



Improving Education of Indigenous People

By: Felicia Fisher

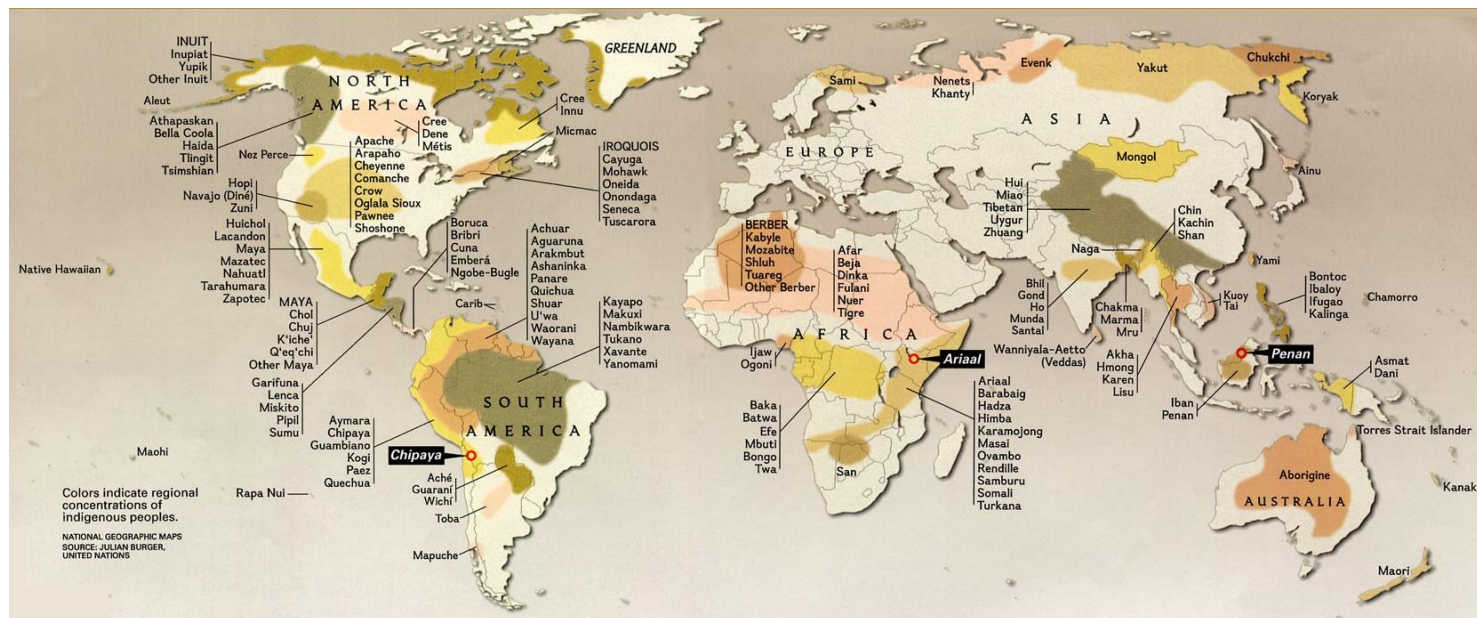
Old Dominion University, Model United Nations Society

Introduction

There are approximately 370 million indigenous people in the world, belonging to 5,000 different groups, in 90 countries. Indigenous people live in every region of the world, but about 70 percent in Asia. They tend to have small populations relative to the dominant culture of their country. In some countries, notably Bolivia and Guatemala, they make up more than half the population. They speak some 4,000 languages.¹

Education of indigenous people is a core challenge facing half of all states and the United Nations. The issue seems uncontroversial, but for many countries it raises fundamental contradictions of national priorities, reflecting the balance of domestic political power, affordability and choices in national spending, rights of indigenous groups versus larger majorities, and the role of the international community setting priorities in the face of national sovereignty.

