Access to Education for Indigenous Groups

Topic Background
There are estimated to be 370 million indigenous people around the world, spread over 90 countries. Although indigenous people make up only 5% of the global population, they constitute 15% of the world’s extreme poor.\(^1\) Indigenous people all over the world face issues of violence and brutality, continuing assimilation policies, dispossession of land, marginalization, forced removal or relocation, denial of land rights, impacts of large-scale development, abuses by military forces and a host of other abuses.\(^2\) This treatment has led to staggering differences in educational outcomes - at all levels, and in all regions of the world, indigenous peoples tend to have lower levels of literacy, enjoy fewer years at school and are more likely to drop-out of school.\(^3\)

This is not a new phenomenon - indigenous populations have faced discrimination and considerable challenges to accessing basic educational services throughout history. Many of these obstacles are a direct result of the structure of educational systems around the world. In many countries, the content of primary and secondary school curriculum does not reflect the history or traditions of indigenous culture. The lack of inclusivity can steer many indigenous communities to keep children out of the state-sponsored systems. However, since many indigenous communities are impoverished, educational resources are limited and the quality and continuity of education can fall below international standards.\(^4\) Furthermore, many of the adverse social conditions experienced by indigenous people can impact a child’s ability to pursue education, such as unstable housing, food insecurity and gender stereotypes.\(^5\)

While greater attention has been paid to the challenges that indigenous populations to face, lack of universal primary and secondary education continues to be an issue affecting these communities. Throughout the world education systems are not properly prepared to provide culturally aware education to diverse populations, often excluding indigenous populations through questions of accessibility or ability to relate to the course material. There are too few teachers who speak indigenous languages, and indigenous schools often lack basic materials. Additionally, educational materials that provide accurate and fair information on indigenous peoples and their ways of life

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\(^3\) Cosentino, G., & World Bank. (2016, August 09). Indigenous peoples have a right to quality education. But so far, we've failed them. Retrieved from https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/08/indigenous-people-have-a-right-to-quality-education-but-so-far-we-ve-failed-them/


are particularly rare. Indigenous students frequently find that the education they are offered by the state promotes individualism in a competitive atmosphere, rather than communal ways of life and cooperation that are common in indigenous communities. They are not taught relevant survival and work skills suitable for indigenous economies, and often return to their communities with a formal education that is irrelevant or unsuitable for their needs. Future action must seek to address how to help indigenous communities secure the proper resources to provide indigenous children with universal education, as well as how state-sponsored school systems that can create a more inclusive environment that would allow indigenous students to flourish.

An additional area for improvement would be addressing the social conditions that can impact an indigenous child’s ability to pursue education. Since many indigenous communities are facing extreme poverty, countless families and individuals also experience food insecurity. Many children will go to school hungry, ill, or tired, which can have a significant impact on their ability to perform in school and decreases their chances of continuing through the education system. Providing social support to indigenous communities, creating a stable foundation for children in terms of housing and food in particular, will promote educational attainment at both the primary and secondary levels.

Furthermore, gender-based issues have impacted the low rates of educational progression for indigenous communities. Indigenous girls often experience difficult problems related to unfriendly school environments, gender discrimination, school-based violence and sometimes sexual abuse, all of which contribute to high dropout rates. In many countries, girls are actually prevented from going to school, and a report commissioned by the Human Rights Council in 2009 found that “families often prefer girls to remain at home to perform domestic chores and care for children and siblings.” Education initiatives must acknowledge an investment in girls and women in order to help close the gap between indigenous men and women as well as the education gap between indigenous people and the greater population.

Education is increasingly recognized as one of the best long-term financial and social investments countries can make. If national governments and the international community do not prioritize the expansion of universal primary and secondary education for indigenous populations, these people will see worsening disparities across the board.

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Access to education for indigenous groups is an explicit goal of the Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 4: universal primary and secondary education, states: by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. Furthermore, outcome target 4.5 specifies: by 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.10

Past International Action

The UN has dedicated resources and discussion to help achieve this goal. In 2007 the Human Rights Council established the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, tasked with providing the Human Rights Council expertise and advice on the rights of indigenous peoples as set out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Expert Mechanism also assists Member States in achieving the ends of the Declaration, working with individual Member States upon request on the promotion and protection of the rights of indigenous peoples.11

Over the last 20 years Indigenous Peoples’ rights have been increasingly recognized through the adoption of international instruments and mechanisms, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007, the establishment of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNSR).12 The United Nations has also established an Inter-Agency Support Group (IASG) on Indigenous Issues, and in 2018, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) developed, in cooperation with indigenous peoples, Member States, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and a range of different stakeholders, an action plan for the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages.13

Although the UN is making progress on this topic, it is not yet determined whether or not Member States will be able to achieve the desired progress on providing supportive education to indigenous populations. To continue to move forward, the UN has partnered with organizations and members of civil society to advance the right to education for indigenous people. Many of the influential NGOs that are working on this topic are domestically focused, as the unique nature of each indigenous community must be considered when developing a plan for improving access to

education. Organizations such as The Aurora Education Foundation in Australia and First Nations Development Institute in the U.S. have taken active roles in advocating for primary and secondary education for indigenous children.

Following the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in countries such as Japan, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, and the Republic of the Congo, laws have been adopted that recognize the rights of indigenous peoples. There are several other notable documents that safeguard these rights, with a specific focus on educational priorities, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which recognizes the importance of culture and the states’ obligation to preserve and protect the child’s cultural identity, essential in developing educational curriculum. Furthermore, international human rights instruments, including the International Labour Organization Convention no. 169 (articles 26 to 31), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (articles 29 and 30), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 26) all uphold the necessity of providing education to indigenous populations.

**Possible Solutions**

Increasing access to primary and secondary education for indigenous population is a key priority of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the goal to achieve SDG 4. In order to make progress towards this goal, countries must determine how they can develop a curriculum that is inclusive of indigenous communities, from acknowledging their role in a country’s history to providing students with necessary skills that will benefit them in their home setting. Additionally, it is necessary for the international community to develop an action plan on how to better support indigenous populations as a whole in order to create the positive social conditions for success in education. Simply integrating indigenous students into mainstream educational settings will not help close the achievement gap. Moreover, action plans must acknowledge the unique gender relationships that are commonly found in indigenous communities, helping to dismantle the additional obstacles that women and girls face in accessing primary and secondary education.

Addressing these topics will have considerable variation, as each indigenous community around the world carries its own dynamic history and practices. In some regions of the world the issue of disparities between indigenous people and the general population is pressing, such as in the case of Australia and the Aboriginal population. The WEOG group also sees large numbers of indigenous peoples in the U.S. and Canada, as well as several groups spread throughout countries in Europe. Moreover, the GRULAC regional group has several countries with large percentages of indigenous populations, and in recent years many Latin American countries have made

considerable progress in passing laws that help protect the rights of these communities.\textsuperscript{16}

Despite these regional and national differences, the need for increasing access to education for indigenous peoples is a global one. It’s time to discuss how UNESCO can have a meaningful impact on helping move indigenous populations towards universal primary and secondary education, or the disparities in social conditions will continue to worsen and these communities will fall deeper into extreme poverty.

**Further Research**
- United Nations for Indigenous Peoples
- SDG 4 - Universal Primary and Secondary Education
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs
- UN Human Rights - Office of the High Commissioner

**Worksheet Questions**
1. What country hosts the Aboriginal indigenous population?
2. What year was the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples passed?
3. What percent of the global population is made up of indigenous peoples?
4. What does the acronym UNSR stand for?
5. What are two of the social issues that indigenous children face that can impact their academic performance?