

**Forum:** United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)

**Issue:** The question of the preservation of indigenous cultures in South America

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## Introduction

The [indigenous populations](#) in South America form the cultural backbone of their respective regions. They represent their country's history in the purest form. There are millions of indigenous people across South America, who have habited the land from well before European travellers discovered it in the late 15th Century. A rich collection of language, food, dance, clothing and other traditions stems from the many tribes on the continent.

The cultural significance of these tribes cannot be overstated. However, since the time of the European settlers, indigenous tribes have faced many challenges. Initially, the indigenous peoples' darker skin and foreign languages convinced white European settlers they were inferior, starting a long history of racial discrimination, from which the indigenous people suffered greatly. Their cultures, social structures, livelihoods, music and languages were shamed and discredited.

In the modern day, as societies took their modern forms, the historic issue prevailed, as the indigenous people are now challenged with [marginalisation](#). More implicit discrimination in terms of social status now lines the explicit factors, like opportunities for education and work. However, as the issue grows larger, so does the efforts towards change. Key developments have created the basis for which to move forward to facilitate the rights of the indigenous people of South America.

In addition to societal and cultural issues, indigenous populations suffer from poverty and lack of adequate services. They make up disproportionately large sections of the total population in poverty when compared their proportion of the total population.

Solving the issue depends mainly on the representation and integration of the indigenous people. This will provide them an audience in their local governments along with a host of other promising opportunities. The indigenous people can uphold their rights to representation for issues they find, thus allowing for legislative action to solve those issues.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

### **Indigenous people**

People of indigenous background are persons who descend from the populations which inhabited the country—or a geographical region to which the country belongs—at the time of conquest, colonization, or the establishment of present state boundaries, and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their social, economic, cultural and political institutions (ILO Convention No. 169).

### **Uncontacted tribes/indigenous people**

Uncontacted tribes are those who do not sustain contact to neighbouring communities, the wider government or the global community. This can be due to not being recognised by the central government or through practice of voluntary isolation.

### **Marginalisation of Indigenous People**

The unjust and unfair recognition from non-native descendants and non-indigenous governments to formally or informally recognise indigenous people in the political landscape, leading to out casting.

### **Plurinational government**

The co-existence of multiple national groups in a country's polity. This avoids division in the respective country's population.

## **Non-binding**

Describing an agenda submitted by a forum that outlines articles that do not create or modify legislation of countries the agenda pertains to.

## **Ratification**

Enacting the articles of an agenda into legislation for the country. May be referred to as a “binding” agenda.

## **National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) [Translated]**

A Brazilian governmental protection agency for Brazilian indigenous people's interests and culture.

## **International Labourer's Organisation indigenous and tribal people's convention (ILO 169)**

An international forum for the recognition and ratification of an agenda on the rights of Indigenous people.

## **United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP)**

A United Nations non-binding resolution passed to maintain the integrity of the rights of indigenous people.

## **Key Issues**

### **Marginalisation of South American indigenous populations**

A prevalent issue in South America is that of indigenous marginalisation. Indigenous communities are marginalised by their governments with lack of recognition and no political representation. Many countries on the continent have large indigenous communities in rural land who suffer from decisions for agriculture and resource extraction without their input. The relevant clauses in the [ILO 169](#) and [UNDRIP](#) are widely

recognised, but in practice, their implementation has not been thorough. This is even true for countries with the legislation in place to condone with the treaties.

Marginalisation also extends into indirect and social effects on the indigenous people. Indigenous culture is often excluded from society due to the lack of governmental recognition. The heritage of the country that lies within the people is almost outcast. The identities of these countries are crucial to maintain in the social framework, as this builds tolerance and acceptance.

### Peru

Peruvian indigenous communities struggle to find audiences with the government and have very little input in the development of society. Although they are a relatively large population, their standing is barely near to the outlined rights by the ILO 169 and the UNDRIP.

Furthermore, the marginalisation has led to external companies using the forested and rural areas for resource extraction, without the permission nor consideration of the indigenous people. Vast areas of forested land, supposedly protected by law, is illegally exploited with no second consideration of the people. At times, this may lead to violent conflict between the tribespeople and settlers, putting their very lives in danger. While this may not be as prevalent as other issues, it highlights the drastic steps taken by the tribespeople to fight for their land, in the literal sense of the word.

