

Submission to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to the General Assembly:

Impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous Peoples

I. Reporting Organization:

Cultural Survival is an international Indigenous rights organization with a global Indigenous leadership and consultative status with ECOSOC. Cultural Survival is located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is registered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in the United States. Cultural Survival monitors the protection of Indigenous Peoples' rights in countries throughout the world and publishes its findings in its magazine, the Cultural Survival Quarterly; and on its website: www.cs.org

II. Executive Summary:

While the COVID-19 pandemic affects the entire world, 476 million Indigenous people living in 90 countries are at disproportionate risk due to the ongoing inequalities they experience. Indigenous communities are facing life-threatening food insecurity, limited access to medical supplies and healthcare, and a paucity of culturally and linguistically relevant fact-based information. Moreover, the pandemic has been accompanied by increasing threats from violence, militarization, land seizures, and environmental destruction. As an international community, we must ensure Indigenous rights are respected and adequate resources are allocated to Indigenous-led initiatives in Indigenous communities.

III. Impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous Peoples & Indigenous-Led Solutions

As the world faces what feels like unprecedented times, Indigenous Peoples across the globe are reflecting on the experiences of their ancestors in fighting past pandemics. They are turning to traditional knowledge, practices and values to remain strong and healthy in this crisis. When rooted in the strength of Indigenous lands, cultures, languages, knowledge, ancestors, and communities, Indigenous Peoples are resilient—but even in their resilience, they still face disproportionate challenges and inequities in navigating this pandemic.

Since 1972, Cultural Survival has partnered with Indigenous communities to advance Indigenous Peoples' rights and cultures worldwide. An Indigenous-led organization predicated on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we leverage our experience and leadership in advocacy, media, public education, programs, and in providing platforms to amplify and empower the voices of Indigenous Peoples as they work to claim their rights to self-determination, their lands, cultures, and precious ecosystems that are essential to the whole planet. Cultural Survival supports a movement of empowered Indigenous Peoples organizing their communities to engage the international processes, national policies and human rights bodies to respect, protect, and fulfill their rights.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cultural Survival is engaged in:

- Making direct grants to our Indigenous partners, providing emergency funding which allows them to leverage Indigenous solutions to respond to the crisis in their local communities;
- Developing and supporting the development radio content on COVID-19 in 100+ Indigenous languages to be broadcast through 1,000+ radio stations globally

- Publishing of an Emergency Response Toolkit for Indigenous community radio stations, translated into 20+ Indigenous languages;
- Curating a global monitoring system for COVID-19 in Indigenous communities using Google Maps technology.

In conversation with our grant partners in Indigenous communities around the world since the start of the pandemic, we have gathered the following information on the impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous Peoples and the Indigenous-led solutions that are working.

Best Practices for Redressing the Economic, Social, and Cultural Impacts of Quarantines and Travel Restrictions

Pandemics function as magnifiers of existing social inequalities, economic vulnerabilities, and systemic violence. The [impact of the COVID-19 crisis upon Indigenous communities](#) is manifold, disrupting access to health care, economic opportunity, cultural practices, food and water. In response, Indigenous communities are mobilizing, building on existing initiatives and networks, and establishing new projects in pursuit of food sovereignty, locally developed communications strategies, mutual aid, and healthy communities. It is vital that Indigenous Peoples are not only participants in national responses, but that Indigenous-led initiatives outside of state structures are also supported. Since May 2020, Cultural Survival's Keepers of the Earth Fund has disseminated [17 emergency grants](#) to Indigenous organizations on four continents, some examples of which we outline below.

In Southern Belize, the Julian Cho Society of Q'eqchi' and Mopan Maya community members leveraged funds from Cultural Survival to purchase and redistribute local corn surplus. Their targeted initiative redresses two pandemic impacts at once. It ameliorates the economic impact of border closures on farmers who customarily sell their surpluses in neighboring Guatemala while simultaneously supporting the the most vulnerable and severely impacted people within the Maya population: the elderly, families in COVID-19 isolation, and those employed in the labor economy who now have neither income nor subsistence farms to support them. Combined with additional purchases of essential food supplies, this initiative will create and foster a community-level market within the Maya villages.

