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**United Nations Human Rights
Council**

Background Guide



Committee Topic: Indigenous Peoples' Rights and Land Sovereignty

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Committee Background

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) is an intergovernmental body composed of 47 states, which are responsible for the protection and promotion of human rights. The UNHRC meets at the United Nations Office at Geneva throughout the year to address and advise on human rights conflicts and arising situations. The Council was formed in 2006 by the General Assembly as a replacement for the ineffective United Nations Commission on Human Rights, which had issues with politicization, as many member states were in violation of human rights. Since then, the UNHRC has held 54 regular sessions, 36 special sessions, and 9 urgent debates, adopted 1,481 resolutions, established 60 Special Procedures mandates, and set up 38 commissions of inquiry and fact-finding missions, with 123 of the 193 UN Member States having served on the Council. The UNHRC serves as an international forum for dialogue on human rights issues with experienced participants, with the goal of adopting resolutions and decisions, holding special sessions to address urgent crises, reviewing the human rights records of all United Nations member states through the Universal Periodic Review, etc. ¹

¹ United Nations Human Rights Council. "Welcome to the Human Rights Council." *OHCHR*, United Nations Human Rights Council, 2025,

Key Terms

- Indigenous Peoples: self-identified as a people with a continuous history with pre-colonial/settler societies, a strong connection to their surroundings, resolve to preserve ancestral environments and communities²
- Land Sovereignty: self-determination over traditionally occupied lands and resources³

I. Introduction

Indigenous peoples, with a population of 476 million people across 90 countries, make up 6.2% of the global population⁴, yet remain one of the most historically marginalized communities. Despite their population size and profound cultural and ecological contributions to society, they are nearly three times more likely to live in extreme poverty³ compared to non-indigenous people, with their rights to self-determination, historic lands, and participation in decision-making processes being continuously and systematically violated.

The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) plays a central role in the protection of these rights, building on the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) adopted in 2007, which establishes a global standard affirming rights to natural resources, traditional lands, and the requirement of Free, Prior, Informed Consent (FPIC) which guarantees the right to consent to or deny state/corporate actions affecting Indigenous territories. These implementations are only the beginning of the preservation of Indigenous rights, as they remain overwhelmingly insufficient. Globally, governments continue to permit resource exploitation and forced displacement of Indigenous communities. For example, in the United

² United Nations. Who Are Indigenous Peoples? 2023.

³ "Land Sovereignty → Area → Resource 5." *ESG → Sustainability Directory*, 2025, esg.sustainability-directory.com/area/land-sovereignty/resource/5/. Accessed 14 Dec. 2025.

⁴ United Nations. "Indigenous Peoples." *United Nations*, 2025, [www.https://www.un.org/en/fight-racism/vulnerable-groups/indigenous-peoples](https://www.un.org/en/fight-racism/vulnerable-groups/indigenous-peoples)

States, the Dakota Access Pipeline was created despite protests by the Standing Rock Sioux tribe against the destruction of ancestral burial grounds and water contamination.⁵ Delegates must evaluate how international human rights laws, environmental regulations, and legal reforms can be used to strengthen indigenous sovereignty and dignity.

I. Key Background: Land Sovereignty and Structural Inequality

The core of indigenous rights is land sovereignty. For most indigenous communities, land is not only a place of residence, but a source of culture, identity, spirituality, and economic survival. However, the gap between historic ownership and legal recognition has yet to be bridged. Indigenous peoples occupy around 65% of the world's land, yet have ownership of merely 10%.⁶ This disparity leaves indigenous territories vulnerable to state appropriation, extractive industry concessions, and “development” projects undermining indigenous land rights and traditional livelihoods, degrading ecosystems, and often disregarding FPIC.

These issues have displaced Indigenous communities worldwide, such as the eviction of Kenyan and Tanzanian Maasai communities from ancestral grazing lands to create touristic areas⁷, or oil extraction and illegal logging in the Amazon Basin, contaminating and drying rivers, stripping 72.5% of Indigenous groups of drinking water and basic sanitation.⁸

II. Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC): Challenges and failures

UNDRIP recognizes FPIC as crucial to protecting indigenous autonomy. FPIC would involve states and private actors having to consult indigenous peoples prior to any development,

⁵ “Stand with Standing Rock | American Civil Liberties Union.” *American Civil Liberties Union*, 30 Oct. 2024

⁶ Veit, Peter, and Katie Reytar. “LandMark: Protecting Indigenous and Community Lands by Making Them Visible.” *World Resources Institute*, 2015

⁷ “Tanzania: Indigenous Maasai Being Forcibly Relocated.” *Human Rights Watch*, 31 July 2024

⁸ Santi, Alexandre de. “As the Rainforest Gets Drier, Amazon Indigenous Groups Thirst for Clean Water.” *Mongabay Environmental News*, 18 Feb. 2025

extraction, or conservation action occurring on or around their lands, with the respect that indigenous communities have a right to give consent.⁹

Yet, FPIC has often been ignored, manipulated, or superficially put into practice. Consultations by governments are often done after contracts with corporations have already been signed, limiting meaningful community input. In many cases, consultations are restricted to a single village even though wider communities are affected. Information is often shared in only dominant languages, making it inaccessible to local populations.

III. Violence Against Indigenous Land Defenders

Protecting land from harmful development often comes at a deadly cost for indigenous leaders and environmental activists. According to Global Witness, one-third of all environmental activists killed in 2022 were indigenous people, despite indigenous communities making up only a small percentage of national resources, particularly mining, oil, and gas extraction in regions such as the Amazon, Southeast Asia, and Central Africa.¹⁰ Additional threats stem from logging operations and the expansion of agribusiness, including palm oil plantations and cattle ranching, as well as large-scale infrastructure projects like dam and road construction. Criminal groups involved in illegal logging as mining further intensify violence and instability in these areas.

