



# COVID-19 and Public Health: Indigenous Peoples on the Front Line

Webinar Report



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Three-quarters of emerging infectious diseases are zoonoses, meaning they can be transmitted from animals to humans, with Ebola, SARS, MERS and now COVID-19 being examples. Scientists are warning that deforestation, industrial agriculture, illegal wildlife trade, climate change and other types of environmental degradation increase the risk of future pandemics.

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a grave health threat to Indigenous Peoples around the world. Indigenous communities already experience poor access to healthcare, significantly higher rates of communicable diseases and lack of access to essential services like sanitation. Local medical facilities are often under-equipped and under-staffed. Even when Indigenous Peoples are able to access healthcare services, they can face stigma and discrimination.

This webinar discussed the connection between land rights, climate and the health of indigenous peoples -- based on the continuous evidence that the damage caused to the planet will bring more zoo-tropic diseases. Officials from the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations (UN) and the World Wildlife Fund International (WWF) have directly linked the emergence of pandemics like Coronavirus to our "broken relationship with nature," epitomized by the destruction of natural habitats and the collapse of biodiversity. They call for a shift back to ecological and ecosystem integrity, sustainable co-existence with the natural world, values which have underpinned indigenous values for centuries, making Indigenous Peoples key actors in the battle to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

**Moderator:**

- Laurie L. Goering, Climate Change Editor, Head of Climate Programme, Thomson Reuters Foundation

**Panelists:**

- Mina Susana Setra, Deputy to Secretary General Social Culture Affairs, Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (AMAN)
- Joshua Lichtenstein, Program Manager, Rainforest Foundation US
- Célia Xakriabá, Emergência Indígena

**A complete recording of the webinar is available on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/IDiSay1y33M>**

## Key Takeaways

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- Diseases leaping from animals to humans are linked to wider destruction of the world's "lungs," the forests that indigenous people are fighting tirelessly to protect.
- Weakened land rights for Indigenous Peoples, already recognized as a serious bar to everything from human rights and development to conservation and the fight against climate change, has also had profound impacts on communities' abilities to respond to the spread of COVID-19.
- In Indonesia, some villages voluntarily cut off from the outside world and with food enough from their lands to support their survival for months or even years.
- In the Amazon, many communities closed the borders to their territories in a bid to halt the spread of the virus. Yet, criminal gangs, loggers and other extractive industries have either circumvented or violently broken through these barricades.

## Webinar Summary

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### **1) WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE LINKS BETWEEN LAND RIGHTS, THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC AND INDIGENOUS HEALTH? CAN YOU TELL US A BIT MORE ABOUT THE AMAZON EMERGENCY FUND? (JOSH LICHTENSTEIN)**

- The Amazon Emergency Fund sprung up in April as a collaboration between COICA and a large group of NGO and donor allies working in the Amazon Basin in the face of the enormous threat posed by the spread of COVID-19 throughout the region.
- Land rights have been fundamental to the pandemic response of indigenous communities in the basin, as the first set of actions were directed to trying to close off territories from outsiders who might bring in the virus. Legal recognition of lands, and the ability to exclude outsiders has really been the first line of defense against the virus. Erecting physical barriers on roads and rivers has long been a strategy of indigenous territories resisting outside incursions, one that took on new life and death meaning in the current context.
- Whether those barriers are effective at keeping people out depends on how well the land rights of indigenous people are respected, and what we have seen in the Amazon Basin is that miners, loggers, other extractive industries, as well as narco traffickers and organized crime will go around (or through, with violence) those barriers and enter territories regardless, at a time when government eyes and efforts are turned elsewhere and the rule of law is barely enforced.