### Brazil

As mentioned earlier in the report, Brazil hosts the largest number of uncontacted indigenous tribes. In addition, they had the largest South American Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at an estimated \$1.4 billion in 2020. Breaking down the GDP by sector, approximately 23% of this total came from agriculture and industry. While these percentages may seem insignificant compared to services, which occupies approximately 63% of the GDP, the estimated earning from the two sectors is \$322 billion, higher than almost all other South American and Caribbean (excluding Mexico and Argentina) countries' entire GDP (all data from statista).

The implications of this earning from the primary sectors are those faced by the Amazonian indigenous tribes. Forested areas, within indigenous regions, are quickly diminishing for the development of resource heavy agriculture and industry infrastructure. While it can be argued that the share of the GDP by these two sectors has seen a steady decrease from 2010-2016, specifically ~27% down to ~24, this does not paint the full picture. Unlike the tertiary “services” sector, infrastructure that is built/land that is developed may be permanent and will inevitably have devastating impacts on the Amazon forests for many years to come, regardless of economic output. Tribes and rural indigenous people suffer greatly from this. Settlers illegally build into indigenous land and continue to destroy the environment necessary for indigenous people's traditional ways of life, provoke violent confrontations and spread disease. Flora and Fauna systems are interrupted and destroyed, clogging the flow of resources to more traditional tribes.

Fearing this very issue, the 1988 Brazilian Constitution attempted to combat this. The main method was the demarcation (zoning) of traditional lands for indigenous people to pursue their way of life and the exclusive access to their land. However, the Brazilian tribal people still face the threats mentioned, due to the slow and political process that is demarcation. Here is where the marginalisation occurs. Lack of government representation, at the time only spearheaded by the [FUNAI](#), meant that conflicts of interest over land were often won by the much more strongly supported parties against the tribal people and has led to the negative cycle which we see the effect of today.

### **High Poverty rates of indigenous populations**

A common misconception is that indigenous populations reside primarily in rural areas. Around 49% of South America's indigenous population live in urban areas (World Bank) and this trend is only set to increase in conjunction with the rapid urbanisation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Urban areas present many attractive propositions to indigenous people in terms of livelihood, but often the reality is that they do not have equal access to these

opportunities. The result of this is a higher poverty rate than any other demographic. According to the World Bank, the indigenous population makes up 8% of Latin America's (Including Latin North American countries) population, but make up 14% of those living in poverty. Material poverty affects 43% of indigenous households (twice the proportion of the rest of the population), while extreme poverty affects 17% (2.7 times the proportion of the rest of the population).

This trend continues, if not worsens, in rural areas, although tribal areas who practice voluntary isolation may still have functional, traditional livelihoods that do not revolve around modern economic systems. The issue surrounding the rural scenario appears different, as the average livelihood is often one of poverty. Lack of infrastructure and development presents poor opportunities. An additional concern is the negative factors of rural life combined with the potential of urban opportunities leading to a greater population of poor, underprivileged urban indigenous populations. While the urban situation has been evaluated, the rural situation also stems from the under representation and lack of governmental support. For example, resources are rarely allocated for the development of these settlements.

### Employment and work

The employment situation of indigenous communities reveals a prevalence of precariousness and low-skilled jobs. This is often a result of the effects of climate change on the traditional livelihoods of the indigenous people, forcing them to branch into new work. Additionally, indigenous produce struggles to compete with the large-scale modern production by large companies and potentially illegal (through exploitation of protected land) third-parties.

### Education and communication

With respect to access to education, there has been an increase in schooling throughout Latin America as a result of the construction of schools in the communities. However, indigenous peoples are the group with the least access. In Brazil, less than 1 percent of the indigenous population has access to higher education, 2.1% to secondary school and 20.5% to primary education in these

communities. Additionally, it is difficult for indigenous families to bear the cost of higher educations, leading to much higher dropout rates.

### Healthcare

An extension to the many issues caused by the widespread poverty is the health concerns the day-to-day life brings. This is because factors such as poor access to sanitation and overcrowding bring about poor health. According to the UNDP, mortality from influenza and H1N1 was between four and seven times higher in indigenous populations. Additionally, the indigenous population has less access to health services: life expectancy is 20 years less; and infant mortality is 3 to 5 times greater than in the rest of the population in Venezuela and Brazil.

One of the less obvious factors is that indigenous populations that have been inhabiting only their restricted regions for hundreds of years, effectively serving as a natural isolation from the world's infectious and dangerous diseases. In the early days of the European settlers and many years thereafter, the diseases brought in by these travellers often had the potential to wipe out entire communities of people. This led to an estimated 90% reduction in the indigenous population over the 300 years from the European colonisation. While this process may have created some immunity, modern diseases only spread faster and there are a much larger number of new diseases.

