance with indigenous and tribal peoples’ self-determination, can positively impact their cultural integrity, identity, and overall wellbeing, increasing their chances of becoming liberated from the wage-labour arrangements that they are pushed into through desperation.

“We saved up enough in our village fund over the last few years, by sustainable harvest of forest produce, to provide for people who have lost their jobs in cities and returned home during the corona crisis.”

— Villager from Kukdel, Maharashtra, India, in Asish Kothari’s ‘How ‘ordinary’ people can show us ways out of global crises’

Discrimination and lack of recognition of self-governance rights

Discrimination is embedded within many political systems, and in the laws they produce. The disregard for indigenous and tribal peoples’ capacity and knowledge to control their lands and territories, and, therefore, their lives, is linked to colonialism and imperialism but is replicated and retained by post-independence states. It is demonstrated in the lack of culturally appropriate healthcare systems and education (see Suriname), and in the failure of government services to incorporate the particular needs and situations of indigenous and tribal peoples. This discrimination is related to a lack of recognition of their rights to self-governance and self-determination, or substantial interferences with the exercise of these rights (see Guyana, where communities seek to exercise lawful authority to exclude non-member on the basis of emergency Covid controls, yet the government formally declared miners and mining to be off-limits to such restrictions).

In Suriname, the indigenous communities were never consulted in the decision-making, planning and regulation stages of the COVID-19 pandemic because the traditional indigenous authorities are not legally recognised as local government structures (VIDS 2020, pers. comm., 13 August 2020). In Guyana, where they are legally recognised, indigenous peoples were again excluded from consultation and decision-making.

These issues are all interrelated and are drivers of the continuing struggle of indigenous and tribal peoples to flourish equally with the majority population.

Forced eviction

The forced eviction of indigenous and tribal peoples from their lands to make way for national parks is in part a product of a colonial past, too often replicated and retained by post-colonial states. Despite several studies proving that indigenous and tribal peoples around the world are often more successful at protecting forests than the gazetting of parks and reserves, nation states—even those that have long gained colonial independence—and leading conservation institutions continue to implement and support “conventional” conservation projects. The resulting landlessness is devastating for indigenous and tribal peoples, with myriad impacts including increasing indigenous peoples’ vulnerability to COVID-19 and to poverty (see Kenya and Uganda). It can destroy livelihoods, making these communities dependent on wage-labour (see Uganda) and affect their access to other basic needs (see Indonesia).

“I’VE BEEN SLEEPING IN THICKETS WITH MY [THREE] CHILDREN, WITH NO FOOD TO EAT. WE HAVE NO PLACE TO GO OR TAKE OUR LIVESTOCK.”

— Caroline Chepkoech of Chai Moto, Marioshoni, Elburgon. Caroline was one of the villagers evicted and whose house was burnt by the Kenya Forest Service.
Economic recovery that puts profit before people

Economic crisis$^{63}$ is one of the many consequences$^{64}$ of the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns. It heightens the concerns of indigenous and tribal peoples over their land rights because initiatives to recover from the global economic impact of COVID-19 often depend on the economic stimulus that results from the exploitation of natural resources.$^{65}$ These natural resources are often found within indigenous and tribal peoples’ territories, and resource extraction is therefore highly likely to affect their rights to lands, cultural integrity and self-determination.$^{66}$ These extractive initiatives that profess to lead the world “back to normal” have been condemned$^{67}$ as one of the very causes of the pandemic.$^{68}$ They fail to address the existing drivers of inequalities that have led to the current situation of indigenous and tribal peoples, particularly in their struggles for land rights, and the overall insecurity and threats resulting from deforestation, land-grabbing and violence against them. These proposals for economic recovery prioritise profit over people, and disproportionately affect indigenous and tribal peoples. Furthermore, many of these resource extraction companies continue to operate despite the lockdown and closure of indigenous and tribal territories, with no measures in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This endangers both their workforce and the communities on whose lands they operate.

Ultimately, governments are proposing a post-COVID economic recovery model that is based on consumption and production.$^{70}$ Despite criticisms of using GDP to measure a country’s growth and progress, and several proposed alternatives, some complementary,$^{71}$ GDP remains the most prevalent marker of “success”. It values life and wellbeing in economic terms, which gravelly misses the importance of the quality of health, education, environment and social connectedness,$^{72}$ among other values. These are some of the most crucial values as we experience this pandemic.

