

WATERLOO CATHOLIC DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

MODEL UNITED NATIONS



GENERAL ASSEMBLY

PROTECTING THE INTERESTS OF INDIGENOUS PERSONS

FEBRUARY 17, 2026

COP30, the latest United Nations conference on climate change held in Brazil, was touted as the “Indigenous climate change conference”. One overriding theme was recognizing the impact of climate change on Indigenous communities and making sure that indigenous voices were heard at the conference. This turned out to be a tremendous “miss” in the minds of many Indigenous delegates, many of whom felt that oil company interests were better served than Indigenous interests. The key complaints included lack of real participation, a failure to address the main issue of fossil fuels, a catering to corporate interests, key disputes over territorial rights and the intervention by the military and police to peaceful Indigenous protests. The continued conflicts felt by Indigenous groups at COP30 are representative of the continuing failure to meet the needs of Indigenous groups worldwide.

While attempts have been made to address key Indigenous issues many of them continue to exist. In fact there seems to be little success in alleviating the problems faced by Indigenous communities. On going issues faced by Indigenous communities include:

1. Continued loss of traditional lands by governments and corporations. This includes land lost to the clearing of rainforest in the Amazon to make way for agriculture, the taking of lands in Africa and North America for natural resources like minerals and the appropriation of land for major projects like pipelines and power plants.
2. Loss of culture amid assimilation. This includes loss of language, traditions and traditional knowledge systems. It is said that a language and tradition can be lost within two generations. With the thousands of languages that have been identified, maintaining language and traditions is easy to lose.
3. Continued socio-economic disparities, especially with high levels of poverty, low levels of employment, lack of substantial training and poor housing conditions. Indigenous populations are subject to poor water quality, exposure to harmful elements and lack of infrastructure.
4. Poor health standards including high levels of child mortality, lower life expectancy, and limited access to adequate health care. Alcoholism, drug addiction and high suicide rates are all problems faced by Indigenous communities.
5. Continuing human rights violations including limited legal protection, and forced relocation programs. Higher rates of incarceration of Indigenous groups in general prison populations remain a constant concern.
6. Lack of meaningful democratic participation especially with regard to real decision making powers and self-governance. Except in limited geographic designed regions, Indigenous populations have little powers over decision making processes that affect them.
7. Disproportionate effects of climate change on vulnerable populations. This is especially true where the consequences of colonialism has taken away traditional hunting, gathering and agricultural activities.
8. Continued effects of historical trauma including ongoing effects of residential schools, colonialism and continued discrimination.

Some of the root causes of continued Indigenous include

- a. Continued colonialism and loss of traditional land
- b. Continued system discrimination
- c. Continued conflict of resource ownership and resource management

There have been attempts, particularly at the United Nations, to identify and rectify issues faced by Indigenous communities globally. One key issue is the difficulty of identifying a uniform definition of what it means to be “Indigenous”. There are approximately 5,000 different groups of Indigenous groups globally representing approximately 476 million people (approximately 6.2% of the global population). These groups are far from universal in culture and tradition. They are found in over 90 countries and represent over 4,000 different forms of spoken language. Trying to find a unified approach to meet the needs of the global Indigenous population, therefore, is extremely difficult, especially when many of the individual groups have individual, and in some cases, competing needs and aspirations. However, the key problems faced by Indigenous groups including human rights violations by state authorities, continued discrimination, displacement from ancestral land, poverty, lack of adequate education, housing and health care are commonly shared.

If there is a common denominator to identifying as Indigenous it would include:

- Self-identifying as an Indigenous Person.
- Sharing ancestral heritage with peoples who lived in particular regions before colonization
- Shared history to particular regions and their natural resources.
- Recognizing of a distinct set of languages, cultures and beliefs that existed before colonization

In fairness, the United Nations has made attempts to address the key issues facing Indigenous populations around the world. The most substantive resolution passed in the General Assembly is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, first passed in 2007 and reaffirmed in 2022. (A/77/460). Specifically, the 2022 resolution calls for the following;

- Stresses that Indigenous Peoples, including those who are in voluntary isolation or initial contact, have the right of self-determination, and can choose to live in accordance with their traditions;
- Encourages the active engagement of Indigenous Peoples in the implementation of the outcome document of the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, and invites the General Assembly to consider holding a Follow Up World Conference on Indigenous Peoples to follow up on the implementation of the outcome document;
- Encourages Member States and the private sector to ensure a more sustainable, environment friendly and responsible corporate behaviour that addresses the well-being and the adverse environmental impact on the lands and territories traditionally inhabited by Indigenous Peoples of some business activities;
- Recalls the launch of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-32 and encourages Member States to adopt national action plans to

preserve, revitalize and promote Indigenous languages, including sign languages;

- Notes the work of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in the preparation of draft general recommendation No. 39 on the rights of Indigenous women and girls, which was adopted by CEDAW in October 2022.

The United Nations also recognized the decade from 2022 to 2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages ([Resolution A/RES/74/135](#)) (IDIL 2022-2032)

The United Nations has the the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues which consists of sixteen members. It acts as an advisory board to the United Nations and is designed to represent the diversity and regional distribution of the indigenous people around the world. Two obvious limitations to the permanent forum is the limited representation of actual Indigenous groups around the world and it's limited role as an advisory body.

Finally, Indigenous concerns are part of the Sustainable Development Goals as designed and implemented by the United Nations. However, Indigenous issues are mentioned only 6 times in the SDG resolution (3 times in the introduction, once in Target 2.3 which calls for the doubling of small-scale food producers, particularly Indigenous Peoples, once in Target 4.5 which calls for equal access to all levels of education, including Indigenous Peoples and once in the follow-up and review section).

Despite the efforts of the UN, it is clear that not enough action has been taken to alleviate the suffering of Indigenous Peoples world wide.

### Key Issues for Discussion

1. How can effective actions be taken to alleviate the concerns that Indigenous peoples experience world wide?
2. How can Indigenous voices become more clearly heard and accepted by governments world wide?
3. How can Indigenous ways of life be more effectively protected?
4. How can the quality of life of Indigenous populations be more effectively accessed?
5. Should the Sustainable Development Goals be amended to include specific Indigenous concerns?
6. Should a clear definition of Indigenous Peoples be incorporated into UN terminology?

### Questions for your country:

1. How pervasive are the problems experienced by Indigenous populations world wide felt in your country?

2. How have Indigenous populations been traditionally treated within your country?
3. What meaningful steps has your country taken in dealing with Indigenous issues?

#### Resources:

##### Articles

How a Torn-off Indigenous Headdress Became Symbol of Cultural and Structural Affront at COP30. Earth.org, December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2025. <https://earth.org/how-a-torn-off-indigenous-headdress-became-symbol-of-cultural-and-structural-affront-at-cop30/>

Indigenous Peoples' Rights. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/indigenous-peoples/>

##### UN Documents

United Nations. Fight Racism. Indigenous Peoples. <https://www.un.org/en/fight-racism/vulnerable-groups/indigenous-peoples>

United Nations. United Nations Human Rights. Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-indigenous-peoples>

##### UN Resolutions

General Assembly. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, first passed in 2007 and reaffirmed in 2022. (A/77/460).

International Decade of Indigenous Languages ([Resolution A/RES/74/135](#)) (IDIL 2022-2032)