

Asia Regional Report
on
Indigenous Peoples and COVID-19: Challenges to Achieving the SDGs
Submitted to Indigenous Peoples Major Group (IPMG)

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically affected the world, posing a grave threat to life and peace of humanity. The health crisis accompanied by the socioeconomic effects caused by the confinement affecting mobility, livelihoods, income generation, and access to food is having adverse impacts disproportionately on Indigenous Peoples, Persons with Disability, and women across the world. The lack of trustworthy information in Indigenous languages also invokes fears amongst these already vulnerable groups. When solidarity and collaboration is most needed, records yet are showing intensified racial discrimination, criminalization, and human rights violations against Indigenous Peoples in various manners. Indigenous Peoples human security and political standings are deteriorating in the world, which is already in chaos. While their non-Indigenous counterparts are gradually recovering from the shock and adapting to the “New Normal”, Indigenous Peoples are still bearing the heavy burden of the erosion of livelihood and wellbeing coupled with rolling back of their rights.

Before the world became fully immersed in a global COVID-19 pandemic emergency, attention to the once invisible Indigenous Peoples have been brought to the fore through the collaborative efforts of indigenous leaders around the world with the United Nations and other relevant bodies and mechanisms hoping for better livelihood and equal social status for them. In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted to continue the missions started by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in tackling the economic, social, and environmental challenges in order to achieve global sustainable development. In the 17 goals and 196 targets the SDGs highlighted with the tenet of “leaving no one behind”, many are directly or indirectly related to rights and well-being of Indigenous People. Five years into its implementation in 2020, however, review reports have revealed that aside from the fact that no country is on track in achieving all the SDGs, some key SDGs are even regressing. A report released by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) states that Asia Pacific will not achieve any of the 17 SDGs by its 2030 target basing on its current trajectory. It further stated “ASEAN has moved backwards on decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), climate action (SDG 13), and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16), and areas requiring immediate action to reverse trends including a number of other social and environmental indicators.”¹

It is, therefore, imperative at this stage for the States and all other development actors to include genuine partnerships with Indigenous Peoples in good faith and through collaborative partnerships to tackle the challenges Indigenous Peoples are facing under the coronavirus crisis in sustainable manners. To provide sound response mechanisms, it is important to start

¹ ASEAN not on track for SDG goals, https://theaseanpost.com/article/asean-not-track-sdg-goals?fbclid=IwAR2sLpPw3j_4I8k4TaNZvtvBHLKAFlar6Y7RaNPVBrREab7b2tLkLZQqTs

by providing health services, information, and systems to ensure life security of Indigenous Peoples. Equally urgent is in addressing the socio-economic situation and provision of basic services and economic recovery mechanism, underlying that all interventions and actions must follow the process of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), with UN agencies and Governments respecting Indigenous Peoples' food sovereignty, land rights and acknowledging the importance of the unique biodiversity preserved in Indigenous territories. Central to the achievement of the SDGs for Indigenous Peoples is the compliance of States to their human rights obligations and commitments, undertaking transformative actions and democratization, recognition of the importance of equality and empowerment of and partnership with Indigenous Peoples and their communities. It is also vital to strengthen the macrolevel framework for the most vulnerable and foster sustainable development, in other words, we need systems that are tailored to the needs of Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous Peoples in Asia

The history of Indigenous Peoples has been a history of struggle. Their unique identities have been gradually made visible albeit stumbling along the way. Denoting the recognition of the rights of Indigenous Peoples at the global level was the most significant international instrument on the rights of the Indigenous Peoples is the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) established by the UN General Assembly in September 2007. At the regional and national level, however, the process of recognition of Indigenous Peoples' identities and rights has always been jagged amongst different countries.

In Asia, more than 411 million people² are identified as belonging to Indigenous peoples. They have developed their customary land use and tenure systems through generations of practices and experiences. Their unique relationship with land, territories, and resources at hand are reflected in the deep connection between "their livelihoods, knowledge and beliefs and comprise economic, social and cultural aspects of their community life"³ and the land they reside and depend on.

In a study conducted by Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact in 10 countries on, '*Situation on Lands, Territories and Resources of Indigenous Peoples in Asia Bangladesh, China, Japan, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Timor Leste and Vietnam*'⁴, it can be discerned that in most of these countries if not completely ignored, Indigenous Peoples are not properly identified at the national and governmental level. Statistics from these countries often lump Indigenous Peoples into a few major groups recognized by the state and do not take Indigenous Peoples' contentions into serious account. These conducts have adverse implications as the distinctiveness of the Indigenous Peoples are not fully recognized and the consequent impacts on the Indigenous Peoples then manifest in inequalities in their social-

² The number is as per the estimation of AIPP.

³ Economic and Social Council. (2018). Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples. Report on the Seventeenth session, (p.5). New York.

⁴ K. Bhattachan, L. Su, A. L. Mali, K. Ahuan, P. Liu, E. Dacquigan, M. Coleman, M. Bataclao, C. Galagal, *Situation on Lands, Territories and Resources of Indigenous Peoples in Asia Bangladesh, China, Japan, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Timor Leste and Vietnam, Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2019*

economic and political status, lack of rights on their land, territories and resources and ultimately, the right of self-determination.

Indigenous Peoples and Sustainable Development

In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted to continue the missions started by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in tackling the economic, social, and environmental challenges in order to achieve global sustainable development. In the 17 goals and 196 targets the SDGs highlighted with the tenet of “leaving no one behind”, many are directly or indirectly related to rights and well-being of Indigenous Peoples. Targeted directly at the Indigenous Peoples are the goals of having equal access to education (target 4.5) and increasing agriculture productivity and incomes (target 2.3). Target 1.4 which stresses the importance of access, ownership and control over land and natural resources is closely related to the rights of Indigenous Peoples as land rights is crucial for their livelihoods and culture.

The aspiration for sustainable development is indeed not new for the Indigenous Peoples, they have been practicing sustainable living, long before the concept of Indigenous Peoples was brought into international attention and the Indigenous Peoples were identified as a distinct group in the sustainable development agendas. As the livelihood and spiritual beliefs of many Indigenous Peoples are deeply reliant of the land and natural environment they dwelled within, the Indigenous Peoples are known for their traditional way of living that is based on a harmonious relationship with nature. There exists within the Indigenous communities’ abundance of knowledge of biodiversity, food security and sustainable cultivation of land as well as Indigenous medical knowledge to name but a few. Their awe of nature is also manifested in some of their rituals. Indigenous values such as sharing of labor and knowledge and respect for the elderly have proved to be sustainable both in time of peace and crisis.

