



UNICEF call to action

Indigenous communities and the right
to education in times of COVID-19

The situation of indigenous communities' vis-à-vis COVID-19

According to data from the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), in Latin America, there are more than 45 million people who belong to more than 800 groups of indigenous peoples, half of whom consist in less than 3,000 people.

In recent months, there have been serious repercussions of COVID-19 throughout the region, affecting indigenous populations who, in most countries, live in areas with low or insufficient coverage of health and social services.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has warned of: “the situation of special vulnerability in which indigenous peoples find themselves, particularly those in voluntary isolation and initial contact, and highlights the need to develop specific responses for these groups that are respectful of their worldview and cultural diversity.”

Despite the difficult situation created by the pandemic, it is worrying that the official statistics of the countries, even those with a high percentage of indigenous population, do not reflect the true magnitude of COVID-19 cases among the indigenous peoples; this is due to the general tendency to make these especially vulnerable groups invisible¹.

The International Forum of Indigenous Women has pointed out that: “[the pandemic] is increasing the cross-sectoral disadvantages that impact indigenous women, combined with impoverishment, limited access to health services and drinking water, the forced displacement from our territories, the degradation of the natural resources due to extractive industries, energy projects and the consequences of climate change, which generally affect indigenous peoples.”

According to Anne Nuorgan, President of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues: “Indigenous peoples experience a high degree of socio-economic marginalization and are disproportionately at risk in public health emergencies, becoming even more vulnerable during this global pandemic, due to factors such as their lack of access to effective surveillance and early warning systems and adequate health and social services.”

Based on reports from indigenous organizations compiled by FILAC², by mid-June, there were outbreaks in at least 163 indigenous communities in 10 countries, with 7,246 infected indigenous people and 847 deaths. These figures clearly show a marked underreporting of cases of COVID-19 among these populations.

¹ Fund for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean and Foro Indígena del Abya Yala, *Los pueblos indígenas ante la pandemia del COVID-19. Segundo informe regional. Comunidades en riesgo y buenas prácticas*, FILAC and FIAY, [s. l.], 2020, p. 22. (In Spanish only).

² Ibid.



The Education sector's response to COVID-19

Although in previous years, some countries have built [Bilingual Intercultural Education models](#), the sudden and obligatory closure of schools due to the pandemic has more severely affected indigenous girls, boys and adolescents. This situation has highlighted the severity of inequities and inequality in the educational systems of the region, also revealing the scarce investment made by the sector. Furthermore, there are concerns that some countries do not have information systems that would allow knowing the number of indigenous students, how many have disabilities

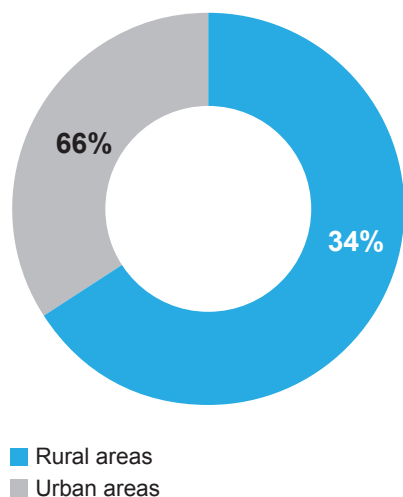
or who require distance education, and how this population is being served.

Under COVID-19, most countries have opted for various forms of distance education using the Internet, television or radio. However, these very means may be a barrier to accessing education in rural areas, due to poor Internet coverage or lack of continuous electricity, or because households do not have the devices for distance learning.

Digital gaps and distance education

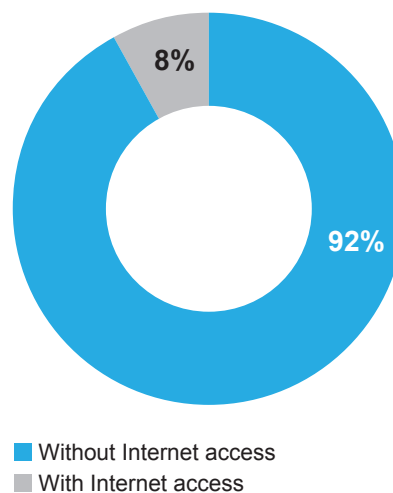
With significant data from some countries of the region, the following figures reflect the access gaps of indigenous children and adolescents to equitable and inclusive distance education in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis.

Internet coverage in **Colombia** according to area of residence



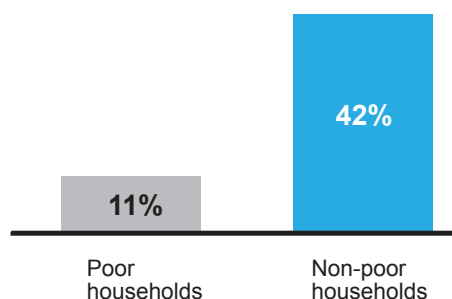
Source: UNICEF. Policy Note UN COVID 19. May 2020

Percentage of indigenous children in **Paraguay** without Internet access



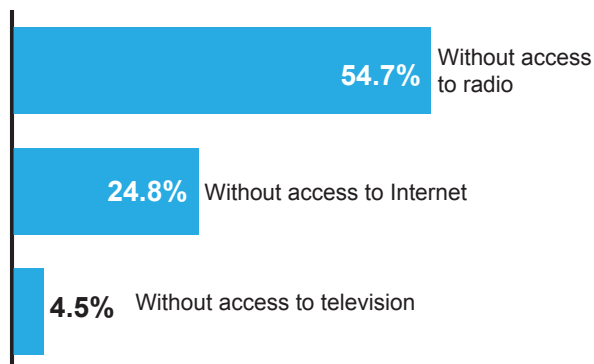
Source: Permanent Household Survey. Indigenous Population (2016-2017). DGEEC (2018).

