

Indigenous determinants of health: a unified call for progress



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The UN General Assembly formally declared 1993 as the International Year of the World's Indigenous People, with a "view to strengthening international cooperation for the solution of problems faced by Indigenous communities in areas such as human rights, the environment, development, education, and health".¹ In 2000, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) was formally established with health as one of its six mandated areas of focus. The UNPFII supported the work to ensure the 2007 adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), a human rights instrument specifying the rights of Indigenous Peoples worldwide, including the right to health and social security.² Yet, globally, substantial challenges remain for Indigenous Peoples.

More than 476 million Indigenous Peoples reside in over 90 countries and they represent at least 5000 unique cultures.³ Despite comprising about 6% of the world's population, Indigenous Peoples are disproportionately affected by poverty.⁴ Many continue to report experiencing barriers to and being prevented from accessing basic rights and freedoms, including the prerequisites of health: peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable eco system,

sustainable resources, social justice, and equity.⁵ In some countries Indigenous Peoples are denied the fundamental right to identify as Indigenous Peoples. This lack of identification amplifies human rights violations and perpetuates data erasure, as there is no systematic collection of data available to support strategy and development for Indigenous Peoples' rights and needs.

Several publications have reported on the health status of Indigenous Peoples in different nation states,⁶ but few have focused on the health and wellbeing indicators from an Indigenous worldview.^{5,7} In 2022, Indigenous Peoples identified a crucial need to establish a framework on the Indigenous determinants of health derived from Indigenous Peoples' communities to guide the UN and "member states in the strategy, policy-setting and actions taken" under the Sustainable Development Goals.⁸ Almost 30 years from the International Year of the World's Indigenous People, and 16 years since UNDRIP, for the first time a study by members of UNPFII and the Indigenous Determinants of Health Working Group (IDHWG) on the determinants of Indigenous health was formally considered and adopted at the 22nd session of the UNPFII in April, 2023—the first global Indigenous-led organisational effort to specifically increase visibility and awareness of the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples to UN member states and entities.⁸ This UNPFII study makes a number of key recommendations on the important connections between territories, cultures, and health for Indigenous Peoples' community wellbeing.⁸ The "Health of Mother Earth" is highlighted with specific calls for ensuring sustainable Indigenous food systems and land and water protections, which includes the protection of Indigenous traditional medicines.⁸ The member study emphasises the need to move towards implementation of key priorities to ensure intergenerational healing and the decolonisation of the determinants of health landscape for Indigenous Peoples (panel).⁸

Substantial barriers exist in advancing these UNPFII and IDHWG recommendations.⁸ Specific implementation targets and accountability mechanisms for Indigenous health and wellbeing will be difficult to operationalise. In addition to Indigenous Peoples not being recognised in a number of nation states, there

Panel: Key priority areas for addressing the determinants of Indigenous health

- WHO and other local, national, and international health agencies to explicitly recognise "Indigeneity" and "colonialism" as overarching determinants of health
- Direct implementation support from all nation states with regard to operationalising the 76th World Health Assembly resolution passed on The Health of Indigenous Peoples (A76/A/CONF./1) in May, 2023⁹
- The development of a Global Action Plan on the Health of Indigenous Peoples to be led and informed by Indigenous Peoples and communities with outcome benchmarks and progress timelines delineated
- Local, national, and international policy recognition and implementation that connects Indigenous Peoples health and land and water rights as intrinsically connected to the planet's wellbeing
- Direct support from individual nation states to ensure the design and development of national implementation plans led by Indigenous Peoples and communities

Some of the text for this panel is adapted from the study Indigenous determinants of health in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.⁸

have been decades of human rights violations, such as forced assimilation and relocation agendas; broken treaties; racism and political marginalisation; and a lack of overarching free, prior, and informed consent.^{5,7,10–12} Indigenous Peoples are additionally too often viewed through a deficit-based lens that minimises community strengths and abilities at local, national, and international levels of influence.¹³ For example, despite an increasing presence of Indigenous Peoples with the expertise to lead large policy and implementation initiatives, local, national, and international agencies typically appoint non-Indigenous “experts” to design, implement, and oversee Indigenous-specific initiatives, perpetuating colonial and patriarchal approaches antithetical to the recommendations in the UNPFII report.⁸

Indigenous Peoples’ communities, including Indigenous scholars and health professionals, have long advocated for strengths-based approaches within public health and wellness research, within interventions and funding mechanisms, and with regard to health policy implementation.¹⁴ Ensuring respect for and elevation of Indigenous Peoples’ brilliance and strengths-based approaches¹⁴ in advancing culturally grounded solutions for all areas of health will therefore be crucial for addressing the Indigenous determinants of health across all practice areas, levels of health-care service delivery, research, and health policy.^{13–15} Additionally, Indigenous Peoples are recognised through varied national and international mechanisms as self-determined peoples,¹⁶ and therefore specific and delineated actions to address the key priority areas shown in the panel should be mobilised on the ground from within Indigenous Peoples’ communities and be specific to unique and diverse geopolitical and cultural contexts.

We are living in a pivotal time in human history. Our planet, Mother Earth, is in crisis. Indigenous Peoples steward 80% of the world’s remaining biodiversity¹⁷ and, therefore, the wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples is an explicit determinant of planetary health.¹⁸ The Indigenous determinants of health are not only for Indigenous Peoples, but also have a benefit that is intimately connected to the future survival of all humanity and the planet. The strengths and wisdom inherent to Indigenous Peoples are “intrinsicly connected to everything that exists on the planet”.⁸ This reality demands nation

states, the UN, WHO, and other entities act now on the Indigenous determinants of health.

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