The dominant narratives in many societies, however, place Indigenous Peoples’ reputations and living conditions in peril. In Thailand for example, though perceptions of the Indigenous Peoples are changing amongst different groups in the country, many mountainous IPs are still bearing much of the blame in the issues such as biodegradation, narcotics trading. Indigenous Peoples continue to be marginalized and discriminated against in many countries, resulting in discriminatory policies and legislation. UN Special Rapporteur Victoria Tauli-Corpuz remarked that:

“Many Indigenous communities face intractable poverty despite living on resource-rich lands because their rights are not respected, and their self-determined development is not supported”⁵

These biased discourses have had dire consequences for the livelihood and socio-cultural practices of Indigenous Peoples. The plights they have been faced with and still ongoing are:

⁵ ‘Indigenous peoples are the best guardians of world's biodiversity’, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/andes-to-the-amazon/2017/aug/09/indigenous-peoples-are-the-best-guardians-of-the-worlds-biodiversity>

poverty and health issues, persistent marginalization and inequality, lack of quality education, climate change impacts, land rights dispute, human rights violations among others. It is, therefore, vital, and urgent to raise awareness to these issues at all levels. Without the resolving of these issues under the cooperation of the society at large, it is likely that Indigenous Peoples will continue assuming the role of perpetrators when they are really the victims in many occasions and the goals of sustainable development will never be eventually achieved.

Five years into the adoption of SDGs, reviews on the key global developments relevant to Indigenous Peoples and the SDGs have shown that “national strategies and action plans largely do not reflect and put into action these commitments particularly in relation to balance implementation of the environmental, social and economic dimensions, the pledge of leaving no one behind, multi-stakeholders partnership with Indigenous Peoples that include rights-holders among others.”⁶ There are even observed signs of regression on some of the key SDGs.

Goal 8 states that it is important to rethink the economic and social policies aimed at eradicating poverty and to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for all. A review of the reality on the ground shows that in many Asian countries, governments’ economic policies are still prioritizing commodification and large-scale exploitation of natural resources. These policies have been given preferential status to certain large-scale businesses including extractive industries that are mostly located in Indigenous Peoples’ territories undermining their customary livelihood practices, occupations and destroying the resources they rely on for living. Some projects are even implemented with militarization. With intensified militarization and human rights violations in some parts of Asia particularly in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Northeast India and the Philippines in the advent of COVID-19 pandemic, not only Indigenous Peoples’ livelihood and wellbeing are under threat, so are their human security, human rights and land rights which are basic human rights posing huge challenges in achieving SDG target 1.4 (equal rights to ownership, basic services, technology and economic resources), SDG 10 (reduce inequality within and among countries) and SDG 16 (peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) among others. Statistics and reports have revealed that persisting marginalization, inequality, discrimination, and lack of access to justice are pressing issues for many Indigenous groups in Asia. A lack of States’ accountability in recognizing the rights of Indigenous Peoples and addressing violations aggravates their sufferings. The situation is further deteriorated when the defense of their rights results in criminalization, persecution, and assassinations.

Other SDGs reviewed of close relations to the Indigenous Peoples include Goal 4 (ensure inclusive and to quality education to all), Goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls), Goal 13 (urgent climate actions) and Goal 15 (protect biodiversity). All are closely related to the livelihood and socioeconomic wellbeing of indigenous Peoples. Although past decades have shown promising increase in accessing to quality education of

⁶ A statement delivered by the Indigenous Peoples Constituency in Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) 2020 under the Agenda item, “ Linking National, Regional, and Global Dimensions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’
<https://aippnet.org/7th-asia-pacific-forum-sustainable-development-statement-linking-national-regional-global-dimensions-2030-agenda/>

the Indigenous Peoples, it is nonetheless far from equal to their non-Indigenous counterparts. Indigenous children and youth are still facing impediments accessing education and attending schools. In some countries, as Indigenous Peoples are not fully recognized by the government, their Indigenous languages and knowledges are therefore not valued and in some extreme occasions facing assimilation and extinction. As for the empowerment of women and girls, progress has so far remained slow. In the rare case that India recognizes women's equal rights over forest land and resources, the law is nonetheless poorly implemented. Additionally, violence against women is reported from several countries and prosecutions of perpetrators are usually weak. Affirmative action for women's representation in decision-making bodies such as legislatures, municipalities or parliaments is another issue needed to be highlighted. Climate changes have also impacted the Indigenous Peoples most as their livelihoods are closely linked to nature and environment although they contribute the least. Their lands make up about 20% of the Earth's territory with 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity which signifies that "indigenous peoples are the most effective stewards of the environment."⁷ Nonetheless, Indigenous Peoples are among the first to face the direct consequences of climate change. Climate change worsens the conditions of Indigenous Peoples as they are facing socioeconomic and political marginalization, land deprivation and human rights abuse simultaneously. Furthermore, some policies and measures devised by the states are not necessarily benign to the Indigenous Peoples. Some have resulted in the displacements and loss of livelihood of the Indigenous Peoples without respectful consulting or seeking for consent from them.

Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals on peace, justice and strong institutions, is aimed at promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. The role of the Indigenous Peoples then becomes paramount in the implementation of the said Goal. There is still a huge gap in the realization of this Goal, as there is continuation of the marginalization of and discrimination against Indigenous Peoples, extensive expropriation of their lands through neo-liberal economic expansion/development policies. The non-implementation and non-recognition of the conflict-resolution systems, autonomy, and protective rights of the IPs is still a huge issue. Capacity development programmes are not tailored to the needs of the Indigenous Peoples and public distribution systems is still an issue. Indigenous Peoples still suffer from grave human rights violations, which stem from historical injustices, without redress or reconciliation and lack of recognition of Indigenous Institutions and other basic rights. Therefore, access to non-discriminatory and inclusive justice, recognition of indigenous institutions, the principle of free, prior and informed consent, and the right to lands, territories and resources should be addressed in realizing this Goal.

Another key target closely related to the interests of the Indigenous Peoples is data disaggregation by ethnicity stated in Goal 17. There remains a large gap in measuring and evaluating the level of inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in the SDG implementation. Some regions or countries had or plan to conduct research accessing countries' capabilities of data disaggregation for Indigenous Peoples. Examples of the government of the Philippines integrating data disaggregation by ethnicity in its national census and in some other countries

⁷ Earth Day and our Indigenous Peoples, <https://ntfp.org/2020/04/earth-day-2020/>

alike show some level of inclusion. Nonetheless, the level of implementation and monitoring is considered insufficient and incomprehensive making the need for states to prioritize capacity building and allocation of sufficient resources for data disaggregation including ethnicity an urgent one.