The most notable of which, is the current COVID-19 pandemic which has brought a halt to the world; however, this issue will be explored in later sections.

### The Coronavirus (COVID-19) and its implications

The most recent issue, COVID-19 has presented a host of new challenges for indigenous people. As mentioned earlier in the report, high poverty rates have driven up health issues and led to devastating effects stemming from outbreaks. This is combined with the negative history associated with infectious diseases, especially the exotic diseases. The risk is so large that entire communities of indigenous people have been quarantined and their lives frozen. Those who come into contact with the virus (as mentioned) will have

far more dangerous effects; however, when hospital care is required, their lack of identification may mean they are not allocated care.

As is customary with the pandemic, the effects spread far further. All discussed effects of poverty and poor urban life are magnified and scaled up in the current landscape of the pandemic. The low-skilled and unstable jobs are extremely volatile and not sustainable in this environment. Furthermore, indigenous communities are often strictly enforced into regional lockdowns, given their vulnerability to the virus itself. This leads to even more complications. The long-term implications, while unknown, are inevitably devastating.

## **Major Parties Involved and Their Views**

### **Bolivia**

Bolivia hosts the largest population of indigenous people of all South American countries with approximately 7 million. In addition, they have the highest proportion of indigenous people to general population, with 62% of people identifying as part of an indigenous group. Bolivia is a trailblazer in South America, as they were the first country to establish an indigenous political party, as well as elect an indigenous president. By embracing the indigenous population, they were able to combine interests and form the first “[plurinational](#)” government. The country has also ratified the [ILO 169](#) and signed the [UNDRIP](#). Bolivia has set the precedent for the future of indigenous groups in South America, with meaningful legislation to uphold their rights and give them equal standing in society.

### **Movement Towards Socialism party (MAS)**

The MAS is a Bolivian indigenous political party formed in 1998 with the intention of representing the indigenous population in governance. They were popular among the Bolivians and were the first indigenous party to be elected into power in South America. Their endeavours in the early 2000’s and during their terms helped to establish key rights



and recognition for the indigenous population, whilst also delivering on a more liberal aligned general policy agenda. To this day, the MAS is still the majority political party in the country. The MAS is a display of the capabilities of the indigenous people and their legitimacy in developing society.

## Peru

Peru has the second largest population of indigenous people, with approximately 6 million people who make up a proportion of 45% of the general population. The Peruvian indigenous populations have observed the signings of both the ILO 169 and the UNDRIP. However, it is contested whether the action taken towards these have been of expectation. However, the intention is to work towards implementing solutions to help the indigenous populations. Peru has seen autonomous governments created to represent indigenous communities and protect their rights to land, dialogue with the central government and stronger social foundations.

## AIDSESEP

The Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest (Translated) or AIDSESEP is a Peruvian national organisation which represents 1,907 indigenous communities of more than 650,000 people. They advocate for the territorial integrity of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, the strengthening of the country's multiculturalism and the development of the indigenous economy.

## Brazil

As of 2010, 817,000 Brazilians identified as indigenous. While the net number of indigenous people in Brazil may not seem as significant, as there are larger populations, Brazil has a huge impact on surrounding Amazonian South American countries. Their relative economic success, largely driven by their primary sector, shines the light for other countries to follow. Herein lies the conflict with the indigenous people. As mentioned, Brazil hosts a relatively modest indigenous population, but they boast the largest number

(67, as of 2007) of [uncontacted](#) tribes in the world. These have not flown under the radar, and Brazil has appreciated their existence and the regions they inhabit. They aim to maintain their order of life (despite an attempt from the current president to integrate indigenous land into one unified Brazil, rescinded by the National Congress); however, this has faltered in practice, favouring economic progress. Brazil's actions may well indirectly affect millions more, with many other Amazonian South American countries fostering uncontacted and large indigenous populations, with equally large ideals for economic growth. In terms of international treaty cooperation, Brazil has ratified the ILO 169 and is a signatory on the UNDRIP.

### **United States of America (USA)**

The USA, while not a member of South nor Latin America, has a history of indigenous people. More specifically, the “Native American” population, which has seen similar conflicts to the Southern American countries. The USA is a signatory, but not a ratifier, of the ILO 169. However, the United States remains the only country that voted against the UNDRIP declaration. In 2010, President Obama announced that the USA would lend support to the UNDRIP. Official reports from the USA about their stance on the resolution mention that the US is already working towards the goals of UNDRIP through consultation and collaboration with US Tribes. The words given by the governments are strongly contested and some believe that they do not support the resolution.

