

**Forum:** General Assembly 2 - Political Committee

**Issue:** Strengthening the protection and empowerment of Indigenous communities in Oceania

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## Introduction

Indigenous communities in Oceania, including the Aboriginal in Australia, Maori in New Zealand and various Pacific Islander groups in Pacific countries such as Papua New Guinea, have long faced social pressure, cultural exclusion and inequality in fields of law, finance and socialization. During centuries after the discovery of Ocenian countries, the Aboriginal people of Australia and Maori of New Zealand in institutional services on health, education and law, except for that, they suffered on social venues among the citizens of developed countries. This issue requires legal moves, communal and cultural protection for indigenous communities.

Key areas of focus include land and human rights, language revitalization, political presence and the effects on traditional indigenous life in Oceania due to climate change. Since the discovery of Oceania by Europeans, a violation of land and human rights have been occurring in mentioned areas. At the same time period, language degeneration and near extinction is also detected. Representation on international and official national fields is needed for the stabilization of indigenous communities. These crises in traditional life are associated with the impact of climate change.



Figure 1.1 A group of indigenous people in Ocenia

## Definition of Key Terms

### Indigenous People

Indigenous people are communities that have historical continuity with pre-colonial societies and identify as distinct from dominant national groups. Examples include Aboriginal Australians, Māori, and Polynesian islanders. There are more than 370 million indigenous people spread across 70 countries worldwide. Practicing unique traditions, they retain social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the societies in which they live.

### Empowerment

Empowerment is a noun that refers to the process of gaining freedom and power to do what you want or to control what happens to you. In terms of indigenous people, it often includes governmental independence, human rights for citizens, economical growth of individuals or the state's general economy and cultural protection and lifestyle with senses of freedom.

### Cultural Preservation

Culture is the attitudes, behaviour, opinions, etc. of a particular group of people within society. Cultural preservation for indigenous people of Oceania include protection of unique traditions, rituals, language and knowledge systems that are specified for the community. Traditional values of Oceania are currently under the risk of disappearing or degeneracy due to globalization or colonization of the past four centuries.

### Land Rights

Legal or traditional claims that Indigenous people hold over ancestral lands. Before 17. Century, the discovery of Oceania by developed countries of the time, Indigenous people have been living in Oceanian countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea. It is socially definite that the culture is highly connected with the land that it is built and actively lived. Therefore, land rights are critical to cultural survival and often tied to environmental stewardship.

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

An international document adopted in 2007 that outlines the rights of Indigenous peoples globally, including self-determination, cultural preservation, and land ownership guided by the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, and good faith in the fulfilment of the obligations assumed by States in accordance with the Charter.

## Background Information

### Historical marginalization of Indigenous communities

The Indigenous people of Oceania firstly started to live in Papua New Guinea and Pacific Islands nearly 3000 years ago. From the 16th Century, the Europeans started to discover the continent Oceania including the countries Australia, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand. Indigenous communities have owned different cultural heritages that reflect spiritual beliefs from their ancestors by wood carving and sculptures.

Many Indigenous populations in Oceania were forcibly displaced during colonization, denied access to education, law or health and subjected to assimilation policies which proposed weakening Indigenous traditions and culture. Therefore, the mentioned communities have suffered from lack of equality and human rights in public areas and government agencies of European states. These historical injustices have left long-lasting social and economic impacts. The destruction and erasure of Indigenous history has a corrosive and corruptive effect on today's lifestyle of Indigenous communities of Pacific Islander countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea.

### *Contemporary Challenges and Inequality*

Indigenous people often faced challenges due to European opportunities and modernity that include lifestyle, clothing, military and eating habits of time different from the survival parts of a simpler life in Oceanian islands. Furthermore,

Indigenous communities have suffered long from higher rates of poverty, lower life expectancy, and limited access to healthcare and education. In rural and island communities, these problems also include geographic isolation.

Today, with these problems still ongoing, Indigenous peoples in Oceania are unable to exercise their rights in democracy, health or education. The land and human rights restrictions that began with European colonialism continue with discrimination in public spaces and social life. The average age of death and the rate of university attendance of Indigenous peoples are much lower in Oceania than in European countries. New Zealand and Australia have taken steps to address these problems.

### Role of traditional knowledge

Indigenous knowledge systems are mostly specified for each mentioned community, in terms of disseminating information and expanding knowledge. They offer sources about climate adaptation and sustainable living. Integrating this knowledge into national and global strategies is essential for resilience and empowerment.