The violence is made worse by unresolved territorial rights across much of indigenous land, which allows governments and corporations to label rights activists and trespassers in their own territories. As a result, indigenous leaders are frequently criminalized, intimidated, arbitrarily arrested, and publicly discredited, increasing their vulnerability to attack. These conditions create an environment where defending land and environmental rights becomes

⁹ "OHCHR | Consultation and Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)." *OHCHR*

¹⁰ ("Standing Firm: The Land and Environmental Defenders on the Frontlines of the Climate Crisis")

extremely dangerous. To effectively address this crisis, stronger global accountability measures and increased corporate transparency are essential to protect indigenous communities and ensure their rights are respected.

V. Indigenous Peoples and Environmental Protection

Indigenous communities are globally recognized as essential actors in environmental conservation. However, they experience disproportionate risks. Indigenous territories contain 80% of the planet's remaining biodiversity.¹¹ Their traditional knowledge systems include forest management, sustainable agriculture, water stewardship, and fire management practices that are increasingly vital to the climate crisis.

Some examples include:

- Amazon Basin Indigenous stewardship has been shown to slow deforestation compared to non-Indigenous lands.¹²
- Aboriginal fire management in Australia reduces wildfire severity through controlled burning practices.¹³
- Sámi reindeer herding knowledge in Northern Europe offers insights into Arctic ecosystem changes.¹⁴

Climate change threatens the basic needs of the Indigenous. This includes food security, water access, spirituality, and cultural practices. Many climate mitigation efforts, such as carbon credit schemes and conservation zones, exclude Indigenous participation and displace communities. Delegates must consider how to strengthen Indigenous-led climate adaptation and mitigation efforts while ensuring respect for sovereignty.

¹¹ World Bank Group. "Climate Stories | Indigenous Peoples." *World Bank*, 9 Aug. 2023

¹² Ndlovu, Mel. "Why Indigenous Land Rights Are Key to Protecting the Amazon." *Global Citizen*, 30 May 2025

¹³ The Nature Conservancy. "Bringing Indigenous Fire back to Northern Australia." *The Nature Conservancy*, 2025

¹⁴ Kimbrough, Liz. "In the Arctic, Indigenous Sámi Keep Life Centered on Reindeer Herding." *Mongabay Environmental News*, 20 Dec. 2021

VI. Country and Regional Examples

1. Amazon Rainforest (Brazil, Peru, Colombia)

- Expanding mining, soy cultivation, logging, and cattle ranching led to violent conflicts.
- Brazil has adopted policies to protect isolated indigenous peoples, yet these protections have been deliberately weakened, as there is no formal patrolling authority.¹⁵

2. Canada and the United States

- Disputes over pipelines such as Trans Mountain and Dakota Access Pipeline highlight failures to fully respect FPIC.¹⁶
- Many historic treaty rights in Canada have not been fulfilled with the urgency they deserve, as demonstrated by the hundreds of unresolved land claims and federal settlements addressing breaches of treaty obligations. There are currently 407 specific claims in negotiation or under assessment.¹⁷

3. Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Philippines)

- Palm oil expansion has displaced Indigenous Dayak and Aeta communities. For example, palm oil company PT Equator Sumber Rezeki has cleared nearly 1,500 hectares of rainforest land that has been designated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.¹⁸
- The Philippines remains one of the deadliest places for land defenders, who face assassination, raids, and murders.¹⁹

4. Africa (Kenya, Tanzania)

- The Maasai have been displaced from their ancestral lands for conservation tourism.⁶
- Maasai pastoralist communities face state pressure that limits traditional grazing routes, and their displacement often occurs without consultation or adequate compensation.

¹⁵ Guardian staff reporter. "Brazil and Peru Are Failing Uncontacted Peoples – and the Amazon's Future Is at Stake." *The Guardian*, The Guardian, 27 Oct. 2025

¹⁶ Greenpeace International. "Greenpeace International." *Greenpeace International*, 31 Dec. 2025

¹⁷ "Welcome to Zscaler Directory Authentication." *Ourcommons.ca*, 2026

¹⁸ Jacobson, Philip. "Indigenous Dayak Sound Alarm as Palm Oil Firm Razes Orangutan Habitat in Borneo." *Mongabay Environmental News*, 2 Dec. 2025

¹⁹ Tadios Sokomondo Denya. "Deadliest Frontline: Why the Philippines Leads Asia in Attacks on the Environment and Land Defenders." *DevelopmentAid*

VI. Questions to Consider

- I. What concrete mechanisms can ensure that Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) is genuinely implemented rather than symbolically consulted?
- II. How should the UNHRC respond when states approve extractive or infrastructure projects on Indigenous lands without consent?
- III. What role should corporations and private investors be held accountable for in violating Indigenous land and human rights?
- IV. How can the international community better protect Indigenous land defenders from violence, criminalization, and assassination?
- V. How should the UNHRC balance state-led development and conservation efforts with Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination and land sovereignty?
- VI. What legal or institutional reforms can help close the gap between Indigenous land occupation and formal land ownership recognition?
- VII. How can Indigenous knowledge and leadership be meaningfully integrated into climate change mitigation and environmental protection policies?
- VIII. How can international monitoring, reporting, and accountability mechanisms be strengthened to prevent repeat violations of Indigenous rights?

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