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Third Committee – Social, Humanitarian & Cultural

This group focuses on the rights people. It wants all people to be free to make their own choices. They believe that human rights are important and that they apply to every person in the world.

The members of this committee discuss human rights. They also encourage states to respect the rights of their citizens. During the year, they hear a lot of reports from experts and groups about the human rights records of states. Social issues are also important to this committee. Questions of crime prevention, drug control, youth, elderly and others are discussed.

This committee works closely with the Human Rights Council. They passed resolutions on the protection of children, how refugees should be treated, and ending racism.

Agenda Item 65 – Rights of indigenous peoples

Background

Throughout history, humans have moved around the world. They built towns and villages, engaged in gathering resources, and developed societies. Oftentimes, groups of humans coming to a new area would meet other human groups. Sometimes the two groups would trade or intermarry. Sometimes they would work together to achieve mutual goals. Other times the more forceful group or more technologically advanced group would term the others “savages” or “uncivilized” and marginalize them so they were not treated fairly.

When Columbus “discovered” the Americas in 1492 it began a period in history when many world powers began to explore the world. As they explored, they began to claim lands for their state. Often, they would send people from their own countries to live in these “new” lands and killed and/or pushed the original people out of the area. Over time, many groups felt pressure to assimilate and join the majority culture. Some did. Other people, kept their independence, culture and language alive.

There is no accepted definition for indigenous peoples. However, generally, it is a minority group who identifies as indigenous and who is ethnically different from the majority population in the state. They usually do not hold a lot of power. Also, they usually have a different language, culture and beliefs from the dominant group. In addition, indigenous groups sometimes have a strong connection to the land on which they live. They keep their traditions alive and pass on those traditions to their children.

After hundreds of years of fighting for their rights, many countries are finally acknowledging the rights of indigenous people within their borders.

The world is 5% indigenous. This works out to more than 350 million people who belong to over 5000 different groups. Most indigenous people live in Asia (70%) but there are indigenous people in 90 countries around the world. 22% of the world is land used by indigenous people. Interestingly, the land they inhabit accounts for 80% of the world's biodiversity. Indigenous people play an important part in preserving the environment.

Some countries avoid the problem of consulting indigenous people by stating they do not define any of the people in their borders as 'indigenous'. China says that they have 55 ethnic minorities in China but that none of them are indigenous. However, there are still other minorities in China who do not fall into one of those groups. Under Chinese law their traditions and cultures might not be protected. They might also not be consulted if the government or companies want to have access to the land in which they live.

Dominant ethnic groups in many African countries did not recognize that there were indigenous people in their countries. From their perspective, they were all 'indigenous' since they all had ancestors who used the land for generations. However, over the past 20 years many groups in African nations have been identifying as indigenous since their experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and connection to the land mirrors the experiences of other indigenous people around the world. Countries in Central Africa, as well as in Kenya and Namibia have more readily recognized indigenous populations.

Guatemala has a large indigenous population. Almost 40% of the country identifies as indigenous. Nonetheless, indigenous people are almost 3 times poorer than non-indigenous people. Also, they are more likely to die earlier and only 5% of them attend university. When 73% of the indigenous people are poor it shows that there are real barriers stopping indigenous people from being treated fairly in place their ancestors have lived for centuries.

The United Nations is a forum for countries to meet nation to nation. Indigenous people, however, are not part of a recognized world nation. They live within a state that can exercise excessive power over them. If indigenous people are treated unfairly they cannot bring their issues to the International Court. If the government in their country does something to upset them or to hurt them, who are they supposed to go to for help? The UN created the Permanent Forum on Indigenous People in order to help solve this problem. However, more work needs to be done.

Indigenous people are at greater risk when it comes to health. Many indigenous people live in rural or remote areas. Governments do not always provide an equal level of health services as they do in urban areas. In Australia, diabetes is a problem in many indigenous communities. In Canada, Inuit youth have a suicide rate 11 times the national average. In Panama, indigenous children are 3 times more likely to die during childbirth. Every country has different health problems but there is a pattern. Indigenous people are more at risk of disease and early death.

Biopiracy is an issue many people in the indigenous community are concerned about. The problem stems from the differing ideas about what can be owned. An example comes from the actions of a French Research Institute and their work in French Guiana. The researchers asked indigenous what traditional treatments they used for malaria. The people showed them a plant: Quassia Amara. The researchers then created a drug using the plant and patented it.

The scientists believed they owned the drug because they found a new way to extract it from the plant. The indigenous people previously prepared the plant as a tea to be drunk. Although they had different ways of getting at the drug it was the indigenous people who had led the researchers to the right plant and saved them countless hours checking and running tests on every plant. Many companies might think the patent from the plant belongs to them because they did the 'official' research. This ignores the work indigenous people did to care for the plant over hundreds of years.