According to the report by the Indigenous Peoples' Major Group (IPMG) for sustainable development, "More than 200 million Indigenous Peoples in the Asia-Pacific region are seriously affected by the huge gap in the SDG implementation and are facing serious threats from economic growth targets, climate change and worsening authoritarian governments, among others."⁸ A review of the progress of the SDGs related to the Indigenous Peoples five years into its adoption has raised profound alarms for all stakeholders aspiring for the attainment of SDGs for humanity and it is high time to call for inclusion of Indigenous Peoples as right holders and active participators in sculpting and implementing developmental measures and policies. The inclusion of Indigenous Peoples should ensure equalities in all aspects of societal lives whilst taking into consideration their distinctiveness in terms of culture, livelihood, beliefs and rights.

COVID-19 and Indigenous Peoples in Asia

As the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps through the globe, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disability, elders and women are amongst the most vulnerable groups facing increased risk due to coronavirus. Due to the historical legacy of neglect, discrimination and marginalization of Indigenous Peoples, health issues including food and water insecurity, underlying health conditions, overcrowding and remoteness, lack of proper access to health resources and information as well as high risk groups are already persistent in their communities. The advent of emergencies like COVID-19 is by all means aggravating their health risks. Not limited to livelihood, the adverse impacts are reaching further to the human rights and human security of the Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous Peoples Human Rights Defenders are more at risk of being targeted as movement is restricted and governments tighten control under the covert of the pandemic. Indigenous Peoples are responding to the pandemic using self-determined protection mechanisms. AIPP has been monitoring the developments of COVID-19 and its impacts on Indigenous Peoples' wellbeing and their sustainable development and highlighted in this report some of the challenges from COVID-19, the impacts of response measures and initiatives they have taken to tackle this global emergency.

- **Impacts and challenges of COVID-19 to Indigenous Peoples' wellbeing and sustainable development**

Information collected by AIPP through a survey with member organisations in 14 countries shows the ramifications of COVID-19 on the Indigenous Peoples. The countries with highest numbers of confirmed cases are India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan, Malaysia and Nepal (as of June 12⁹). In fact, Indigenous Peoples, in particular Indigenous women and

⁸ Inclusion, Equality, and Empowerment to Achieve Sustainable Development: Realities of Indigenous Peoples, <https://www.indigenouspeoples-sdg.org/index.php/english/all-resources/ipmg-position-papers-and-publications/ipmg-reports/global-reports/124-inclusion-equality-and-empowerment-to-achieve-sustainable-development-realities-of-indigenous-peoples/file>

⁹ https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?utm_campaign=homeAdvegas1?

girls are often disproportionately affected by epidemics and other crises. Women often face significant barriers to health care due to lack of autonomy over their own sexual and reproductive health, inadequate access to health services, and insufficient financial resources and also intensified gender-based violence among other issues. Some confirmed cases of IPs contracted COVID-19 have been found in the Philippines, Bangladesh, Malaysia. A Tripura Indigenous youth aged thirty reportedly died of coronavirus symptoms while undergoing treatment at Khagrachari Sadar Hospital of Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh on 25 March 2019. The numbers are increasing as migrants in huge numbers are being repatriated back to their own territories. This is being done through cramped public transportations and under equipped and unsanitary quarantine centers on their return. In the Northeast-India where most of the states have substantial IP population, the number of cases have tremendously increased since the inter-state repatriation of the migrants, the record of 2019 recorded 4694 cases in Assam, Tripura at 1135, Manipur at 552, Nagaland at 113, Mizoram at 121, Arunachal Pradesh at 99, Sikkim at 70, Meghalaya at 44. Testing rate and positive cases count is increasing by day. Since access to health centers is very limited in the Indigenous areas, the safety of the Indigenous communities is at a very high stakes.

The impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous Peoples are multifaceted. Amongst them health issues are one of the most pressing and directly related to Indigenous Peoples' wellbeing. Indigenous Peoples are "nearly three times as likely to be living in extreme poverty as their non-Indigenous counterparts"¹⁰ which has also increased the likelihood of having underlying health conditions making them extremely vulnerable to virus attack. As most, if not all, attentions are drawn on the treatment of COVID-19, there is shortage of providers for other health related issues, which results in the exacerbation of other ailments. In addition to poverty and underlying health conditions, many Indigenous Peoples live in remote or isolated areas, where health-care services, sanitation and protection equipment (such as masks) as well as accurate and authentic information on COVID-19 are difficult to reach and have limited capacity or do not exist. In many cases of Asian region, the governments have not yet provided translated information in local languages and the information is not friendly for persons with disability.

In India, news reports have been continually carried out in revealing the grim situation of its healthcare services particularly in rural areas. According to an analysis¹¹ of its latest health ministry data, "Rural provision of health services declined in February and crashed in March, affecting everything from Bacillus Calmette–Guérin (BCG) immunisation (primarily used against tuberculosis) to treatment for acute cardiac emergencies" "Hundreds of thousands of children might already have missed vital immunizations".

Similarly in Thailand, since the coronavirus began to spread, the Community Health Care Centers (CHCC) across the country have set limit to provide service only to emergency case or patients suspected to have contracted Covid-19. In some areas, these measures resulted in

¹⁰ Indigenous Peoples & The COVID-19 Pandemic: Considerations, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2020/04/DESA-COVID-19-Considerations.pdf>

¹¹ How COVID-19 response disrupted health services in rural India, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/how-COVID-19-response-disrupted-health-services-in-rural-india-11587713155817.html>

patients with chronic diseases, eg diabetic patient not being treated timely. This situation is not limited to Thailand but also other countries such as India, Bangladesh, Nepal.

Cases disclosing health threats faced by Indigenous Peoples can also be found in Bangladesh. Tea workers of Bangladesh, of which IPs account for a large proportion, are living with high risk during the pandemic as they work in groups. There are no facilities like hand washing, sanitizers, and supply of clean water at their workplaces. The initial announcement of the government on the closure of all public and private offices began on March 26, but this order was not implemented in tea gardens. Neither the government nor the tea companies have taken any steps to save the tea estate communities in Bangladesh. The outbreak of Measles in some Indigenous communities in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) further undermines their already poor health systems claiming Indigenous Peoples' lives prior to coronavirus.

Lack of food security is another menace for the wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples. For communities that do not have sufficient food supplies within their land, the outbreak and subsequent often rushed response measures such as national lockdowns can completely cut off their source of supplies. As many of the Indigenous people are also dependent on daily wage, losing their jobs during the pandemic can be devastating for their families. As food stocks become limited and even scarce, it is feared by many Indigenous communities that if infections were to occur in their territories, it may take formidable shape and cause brutal destructions. Many Indigenous representatives, in their calling for a reconsideration of policies and measures taken to contain the virus, have strongly stated: "Instead of coronavirus, the hunger will kill us".