Figure 1. Major indigenous groups around the world



From a human rights perspective, education is essential in achieving growth and stability in society. Education is a tool of empowerment, strengthening communities and societies in all parts of the world. If education struggles aren't resolved by actions, the indigenous people/culture will go extinct causing an even bigger gap in social, economic, and political barriers; possibly causing illegitimate conflict amongst large populations. The lack of equality and access to education, will

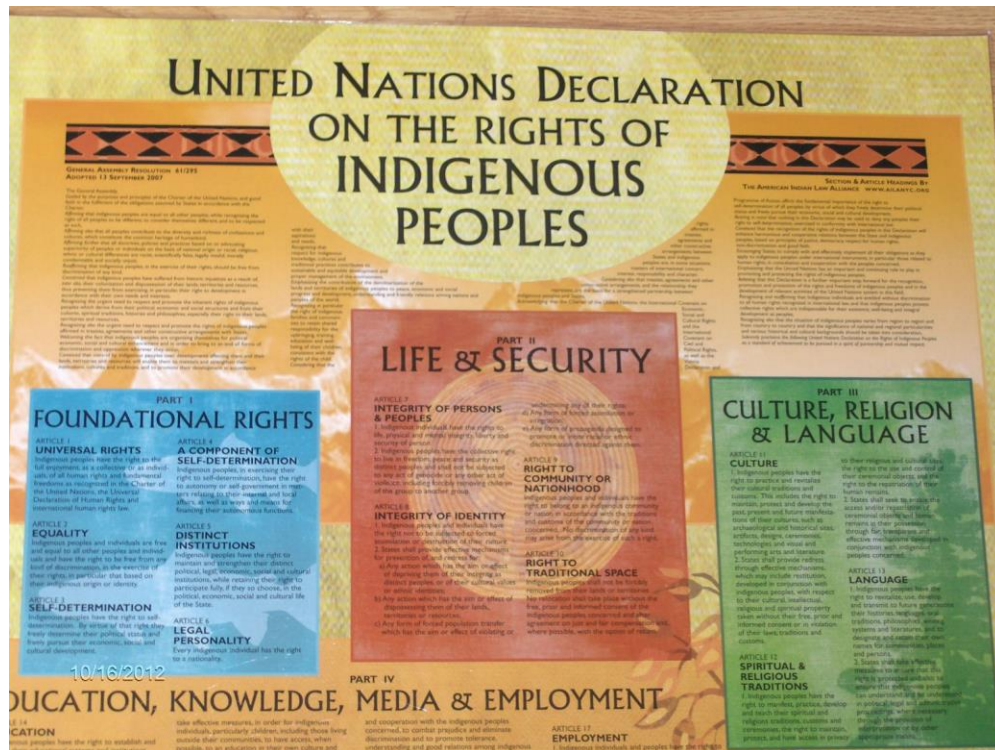
¹ "Who are indigenous peoples", *Cultural Survival* (n.d.). <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/node/10275>

ODUMUNC 2015
Issue Brief for World Conference

extremely affect the future continuity and interaction of indigenous people to other populations; segregating and weakening states' sovereignty.

The issues strike at basic tensions tearing at innumerable societies around the world. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples addresses and outlines the security of the rights to education. Many countries believe national unity and citizenship requires that education mean merging all cultures and languages, making education a tool for state unity. But to indigenous groups this often means losing their ethnic identity, and they resist such policies. At stake in this debate, then, potentially are the future survival of indigenous people as separate identities, and the unity of states as single nations.

Figure 2. UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), 2007



Current Situation

In many instances educational rights for indigenous people go unnoticed, ignored by largest society, their problems unaddressed and unrelieved. Sometimes the resulting tensions lead to political confrontations or armed violence. More often they sustain a spiral of poverty and suffering. The United Nations member states have agreed to make the UN a center for global efforts to improve the situation and opportunities for indigenous peoples.

Especially influential is the example of Australia, which markets programs bringing educational justice and equality for aboriginal-indigenous populations. The “Dare to Lead” program/campaign is one that is recognized in Australia as assisting in the education of indigenous students across the state. Awareness through nationally funded projects is a productive, initiative to build the legislative foundation for an equal education for all indigenous populations; male or female, no matter their geographical location.

Each UN member state needs its own policies on these issues. Whether they have indigenous populations, or support the improvement of indigenous conditions elsewhere, the UN process makes this a universal issue.

Figure 3. The scale of the problem



In a globalized world, condemned without much future

Background & Role of the United Nations

In September 2007, the United Nations General Assembly successfully made improvements for the advancement of indigenous people, with a majority vote supporting the adoption of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People* (UNDRIP).² Through the declaration the United Nations emphasizes the vitality of actions that needed to be in place furthering the development for growth among indigenous populations. Education should be the highlight of opportunity for indigenous people acting on their rights and freedoms, equal to many other citizens within the state.

