

1.4 Who are Indigenous Peoples?

The designation of “Indigenous Peoples” has come to be recognized over the last few decades as a particular demographic category under international law through instruments such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and in some countries through national legal mechanisms.

The term “Indigenous Peoples” has principally been applied to those who are considered to be the descendants of the pre-colonial peoples of the Americas, Scandinavia, Australia and New Zealand, such as Native Americans, Inuit of the Arctic, Sami people of Scandinavia, forest people of the Amazon, Aboriginal Australians and the New Zealand Maoris. In various Asian and African countries, marginalized minority ethnic groups (often described as “tribal populations”), with a culture distinct from the majority of the population and who have historically occupied certain regions, are often also referred to as, or self-identify themselves as, Indigenous Peoples (eg Pygmy peoples in central Africa, San peoples in southern Africa, the Karen hill tribes in Thailand).

Some countries recognize Indigenous Peoples and use this or related terms officially. For example, Latin American countries such as Venezuela, Peru, Colombia, Chile and Bolivia use the Spanish equivalent of *pueblos originarios*, meaning “First Peoples”. In the United States, the term “Native American” is commonly used. “First Nations” is an official term used in Canada and “Aboriginal peoples” is a term used in Australia and Canada. Other countries, by contrast, do not formally recognize the existence of Indigenous Peoples within their borders (eg Malaysia, China, Botswana), or only recognize some groups as indigenous despite others also claiming that label (eg Russia).

The issue of setting a single definition for Indigenous Peoples has been extensively debated in UN working group sessions over the years, and it has come to be officially accepted that no single definition can fully capture the diversity of Indigenous Peoples. However, the UN and other regional intergovernmental organizations have outlined various defining characteristics of Indigenous Peoples (see Box 1), emphasizing the particular importance of self-identification.

It is important to emphasize that, like any community, indigenous communities may not be homogeneous or harmonious. They can be characterized by heterogeneity in terms of power, knowledge and wealth. Conflict may be a part of daily life, which is not seen as pathological but rather as a way of interacting that flares up and down over time.

Box 1 Characteristics defining Indigenous Peoples

The two most commonly cited international documents on the definition of Indigenous Peoples are the Study on the discrimination against Indigenous Peoples (Jose Martínez Cobo, UN Special Rapporteur) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169. These documents highlight the following general characteristics as partly and/or fully indicative of Indigenous Peoples:

- self-identification as indigenous
- historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies
- a common experience of colonialism and oppression
- occupation of or a strong link to specific territories
- distinct social, economic and political systems
- distinct language, culture and beliefs from dominant sectors of society
- resolved to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and distinctive identities.

These general criteria of Indigenous Peoples are purposely inclusive and are thus meant to encompass the diversity of worldwide Indigenous Peoples’ experiences, while still separating “Indigenous Peoples” from other national minorities and providing a basis for the kinds of rights that they claim.

