



HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

Topic 1: Addressing the Rights of Indigenous People and Cultural Preservation

Committee overview

Purpose of the UNHRC

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) is the primary intergovernmental body within the UN system responsible for the promotion and protection of all human rights around the globe. Composed of 47 Member States, the Council discusses thematic human rights issues and situations that require the international community's attention.

Relevance in Global Governance

The UNHRC serves as the “moral conscience” of the United Nations. In the context of global governance, it acts as a platform where non-state actors and marginalized groups—specifically Indigenous peoples—can hold sovereign states accountable. By utilizing mechanisms like the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the Council ensures that human rights remain a central pillar of international relations, preventing the “tyranny of the majority” from erasing the identities of minority populations.

Background on the topic

The Issue

Indigenous peoples represent approximately 6% of the global population but protect about 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity. Despite this, they face systemic “cultural erasure”—the loss of languages, traditional knowledge, and ancestral lands. The core of the issue lies in the tension between national industrial development and the Indigenous right to Self-Determination.

Historical Context

- **The Era of Assimilation (19th - mid-20th Century):** Many states practiced “forced assimilation,” such as the residential school systems in North America and “Stolen Generations” in Australia, aimed at erasing Indigenous identity.
- **The 1982 Working Group:** The UN established the first Working Group on Indigenous Populations, marking the first time Indigenous leaders were given a formal seat at the table.
- **UNDRIP (2007):** The adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was a watershed moment, shifting the global framework from “paternalism” to “partnership.”

Current Global Stance (2026)

As of 2026, the focus has shifted toward “Biocultural Rights.” The international community increasingly recognizes that you cannot protect the environment without protecting the people who live in it. However, a major “implementation gap” exists: while many countries have signed declarations, local laws often still prioritize mining, logging, and infrastructure over Indigenous land titles.

Key Statistic: According to UNESCO, one Indigenous language dies every two weeks. By the end of this century, it is estimated that 90% of the world's languages will have disappeared if current

trends continue.

Key terms and definitions

Self-Determination: The fundamental right of Indigenous peoples to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development.

Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC): A specific right that allows Indigenous peoples to give or withhold consent to a project that may affect them or their territories.

Ancestral Domain: Lands, inland waters, and coastal areas held under a claim of ownership by Indigenous communities by virtue of their presence since time immemorial.

Cultural Erasure: The systematic removal or suppression of a group's cultural traits, including language, religion, and traditions, often by a dominant power.

Traditional Knowledge (TK): A living body of knowledge passed down through generations, which is often essential for biodiversity and climate adaptation.

Intangible Cultural Heritage: Oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and festive events that are central to a group's identity.

Relevant UN bodies and resolutions

- **UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII)** - An advisory body to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) with a mandate to discuss Indigenous issues.
- **Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP)** - Provides the Human Rights Council with expertise and advice on the rights of Indigenous peoples.
- **ILO Convention No. 169 (1989)** - The only legally binding international treaty specifically dedicated to the rights of Indigenous and tribal peoples.
- **Resolution 2007/13 (UNDRIP)** - The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Although non-binding, it sets the universal “minimum standards” for their survival and dignity.
- **International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032)** - A current UN initiative aimed at drawing global attention to the critical loss of Indigenous languages.

Major actors and their relevance

Countries

- **Brazil** - Home to the largest number of “uncontacted” tribes. The government faces intense pressure to balance Amazonian economic development with the territorial rights of the Yanomami and other groups.
- **Canada** - A leader in domesticating UNDRIP through the *UNDRIP Act (2021)*, yet continues to struggle with the legacy of residential schools and land disputes regarding pipelines.
- **Norway** - Often cited as a “best practice” model due to the Sámi Parliament, which allows the Indigenous Sámi people a formal voice in national governance.

Non-State Actors

- **NGOs (e.g., Survival International, IWGIA)** - These organizations act as “watchdogs,” documenting human rights abuses in remote areas that the UN cannot easily monitor.
- **Private Sector** - Multinational mining and energy corporations are often the primary “adversaries” in land rights disputes, making their compliance with FPIC protocols vital.
- **Regional Organizations** - The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has been instrumental in creating legally binding precedents for Indigenous land ownership in Latin America.

Guiding questions

- 1. How can the international community enforce FPIC in countries where national economic interests directly conflict with Indigenous land rights?
- 2. What mechanisms can be established to ensure the repatriation of Indigenous artifacts and ancestral remains held in foreign museums?
- 3. How can digital technology be leveraged to preserve dying languages without exposing vulnerable communities to digital exploitation?
- 4. In what ways can “Traditional Knowledge” be legally protected from biopiracy (the commercialization of Indigenous biological resources without compensation)?
- 5. How should the UN address the specific needs of Indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation?
- 6. Can a “Global Fund for Cultural Preservation” be established to subsidize Indigenous-led education systems?