Traditional knowledge of Indigenous people include an ecological life style in each field of life such as the fire-stick farming of Aborjins on the field of agriculture, social order and justice such as tikanga of Maori on the field of law, source of knowledge such as nature observing, hunting, agriculture and craftsmanship on the field of education. Moreover, it contributes to the world about global warming and climate change, therefore the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasizes it is essential for decreasing the effect of global warming.

### Impact of climate change

Extreme weather conditions and geographical changes caused by industrialization of Europeans have been disproportionately affecting the cultural practices of Indigenous communities. Global climate change has a major impact on indigenous peoples due to their lives in the low-lying coastal areas of

Australia, New Zealand or Papua New Guinea and on the Pacific islands. Displacement of Indigenous people threatens the traditional heritage related to environmental factors and values.

Since nearly 1000 BC, the Indigenous communities have been living in Oceania, therefore they have a high knowledge of ecological life-style and an essential cultural heritage on islands of Oceania. As the sea level rises, The indigenous culture in Oceania is disappearing and the environmentally friendly knowledge they have gained so far is becoming invalid because of climate change. The Indigenous populations in Fiji have confirmed that the traditional agriculture calendar does not work anymore. The Indigenous communities are not represented equally in international climate policies, even though they are at risk of drought, flood and hurricane on Oceanian Islands.

## **Major Countries and Organizations Involved**

### **Australia**

In 1788, British discoverers landed on the shores of New South Wales and displaced Indigenous people and restricted their access to water sources and hunting areas ignoring the land and human rights of Indigenous communities. During the 19th and 20th Centuries, the state started an assimilation policy for indigenous people on health, education and social life, however that had caused various inequality consequences. From the 1960s, Indigenous communities have started to ask for rights to be a part of social and political life. With "1967 Referendum" and "1992 Mabo Decision, Parliament of Australia recognized the Indigenous communities and their land rights.

Today, Australia is one of the major countries that owns Indigenous communities, therefore the Australian government has taken steps to strengthen Indigenous culture, traditions and lifestyles through programs such as "Closing the Gap," yet the issues about land rights, international recognition and national or international political representation are unresolved. Some universities and local governments have been carrying out projects with

## New Zealand

With nearly 8000 Indigenous people, New Zealand is considered a global leader in Indigenous rights, with the Treaty of Waitangi that signed in 1840 between Maori and Britain Kingdom serving as a foundation for Māori self-governance. Besides, the translations of the treaty are different in English and Maori, therefore it causes misunderstandings and displacement or exclusion for Indigenous communities by Britain Kingdom. Efforts in education, health and language revival are ongoing by Maori language education at schools and provide education and health equality between Pakeha (the European discoverer communities) and Maori.

## Papua New Guinea

With over 800 Indigenous languages and dozens of cultural groups, Indigenous people of Papua New Guinea struggle with development challenges such as displacement because of industrialization or difficulty in accessing public services because of traditional lifestyle in rural areas, but have local-level governments with Indigenous leadership and legal recognition. Papua New Guinea constitution accepts the land rights of Indigenous communities, which has a rate of 97% of Papua New Guinea and supports the protection of Indigenous culture.

Indigenous communities in Papua New Guinea are nearly 97% of the population and with official recognition by the government, they protect their human and land rights mostly. However, the Indigenous communities, which usually live in the countryside, are not able to access education and health opportunities despite their present rights. Moreover, Indigenous land rights are often violated by the government for extractive economic development projects. Such economic moves can lead to displacement and human right violations.

## United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII)

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) is a high-level advisory body to the Economic and Social Council. The Forum was established on 28 July 2000 with the mandate to deal with indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights. It provides expert guidance on Indigenous matters and monitors implementation of UNDRIP.

UNPFII ensures that the problems and challenges Indigenous communities are discussed globally. The current issues of countries such as Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu are debated in UNPFII sessions. UNPFII also emphasizes the protection of culture against human rights violations and climate change as Indigenous people are disproportionately affected by the climate crisis. UNPFII directly gives advice about the empowerment of Indigenous communities, oversees the implementation of UNDRIP and submits a report to ECOSOC when it is needed.

