

Leaflet No. 9: Indigenous Children and Youth

Key Words and Ideas

UN World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond

United Nations Children's Fund

Convention on the Rights of the Child

UN Youth Unit

***Summary:** Indigenous Children and Youth are particularly vulnerable to human rights violations, as they often find themselves caught between their indigenous language, customs and values and those of the wider community. Several organizations, such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the UN Youth Unit, deal specifically with the problems faced by children and youth.*

Issues affecting indigenous youth

Indigenous youth (young people aged between 15 and 24 years) are vulnerable to a range of social and economic factors that affect their human rights. Indigenous youth are often forced to leave their traditional communities and move to urban areas to pursue employment or education opportunities. In the new urban environment, indigenous youth are often subjected to discrimination by the wider community and denied equal opportunities in employment and education. Throughout the world, indigenous youth are disproportionately represented in youth unemployment. Indigenous youth may have great difficulty coping when they are separated from their traditional communities and live in a social environment that does not promote their participation in economic or social life. This can have devastating effects on their sense of self-worth and cultural identity and may lead to a range of serious health and social problems, such as depression and substance abuse. In many cases, indigenous youth also lack adequate access to affordable and culturally sensitive health education and health care, increasing their risk of contracting preventable diseases.

Indigenous youth inherit the responsibility to protect and preserve their traditional lands, resources and sacred sites upon which their cultural heritage and identity is based. However, many indigenous youth today are physically and psychologically removed from their culture and traditional life. Indigenous youth require special assistance so that they can regain and preserve their cultural heritage and enjoy free access to their traditional lands and sacred sites. Continued damage to the environment threatens the survival of many indigenous peoples. Because their cultural identity and heritage is inseparable from their traditional lands, the protection and conservation of the environment is a priority for indigenous youth worldwide.

Recognizing the rights of indigenous children and youth

Economic and social justice, and participation in traditional customs, values and practices, is a right to which all indigenous youth are entitled. The rights of indigenous youth are recognized, implicitly and explicitly, in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the World Declaration and Plan of Action for the Survival, Protection and Development of Children, the Declaration of the World Summit for Children and the UN draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. These rights include the right to education, employment, health and housing, freedom of expression as well as the protection of social and cultural rights, such as learning and speaking traditional languages. For example, Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child explicitly recognizes the right of indigenous children to enjoy their traditional culture, practice their own religion and use their traditional language. Chapter 25 of Agenda 21, adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit, calls upon governments to ensure that indigenous youth have access to natural resources, housing and a healthy environment.

The need to provide special protection for indigenous youth is also recognized in the **UN World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond**, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1995. As part of the World Programme of Action, the Global Indigenous and Youth Cultural Olympics was held at Manila in 1996. The Manila Declaration, adopted at the meeting, confirmed that indigenous youth have the right to all aspects of the social, economic, political, educational, cultural, spiritual and moral life of the society in which they live.

The World Programme of Action encourages the participation of indigenous youth in international forums, including UN Youth Forums, which are held in association with UN Conferences. World Youth Forums provide an opportunity for youth and youth-related organizations to address issues related to youth and to promote youth involvement in decision-making processes within the UN system. In recent years, World Youth Forums have been held alongside a number of international conferences, including the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio in 1992, the UN Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in 1994, the UN Summit on Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995, and the World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, held in Portugal in 1998.

The series of World Indigenous Youth Conferences that have been held since 1992 represent a major achievement of indigenous youth. These conferences are organized by indigenous youth and provide a forum for young indigenous persons from around the world to meet and exchange ideas and experiences and to address common problems. The conferences, held in Canada, Australia, Ecuador and Sweden, enable indigenous youth to develop networks and work together to promote indigenous rights. Some of these networks include the Asian Students Association, based in Nepal, the Latin American Network of Youth Organizations for Sustainable Development, and the Caribbean Youth Environment Network. Young indigenous women are also forming networks, such as the New Generation Leaders (NGL), which promotes the rights of young indigenous women.

Relevant UN organizations and how to use them

THE UNITED NATIONS' HUMAN RIGHTS BODIES

Concerns related to the rights of indigenous children can be addressed through the various bodies of the United Nations that deal with human rights, including both the treaty bodies and the charter bodies. For more information on this, see Leaflet No. 4 on "Human Rights Treaty Bodies and Indigenous Peoples".

THE UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN'S FUND

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is the only UN organization dedicated exclusively to children. UNICEF works with governments, NGOs and UN specialized agencies to address children's rights by providing primary health care, basic education, safe water and sanitation, and activities to protect children from exploitation, violence and abuse. UNICEF serves the world's most vulnerable populations--children and women--in more than 140 countries.

UNICEF advocates globally for the rights and needs of children and women and its work is guided by the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** (see Leaflet No. 4 on "Human Rights Treaty Bodies and Indigenous People"). This Convention defines and upholds the civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights of all children. It outlines the obligations of governments and families, the international community and local communities, to ensure that every child has the opportunity to fulfill his or her potential. Within the framework of this Convention, UNICEF addresses such issues as child labour, land mines, the sexual exploitation and trafficking of children, and indigenous women and children. UNICEF takes a leading role in encouraging universal ratification and full implementation of this Convention and in establishing international standards for the treatment of children worldwide.