In the context of South America, the official foreign policy of the USA expresses support for the human rights of citizens. In a general sense, the USA advocates for freedom for citizens, and the country believes this is best achieved through democratic political structures. This can be inferred as support for the representation of all citizens, including indigenous people.

### **United Nations International Labour Organisation (ILO)**

The ILO is a United Nations based agency which ensures social and economic justice. In terms of the indigenous people of South America, the ILO has contributed

significantly with the ILO 169 – which improved many facets of indigenous rights to great effect through many [ratifications](#). The ILO works towards legislative action to preserve the integrity of the rights of the indigenous people.

### Development of Issue/Timeline

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
<b>1492</b>	<b>First European settlers on the South American continent</b>	Colonisers claimed to be superior to indigenous people due to race and began a long history of discrimination. Colonisation also facilitated the spread of foreign diseases which led to a 95% percent reduction in indigenous population across 300 years.
<b>1952</b>	<b>Revolutionary war in Bolivia</b>	This granted indigenous people citizenship, but a lack of political representation remained.
<b>1989</b>	<b>International Labour Organisation indigenous and tribal people's convention (ILO 169)</b>	Identified topics in its agendas including: General policies, Land, Employment, Rural industries, Social security, Health and Education. Its success lied in the high number of ratifications from signatories. ILO 169 was ratified by 15 South American countries.

<b>22 January 2006</b>	<b>Instating of the MAS in Bolivia</b>	The MAS was historically voted into power as the first indigenous party in South America. It carried strong ideals for the rights of indigenous people and popular policy among Bolivians. They remain the dominant party in Bolivia today.
<b>13<sup>th</sup> September 2007</b>	<b>United Nations Declaration of the right of indigenous people (UNDRIP) passed.</b>	<a href="#"><u>Non-binding</u></a> resolution which defined key rights for indigenous people and brought attention to other issues like cultural and intellectual property.
<b>29th November 2015</b>	<b>The Wampis Nation is formed</b>	The Wampis Nation was the first autonomous territorial government in Peru, after years of pushing for autonomous governments. This brought about more autonomous communities. These autonomous communities protect the lands from external resource extraction and enhance dialogue between the central government and the communities.
<b>March 2020-2021 (Current day)</b>	<b>The outbreak of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.</b>	The pandemic has brought about a dire situation for the indigenous populations (even more so for those in urban areas), amplifying the previous issues faced in the communities and

		leading to general uncertainty of future prospects.
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## **Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue**

### **The Movement towards socialism (MAS)**

In 1998, the MAS was formed in Bolivia with the intention of representing the indigenous population. The political party, led by Evo Morales, brought forward many propositions for both instating the rights of the indigenous population and the general governance of the country. The party aimed to create the first “plurinational” state in South America and succeeded in the mid 2000’s, which saw them become the ruling party, with Evo Morales as president. This led to many of the mentioned reforms and set a great example for many other South American countries to follow.

The success of this party in relied on the previous national legislation brought forward such as the Electoral law in 1996 which switched Bolivia to a hybrid proportional voting system. This allowed for greater indigenous representation and laid the groundwork for the MAS.

### **International Labourer's Organisation indigenous and tribal people's convention (ILO 169)**

Created in 1989, the ILO 169 was an agenda brought forward by the International Labourer’s Organisation which tackled multiple issues regarding marginalisation of indigenous people globally. These included: General policies, Land, Employment, Rural industries, Social security, Health and Education. While being the most detailed and significant agenda of its time, its importance lied in the fact that 15 South American countries ratified the treaty (including Bolivia, Peru, Brazil and Argentina). In other words, the treaty was binding and brought about legislative change.

Specific terms of the agenda which are most relevant to the greatest challenges faced pertain to governance and representation. The agenda states the following: “governments are responsible for ensuring that Indigenous peoples possess equal rights and opportunities under national law, for upholding the integrity of cultural and social identity under these rights, and for working toward elimination of existing socio-economic gaps between Indigenous peoples and the rest of the respective national community.” (Convention C169).

### Peru

In 1994, Peru signed and ratified the treaty as a result of their large indigenous population. While the legislation was there, it is debated that the extent to which the country upholds this legislation is not up to expectations. Additionally, some legislation took much longer to instate, such as the right of indigenous people to consult the government, introduced as late as 2011.