Miscommunication or lack of it has provoked fear and even anger. In the Philippines, as AIPP's member organization Kalipunan ng mga Katutubong Mamamayan sa Pilipinas (KATRIBU) has reported that Aeta villages of Nabuclod, Mawacat and Camachile in Floridablanca town in Pampanga is under lockdown after two Aetas became positive to COVID-19. "We are deeply disturbed since Indigenous Peoples are one of the most vulnerable sectors in our society. If the virus spreads to other communities, they are not fully equipped to combat infectious diseases like COVID-19". Fears of similar kinds are also felt in some Indigenous communities in India as there are no communication strategies to educate the people of COVID-19. Messages and videos circulated with all sorts of claims are mostly not evidence based. Incorrect information is creating more chaos than the actual disease. Official evidence-based information on COVID-19 is not passed on to the common people.

As their wellbeing and livelihood are under threat, Indigenous Peoples are also forced to bear the ramification of public fear and anxiety against COVID-19. Racial attacks and discrimination against Indigenous people from North-East India have spiked since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic ignoring the fact that the North-Eastern states have one of the least reported cases. These cases are mainly witnessed in cities where a large number of North-Eastern Indigenous people migrate to seek for education and employment opportunities. Instead of acknowledging their contribution to the socioeconomic wellbeing of the society, cases of racism against them are constantly reported with the situation escalated due to the pandemic. People were subjected to being called "corona virus" and were taunted and accused of having brought the virus to the community. There have been many instances where the people from the North-East were spat upon, denied entry to shops even to buy

essentials, beaten up or taken into custody without explanations. There were several reports of mistreatment of migrant workers and women from this region living in a traumatized situation in urban areas. These cases are serious human rights violation against Indigenous people suggesting a long-standing racial inequality in Indian society. COVID-19 has acted as an agent to bring this chronic issue to light and further regressed the goals of sustainable development in terms of creating an inclusive and equal society.

Reflecting on the SDGs and its central promise to 'leave no one behind', yet today, the risks of leaving many behind from life-saving measures are great and grave. In dire needs are Indigenous Peoples' livelihood, wellbeing as well as their dignity, freedom, and security as equal human beings.

- **Ramifications and challenges of response measures on Indigenous Peoples' wellbeing and sustainable development**

During the state of emergency, citizens are turning their hopes to the government for disaster assistance and emergency relief. In order to contain the spread of virus and keep its consequences to the minimum, governments of affected countries have all established various policies and plans as they see fit. Governments have announced allocation of financial packages and material aid such as food, water and medical provisions to alleviate the socioeconomic impacts on their people. Indeed, these measures are devised with good intentions. Some governments are aware of the extra burden on Indigenous Peoples and have established specific policies and programs with reference to Indigenous Peoples' land, health, education issues and even set up specific institutions to take care of these issues. Thai government supports workers and farmers affected by COVID-19 a cash handout of 5000 baht per month for three months. As infected cases decrease, it also rolls out staged restriction lift so as to stipulate economy and secure jobs. India has its own Ministry of Tribal Affairs. In the Philippines, there is National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP). These institutions are supposed to be the main body that action out plans led by the government. It is, however, repeatedly reported from the ground that government designated emergency relief often does not reach Indigenous Peoples timely or not at all.

It is therefore disheartening to discover that many of these policies, plans and their implementations have either ignored special societal groups including Indigenous Peoples, people with disabilities, Indigenous women and elderly or being delivered in a slow and delayed manner or worse still, imposing unfavorable ramifications on many aspects of their lives. Thus, the risks and challenges to the Indigenous Peoples are compounded by the failure of responsible institutions to implement benign counter-pandemic policies and plans that are tailored to the sustainable needs of Indigenous Peoples.

Aside from government relief operations, some Indigenous Peoples organizations have also taken efforts to solicit and distribute relief packs such as rice, canned food, medicines (particularly for persons with disabilities), eggs and vegetables to urban poor and other vulnerable communities. AIPP, along with its members and networks organized relief work in several countries and set up the Regional Response and Network on COVID-19. However, these groups have limited resources to continue to do this and they rely heavily on solicitation of donations.

One policy that has been universally adopted by the governments is social distancing, quarantine and nationwide lockdown albeit to various degrees. Social distancing can be difficult to practice as some Indigenous communities live in overcrowded conditions. As many Indigenous People migrate to cities working as wage labor, their working conditions also prevent them from abiding by the rules of social distancing. Since quarantine is regarded as an effective public health measure, social and economic activities of Indigenous communities are highly disturbed. Culturally, Indigenous People tend to gather in groups to perform rituals in times of crisis or during communal farming activities. In terms of quarantine centers, many are ill-facilitated. Some are unable to provide proper distancing among people resulting in a soar of infected cases after being “quarantined”. Many lockdown measures are carried out in a rushed manner, which have caused many adverse impacts particularly on already marginalized groups.

During lockdown, many governments have failed to provide the people information on COVID-19 leading them to panic and uncertainties. As provision of relief and sanitary goods as well as public health care remain inaccessible in many rural and remote areas where Indigenous People reside, many of them find themselves in an unfavorable condition. This is largely due to a longstanding systematic discrimination by the society and its institutions rather than a careless mistake made accidentally. Students are amongst the most affected group during the pandemic as many schools are forced to close and the conditions of some schools are not appropriate for the containment of infectious diseases. Equal access to education has also deteriorated during the lockdown.

With the unpredictable situation, several governments have introduced or prescribed online classes across the spectrum in an unscientific manner. The policy is resulting in increasing social divide between economically privileged and the economically backward. Groups like Indigenous Peoples are getting excluded from education due to lack of digital/online education, which is called for in a democratic country that guarantees universal public education. Further, the hardest hit are persons with disabilities as their specific needs and concerns have not been taken into account.

In India, the imposed lockdown has inevitably affected the livelihood of forest-dependent communities of Odisha in India. The collected non-timber forest products (NTFPs) could not be sold because middlemen could not travel to the village and the market in communities were paralyzed. Similar dilemma can be found in Khagrachari Sadar Upazila in Bangladesh. Trinamul Unnayan Sangstha (TUS) reported that “Indigenous families who are dependent of NTFPs are facing problems for their substantial livelihood. They cannot move easily and not able to sell their products on time nor are they able to get a fair price. There are no initiatives from the side of the government in providing relief and subsidy for the poor and marginalized communities.” In Thailand also, the trend of eviction and difficulties in accessing NTFPs are still ongoing. A case in point is that Mr. KaeAuy has been prosecuted for forest encroachment in his own rotational fallow field located in Omkoi district of Chiang Mai province on April 13, 2020.

In the Philippines, the Aeta, Dumagat and Lumad among other Indigenous communities in the country have already reported severe food shortages and a chronic lack of access to basic

goods. Restrictions of mobilities have been forced on some Indigenous communities. It is reported that in the Sierra Madre region, not only are some villagers barred by the state security forces from going to forest areas to gather subsistence wild crops, they were also prevented from selling their products in the market outside their community. These measures have heavily affected their basic livelihood provisions.