The United Nations called attention to general violations to indigenous peoples rights, a hand full of internal discrepancies still exist. Aside from the issue always being education, thousands of indigenous men and women question the value of the education they would receive; plus the emergence of their language and culture into an education. Access to education—making it easily available and affordable—is the most aspect issue. A major problem stressed by the UN is discrimination toward indigenous women in education, who often fare much worse than indigenous men.

Specifically, the UNDRIP states:

Article 14

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of

² *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People*, 13 September 2007, passed by the UN General Assembly with 144 states in favor, 4 votes against (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States) and 11 abstentions (Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burundi, Colombia, Georgia, Kenya, Nigeria, Russian Federation, Samoa and Ukraine). Available at http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf

teaching and learning.

2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.

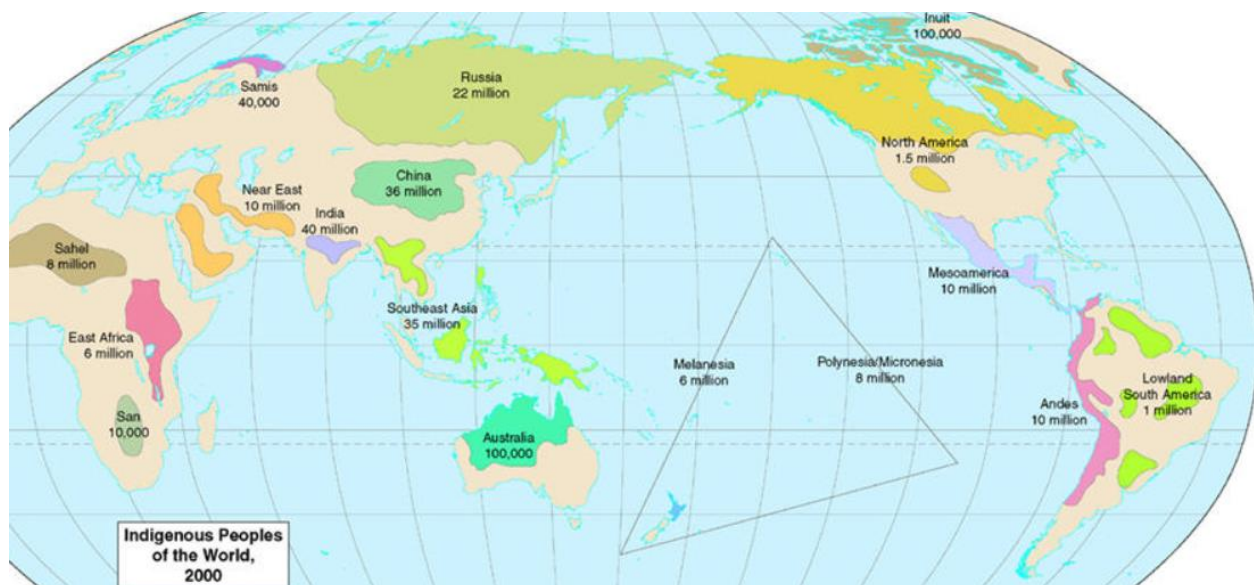
3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

While the principles were carefully negotiated and have wide support, a major problem is uneven, often non-existent, *implementation* of the UNDRIP. Governments differ greatly on their willingness to implement these principles. To many governments, the UNDRIP principles reduce the power and authority of the state and the unity of their nations. Others embrace these principles as essential elements to establishing a fair and legitimate place for indigenous people. For many countries, the most common policy is simple neglect. Underfunded school systems are left to do whatever local officials want. This often insures the indigenous people can be educated in their own language, but limits education to a few years of poor quality instruction with underpaid teachers in terrible facilities.

Some countries stand out for greater progress. Within the last decade Australia, New Zealand, and Pacific Islands and several countries of Central and South America have made progress toward re-establishing a native-cultured education. Slowly some sub-Saharan nations are finding a voice projecting their need for education specifically for native, indigenous children. Canada, China and the Nordic countries also stand out for efforts to insure high quality primary education in indigenous languages.

Above all education of indigenous people in a way consistent with the UNDRIP requires *official commitment, prioritization and adequate funding*.

