**GLOBAL GREENGRANTS FUND**

**FEEDBACK ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLE**

**JUNE 12, 2020.**

**How does the State collect and analyze information on the impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous peoples and individuals? Is disaggregated data on Indigenous peoples, including health impacts, available?**

Our networks sent in responses for this question from Brazil, Kenya, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Peru and India.

In Brazil, the State is collecting information through the Special Indigenous Health Districts (DSEIs).This information only captures Indigenous communities in rural/village settings, excluding the majority living in cities, and those visiting their families and friends or passerby. Indigenous communities in Brazil see this as another form of discrimination as many ethnic groups do not have recognized territories.

In Kenya, the Narok County government is undertaking priority testing on Maasai Indigenous communities living at the border points. The testing comes after the area received testing kits from the National Public Health Laboratory. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in many other Indigenous communities that we partner with. In the Peruvian Amazon for example, testing has been restricted and focused primarily in urban centers with no specific guidelines for remote Indigenous groups inhabiting native communal territories. Indigenous communities lack telephone and radio connections to share information about the virus. The biggest concern at hand is keeping the pandemic from spreading to remote Indigenous communities in the first place.

In Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the states provide overall statistics on the pandemic. However, there is no disaggregated data on population categories, much less on Indigenous Peoples. Information hardly gets to the grassroots level and in many cases is denied/misperceived by the communities. As such, most of our advisors have been at the forefront in remote and conflict areas providing firsthand information to communities who are vulnerable, not only about the pandemic and its mode of transmission but also on means of preventing it.

In India, the government has absolutely no mechanism in place to collect data on the health status of Indigenous Peoples in the country, not even during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the healthcare system in rural and forest areas where most Indigenous communities live is almost non-existent. The only disaggregated data on Indigenous communities the State has is the population count, which happens every 10 years.

**How are Indigenous Peoples supported in their own initiatives to fight the pandemic, protect health and provide assistance in their own communities? What lessons can be learnt from Indigenous traditional practices and community-based programs in lock down and emergency?**

Most Indigenous communities have turned to traditional methods of healing and prevention to help them during this pandemic. For example, ninety percent of the population in Madagascar is turning to traditional and herbal medicine to prevent the spread of the virus. One of the remedies that is being used is Covid Organix, a beverage that has historically been used to treat malaria but is believed to cure the virus. According to the Malagasy Institute of Applied Research, the organization that developed the beverage, the remedy consists of a number of Indigenous herbs, along with *artemesia annua*, a plant with proven efficacy for malaria treatment.

In India, Indigenous communities lack sophisticated healthcare systems to deal with the pandemic. Most Indigenous communities have started practicing self-care. Physical distancing is a daunting task for now, but communities are trying to avoid gatherings and wearing locally made masks. The essential annual cultural festivals are either cancelled or observed with less participation of community people. Indigenous Peoples believe that because they mostly depend on naturally grown food bases, their food habits are endowed with sanitizing and preventive elements. Moreover, some believe the traditional lifestyle in sync with the nature also helps them stay safer from such ailments.

Self-Isolation is not a new phenomenon for Indigenous Peoples. It’s a historic strategy that most communities use to avoid mixing with external agents. In the Brazilian Amazon, given the potential threats and obstacles, many Indigenous communities have decided that the most viable option is to restrict or close their own borders, with action aimed largely at preventing viral transmission. Many groups have already restricted their borders on their own, especially people accustomed to lockdown during previous epidemics. There are very different realities in such a large and diverse territory including the construction of quarantine posts for visiting relatives. Spiritual strengthening rituals are being performed more frequently. Patients with mild symptoms are treated with traditional medicine to keep the fever down while serious cases are referred to physicians. For example, the Kambeba village of the lower Rio Negro had contact with Covid 19. People affected received community healing and they all survived.

A similar approach is being experienced in the Philippines. Without medical services, many communities in remote areas are taking steps to isolate themselves amid fears of food insecurity, which has become a serious obstacle to maintaining livelihoods. In East Africa for example, open air markets have been closed down. These are places where Indigenous Peoples can sell their livestock (goats, sheep and cows) and in turn get food, such as maize, flour, sugar, tea leaves and other produce, as well as household items, for their families. With the closure of these markets, hunger has become a real concern for a large portion of the population, and it also impacts incomes as locals are not able to sell their livestock and wares. For many Indigenous and vulnerable communities, this has left them with limited access to food.

**Please provide information on how States of emergency may contribute to threats or aggravate ongoing human rights violations against Indigenous Peoples, including with regards to the freedom of assembly and the protection of their traditional lands and resources. What measures have been taken to protect the lands, territories and resources of Indigenous Peoples against invasions and land-grabbing by external actors during the pandemic?**

In an article published by Cultural [Survival](https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/9-ways-indigenous-rights-are-risk-during-covid-19-crisis), land rights defenders are at a risk. That some governments are using this crisis to specifically target land rights defenders (LRDs) is both concerning and revealing. Quarantine measures have made it difficult for land rights defenders facing threats to file complaints with police and access judicial remedies.