It is claimed that the government initiative of Nepal to cope with COVID-19 pandemic is not friendly to Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities. Dissemination of public notice on COVID-19 from government has not been translated into Indigenous language nor any sign languages. Medicine and other equipment have been inadequately supplied even as they are very important for Indigenous Peoples with disabilities. According to Pratima Gurung, Chair of the National Indigenous Disabled Women Association Nepal (NIDWAN), issues related to gender remains invisible in Nepal and many other regions in Asia. For instance, during the pandemic, the rates of violence and discrimination has increased, and suicidal rates are growing. More specifically, gender-based violence, and private-sphere violence has intensified. Confined indoors, these women are suffering much less visible abuses and are not able to report this information. Historically, persons with disability in Nepal are exposed to multiple sources of discrimination due to their ethnicity, gender, disability and so on. It is fair to say that the pandemic and current lockdown status exacerbates the situation. Social protection is lacking as very few cases are being reported to the police.¹² “Civil society organizations and governments are focused on other priorities in the agenda but specific needs are not taken into account”, Pratima further commented.¹³

In Thailand, as schools are forced to close, the government and Education Ministry attempted to create virtual classrooms as an alternative during the pandemic in most countries. However they turned out to be poorly prepared and simply added to the plight of those who have been hit hardest by the outbreak, including persons with disabilities. Many students especially the Indigenous students are not able to access proper internet, let alone some not having a device or access to electricity at all. These ill-planned strategies have negative impacts mostly on already disadvantaged social groups even leading to students to drop out of school.

The handling of migrant issues by the government also proves to be inefficient and insufficient in many countries. Internal and international migrant workers have been the backbone of many labor intense industries in this region. Indigenous people take up a large percentage of migrant workers in urban areas. A sudden lockdown could render their lives uncertain and cause huge damage to the lives of them and their families. These issues are prominently stringent in countries like Thailand where millions of migrants from neighboring countries and as most countries have internal migrants, the impact of COVID-19 is highly relevant to them as well.

In Thailand, many urban migration workers face food insecurity issues. They are mostly out of work due to shut down of workplaces and businesses and restriction of international

¹² COVID-19: National Indigenous Disabled Women Association Nepal (NIDWAN Nepal), <https://disabilityrightsfund.org/nidwan-nepal/>

¹³ COVID-19 in Nepal: What are the challenges for indigenous persons with disabilities?, <http://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/covid19-indigenous>

travels. These group of people need food and drinking water for survival. Among this group of people some have gone back to their villages but left behind are the people having no home in the villages or impossible to travel back due to the lockdown. Since May 15, 2020, the government announced to reopen many sections to stimulate the domestic economy such as supermarket and shopping mall but restricted the opening hours. As economy continues to struggle, migrant workers without jobs are the ones hit hardest and whose future most uncertain, so they require urgent assistance from the society. While most Thai workers are covered under the social security system and receive unemployment benefits, migrant workers holding foreign passports, pink cards or in stateless status are not so lucky. Migrant workers are only granted the right to work temporarily in Thailand pending their application for a work permit.

In India, loss of jobs and livelihood are coupled with spurt in the cases of racism against the North Eastern people living in metro cities and cases of landlords forcefully evicting tenants for non-payment of rent and other reasons. With no income to sustain in the cities and remittances to send back home, they are left with no choice but to head back to their native states and villages. While many are trying to arrange their means of transport and headed home, the different state governments are executing evacuation plans through trains and buses. The unclear polices have left many trapped in big cities where the sense of home is nowhere to find, many discover, though happy to head home, jammed in the overcrowded train where physical distancing is impossible to obey, and still worse, many walking towards home some hundreds of miles away. And no guarantee of well-organized quarantine is awaiting in their homeland.

For example, a train from Delhi to Jiribam in Manipur on 23rd May 2020, which was suppose to carry over a thousand passengers reportedly started its journey with over 2000 passengers. The train takes at least 40 hours to reach it destination. Without physical distancing, the trains can potentially become hot spots for spread of COVID-19.

Socioeconomic impacts listed above exemplify issues faced by Indigenous population due to failed measures under COVID-19 emergency as these measures cause health issues, value chain breakdown, unemployment, secession of remittances, migration back to community. Not limited to the above, under a global emergency, historical inequality among racial and ethnic groups has been evoked leading to graver consequences on the rights and security of Indigenous Peoples. Issues of land rights disputes, militarization and human rights abuses are exacerbated during the pandemic lockdown.

COVID-19 is being used to further exploit the lands and territories of Indigenous Peoples. Transnational corporations (TNCs) under the support of some state and local governments have advanced their ravaging agenda over Indigenous lands and resources. Often these mega projects are destructive to the land and livelihood of Indigenous communities and subsequent violating their rights to self-determination and ecological integrity. In the time of pandemic as people are stuck under lockdown and quarantine and community organizing and protest actions prohibited, resource exploitation, land grabbing and rights violations are taking place. "Land rights activists and IP human rights defenders are continuously being criminalized and

attacked for defending the ancestral territories and ways of life” stated in a report done by Indigenous Peoples Movement for Self Determination & Liberation.¹⁴

In Bangladesh, Indigenous leaders and organizations have reported that land grabbing and mining operations are continuing without the consent of the affected communities. Reports have come in from AIPP member-organizations that around 5,000 acres of rubber plantations of the Indigenous people were burnt down in different areas in Bandarban Hill District of CHT to drive out the Indigenous Jumma villagers from their villages and grab their lands. The confrontations have led to the arrest of innocent villagers as the land grabbers are powerful companies and influential persons belonging to political parties or are political party leaders themselves.

In the Philippines, destructive projects such as mining in Indigenous territories is continuing. Indigenous Peoples protesting these projects are targets of harassment under the cover of COVID-19. In one incident, the mining company OceanaGold violently broke through and dispersed the people’s barricade in Didipio, Nueva Vizcaya to bring in their fuel supplies despite the lockdown. In another incident, the mining company OceanaGold violently broke through and dispersed the people’s barricade in Didipio, Nueva Vizcaya to bring in their fuel supplies despite the lockdown. In the incident, some people, including Mr. Rolando Pulido, Chairperson of the Didipio Earth Savers Multi-Purpose Association (DESAMA) were arrested. Further, in Quezon province at the construction site of the Kaliwa dam, military forces are heavily guarding the construction equipment in the area even while construction activities have halted causing concerns to the locals. Further, the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture announced that the government plans to utilize ‘idle’ ancestral lands for production of high value food crops in response to food shortages, especially during times of crisis as part of the Plant Plant Plant program of the government. These are land grabbing policies aiming at converting ancestral territories to commercial planting or big agribusiness.