Biopiracy also occurs in the agricultural sector. When Europeans arrived in the Americas, tomatoes were taken from central America, potatoes were taken from the Andes in South America and pumpkins were taken from North America. Now, these plants grow all around the world and feed millions of people. This ignores the fact that indigenous people cultivated these plants for hundreds of years. They protected, harvested, and chose the best specimens to reproduce. Indigenous people did not benefit from the work they put in – however companies can now patent the genes of plants they had no hand in nurturing.

UN Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples

This declaration was adopted by the General Assembly on 13 September 2007 by 143 states. It is not law but it is a standard that countries should follow when dealing with indigenous people in their borders.

Special Rapporteur on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples

The Commission on Human Rights appointed a Special Rapporteur who reports on the human rights situation of indigenous people around the world. It focuses on the violations of rights. In 2014 Ms. Victoria Tauli Corpuz was appointed to the position.

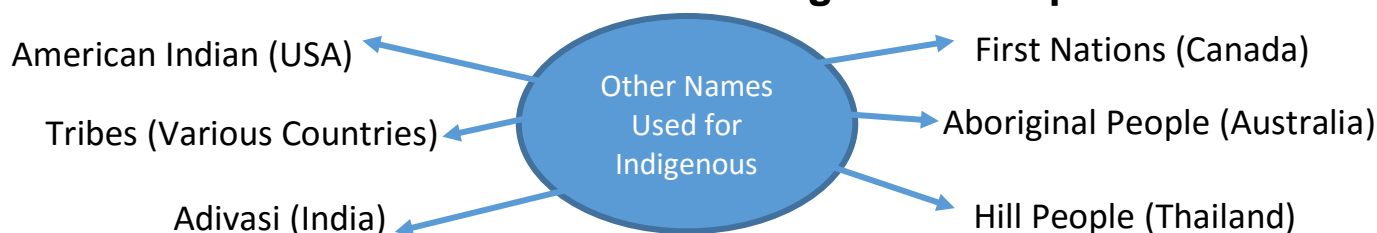
Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

The Economic and Social Council established this forum on 28 July 2000. It focuses on the economic, social and cultural life of indigenous people and advises the Council. It also raises awareness about indigenous issues within the UN system.

Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP)

The Human Rights Council created this mechanism in 2007 to complete studies and research in order to advise the Human Rights Council. It is focused on research that the Human Rights Council asks it to do. It then reports to the council with advice.

Other Names Used for Indigenous People



Guiding Questions

1. What are the minority groups in your country? Would any of these people be considered indigenous? What are the problems affecting the minority populations in your country?
2. Has your country ever been a colonizer? How did it interact with indigenous people it met in the past? Has your country ever been colonized? How did the colonizers interact with the population already living there?
3. Read the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. How does the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples go beyond the Universal Declaration of human rights?
4. What are some reasons that countries might have for not recognizing the rights of indigenous people within their borders?
5. Indigenous people are more at risk of suffering from social problems (poor health, access to education, access to water, drug addiction). Research some of the problems affecting indigenous people and possible solutions.
6. Many indigenous groups are spread over several countries. How can countries better work together to support indigenous people in these types of situations?
7. Indigenous people often live in remote areas and have a strong connection to the land which they depend on to survive. How can governments work with indigenous people to become partners in environmental protection efforts?
8. Does the problem exist in your community?
9. Who is working on it? NGOs, not for profits, other groups or individuals?
10. Knowing about this problem, how does it impact your world view?
11. How could you make an impact on this issue through your life choices?

Resources

Title	Hyperlink	How is it helpful?
<i>United Nations Human Rights: Indigenous People</i>	http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/IPeoples/Pages/IndigenousPeoplesIndex.aspx	An overview of actions being taken to give a voice to indigenous people at the UN.
<i>United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People</i>	https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/512/07/PDF/N0651207.pdf?OpenElement	A best practice document that outlines all the rights of indigenous people.
<i>The World Conference on Indigenous People</i>	http://www.un.org/en/ga/69/meetings/indigenous/#&panel1-1	A website for a conference held in 2014 to bring governments and indigenous people together to discuss problems and solutions.
<i>Country Reports</i>	http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/IPeoples/SRIndigenousPeoples/Pages/CountryReports.aspx	Country reports by the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous people.
<i>Indigenous Peoples Fact Sheet</i>	http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf	A fact sheet that gives an overview of how indigenous people can be defined.
<i>Rights of Indigenous Peoples</i>	http://www.globalissues.org/article/693/rights-of-indigenous-people	An in depth look at many of the issues affecting indigenous people.
<i>Health of Indigenous Peoples</i>	http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs326/en/	A fact sheet by the World Health Organization detailing the health issues affecting indigenous people.
<i>The Sad Truth of Uncontacted Tribes</i>	http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20140804-sad-truth-of-uncontacted-tribes	A BBC news story about indigenous people who do not have contact with the wider world.
<i>The Indigenous World</i>	http://www.iwgia.org/regions	An interactive map of indigenous people by regions of the world.