Across the globe, innovative Indigenous-led initiatives like this one are helping communities to address the multifaceted impacts of COVID-19 upon the social, economic, and cultural fabrics of their specific communities without reinforcing or renewing dangerous cycles of dependency. In Brazil, Indigenous people from

communities including Pimentel Barbosa and Eténhiritipa are avoiding the contagion risk of supermarkets in town by planning community fishing expeditions and returning to traditional collecting activities under the guidance of their Elders. In Oaxaca, the *Union of Organizations of the Sierra Juárez* is using its small grant from Cultural Survival to distribute seeds from its seed banks to community growers. In Costa Rica, Bribri *Council of Elders Iriia Bribri Sá Ká* are both purchasing and sowing seeds and installing a collective community water system. In the Northeast United States, Native women part of the collective *Eastern Woodlands Rematriation* have scaled up their work in distributing seedlings, saplings, and traditional local foods and medicines, “as a way to care for each other and build power in how and from where we feed and nurture our bodies.” Their plan not only feeds Indigenous people today, but it cultivates both the food reserves and strong kinship networks necessary to survive a projected fall or winter surge in cases and subsequent economic shutdowns. Initiatives like these are stronger because they draw from Indigenous practices, support the continuation of traditional knowledge systems, and have the requisite flexibility and local expertise to successfully navigate rapidly changing crisis environments.

Meeting the Needs of Remote & At Risk Communities

Cultural Survival Partners across the globe are developing diverse initiatives to meet the needs of their communities while governments are failing to do so. Our partners in India, Brazil, Mexico, and Africa have launched local mask manufacturing initiatives in order to concurrently meet two vital needs: expanding access to personal protective equipment and providing employment for those who have lost jobs or opportunities, frequently women who are thrice marginalized and particularly economically vulnerable. They are producing pamphlets and resources on traditional medicine, building collective immune strength and revitalizing traditional knowledge and practices. They are organizing community COVID-19 monitoring systems, the distribution of medical and sanitation supplies, and disseminating vital health information in Indigenous languages. (Radio-- a vital tool for reaching remote communities--is addressed in a subsequent section)

[Il'laramatak Community Concerns](#), an NGO serving Indigenous pastoralist communities in Kenya, and CS grantee, is currently combating the spread of COVID-19 in a country with fewer than two doctors per ten thousand people, and within communities where touch is vital to a range of cultural practices and water—a scarce resource—is carefully reserved for drinking and cooking. Il'laramatak Community Concerns' offer a range of solutions reflective of the variety of challenges their communities face. Their response identifies those most at risk due to food insecurity, disability, or marginalized status. They are providing communities with not only food, water, and soap, but large containers with the appropriate taps to facilitate safe hand-washing. They are also

distributing 20 smartphones to targeted recipients, to both reach remote communities with information about culturally appropriate social distancing practices and to ensure that high-achieving students from poor families do not lose access to their teachers. Indigenous actors, like Il'laramatak Community Concerns, are uniquely poised to understand their communities' needs and to produce innovative solutions which reflect the realities on the ground.

Supporting and Learning From Indigenous Traditional Practices

Indigenous communities across the globe face a variety of challenges which make standard best practices for the prevention of COVID-19's spread both illogical and inappropriate without specialized support. Many lack access to running water, hospital and intensive care facilities, and safe, reliable infrastructure. However, if we understand infectious pandemics as community problems—that is, as challenges for public containment more so than individualized medicine—then we need look no further than Indigenous Peoples for [models of community care and insights](#) which can benefit all people. For example, community-wide, self-isolation is not new to many Indigenous Peoples. The Igorot peoples of Luzon, Philippines have long practiced temporary self-isolation as a way to protect, cleanse, and heal its members during a crisis or after a tragedy. Among the Karen people of highland Thailand, *kroh yee* [village closure] is a regular part of ritual in the sixth month of the lunar calendar and can take more complicated form during serious crises, as occurred seventy years ago during a cholera outbreak.

However, in order to sustain these life-saving self-isolation practices, Indigenous communities require international support. In Oaxaca, the Union of Organizations of the Sierra Juárez is using its [small grant from Cultural Survival](#) to provide the teams monitoring entrance to their communities with personal protective gear. Grantmaking also supports the acquisition of medicine, food, and sanitation equipment. However, Indigenous communities also need guarantees of unimpeded and safe access to nearby natural resources for sustenance and legal protection from outsiders who would violate their critical isolation practices.

UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues Chairperson [Anne Nuorgam](#) (Sami) has urged that “States must prevent outsiders from entering into [Indigenous] territories. Any plan or protective measures to address indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation...should be multidisciplinary and follow agreed protocols and international recommendations such as the recommendations of the Inter American Commission on Human Rights.” Unfortunately Chairperson Nuorgam's call has not been heeded. In the United States, South Dakota governor Kristi Noem challenged [coronavirus checkpoints](#)