Environmentalists in India are criticizing government moves to continue to approve major industrial projects and to relax the nation’s environmental impact assessment rules during the time of coronavirus emergency as public oversight is complicated and potential field reviews canceled. Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change was also moving ahead with a rewrite of some of India’s environmental rules in which it proposed reducing the time allowed for public comment on assessments, and allowing more projects to avoid the public comment process entirely. “We are deeply concerned that this draft notification has been put out in the midst of a national health crisis. As you are aware, most of the country is under lockdown and there are severe restrictions on movement in public places,” said a letter written to Environment Secretary CK Mishra, on March 25.¹⁵

¹⁴ Weaponizing Pandemic against Indigenous Peoples: Continuing Plunder and Rights Violations, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-NOsFU3gQaeXUjj6AktSntDCdNB4Kkb9/view?fbclid=IwAR34MNFC40izdWflu7o5suGJLrs1DG2aEgl_Y1SOJlcrwM81Fjfksemllg

¹⁵ COVID-19: MoEF&CC extends validity of environmental clearances till June 30, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/environment/covid-19-moef-cc-extends-validity-of-environmental-clearances-till-june-30-70088>

Contravening its own decision of lockdown, the government of Nepal decided to carry out the work on the hydropower project and allowed free movement of workers such as transporting machines and supplies. On March 31, 2020, the employers of the Nyadi Hydropower Plant located in Lamjung District clashed with the locals in Marsyandi Rural Municipality in the same district, where community made temporary barricade with bamboo to restrict the movements of vehicles and people and set up a clear notice with contact numbers in case of emergency transportation. As two opposing groups confronted each other, two people from project and some villagers sustained minor injury during arguments. The next day police came and compelled villagers to sign a paper without allowing them to read. But they refused to give signatures. Now villagers are under fear that they might face legal allegations after the lockdown. According to Lawyers' Association for Human Rights of Nepalese Indigenous Peoples (LAHURNIP), The COVID-19 pandemic will have unprecedented impact on human rights and democracy in Nepal. The current political situation, authoritative governmental moves clearly gestures a regression of democratic space of Indigenous Peoples after promulgation of the Constitution in 2015.

Some governments are taking advantage of COVID-19 and conducting military operation, targeting activists, red tagging activists and leaders, attacking freedom of speech and so on. With intensified militarization in some parts of Asia particularly in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Northeast India and the Philippines, several people have been tortured and killed.

In Myanmar, the government and military are accused of using COVID-19 pandemic for political advantage against ethnic groups. Recently in a report based on comprehensive review of reports and statements from media, civil society, government and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) made between 23 March to 10 May, 2020, claimed that there have been increased offenses against the Arakan Army in Rakhine and Chin States by the Burma military since the first cases of COVID-19 were recorded in the country. It is also reported that the presence of military troops and confrontations are increasing in the Karen areas between the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and Tatmadaw. This has resulted in thousands of villagers fleeing their homes and the loss of lives of several civilians. In the Naga areas of India and Myanmar, the armed forces of India are engaging in provocative and systematic operations against the Naga armed resistance groups. Clearly, the ceasefire agreement has been utterly disregarded under the convenience provided by the pandemic. Additionally, the Burma Army is accused of actively undermining COVID-19 prevention efforts by EAOs in the country's East.¹⁶ A few COVID-19 screening posts set up by the Karen National Union (KNU) Thaton District officials had to be shut down following several complaints from the high level Burmese politicians.¹⁷

In the Philippines, human rights abuse cases have surged as the government have taken unfair advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic to advance policies and related actions that are harmful

¹⁶ Government, Military Accused by Rights Group of Using COVID-19 Pandemic for Political Advantage – Burma Army Continues its Attacks on Ethnic People, <http://karennews.org/2020/06/government-military-accused-by-rights-group-of-using-covid-19-pandemic-for-political-advantage-burma-army-continues-its-attacks-on-ethnic-people/>

¹⁷Burma Army Demand KNU Close its Covid-19 Screening Posts – Despite Community Support, <http://karennews.org/2020/05/burma-army-demand-knu-close-its-covid-19-screening-posts-despite-community-support/>

to Indigenous Peoples. Such policies include President Duterte's "shoot to kill" order to cops and soldiers to shoot dead the 'troublemakers' amid the lockdown as a reaction to the protest of some residents in Quezon City who were merely asking for food assistance and the implementation of Executive Order No. 70 amidst Covid-19 crisis, to further militarize communities, to silence legal dissent of activists and encroach lands and territories of Indigenous Peoples, targeting Indigenous human rights defenders, and committing human rights violations against Indigenous Peoples. As the militarization intensifies, more cases of abuses and human rights violations reported. An example is the systematic vilification, red tagging and threat to the Cordillera Peoples Alliance and its leaders, Windel Bolinget and Bestang Sarah Dekdeken. The threat also extended to their family members including the minor son of Bolinget. It is recorded that in Mindanao, families continue to flee from their respective homes in the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the report of the Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction Management Officer (MDRRMO), affected by renewed fighting between clans that have affiliations with armed groups, approximately 4,500 individuals from three barangays have been forced to flee their homes in Maguindanao last on April 2020.¹⁸ Numbers of internal displaced people continue to rise since then.¹⁹

In the northern province of Ratanakiri in Cambodia, a part of the 742-hectare land was reportedly cleared in March by Hoang Anh Gia Lai (HAGL), a conglomerate owned by a wealthy Vietnamese businessman with interests in property, agriculture, energy and a Vietnamese football club. As Cambodians were told to seek shelter amid the coronavirus pandemic, this land was designated for return to Indigenous communities. Human rights groups Equitable Cambodia and Inclusive Development International (IDI) in a joint statement accused the business funded by investment banks with links to the private-sector arm of the World Bank "The company bulldozed two spirit mountains, wetlands, traditional hunting areas and burial grounds,"²⁰

"In a lockdown situation, we are not able to go to the court or come out to protest, and governments are effectively using this situation to suit its own designs and vested interests. We are seeing that governments are rolling back protective laws and policies, weakening environmental safeguards, and diverting forestlands for large-scale development projects and agricultural purposes." Secretary General of Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) Mr. Gam A. Shimray expresses in his account great concern on the development of these events and urges actions and solidarity from developmental actors.