According to [International Land Coalition,](https://africa.landcoalition.org/en/newsroom/how-covid-19-affecting-land-rights-africa/) measures put in place to combat the COVID-19 pandemic could affect the implementation of land laws and regulations that provide tenure security for Indigenous Peoples. For example, the African Court has scheduled a hearing in June at Arusha, Tanzania to discuss reparations of the Ogiek Community to the Mau forest. Unfortunately, the Tanzania-Kenya border is closed and the Court may need to adjourn to an unknown date.

The ongoing Implementation of community land laws in Kenya has been affected. The law lays out the steps for communities to acquire title deeds to their ancestral land. Most of Indigenous Peoples’ land is classified as community land, meaning that under the Community Land law, this land should be recognized, protected and registered under the communities. Around two-thirds of Kenya’s land is customarily owned by communities without formal title deeds, making it easy for corrupt individuals to sell or lease the land without the communities’ knowledge. Most Indigenous movement leaders are based in the rural areas and have been isolated to virtual platforms that discourses on the implementation strategies. Equally, the closing of land administration services as part of lockdown measures is detrimental to accessing important land documents for environmentalist and land rights defenders. Land grabbers are taking advantage of the pandemic to increase their attacks on Indigenous leaders and consequently invasion of their territories. In Kenya, there is a flare-up of ethnic clashes on the border of Narok and Nakuru counties that has left six people dead and at least 13 others injured. Security officials link ongoing clashes to land issues culminating from incitements by local politicians most of whom are beneficiaries of massive logging at the Mau forest.

In Indonesia, land conflicts have escalated with the spread of Covid-19. Rural community farmers are clashing with Palm oil companies. There is an effort by the government to enforce lockdown and capitalize on the pandemic to stop all activities that oppose companies destroying the environment. In North Sumatra province for example, farmers allege that a palm oil company is illegally clearing land inside a mangrove forest by burning. Indigenous Peoples are kept from forests because of restrictions on movement, making it easier for illegal loggers and companies to encroach their lands.

In India, the lockdown situation is being used by the government as a suitable setting to escalate repression on Indigenous Peoples who have been struggling to protect their land, forests, and water sources. At the macro level, various environmental laws have been twisted to sanction environmentally devastating projects, such as for large-scale mining (coal, bauxite, iron ore, etc.), big dams, extensive monoculture plantations, and polluting factories. At least 30 such mega projects have been given a nod by the central government in the past two months without the mandatory environmental and social impact assessments done. Even the most important part of the process – public consultation – was done away with before sanctioning these mega projects. In the state of Odisha, just within a week into the lockdown, 35 houses of an Indigenous community were razed to dust and hundreds of the Indigenous People were rendered homeless near a wildlife sanctuary in order to carry out plantations by the forest department. In the state Jharkhand, the forest department started to dig trenches and put up nurseries for plantations and other activities on the land legally owned by Indigenous Peoples during the lockdown. As local Indigenous communities protested these illegal activities, many of them have been charged with criminal cases. Due to restrictions on freedom of movements, people are not able to defend their territories. Even Gram Sabhas (village assemblies) – which are legally empowered bodies under the Panchayat Extension to Schedule Areas (PESA) Act and the Forest Rights Act (FRA) – are also not allowed. On the other hand, forest officials have been caught by villagers trying to steal and illegally transport freshly cut trees in some places in Jharkhand. To worsen the situation for IPs, the authorities are not allowing them to use local resources to even meet daily needs and for construction of houses. As people’s gatherings and protests are banned due to the lockdown, the State is also using this situation to arrest activists and students arbitrarily by picking them from their houses. More than 1500 hundred people have been arrested so far during the past two months. Most of them are from minority groups (especially Muslims) and Indigenous communities. In such a vicious environment, there is no expectation for any measure to protect people’s rights. Rather, there is an all-out attempt to curtail rights completely.

Environmentalists in India are criticizing government moves to continue to approve major industrial projects, and to relax the nation’s environmental assessment rules. The COVID-19 pandemic has complicated public oversight and canceled potential field reviews. On 23 March, The Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change issued a new draft policy on assessing the environmental impacts of large projects. Among other changes, the draft proposes reducing the time allowed for public comment on assessments, and allowing more projects to avoid the public comment process entirely.

Natural resources extraction increase the risk and spread of Covid-19 in many Indigenous Peoples territories. While communities struggle to survive, mining operations and logging efforts continue under lockdown, deemed as essential. In Brazil, report of continuing land invasions, killings of Indigenous leaders, and rising numbers of COVID-19 infections inside Indigenous reserves has raised concerns about the increased vulnerability of Indigenous communities to violence and infection by illegal extraction gangs as the pandemic rages. The report from Brazil is timely: At a time of massive encroachment on the Amazonian rainforest, COVID-19 stopped monitoring by environmental and human rights monitoring bodies which further emboldened illegal loggers, miners and land squatters. January, February and March 2020, the rate of deforestation increased by 56% - the rights of indigenous people to territory has been completely eroded and now facilitated by the pandemic. Brazil currently has the highest and fastest rate of expansion of the virus in the world, and Indigenous communities are especially vulnerable and several deaths of Indigenous people have been recorded but data is scant and suppressed by the government.

In Peru, extractive industries are still in operation, many of them overlapping with Indigenous territories. Workers are going back and forth from cities to the rainforest and are taking very few safety precautions. Over 200 mining workers and one oil worker has already tested positive for COVID-19 and the Indigenous communities are worried about the risk of infection.