### United Nations Declaration of the rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP)

Passed by the UN in 2007, this non-binding resolution defined the rights of indigenous people, this resolution highlighted new topics like the protection of the cultural and intellectual property of indigenous people. While not as legislatively powerful as the ILO 169, the global recognition of the expectations on the countries the resolution pertains to prove useful. It also provides the local representatives with the endeavours to base their campaigns and efforts on.

### Peruvian autonomous governments

In the 2010's, Peruvian indigenous communities pushed to create their own autonomous governments. In 2015, the first Peruvian autonomous government, named the Wampis Nation, was formed and brought about better resource security and far greater representation from the central government. More autonomous communities followed suit, and the current norm is the development of bodies for the majority of large indigenous communities. This movement supports indigenous representation greatly and can be transferred to a number of other South American countries.

### Wampis Nation

Elaborating further, the Wampis Nation has few shortcomings in its implementation. It covers a rainforest area approximately a third of that of the Netherlands and encompasses around 15,000 people in total. Leaders say their newfound autonomy and authority has allowed them to directly expel illegal deforestation activities from their land. This new concept of autonomous decision making regarding the operations in the region has strengthened the fight against dangerous and sometimes illegal mining, logging and agricultural developments.

## **Possible Solutions**

### **Facilitating the communication and cultural variance in public services**

A key step to inclusivity is ensuring equality in access to all public services. In the case of communication, there are different approaches to be taken. A universal medium of communication can be established, as per the country's convenience; or the most common indigenous languages can be integrated into the existing structures. Both methods have their benefits and drawbacks, but the required outcome is equal access for indigenous people.

In terms of culture, often there are hindrances to processes like loan applications, land ownership, retail opportunities and access to education, due to cultural differences which may be unconventional. While not legislative, a positive change is to advocate for awareness of the indigenous cultures and create familiarity for indigenous products and land use. This will encourage integration of indigenous people into communities and urban environments, allowing for equal economic and social activity. Indigenous products will then also be accepted into the economy and increase opportunities.

### **Facilitating the development of correct identification for indigenous people**

An overlooked issue is that of identification for indigenous people. While they may be considered as citizens, the documentation for this status often lacks in South American countries. This issue has a direct solution – establish documentation. Opportunities like

education, asset ownership and employment will present themselves to the indigenous people. Conversely, the countries will recognise a new demographic of citizens who will diversify their culture and introduce new ideas into society.

### **Support for organisations and movements within the countries which promote indigenous rights.**

Many countries within South America have sizeable movements led by either national organisations and political parties or small-scale non-profit organisations. These movements present a strong platform for the populations to be heard by governments. Supporting these groups in various ways can clearly provide benefits, and will create the representation which has been absent. However, it is crucial that the sovereignty of countries is to be maintained in the actions taken and local political processes are not hindered.

### **Aid the development of autonomous governments for indigenous communities**

Taking example from the Peruvian government bodies that have formed, many South American countries can develop their own autonomous systems of governance. As seen in Peru, these will enhance dialogue between the autonomous communities and the central government, as well as protect the land from external resource extraction.

### **COVID-19 recovery programmes**

COVID-19 has presented the most difficult challenge to the urban and poverty-stricken indigenous population. For this reason, it is imperative that a plan of action is established to aid the recovery and reinstating of the livelihoods of those affected. Furthermore, these action plans should aim to tackle factors that prohibit future catastrophe by establishing stable jobs and healthcare for the indigenous people. The resources required for this project are considerable, and it requires cooperation with local governance, however is promising in that it could lead to the development of legislation for the causes.



### Education of the indigenous youth

It is crucial that education of the indigenous youth is thorough, as this is one of the key factors leading to development by allowing the indigenous people to realise their ambitions. The knowledge of land, business, resource, family and any other management can empower the development of indigenous political parties. Currently, high schools and universities face higher drop out rates from indigenous people than any other demographic, due to a lack of concrete opportunities apart from primary sector or low-skilled jobs which may not require extensive qualification. There are also other factors, such as the financial considerations of the families, the lack of documentation to allow schooling and potentially a bias towards non-indigenous students for school selection.

An effective method to ensure greatest school engagement is to identify the proportions of indigenous children amongst different age groups and establish a similar proportion of indigenous children in schools. This method should allow for many children's participation, and more importantly, integration into the regular school system. This can be a mandated requirement of public schools and provide subsidisation benefits of private schools to achieve this proportion.

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