As many Indigenous People are forced to bear the blame for the spread of virus, antagonizing emotions are brewing in them. This has resulted in irrational behaviors which if left unattended, can cause deeper social issues and divergence. Psychological distress caused by

¹⁸ Mindanao Displacement in the time of COVID-19, <https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/mindanao-displacement-time-covid-19>

¹⁹ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/philippines>

²⁰ Vietnam firm with World Bank links accused of bulldozing indigenous land in Cambodia, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3086758/vietnam-firm-world-bank-links-accused-bulldozing>

the pandemic also lead to a surge in suicidal rate in some countries. Nepal has reported a total of 875 people committing suicide during the lockdown period since March 24.²¹

Overall, the key measures taken by the governments and responsible institutions, if any, to combat the COVID-19 pandemic is proved to be insufficient and ineffective for Indigenous communities. Some of the realities are consequences of poor planning and implementation by national governments and related institutions whilst some are the result of discrimination and disregard for Indigenous Peoples. The cases reported as part of the enforcement of the restrictive measures by the governments have increased systematic oppression of Indigenous communities, further undermining Indigenous Peoples' rights to self-determination.

- **Efforts and initiatives of Indigenous Peoples in addressing COVID-19**

Many Indigenous communities in Asia are taking their own initiatives to save themselves from COVID-19 Pandemic. Reports have come in that several Indigenous communities have revived their age-old rituals that were used when epidemics occur. They have declared self-quarantine and village lockdowns. Facing shortage of protective equipment, they have organized among themselves workshops of making masks, hand sanitizers and soaps. Some are also campaigning in social media, translating awareness-building messages, factsheets, and leaflets on COVID-19, and distributed across communities.

We firmly believe that Indigenous Peoples are custodians of a wealth of Indigenous knowledge, practices and culture which are deeply rooted in our connections with land, territories and natural resources and can contribute to our health and well-being. These have endured time as well as challenges of crisis. The role of elders in Indigenous communities is particularly significant as they are the backbone of the survival and thriving of these communities and key roles in keeping and transmitting Indigenous knowledge, practices and culture to their descendants. During the COVID-19 crisis, it is to our delight to witness and hear many cases where Indigenous Peoples are taking charges to fight against the virus and the discriminative policies imposed on them. As their awareness and knowledge of the virus increases, their responses have also transformed from panic-driven into well-planned responses.

In Thailand, Karen people have performed rituals by shutting down their villages and not allowing anyone to enter or get since the outbreak. These village shutdowns were announced in conjunction with the revival of the ancient ritual called, "Kroh Yee" (or village closure). It was found that this ritual was used 70 years ago when there was an outbreak of cholera. Local knowledge holders believe that there would be enough food for annual consumption if a pandemic occurs and the village needs to be closed down. In addition, another ritual called, "Wee Doh", or dispelling of communal malevolent spirits is performed by community ceremonial leader who prepares a bamboo basket containing chili, salt, tobacco, Acacia concinna, turmeric, and grains of rice to execute this ritual. The ceremonial leader, together with community members cast all malevolent spirits out of the community and take the whole bamboo basket with all the items and throws it away outside the community to end the ritual

²¹ 875 people commit suicide during lockdown period in Nepal, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/26/c_139089729.htm

and that spot is referred to as “Doo-eu” (or no-man’s zone). “Wee Doh” is performed when there are several illnesses at the same time, but no dying incidence yet, or when bad, but not serious, omen occurs in the community.

Thailand has also done particularly well in addressing the health issues of Indigenous People through the volunteer system. Village health volunteers, especially in under-resourced communities, are playing key roles in combating the virus. After receiving trainings and supplied with health equipment, these volunteers pay visits to the 10 to 15 households that have been allocated to them and monitor the health of these residents. People with serious underlying medical conditions, people with disability, the elderly and recent returnees are of particular concern. It is estimated by the Department of Health Service Support that there are 1,040,000 village health volunteers nationwide providing critical services for their fellows.²²

Relief services and provisions are also actively provided in Thailand in which volunteers again play a critical role in successful implementation. For communities with food insecurity, various organizations have initiated programs to deliver much needed life essentials to the villagers. Food exchanges are being carried out between north and south Thailand on rice and fish exchange. In these campaigns, dried fish are supplied by fishermen along the Andaman coast in exchange for rice from the north and northeast region of Thailand so that communities can continue to meet their basic needs during the pandemic. These non-monetary exchanges are unique to the peasant culture of Thailand and set perfect examples in creating solidarities among social groups.



Figur 1 Thailand Volunteers in relief action, https://www.thaienquirer.com/11963/in-the-absence-of-state-support-the-poor-help-the-poor/?fbclid=IwAR2QcbNd-rl9PIp8uM-Wa6Bv7a9v-1XgKWqY6qMdSJsUhhqfQ1a_jzpX6dg

²²Volunteers on the frontline, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/special-reports/1903330/volunteers-on-the-frontline>

The measures in Thailand are applaudable not only because they are effective and efficient and helping a vast number of people under critical condition due to the pandemic, but also due to the fact that they are replicable by other areas and countries.

The Indigenous Peoples' strategy to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in Orang Rimba, an Indigenous community who live within the Bukit Duabelas National Park in Jambi, Sumatra, in Indonesia is called Besesandingon in their language. It has been given an applauding English translation as "dignified quarantine". Besesandingon is an obligation for any member of the Orang Rimba who have just returned from travel. Villagers have built huts not far from the main village and erect signs instructing people to keep their distance. However, the whole process is implemented and monitored voluntarily, and villagers make sure quarantined persons are well taken care of and feel welcomed.²³

In Bangladesh, several Indigenous communities adopt their traditional lockdown systems by imposing community-wide isolation to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. For example, Mro Indigenous communities of CHT put up a bamboo fencing (Khasur) at the entrance of their territory to isolate their villages. The villages are thus cut off from the outside world by this bamboo fencing temporarily under the crisis wanes.



Figure 2 Khasur, a bamboo fencing of Mro community to isolate their village in CHT, Bangladesh, <https://www.thedailystar.net/coronavirus-deadly-new-threat/news/coronavirus-20-villages-ethnic-minorities-bandarban-impose-community-isolation-1886755>

Mokokchung district is home to the Ao Naga tribe. It is consisted of many ancient villages in the former Naga Hills, Nagaland, India. The Ao Nagas are racially Mongolians and considered Indigenous people in India. During the pandemic, the Mokokchung district is amongst the first areas in India that initiated area-wise (sub-division) sensitization on the novel coronavirus. Representatives of each village are informed and educated of the latest available information

²³ Dignified quarantine: indigenous strategies for containing COVID-19 in Indonesia, <https://www.newmandala.org/dignified-quarantine-indigenous-strategies-for-containing-covid-19-in-indonesia/>

about COVID-19 and preventive and responding measures to tackle the virus. Facilitated by government agencies and non-government organizations alike, local people have also created videos in which protagonists (acted by Indigenous people) portrait a couple discussing in native language their knowledge (with English subtitle) and understanding of the novel coronavirus in a light-hearted and humorous manner. The video aims to disseminate accurate knowledge of the virus and current situation in India clarifying the myths about the virus spreading both on and off the internet among the people. These sensitization measures organized at district level with the participation of Indigenous residences are indeed successful examples of how Indigenous people use their wisdom to combat crisis and possible collaborations between authorities and Indigenous Peoples²⁴. The district has also conducted simulations on a number of important Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) activities that could happen under a pandemic.²⁵

Another highlight of positive Indigenous response to control the virus is the Manipur Naga village in India. Naga people are Indigenous resident in Northeastern India. The village of Tungjoy is a home to the Poumai Naga tribe in the Northeastern India state called Manipur. Residents of this village have built 80 huts with basic amenities for recent returnees from outside the state. These huts are widely spread on a hillside overlooking the picturesque forests. Distance between huts are ensured to follow the norm of social distancing. Each hut is made mostly from local and recycled materials and is electrified with its own kitchen and toilet.²⁶ This initiative is a collaboration among the Manipur's apex Naga social organization United Naga Council, village authorities and villagers and have indeed established an excellent precedent which has engaged the capacity of Indigenous Peoples and collaboration with external actors. Despite the model being slightly too "luxury" to replicate, it is undoubted that other Indigenous communities could learn something from it.