## **2) WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE LINKS BETWEEN LAND RIGHTS, THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC AND INDIGENOUS HEALTH IN BRAZIL? (CÉLIA XAKRIABÁ)**

- 30,000 indigenous people in Brazil are infected and are fighting for their lives. 170 elderly indigenous elders have already been killed by the virus. When indigenous elders pass away, it is not just their physical bodies that die, their knowledge of biodiversity dies, as well as their knowledge of how to cure illnesses.
- In the context of COVID-19, the biggest campaign worldwide has been to stay at home. For the government of Brazil, the campaign is negotiating the territories of indigenous peoples. There is no vaccine against deforestation, there is no vaccine against forest burning, there is no vaccine against racism. There is no vaccine for all this.
- The indigenous peoples believe in humanity, so it is urgent to reactivate this principle to heal the lungs of our bodies, as well as the lungs of the earth.
- Democracy will not prevail unless the demarcation of indigenous peoples' territories actually happens. Indigenous peoples in the Global South have deep scars and have been fighting for more than 500 years, and this resistance will continue.

## **3) WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE LINKS BETWEEN LAND RIGHTS, THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC AND INDIGENOUS HEALTH IN INDONESIA? (MINA SUSANA SETRA)**

- The flow back home of indigenous peoples from cities has made the community more vulnerable to being exposed to the pandemic.
- The long distances and lack of adequate health facilities in the villages are a threat to indigenous communities. Most of the community health centers are not equipped adequately to handle COVID-19.
- Companies continue to operate in indigenous territories, with workers coming in and out of the village.
- Indigenous peoples are in danger of having their territories seized by the companies for conservation purposes.
- As indigenous people are forced to become laborers, staple foods such as sago, cassava and tubers have been eliminated,
- They have responded to COVID-19 by locking down the villages. Access to indigenous peoples' territories has been closed, and no one can leave or enter the indigenous territory except for urgent matters.
- They have established a mechanism for food sharing among communities.
- As of now, there have been no outbreaks of the COVID-19 pandemic in AMAN member communities.

**4) THANKS TO THEIR TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE NATURAL WORLD, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES HAVE LONG KNOWN THAT THE DEGRADATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO UNLEASH DISEASE. WHAT ARE YOUR REFLECTIONS UPON THIS STATEMENT?**

- We have heard stories in a number of countries and territories about elders who foresaw a coming crisis, and this has aided communities in believing the public health messages and organizing a rapid response, including by moving children and elders further into the forest, to be safer and protected in isolation.
- In the pandemic response in the Amazon Basin, and elsewhere around the region, communities have had to rely more than ever on traditional knowledge to both prevent and cure diseases and promote health and well being. Given the poor access to medicines, communities have had to rely on traditional medicines, and there are growing efforts to systematize that knowledge, pass it on to the younger generations, and to expand community cultivation of medicinal plants as part of expanded efforts at food security. This has included strategies to build camps in the forest to teach youth how to fully live off the land, as well as efforts to establish more formal training institutes, botanical gardens and village production of remedies and cures. (Josh Lichtenstein)
- In ancestral medicine, trees are part of our own bodies, so if you cut a tree you are cutting yourself; the tree and the body are part of nature. We are part of Mother Earth. We are an extension of nature, and the land is being poisoned. Indigenous peoples may only be 5% of the population, but we protect 82% of the biodiversity of the world. How will humanity will sustain itself without indigenous peoples fighting against attacks on nature? Where will science and capitalism sustains themselves? (Célia Xakriabá)
- Our communities are bringing back their collective memory, and they are reconnecting with their ancestors, their elders and their communities, as the knowledge keepers now playing a central role in fighting this pandemic. This builds upon the youth homecoming movement, and now is a good time for the youth to come home and practice the knowledge from the elders. Thus, traditional knowledge has really helped communities, and it can also support governments, if governments want to research find out what indigenous peoples have said, which can contribute to science. (Mina Susana Setra)

**5) CAN YOU SPEAK TO US ABOUT HOW INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS HAVE BEEN PARTICULARLY AFFECTED BY THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC? DO YOU HAVE EXAMPLES OF HOW INDIGENOUS WOMEN HAVE BEEN AT THE FRONT LINES IN THE PAST FEW MONTHS?**

