



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič, Permanent Observer of the Holy See
to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva
at the 45th Session of the Human Rights Council
Item 3 – Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur
on the rights of indigenous peoples
Geneva, 24 September 2020

Madam President,

The Delegation of the Holy See takes note of the report with its specific focus on the severe and disproportionate impact of the COVID pandemic on indigenous communities. The Holy See expresses its solidarity and closeness with them, so often marginalized and, yet, keenly aware of their unique identity and contribution to society.

Indigenous people represent 6 percent of the world's population and experience some of the highest rates of poverty, leaving them far more vulnerable to the current challenges we are facing, such as climate change, natural disasters, and the ongoing COVID crisis.¹ Lack of access to medical supplies and increased food and water insecurity, due to the restrictions on their freedom of movement, have only exacerbated the effect of the current health pandemic on their communities. In addition, the majority of indigenous people, especially women, work in the informal economy which, during the pandemic, was particularly hard hit.

Regrettably, in many parts of the world, the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples continue to be violated, including through inadequate access to justice and education, displacement due to wars or natural disasters, the arbitrary arrests of indigenous leaders, as well as the violation of their cultural rights and particularly their right to self-determination over their land and territories.

For indigenous communities, their land, and the natural resources on which they depend, are closely linked not only to their identities, and cultures but also to their physical and spiritual well-being. Indigenous communities safeguard 80 percent of the world's biodiversity, contributing dramatically to global ecological integrity.² For them, "land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors [...], a sacred space with

¹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/indigenouspeoples>

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which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best”.³

Last year, Pope Francis, in the concluding document of the Synod on the Pan-Amazon Region, called upon the international community to restore justice for indigenous people and protect them from land expropriation and economic exploitation through stronger national and international legislations. Indigenous people “have been impacted by norms, public policies, and practices favoring the expansion of areas of natural resource extraction and infrastructural mega-project developments, which exert pressure on ancestral indigenous territories. This is accompanied [...] by the grave and widespread impunity in the region regarding human rights violations and obstacles to obtaining justice.”⁴

Madam President,

The Delegation of the Holy See urges to give special care and attention to indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. They are not merely one minority among others. They are principal dialogue partners and should be included in all decision-making processes at the political level, especially those affecting them directly. Efforts to include their voices and concerns have been particularly lacking during COVID pandemic, where indigenous communities were often ignored and even forgotten in the responses to the pandemic.

This current crisis is a wake-up call for all of us: man is not the owner of nature, but the one who manages it. We are called to develop new ways of living⁵ in accordance with our human nature in setting up development policies at international, regional, and local levels that truly involve indigenous people and respect their specific identity and culture. This will constitute a formidable tool in our efforts to promote a more profound and broad understanding of authentic and integral human development.

Thank you, Madam President.

³ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, 146.

⁴ <http://www.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.html>