²⁴ Area-wise COVID-19 sensitisation begins in Mokokchung, <https://easternmirrornagaland.com/area-wise-covid-19-sensitisation-begins-in-mokokchung/>

²⁵ Mokokchung conducts mock drill on COVID-19, <https://easternmirrornagaland.com/mokokchung-conducts-mock-drill-on-covid-19/>

²⁶ Manipur Naga village builds quarantine cottages for returnees, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/good-news/2020/may/13/villagers-in-manipur-build-80-huts-that-will-function-as-covid-19-quarantine-centres-2142810.html>



Figure 3 Village in Manipur's Tungjoy setting up 80 fully equipped huts for COVID-19 quarantine
Photo: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/good-news/2020/may/13/villagers-in-manipur-build-80-huts-that-will-function-as-covid-19-quarantine-centres-2142810.html>

Conclusion and Specific Recommendations

As the world is undergoing tremendous change and nations taking turns rolling out their 'lockdown' status, many have begun to rethink on the relationship between human and their environment. However, five years into the adoption – of the SDGs by the United Nation, the Indigenous Peoples are still either somewhat invisible to the dominant societal forces or remain marginalized and ill-respected. Going forward, it is vital to bring Indigenous Peoples to the fore and acknowledge their values and heterogeneities, values that should be reinforced within non-Indigenous communities. Protecting elders is the value highly held by the Indigenous communities. It is to the contrary of the sufferings of the seniors of some nations under COVID-19. Sharing food is also an essential value among Indigenous Peoples especially in times of need. However manic hoardings are recorded in many cities around the world particularly at the beginning of the pandemic. These are fundamental human values that are proved to be fundamental and sustainable for humankind and needs to be shared, reinforced, and adopted. It is crucial to recognize Indigenous Peoples' food sovereignty, territorial rights, and relationship to biodiversity now more than ever. Positive outcomes need to be seen. But it will never be achieved by Indigenous People alone. Inclusion, equality, collaboration, and empowerment among all related actors should be the principal codes of conduct when channeling resources to the Indigenous communities and creating favorable conditions for a more sustainable post-coronavirus environment for them. (you may delete this if this doesn't fit)

Therefore, we strongly recommend:

1. States shall set up COVID-19 response cells with designated funds at the local level, with a team of designated nodal officers to coordinate with state or provincial authorities, including appropriate local authorities, and civil society organizations to monitor Indigenous issues and provide the necessary support. The response team

should also coordinate with the appropriate authorities to cater to the special needs of women, children, older people and persons with disabilities in Indigenous areas.

2. States shall ensure that appropriate guidelines and instructions are issued to provincial/state and local authorities on measures to be taken for Indigenous Peoples to deal with COVID-19 and lockdown or to deal with cases of second wave of the pandemic, including on ensuring compliance. State and non-state health institutions to devise intercultural approach that includes Indigenous health systems and care takers, and awareness raising materials; train them and provide the much-needed equipment and hygiene kits to contain the virus. Access to safe water for cleaning and drinking, and nutritional food should be ensured given the known evidence of undernourishment in many Indigenous areas.
3. States shall localize COVID-19 care centres and quarantine strategies encouraging natural environment can be set up and managed by community healers and nurses with appropriate services such as testing, quarantine facilities and professional services provided. Special attention should be given to areas with high rate of reverse migration, and to persons with disabilities, women and old people, and priority should be on prevention, early diagnosis and treatment. In remote areas, mobile health units should be deployed for emergency health services with transportation facilities.
4. States shall ensure food security and protect the livelihoods of Indigenous Peoples since the period of harvesting of NTFP and planting crops in several areas have been affected. Over at least the next six months it will be necessary to distribute free rations of nutritional food, irrespective of people's migratory status or whether they have an ID card.
5. States shall take urgent action to strengthen non-timber forest produce (NTFP)-based livelihoods by urgently devising effective institutional mechanisms for collection, storage, procurement and sale because dependence on NTFP is high across Asia. Financial and logistical support should be provided directly to the communities, particularly Indigenous women, to help generate sustainable livelihoods especially for those communities engaging in improving and enhancing local production and sustainable resource management such as NTFP, survival gardens and seed banking, etc. Communities living in protected areas must be allowed to have access to forests for livelihood purposes.
6. States shall respond to the call of the UN Secretary General to cease military campaign across the globe and focus on the fight against the pandemic. Further, governments shall stop mining operations, diverting forestlands for large-scale development projects, rolling back of IPs rights and environmental safeguards, and eviction drive of communities from protected areas, etc. without the FPIC of Indigenous Peoples in their traditional territories.

7. Considering the possibility of COVID-19 spread and future preparedness, states shall introduce culturally appropriate and decentralized education system that is established within the community governance system. Local level education system shall have facilities for both online and classroom educational activities, including facilities that addresses the specific needs of persons with disabilities.
8. Calls on regional bodies and all governments to ensure adequate actions on cross-border issues to ensure the protection of human rights and the environment; to facilitate more interactive and action -oriented discussions and exchanges in addressing systemic barriers including unfair trade and investment relations and mechanism, and economic policies that is widening inequality and destroying the environment and livelihoods of communities.
9. Calls on the states to take the pandemic as an opportunity to establish effective mechanisms and partnership for sustained engagement with Indigenous Peoples in developing and implementing laws and programs; and lay down pathways for transformative actions by bolstering local partnership and actions. Further, conducting data-disaggregation by ethnicity, and monitoring and assessment of the impact of all interventions in partnership with Indigenous Peoples is a critical need that shall be ensured by governments.
10. States shall ensure that Indigenous women and persons with disabilities are effectively engaged in decision-making related to COVID-19 and the SDG in dealing with the health and socio-economic effects recognizing that they are disproportionately affected by the pandemic and adverse development interventions.