set up by the Oglala Sioux and Cheyenne River Sioux Tribes on a highway traversing their reservation. With only an eight-bed facility for the 12,000 people living on the reservation, these checkpoints are an essential tool for regulating and limiting the spread of COVID-19. Similarly, the Xavante Warã Association has demanded that Brazil suspend commercial traffic along the [highways which traverse the Xavante Indigenous Territories](#) of Areões, Marãiwatse, Pimentel Barbosa, São Marcos, and Sangradouro, and the Bororo Indigenous Territory Meruri. Like many Indigenous Peoples, the A'uwẽ-Xavante are particularly at risk for COVID-19 because of high rates of pre-existing diseases (resulting from centuries of negligence in health policy towards Indigenous Peoples) that represent significant comorbidity. However—like many of Brazil's Indigenous Peoples—they also rely heavily on store-bought food staples and subsistence items, which can only be accessed via these highways. The government has also failed to address the illegal fishing and hunting poachers, loggers and miners who regularly enter Indigenous lands, further increasing Indigenous Peoples' risk of COVID-19 exposure, and has made moves to facilitate ongoing extractivism during the pandemic with draft Bill 191 (Projeto de Lei 191) that President Jair Bolsonaro submitted to the National Congress on February 6, 2020 and described as his “dream”, which would loosen restrictions on third party activities in Indigenous Territories and permit mineral, oil and gas exploration and extraction, as well as the implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects such as roads and hydroelectric dams and also allow intensive agricultural activities.

States must work with and in support of Indigenous Peoples as they mobilize, building on existing initiatives and networks, to establish new and life-saving projects in pursuit of food sovereignty, locally developed communications strategies, mutual aid, and healthy communities.

Disseminating Information to Indigenous Communities in Indigenous Languages: Life-Saving Community Radio

Across the globe, Indigenous people are experiencing acute barriers to accessing life-saving information about the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it is paramount that Indigenous Peoples have access to culturally appropriate resources and information in their own languages, commercial media in many countries broadcasts only in mainstream languages, exacerbating the preexisting inequity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples.

To date, Cultural Survival has recruited translators in 80+ languages to produce [COVID-19 radio content](#) that ensures widespread access to medical, public health, and other

essential information. Radio's ability to serve remote communities in a localized way, as well as its universal and free nature, makes it an ideal medium to reach underserved Indigenous audiences. Cultural Survival has disseminated [17 emergency grants](#) to 21 Indigenous community radio stations in 8 countries. Indigenous community radio journalists and broadcasters are uniquely poised to clear rumors and false news, generate knowledge, and ensure the widespread understanding and cultural continuity which can slow the spread of COVID-19.

[José Colleman](#), an Indigenous leader from Nicaragua, described the importance of these initiatives. "There is a great need to inform in our language, especially in remote communities where Spanish is not spoken and where the State provides information only in Spanish. This grant helps us meet the request for information and we have seen the results. We have seen 90% of people wearing masks, and Indigenous authorities are now restricting mobility and entry into their communities." [Rodolfo Urrutia](#), director of Radio Nimlajacoc in Guatemala, relayed a similar experience. He said, "Through the information that has been broadcasted, people are taking precautions more seriously. Since then, fewer people are traveling to the capital of our department. They ask the station how COVID-19 spreads. This is the reason why we insist on broadcasting in our local language about the importance of staying at home and making proper use of masks and hand washing. This can make us safe for now."

Indigenous Community Radio stations also address the cultural, economic, and infrastructural impacts of COVID-19 by speaking to a wide range of topics including access to water; sanitation, economic and food sovereignty; food banks; planting basics; barter and community markets; community and mental health; care for Elders and children; and the arts. Indigenous Community Radio also plays an important role in reporting domestic violence, which has been increasingly affecting women since the start of the pandemic, and have been a vital tool in reporting abuses of power and negligence of state authorities towards Indigenous Peoples.

Despite the importance of community radio as an organizing tool in emergencies, States have failed to provide funding to stations to do this important work and have not recognized their important role in Indigenous language broadcasts. Lockdown restrictions aiming to stop the expansion of the COVID-19 have also had the secondary effect of limited financial support for radio from local communities and businesses. Stations report decreased volunteers and increased expenses due to prevention protocols, and reducing programming hours. Support from organizations like Cultural Survival can keep these broadcasts on the air by covering basic expenses including electricity, internet, and a per diem for some permanent volunteers. Cultural Survival has also produced a tool-kit for Indigenous community radio stations during COVID-19.

This [manual](#), translated into 22 languages, contains tools to protect journalists from the possible spread of the virus at radio stations. It also highlights the many ways radio can serve as a community engagement agent: calling for a calm and unified community prevention strategy; providing a space for community teachers trying to reach children that do not have access to the internet and cannot attend online schooling; and defending human rights as many governments abuse their power during the pandemic.

Collecting, Disaggregating, and Analyzing Data

Countries across the world have faced challenges in attempting to produce data on COVID-19 cases and deaths. For Indigenous Peoples, data is even more inexact or nonexistent. In the United States, almost half of the states who included ethnic demographic data in their published infection reports failed to include a category for Indigenous Peoples, relegating them instead to “Other” and effectively eliminates them in the data, according to [Abigail Echo-Hawk](#) (Pawnee), director of the Urban Indian Health Board and chief research officer of the Seattle Indian Health Board. Indigenous Services Canada only counts cases of COVID-19 in Indigenous people on reserves, erasing those who live outside of reservations and homogenizing Indigenous Peoples of different cultures who live in communities together. Similarly, in Mexico, the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples’ most recent report lists 489 cases of COVID-19 in 31 states throughout the country, without clarifying to which of the country’s 68 Indigenous Peoples they belong or noting cases in migrant workers.