Figure 4. Population and distribution of indigenous people



Country Positions

For most countries, the rights of indigenous people raise tricky issues of balance. How to balance issues like:

- Indigenous autonomy vs. central authority
- Indigenous identity vs. national coherence
- Indigenous needs vs. central funding
- Indigenous poverty vs. majority demands
- Indigenous rights vs. majority pressure

There are no easy answers to these dilemmas. All countries come up with their own choices.

Australia and New Zealand are international leaders in education rights for indigenous populations, and especially outspoken on the issue. Both aggressively fund, provide legislative and regulatory support for indigenous education, with the most authority for implementation granted to indigenous authorities. They also support and fund education and other services for indigenous populations in Pacific island countries. These policies are partially based on basic norms about universal human rights, they also promote development within Pacific Island countries, reducing pressure for residents to immigrate to countries like Australia and New Zealand.

African countries are probably the most aggressive and fixed on the idea of educational rights for the indigenous. Indigenous populations in Africa, specifically Sub-Saharan Africa, are the most diverse in the world. Namibia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo previously cooperated to acknowledge the pace and cooperation necessary to implement provisions for the rights of indigenous people through the United Nations' policies. Many African nations almost prefer a trial and error policy that is tested through different indigenous groups so that the people feel included like their voices are heard. The policies for an indigenous education are thoroughly outlined by the people through the government, to the United Nations. An education is truly the foundation for every other right that is neglected by indigenous populations in Africa. Countries build off of each other for ideas; this is a topic that will be constantly addressed for many years to come.

China and Russia: China and Russia both give indigenous peoples constitutional protections and emphasize equal funding by the central government in Beijing and Moscow, respectively. The major issue both face is separatists and secessionist movement among indigenous populations, such as Tibet and Uyghurs areas in China, and Chechnya in Russia. Central government refuses to share political authority with these regions and uses military force to suppress separatist tendencies. Russia fought two major wars in Chechnya in the 1990s and 2000s.

European Union: Most of the 28 member states of the European Union lack significant indigenous populations with independent identities from the majority populations. The largest indigenous populations in Europe are the Sami (Laplanders) of northern Norway, Sweden and Finland. Sami educational rights are assured and actively supported in all three countries. But the European Union routinely uses its aid and development funds for projects aimed to improve the situations and rights of indigenous peoples around the world.

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India and Pakistan inherited policies of *benign neglect* from their colonial rulers, and largely perpetuated these policies. Tribal areas, as they are known in both countries, are largely ignored by the central government. Some are bitterly unhappy and want better provision of government services, including education, health services and electricity. Others have developed strong independent traditions and resist government encroachment, becoming centers for anti-government insurgency and violence. Their goals are increasingly about taking control of the government to better address their needs. Well known examples are Waziristan in Pakistan and India's tribal belt, where Maoist guerrillas are increasingly active.

Latin American governments emphasize these issues vigorously, since indigenous peoples often constitute a large proportion of their populations. In some countries—Bolivia is the best known example—indigenous political parties have won control over the national government. All of these countries face funding limits that weaken education for much of their populations, especially indigenous peoples who tend to live in remote areas where government services are poor. Some like Honduras, El Salvador and Costa Rica, have laws but lack the means to consistently fund special schools or programs. Especially because the need for more food or jobs is just as important, if not more vital which doesn't help the cause to focus on supplying education. This region of the world like Africa will need the most incentives and monitoring from the United Nations to even begin serious improvement for indigenous people.

In *Southeast Asia* indigenous rights are often seen in terms of separatist disputes. Governments must balance pressure to act decisively—often by deploying their militaries and sometimes fighting insurgent wars—while acting to promote regional economic development and civil liberties, to reduce tensions. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Philippines all struggle with these extreme tensions. They tend to welcome foreign aid to indigenous peoples, but are very suspicious of anything that increases their political autonomy.

United States: A major role of the UN process is insuring countries with greater consistency within their territory, insuring greater fairness in treatment of all indigenous peoples, so some do not benefit greatly while others are deprived. An extreme example is the United States, where most authority over indigenous peoples belongs to Indian tribes through sovereignty-sharing arrangements, some based on international treaties. This leaves indigenous groups largely responsible for their own funding. Some are very wealthy—especially those lucky enough to control gambling industries near major cities or petroleum exploitation—while others are impoverished. No other country has followed the American example, most preferring policies aimed at greater revenue sharing and equality. Many also stress the importance of bi-lingual education, to preserve indigenous identity and facilitate their integration in the majority community.

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