Internet coverage gaps in **Ecuador** according to poverty level



Source: UNICEF calculations, based on the Ministry of Education survey in 1,141 parishes. April 2020.

Percentage of indigenous children in **Mexico** between 7 and 17 without access to means of distance learning



Source: INEE, UNICEF. Panorama educativo de la población indígena y afrodescendiente. (INNE-UNICEF, 2018).

Main educational challenges for indigenous communities

Although some countries offer distance education in native languages, this is concentrated in the predominant language (Spanish, Portuguese), or the content studied is not culturally relevant. In Peru, for example, of the 47 indigenous languages, distance education programmes are offered only in 9 languages. In Paraguay, educational programmes are broadcast only on community radio stations in 4 of the 19 indigenous languages. In Mexico, distance educational radio materials have been translated into only 15 of the 68 recognized indigenous languages.

Not only is the lack of connectivity and equipment critical, but also, how education is delivered. The implementation of distance learning has revealed the digital gap and the limited development of digital skills of indigenous girls, boys and adolescents, which is aggravated by the insufficient training of teachers on intercultural education specially under these circumstances.

As if that were not enough, amid the situation created by the pandemic, the relationship with the natural environment, ancient wisdom and knowledge, as well as the role played by the wise in the education of younger generations, is being wasted. Furthermore, this difficult state of affairs has highlighted the environmental crisis and the negative impacts on the quality of life of the indigenous populations, which undoubtedly represents an impediment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

In sum, in addition to the severe impact that the pandemic has had on the learning achievements of most indigenous boys, girls and adolescents, inequalities in the quality of educational services clearly emerged. These, combined with the socio-economic conditions of their families can contribute to significantly increasing school dropout, thus limiting opportunities for personal development and the survival of their communities now and in the future.



UNICEF call to action

Considering the above, this [call to action](#) seeks to redouble efforts in education for indigenous populations in order to mitigate the deepening gaps as follows:

1. This situation of crisis may also be an opportunity to launch or relaunch relevant and consistent [bilingual intercultural education](#) programmes geared to the educational needs in each of the countries. They should be focused on strengthening the training of teachers who speak native languages, the expansion of bilingual intercultural primary and secondary education services, and care for people with disabilities. This requires greater resources and the political will to carry out the necessary transformations to serve all indigenous peoples.
2. The above will not be possible without building or reinforcing [information, monitoring and supervision systems](#) that reflect real situation and educational needs of indigenous populations.
3. It is imperative [to intensify efforts and increase investments](#) so that [the distance education programmes](#) implemented by each country reach indigenous communities with quality and cultural relevance, improving digital connectivity, providing equipment (computers, tablets, mobile phones, etc.) and using local media (radio, television, Internet, etc.), all of which should be supplemented with printed materials and other educational aids.
4. While several countries are beginning to reopen schools with adequate biosafety protocols, it is urgent to prioritize the [safe return of children and adolescents to their schools](#), with an emphasis on support and acceleration programmes, and with other complementary health services, food, and protection against violence.
5. [Indigenous organizations must be strongly involved](#) in consultations and decision-making processes, as stated in Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization. For example, it is particularly important that measures for the gradual and safe reopening of schools take into account the opinion of the communities, safeguarding the right of girls, boys and adolescents to quality and culturally relevant education.
6. More powerful [alliances](#) must be forged between national and local educational authorities and the communities. UNICEF is committed to these efforts. It will therefore continue to support government initiatives and policy implementation to improve governance and response to the crisis while remaining close to indigenous communities and schools in prioritized areas. UNICEF also works with other United Nations agencies and humanitarian organizations seeking creative and sustainable solutions.
7. Finally, it is necessary to [strengthen South-South cooperation](#), which would allow to share experiences and technical collaboration between countries in the region. Specifically, focus should be placed on successful distance education strategies for indigenous populations; the production of materials and teacher training, among other initiatives; and evidence and good practices; regaining the regional leadership role in Intercultural Bilingual Education, linked with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Bernt Aasen
Regional Director, a.i.

Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office

© United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

Cover photograph: © UNICEF/UNI235461/Willocq

Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office
Building 102, Alberto Tejada St.
City of Knowledge
Panama, Republic of Panama
P.O. Box: 0843-03045
Telephone: +507 301 7400
www.unicef.org/lac
Twitter: @uniceflac
Facebook: /uniceflac

unicef 
for every child