- In the Amazon, we have seen a marked uptick in the level of organization of women, particularly as efforts have focused in all countries on purchase and distribution of food and medicine and taking care of elders and the sick.
- Importantly, this has led to more vocal demands by women to participate in decision making around grant priorities for the Amazon Emergency Fund (AEF), and to ensure that women's organizations at the country level have access to the funding that is flowing in. The AEF early on established an indigenous women's seat on the Governance Group, the AEF's governing council, and has mandated that 30% of all the funding to the national indigenous organizations should be directed towards women's organizations via a plan approved by them. At the meeting this week, it was further approved to ensure there is funding for a women's coordinator or communicator in each country to ensure that women's voices are heard and their demands addressed. (Josh Lichtenstein)
- Women's land rights in Brazil have been brutally affected, as the first person the government chose to attack was a woman, Mother Earth. If we don't die from COVID-19, we will die from the conflicts, the deforestation and the forest fires. We have we transform pain and mourning into desire to continue saving lives. Women have a spiritual immunity to both cure illness and carrying it with them. We are bringing together Indigenous women from all over the world because we need to heal the lungs and we need to heal the uterus. We need to heal the errors our ways and all of humanity. (Célia Xakriabá)
- In our communities, women elders are the knowledge keepers, and usually they have specific knowledge that is really important in situation like COVID-19, not only about medicinal or herbal plants, but also as a keeper knowledge keeper in the emergency response team and other important knowledge, which they are trying to pass on to the younger generations. The role of indigenous women is really important, and although the land rights of indigenous communities in Indonesia are not yet recognized, women continue to struggle against encroachment on indigenous lands. (Mina Susana Setra)

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## Notable Quotes from the Panelists

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**“THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC POSES A GRAVE HEALTH THREAT TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AROUND THE WORLD. LOCAL MEDICAL FACILITIES ARE OFTEN UNDER EQUIPPED AND UNDERSTAFFED. EVEN WHEN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ARE ABLE TO ACCESS HEALTH CARE SERVICES THEY CAN FACE STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION.”**

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**- LAURIE L. GOERING, CLIMATE CHANGE EDITOR, HEAD OF CLIMATE PROGRAMME, THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION**



**“WE REPRESENT AROUND FIVE PERCENT OF THE POPULATION OF HUMANITY, BUT WE PRESERVE AROUND EIGHTY-TWO PERCENT OF THE WORLD’S BIODIVERSITY. WE HAVE A VERY IMPORTANT ROLE IN THINKING ABOUT SUSTAINING THE LIFE OF THE PLANET AND THIS RESPONSIBILITY HAS FALLEN ON US.”**

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**- CÉLIA XAKRIABÁ, EMERGÊNCIA INDÍGENA**



**“IN THE PANDEMIC RESPONSE ACROSS THE AMAZON BASIN, AND ELSEWHERE IN THE REGION, COMMUNITIES HAVE HAD TO RELY MORE THAN EVER ON TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE TO BOTH PREVENT AND CURE DISEASES AND PROMOTE HEALTH AND WELL BEING.”**

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**- JOSHUA LICHTENSTEIN, PROGRAM MANAGER, RAINFOREST FOUNDATION US**



**“UNFORTUNATELY FOR INDONESIA, WE ARE FACING A SETBACK OF SECURING LAND RIGHTS, AS THE GOVERNMENT IS PLANNING TO INVITE MORE INVESTORS, AND THERE IS A DRAFT LAW THAT IS REALLY DANGEROUS FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AS IT GIVES ALL THE MAJOR RIGHTS FOR THE INVESTORS TO USE LAND IN INDONESIA.”**

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**- MINA SUSANA SETRA, DEPUTY TO SECRETARY GENERAL SOCIAL CULTURE AFFAIRS, ALIANSI MASYARAKAT ADAT NUSANTARA (AMAN)**



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