The Secretariat of UNICEF is located in New York, with offices in Geneva, Copenhagen and Tokyo and a research centre in Florence. There are eight regional offices and 200 field offices through which 85 per cent of UNICEF staff work to address the needs of children. There are also 37 National Committees for UNICEF. These Committees are NGOs that support UNICEF's promotion of children's rights and raise funds for UNICEF projects.

UNICEF is governed by an Executive Board, which is composed of representatives from 36 Member States who are elected on a regional basis by the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The Executive Board is responsible for supervising UNICEF's policies and programmes and meets annually at UN Headquarters in New York. NGOs that have consultative status with ECOSOC can attend the meetings of the Executive Board as observers.

UNICEF and indigenous issues

Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the right of indigenous children to enjoy their traditional culture, religion and language. In 1991, UNICEF's Executive Board adopted a resolution committing UNICEF to improving the way in which its projects help indigenous children to enjoy this right. In Asia, Latin America and Africa, UNICEF projects focus on education, health, nutrition and rural development to improve the living condition of indigenous women and children, while promoting their right to enjoy their religious and cultural life. UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre, located in Florence, undertakes research on the needs of indigenous children, and UNICEF's headquarters produces education and training materials on the Convention on the Rights of the Child specifically for indigenous children.

UNICEF activities relating to indigenous women and children

Increasingly, UNICEF programmes are designed to address inequality and poverty reduction. Indigenous communities are among the world's most disadvantaged and, as a result, are a special focus of UNICEF's work. In the Asian region, UNICEF works closely with governments and community organizations in Thailand and the Philippines to improve the living conditions of indigenous communities. In the Americas, the PROANDES programme (Basic Services Programme for the Andean Sub-region) targets the poorest areas of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela in which many indigenous peoples live. UNICEF's project, Sustainable Development for Children in the Amazon Basin, addresses the problems faced by Amazonian populations and focuses on improving the status of women and children.

Indigenous children also benefit from UNICEF's country programmes, which address issues such as child labour, education, health and sexual exploitation of children. UNICEF lobbies governments to amend their national laws to protect the rights of all children as recognized in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and actively promotes awareness of indigenous children's rights through its programme activities. In 1996, UNICEF sponsored an international workshop, in collaboration with the University of Victoria in Canada, on the rights of indigenous children. This workshop promoted awareness among indigenous peoples on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and emphasized the right of indigenous children to enjoy their language, religion and culture. Participants included indigenous elders, youth and children, representing the First Nations of North America and Latin America as well as representatives of the Canadian Government, UNICEF, the ILO and several NGOs.

Participating in UNICEF activities

The meetings of UNICEF's Executive Board are open to the public but participation is limited to the 36 Member States of the Board. NGOs, including indigenous organizations that have consultative status with ECOSOC can attend the Executive Board's meetings as non-participating observers.

How to contact UNICEF

If you would like to find out how UNICEF may be able to assist indigenous women and children in your region, please contact your UNICEF Country or Regional Office. You can also obtain information on

UNICEF's activities for indigenous women and children worldwide by contacting UNICEF's Secretariat.

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Fax: 1-212-887-7465

THE UNITED NATIONS YOUTH UNIT

The UN Youth Unit is the UN's focal point on youth activities, responsible for promoting cooperation among UN organizations, specialized agencies, Member States and NGOs on issues of concern to youth. The UN Youth Unit is located in New York and reports to the Economic and Social Council through the UN Commission on Social Development. The membership of the Youth Unit is comprised of government ministries, national youth bodies, and regional and international organizations concerned with youth issues.

The Youth Unit is involved in a range of activities, including coordinating the implementation of UN guidelines and activities as part of the World Programme of Action for Youth towards the Year 2000 and Beyond. The Youth Unit also provides support services to youth organizations, assists with inter-regional youth seminars and advises governments in the development of youth policies and programmes. The Youth Unit also serves as the Secretariat for the UN World Youth Forum and for the UN World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth.

The Youth Unit produces a range of publications on youth issues, including the Youth Information Bulletin, which is produced three times a year. The Bulletin is published in English, French and Spanish and provides information to youth, non-governmental youth organizations, governmental youth ministries and departments, organizations and bodies of the UN system, and other inter-governmental organizations concerned with youth matters. The Youth Unit also manages the UN Youth Information Network (UNYIN), which is an information data base for youth policies and programmes worldwide. This Network service is available to member States, UN agencies and NGOs.

The UN Youth Unit and indigenous youth organizations

The Youth Unit supports a network of more than 100 global and regional youth movements and over 3,000 national youth organizations, including many indigenous youth organizations. The Youth Unit helps these organizations to participate in UN activities, such as the World Youth Forum, so UN agencies and youth representatives can meet and discuss issues of concern and identify joint projects. The Youth Unit also works with inter-governmental bodies, such as the UN-NGO Committee on Youth in Geneva, UNESCO's Collective Consultation of Youth NGOs in Paris, the UN Economic and Social Commission's Standing Committee on Youth for the Asian-Pacific Region, and Latin American and Caribbean Youth NGO meetings.

Participating in the UN Youth Unit

If you would like more information on how your organization can participate in the UN World Youth Forum, or would like to know more about how the UN is working with indigenous youth and their organizations, you can contact the UN Youth Unit in New York.

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The Youth Information Bulletin is prepared at the beginning of January, May and September each year. If you would like to contribute to the Bulletin, you can forward your contribution at least one month prior to these dates (i.e., by the beginning of December, April and August) to the Editor at the following address:

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