Aggregated data hides both basic data and inequities by compiling all cases into limited categories and removing demographic information such as sex, gender, race, or Indigenous identity. It occludes insights on not only infection and mortality but economic impacts, disproportionate care burdens, and violence, including gender- and race-based violence. Knowing the impacts experienced by specific peoples and communities is vital to allocating resources to the most vulnerable groups. Specific, disaggregated, and location-based data is also critical for Indigenous leaders in their tracing and prevention efforts.

Indigenous organizations across the globe have demanded that governments include Indigenous Peoples in their COVID-19 statistics. They have also begun to do the work that the states can or will not. In Ecuador, CONFENIAE is carrying out constant monitoring and mapping of Indigenous Peoples in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Organizations like REPAM in Brazil are doing similar work, and media organizations like Servindi in Peru are reporting cases among Indigenous Peoples. In the United States, the Diné (Navajo) People have monitored and shared information via its own media on

the devastating impact COVID has had in Diné communities, as well as nearby Hopi Peoples.

In an effort to name the Indigenous Peoples affected by COVID-19, Cultural Survival is [mapping cases](#) across the world. Unfortunately, to date, we have identified 129 affected Indigenous Peoples in 20 countries. Our investigation has highlighted concerning data globally. The Indigenous Peoples with the highest number of cases are the Navajo (Diné) Nation in the United States, followed by the Shipibo Konibo People in Peru, both of which have cases in several of the communities that comprise their nations. The Amazon is the region with the greatest diversity of Peoples impacted, many of whom are small, isolated communities made up of only a few dozen families. People are far more than just numbers, and losses are particularly felt in the cases of elders, who are more susceptible to complications from COVID-19. Among Indigenous Peoples, it is the elders who often maintain Indigenous languages and carry the communities' ancestral knowledge and traditions. Medicine man [Ty Davis](#), who knows at least five traditional practitioners who have died from COVID-19, asks, "What do we do now? How do we retrieve that knowledge that these elders once knew now that they have died with those ceremonies? How do we get those back?" Each medicine person specializes in different ceremonies. So when someone dies they take that knowledge with them."

Tracking Human Rights Violations in a State of Emergency

Cultural Survival's mapping project moves beyond tracking cases of infection to include cases of human rights violations taking place within the context of COVID-19. "The democratic fabric of many countries is eroding during this pandemic," insists Secretary General of Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact [Mr. Gam A. Shimray](#). "When people are in lockdown and prevented from going out and protesting or going to the court, governments are rolling back constitutional rights of Indigenous Peoples, and evicting people from forest lands and military campaigns are being carried out." These include attacks on human rights defenders known to be in their homes due to quarantine. They include state actions, including those by governments taking advantage of attention on COVID-19 to undertake development projects or waive consultation processes. They include dangerous harbingers, such as Brazilian Health Officials' return of a COVID-19 positive A'uwẽ-Xavante man to his community where communal living and poor sanitation makes transmission inevitable, in direct violation of World Health Organization guidelines. This act, according to anthropologist [Laura R. Graham](#), "signals a grim return to Brazil's genocidal policies of the 1960s that caused thousands of Indigenous deaths."

International solidarity is vital for the survival of Indigenous Peoples and all our relations. There is a special need to support ground-breaking initiatives managed by Indigenous governments, local community organizations, women, and youth, who know what is needed on the local level and are on the ground to carry it out. Cultural Survival stands with and works in support of these initiatives to upholding Indigenous rights, health, well being and cultural continuity during this critical time.

IV: Recommendations:

Cultural Survival recommends the following actions:

1. Urge States collect COVID data disaggregated by ethnicity
2. Consult with Indigenous communities to determine unique needs and strategies for COVID prevention and treatment
3. Involve Indigenous Peoples in all decisions that may affect them related to planning and development of COVID response
4. Decentralize health services from cities to rural centers
5. Halt all extractive activities in Indigenous territories while the pandemic is ongoing, as outside workers act as vectors for bringing disease to otherwise isolated communities.
6. Supply proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to health professionals working with Indigenous Peoples and in quarantine facilities
7. Increase the number of trained medical health professionals attending Indigenous areas and Indigenous populations in urban environments
8. Channel funding to community radio stations who are doing work to broadcast informational messages in Indigenous languages.
9. Provide masks, gloves and other PPE to local communities
10. Supply Indigenous communities with disinfecting supplies so people may follow sanitation guidelines.
11. Institute regular and repeated Covid-19 testing of Indigenous populations at their request and with their consent.