Alternative proposals for economic, social and cultural reforms have been proposed. Explicit in the 2019 global assessment of the state of the natural world is a recognition that economic, productive and consumptive systems are some of the direct root causes of environmental destruction.$^{73}$ Global policy responses to this, both in the UN’s Global Biodiversity Outlook (5th edition) published this year,$^{74}$ and the companion report Local Biodiversity Outlooks 2 compiled by indigenous and community researchers,$^{75}$ have highlighted the need to support and advance alternatives to these economic drivers. Both reports call for significant reforms—transformations—in the systems that we use to sustain ourselves and our planet.

A perspective that separates humans from the natural world

When UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said, “Let us remember that we are only as strong as the weakest health system in our interconnected world$^{76}$, he highlighted one of several realisations that the COVID-19 pandemic has unveiled—the importance of interconnectedness. This interconnectedness is neither reflected in the prevailing economic system nor in the economic recovery models, particularly with regards to the global impact of biodiversity loss. Although deforestation and land-grabbing primarily affect certain indigenous and tribal peoples, the impact of the resulting biodiversity loss ripples around the world and is, indeed, one of the drivers of the pandemic and of climate change.

“WE ARE ONLY AS STRONG AS THE MOST VULNERABLE PERSON IN OUR COMMUNITY, SO NOW, MORE THAN EVER, IT IS IMPERATIVE FOR US TO DECOLONIZE FROM INDIVIDUALISM AND RECONNECT WITH WAYS OF COMMUNITY CARE.”

— Jade Begay, Diné and Tesuque Pueblo of New Mexico, USA, ‘Community care: an indigenous response to coronavirus’$^{78}$
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

**ACTIONS NEEDED**

COVID-19 and the associated lockdowns are the newest additions to the ongoing struggles of Indigenous and tribal peoples, affecting and exacerbating the inequalities they experience which result from the lack of recognition of their individual and collective rights. As noted by World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus: “The health impacts of the pandemic extend far beyond the sickness and death caused by the virus itself... this is so much more than a health crisis”.

The COVID-19 pandemic reveals how Indigenous and tribal peoples’ past struggles continue to impact their present. Although all drivers of inequality require attention, some actions must be prioritised over others to ensure the health and survival of Indigenous and tribal peoples through the pandemic.

**IMMEDIATE ACTIONS TO SAVE LIVES**

Governments and other duty-bearers should prioritise saving lives and preventing the direct impacts of COVID-19 by:

- supporting any existing community initiatives that aim to improve access to health care, food, water, sanitation and information

- consulting and cooperating with Indigenous and tribal peoples and observing their cultural protocols, making sure they receive consistent, culturally appropriate and immediate health care, information on COVID-19, and food, water and sanitation supplies

- carrying out proper COVID-19 testing especially in overcrowded living areas and workplaces; providing immediate health care if necessary; providing food, water and sanitation, and, if needed, a safe journey home to their communities, while monitoring their health status until they are deemed free of the virus.

**MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS**

States should consistently consider the specific needs and situations of Indigenous and tribal peoples during the pandemic and beyond, through:

- transforming government institutions to be more responsive, through good-faith consultation and cooperation with Indigenous and tribal peoples when developing facilities and infrastructure for health care, education, information and communication

- protecting Indigenous and tribal peoples’ health and safety by supporting their traditions of self-isolation, while providing specific basic needs such as food, water and sanitation supplies, and protection from intruders, as necessary

- ceasing all business operations and transactions that involve exploitation of Indigenous and tribal peoples’ lands and territories until they are ready and they open their borders for consultation (respecting their rights to free, prior and informed consent)

- giving access to justice and remedy to Indigenous and tribal peoples affected by forced evictions, land-grabbing and related attacks and violence.
Effective and sustained realisation of rights requires more transformative action. Governments and other duty-bearers must start transitioning towards social, political and economic systems that:

- recognise and protect the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples to their lands and territories, recognising also their roles in sustainable use and management of natural resources

- design and deliver culturally appropriate and context-specific programmes that allow indigenous and tribal peoples to fully enjoy and exercise their individual and collective rights, particularly to their lands and territories, cultural integrity, self-determination, food security and food sovereignty

- support the emergence of locally determined development models, reflecting self-determined priorities in land management, food systems and healthcare systems

- choose economic recovery models that aim to equally improve the quality of life and wellbeing for all, while ensuring a universal, equitable balance of economic, social and environmental growth.
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