



48th Session of the Human Rights Council - Situation of human rights of indigenous peoples facing the COVID-19 pandemic with a special focus on the right to participation

Stakeholder submission by the Anglican Consultative Council

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Since the beginning of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, pre-existing inequalities and discrimination have only worsened, and indigenous communities have been disproportionately impacted. At the same time, indigenous peoples have also been at the forefront of vaccination efforts within their communities, creating innovative approaches to spread essential knowledge to end the pandemic. Nonetheless, the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) remains concerned with the lack of consultation with indigenous peoples on the way forward to increase vaccination rates as well as in measures of prevention and treatment of the rising number of cases of the Delta variant. The ACC strongly encourages this panel to review the following challenges faced by indigenous communities during this time:

Historical Trauma and Neglect of Indigenous Communities

Due to the historic neglect and marginalisation of indigenous communities by their countries' governments, indigenous peoples have borne the brunt of the pandemic. Years of underinvestment and lack of access to resources and social services has put them at a disadvantage when the COVID-19 pandemic hit their communities. Additionally, many indigenous people, especially elders, are already at higher risk of exacerbated effects of the virus as they are living with chronic health conditions. They also lack access to routine medical care and health facilities due to the remoteness of many indigenous reserves and discrimination within the health care system. Decades of inadequate funding for basic infrastructure in indigenous communities have also led to disparities in nutrition, housing, and clean water. For these reasons, indigenous peoples were among those most affected by the coronavirus, especially in the Americas where they accounted for 256 of every 100,000 deaths¹, more than any other ethnic group.

Although countries have been ramping up their efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19 and increase vaccination rates, many have been taking a "one size fits all" approach to implementation, which doesn't take into account the nuanced hardships faced by indigenous communities and in some cases their hesitancy in receiving the vaccine. Due to the historical colonial trauma experienced by indigenous communities, during which they were the subjects of unapproved health experiments, mass sterilisations of women of child bearing age without their consent or approval, and other state-sponsored medical violence, indigenous peoples are hesitant to trust their governments again, especially with little

¹ APM Research Lab Staff. (2021, March 5). *The Color of Coronavirus: Covid-19 Deaths by Race and Ethnicity in the U.S.* APM Research Lab. www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race

knowledge on the science behind the vaccine². This makes education and partnerships with trusted indigenous leaders fundamental to stop the advancement of the virus.

The Importance of Church Leaders

Whilst not the case for all indigenous communities, many have adopted a Christian belief system, looking up to indigenous church leaders for guidance and support. As both governments and international health institutions like the World Health Organization continually affirm, the key to ending the spread of COVID-19 is to provide communities with information and assurance from trusted sources³. Church leaders are part of their congregation's community, understanding their nuanced perspectives on COVID-19 and vaccination efforts, and are therefore well placed to provide support in information distribution and counseling, ensuring their communities understand that vaccines are safe and effective. Whilst most indigenous peoples are cautious about health advice from their governments, they are open to guidance from tribal and church leaders.

Given the essential role church leaders can play in ending this pandemic, governments should partner with church leaders, including within indigenous communities, to craft plans of engagement with indigenous communities and provide materials and vaccination sites within reservations and local communities so as to decrease the obstacles to receiving the COVID-19 vaccine.

Indigenous People Leading Vaccination Efforts

Despite their hesitancy to receive a vaccine distributed by governments that formerly harmed them, indigenous peoples have been among those leading the efforts of vaccination within their communities, with Native Americans averaging a 32% vaccination rate as of April 5th, 2021, higher than any other ethnic group⁴. Despite the promotion of national vaccination campaigns, indigenous peoples took it on themselves to create local campaigns that better reflect their collective values so as to persuade those

² Cherofsky, Jess & Juárez López, Bia'ni Madsa'. (2021, March 29). *COVID-19 among Indigenous Peoples, One Year into the Pandemic: Data, Variants, and Vaccines*. Cultural Survival.

www.culturalsurvival.org/news/covid-19-among-indigenous-peoples-one-year-pandemic-data-variants-and-vaccines

³ World Health Organization. (2020). *Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19*. www.who.int/publications/i/item/practical-considerations-and-recommendations-for-religious-leaders-and-faith-based-communities-in-the-context-of-covid-19

⁴ Hill, Latoya & Artiga, Samantha. (2021, April 9). *COVID-19 Vaccination among American Indian and Alaska Native People*. KFF. www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/covid-19-vaccination-american-indian-alaska-native-people/

within their communities that remained hesitant⁵. Part of the reason they have excelled at implementing vaccination efforts is that indigenous people live in tight-knit communities rooted in unity and collective traditions, prioritising collective well-being and their elders.

The success achieved by indigenous communities in both the protection of their communities from the spread of COVID-19 and their high vaccination rates proves that indigenous peoples are essential partners in government efforts to vaccinate their populations, and yet they are often excluded from decision-making processes. Not only is it their right to participate in decision-making and planning around the initiatives that will be implemented within their communities, they are also pivotal in ensuring plans are effective and culturally sensitive, having an insider perspective on the particular obstacles to implementation their communities might present.

Recommendations

In order to ensure “no one is left behind” in the efforts to eradicate COVID-19, it is vital that governments not only allow, but also empower indigenous people to exert autonomy within their own communities. Throughout the pandemic, indigenous peoples have proven to be capable of developing creative responses and solutions that are based on their cultural values rather than rely on the generic messages being distributed by the government among the general public. The ACC urges the Human Rights Council to recognise the importance of indigenous church leaders in these campaigns as they continue to be strong partners for the implementation of sound government initiatives within hesitant communities.

The continued marginalisation of indigenous communities has left many without access to modern health resources, making it more difficult to treat and prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to implement vaccination plans. In many countries, receiving the vaccine requires using the internet and electronic devices, both of which many indigenous people do not have access to. In this sense, governments should prioritise providing local assistance, bringing vaccination sites to indigenous reserves and local communities, circumventing the registration process used in other contexts. They should also prioritise vaccinating indigenous communities as they are more susceptible to contracting the virus due to the lack of access to health care, sanitation measures, and social distancing.

For more details, please contact: Marla Teixeira, Administration and Research Assistant,
marla.teixeira@anglicancommunion.org

⁵ Sohn, Rebecca. (2021, June 23). *Indigenous community outreach jumpstarted COVID vaccinations. Can it get past a slowdown?* Mashable. www.mashable.com/article/indigenous-covid-19-vaccination-programs