#### United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO is the United Nations agency that promotes education, science, culture, and communication to foster peace and equality worldwide. It supports Indigenous language revitalization and cultural heritage protection, particularly through the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. (2022-2032)

## Timeline of Events

1840	<b>Maori were promised land and human rights by the British Kingdom with the "Waitangi Treaty."</b>
1971	<b>"Aboriginal Tent Embassy" by Australian Indigenous communities became the symbol of Indigenous resistance.</b>
1975	<b>Waitangi Tribunal, the legal mechanism to address historical Māori grievances, established</b>
1982	<b>UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations (UNWRAP) founded as the first UN body that focuses solely on Indigenous issues</b>
1992	<b>With the "Mabo Decision" by the Australia High Court, the Indigenous were officially recognized by the Australian government.</b>
1993	<b>The process of claiming on traditional lands have legalized by Australian government with "Native Title Act."</b>
1993	<b>The UN declared the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995–2004) to raise awareness.</b>

2007	<b>The UN declared the rights of Indigenous people to land, culture, language and self-determination with "UNDRIP."</b>
2008	<b>The Australian Government officially apologized from Indigenous communities because of the lack of human and land rights and assimilation policies that corrupt indigenous culture.</b>
2014	<b>With the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples (WCIP), UN member states emphasized partnership with indigenous people.</b>
2020	<b>Māori Health Authority established in New Zealand.</b>
2023	<b>“Voice to Parliament” Referendum, which proposed constitutional representation for Indigenous Australian, failed by public vote.</b>
2023	<b>COP28 Indigenous Climate Action is presented as a solution to climate change.</b>

### **Relevant UN Resolutions and Other Documents**

[ILO Convention No. 169 \(1989\)](#): It is a convention concerning Indigenous and tribal people. Legally binding for ratifying states; supports consultation, participation, and land rights.

[Paris Agreement \(2015\)](#): Includes recognition of Indigenous knowledge in climate policy.

[UNDRIP \(2007\)](#): Recognizes Indigenous rights to land, culture, language, identity, self-governance, and participation.

[WCIP Outcome Document \(2014\)](#): Affirms states' commitment to partnering with Indigenous peoples in governance and development.

[Resolution establishing the World Conference on Indigenous People \(2011\)](#): This resolution aimed to empower the projects of UNDRIP by cooperating Indigenous communities politically and socially.

[Resolution defining the scope and modalities of the Conference \(2012\)](#): this resolution provided detailed organizational arrangements for the World Conference on Indigenous People emphasizing full and active participation of Indigenous communities to the conference.

[Resolution on the rights of Indigenous People \(2012\)](#): It encouraged the implementation of UNDRIP and states to develop policies in consultation with Indigenous people addressing the issues on education, health care and governance.

## **Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue**

### **Australia's "Closing the Gap" Initiative**

"Closing the Gap," is a political attempt made by the Australian government in 2008 to provide equality on life qualities of Australian and Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal communities. Main purposes of the project are providing equality on life expectancy, decreasing the rate of child death, increasing the access to pre-school education and the rate of literacy, increasing the rate of employment and home ownership. "Closing the Gap" is revised in 2020 as "National Agreement on Closing the Gap," and it has designed cooperating with Indigenous communities for the first time. Reforms are made in four fields: Shared

decision-making, the better management of Indigenous data, designing services specific to Indigenous communities, more resource transfers to Indigenous communities. In the result of the project, some projects led by Indigenous have succeeded and there have been improvements in child health services and vaccination rates in some areas.

### Waitangi Tribunal (New Zealand)

Waitangi Tribunal is an official observing organ that was founded in 1995, which purposely supervises Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Waitangi Treaty) and complaints of Indigenous people.

The Waitangi Treaty was signed between the Maori and the Kingdom of Britain in 1840. It caused misunderstandings as it has meanings in English and Maori translations. Waitangi Tribunal debates about the complaints of Indigenous and evaluates the violations of the state such as land grabbing, forced assimilation, discrimination in education and health. Its final decisions are not binding, but its political and social impact is enormous, therefore the state has paid compensation or returned land in compliance with the Tribunal's recommendations on many occasions.

### UNPFII Reports

United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues is founded in 2010 to advising on issues of Indigenous people such as lack of human rights, land rights, development and culture to the UN, globally speaking for Indigenous people and their participation in decision-making process and disseminating policy advice through collaboration with UN agencies, governments and civil society.

### Possible Solutions

Strengthening the empowerment and protection of Indigenous communities of Oceania requires a sensitive approach from UN, individuals and member states. Governments should ensure that the land and human rights of

Indigenous communities are protected and the access to the sources, hospitals or schools of Indigenous people should be provided. The application of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) must become a legal requirement in any development or extractive activity on Indigenous lands. The Indigenous communities should be represented in international areas and self- governance mechanisms are highly required. Therefore , the social representation of Indigenous communities among locals of Oceania is essential. Governments should invest in bilingual and culturally appropriate education systems that include Indigenous languages, histories, and values. The present knowledge should be protected and empowered. Moreover, climate adaptation policies should include Indigenous perspectives and international funding mechanisms must allocate resources specifically for Indigenous climate actions. Lastly, The role of UN bodies such as the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) and the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) must be expanded for the achievement of the goals.

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