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**Junior Committee**

**Issue: Addressing and Mitigating the Consequences of Colonialism on Indigenous Communities**

**Background information:**

Colonialism refers to the control or governing influence of a nation over a dependent country, territory, or people, characterized by its economic motives, political dominance, and cultural suppression or assimilation[[1]](#footnote-1). ‘‘Indigenous’’ is defined by the concepts of settlers and colonists: people are ‘‘Indigenous’’ as the land was originally theirs, but was infiltrated by colonizers. The irony remains that Indigenes were the first inhabitants, and logically should maintain their privileges and immunities, while this is not the case[[2]](#footnote-2). The effects of colonialism upon indigenous communities are long-lasting, occurring up to this day. Colonizers typically usufruct from exploiting natural resources, establishing new inhabitants and forcibly pushing out the native population, disrupting social and cultural structures. Many colonial governments implemented a foreign legal, social and political infrastructure that often-exterminated original systems of governance and ways of life. This was evident through the marginalization of indigenous communities in North America and Australia. In Canada, indigenous people were considered savages by the colonizers, and the government wanted to strip them of their ancestral culture and assimilate them into the colonizers’ culture. Canada’s Prime Minister stated the following regarding the Indian Act[[3]](#footnote-3): *‘‘The great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal systems and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the other inhabitants of the Dominions as speedily as they are fit to change.’’* – John A Macdonald, (1887). The Indian act imposed some of the following measures:

1. Indigenous people were renamed with European names
2. Indigenous people were forbidden to speak their native language
3. Practicing Indigenous spirituality was forbidden (*this included the use of traditional medicines and practices*)
4. Wearing traditional regalia was forbidden
5. Potlatches and other cultural ceremonies were declared illegal

In addition to the cultural and literal genocide, there are further implications of colonization. In Australia, the British colonizers brought a wave of epidemic diseases such as measles, influenza and smallpox, which spread ahead the destruction of many Indigenous Australians and the settlement of colonists. The sexual abuse and exploitation of indigenous women and girls also caused widespread venereal diseases among indigenous people[[4]](#footnote-4). The arrival of the Europeans also played a significant role on agriculture, as they cleared and farmed the land, and implemented their preconceived cold-climate ideas of landscape, agriculture and land ownership, which caused profound changes and negative impacts across land and resource management. Finally, it’s important to note that the Indigenous people continuously resisted the infringement of their rights. This resulted in the death of more than 20,000 Indigenous Australians, cruelly hunted and murdered on many occasions.

While the general historical effects of colonialism have varied depending on geography, specific examples invariably included a loss of land, forced labour, a loss of language and culture, and socio-economic deprivation. This traumatic legacy of colonialism is reflected, to this day, in the unequal access that Indigenous populations have towards health care, education, economic resources and political representation. A 2021 report by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues highlighted that the loss of land and resources has left many indigenous communities among the poorest in the world, with inadequate infrastructure and very often relatively high unemployment and poor health.

**International action to date:**

UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People:

It establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity, wellbeing and rights of the world’s indigenous peoples[[5]](#footnote-5). The Declaration imposed in 2007 includes the rights of Indigenous peoples to:

* Self-determination: the right to shape their own lives, including their economic, social, cultural, and political futures (*Article 3*).
* Autonomy and self-government: the right to decide how to develop politically, economically, and socially (*Article 4*).
* Indigenous decision-making institutions: the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social, and cultural institutions (*Article 5*).
* Culture: the right to practise and revitalise their cultural traditions and customs, including to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures (*Article 11*).
* Language: the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning (*Article 14*).
* Participation and representation: the right to participate in decision-making in matters that affect their rights, and through representatives they choose (*Article 18*).
* Consultation with government: the right to be consulted through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them (*Article 19*).
* Determining future priorities: the right to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other economic and social programs affecting them (*Article 23*).
* Land: the right to legal recognition and protection of the lands, territories, waters, coastal seas, and resources that they have traditionally owned or occupied (*Article 26*).

Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169):

Adopted in 1989 by the General Conference of the International Labour Organisation at its seventy-sixth session, the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention is a legally binding international instrument that recognizes the rights of indigenous communities to their lands and calls for their involvement in decisions related to land use and natural resources. Since then, the Convention has been ratified by 23 countries, and has guided and inspired governments, trade unions and employers’ organizations as well as indigenous peoples across the world in their work to promote and protect indigenous peoples’ rights[[6]](#footnote-6).

World Health Organization Global Plan of Action for the Health of Indigenous Peoples:

In May 2023, the 76th World Health Assembly adopted Resolution 76.16 on the Health of Indigenous Peoples.

The resolution requests the WHO Director-General to develop a Global Plan of Action for the Health of Indigenous Peoples, in consultation with Member States, Indigenous Peoples, relevant UN and multilateral system agencies, as well as civil society, academia and other stakeholders, in line with WHO’s Framework of Engagement with Non-State Actors, taking a life-course approach, with a particular emphasis on reproductive, maternal and adolescent health, and with a specific focus on those in vulnerable situations, and bearing in mind local context[[7]](#footnote-7).

**Current situations & Focus for Debate:**

From the economic effects of colonialism to the cultural and political relations it continues to impact today in indigenous communities worldwide. Colonial regimes officially came to an end for many countries in the mid-20th century but systems that continue to oppress indigenous peoples, dispossess them from their land and inhibit access to basic services are still prevalent. Modern indigenous populations frequently experience high levels of poverty and low access to health care and education. Decades of colonial exploitation and policies have robbed indigenous people of their cultural identity as well as sovereignty, making way for greater marginalization.

At the crux of the matter is land rights, as indigenous territories remain under threat from private and state initiatives such as mining, agriculture, and logging. Stillmore displacement, environmental destruction and rapid loss of the way of life follows. In addition, cultural erasure through forced assimilation and the disruption of indigenous languages continues to negatively affect Indigenous heritage loss. Social challenges in the form of discrimination and limited political representation further impact their conditions.

Moreover, efforts to address colonial trauma have varied widely. Reparations, partial land returns, and autonomy agreements have been enacted in different countries, but these often fail to address the full scope of colonialism’s impact. International bodies, including the United Nations, have suggested frameworks for indigenous rights, but enforcement remains a challenge.

Delegates should centre their discussions on effective and viable mechanisms that can alter the impact of these residuals in a culturally relevant, sustainable, and enforceable manner. Member states are to consider all possible solutions that delegates propose, which might include, but are not limited to:

* Land and resource rights; delegates should consider models that protect indigenous lands and resources from exploitation. This could involve broader international safeguard mechanisms, provision of adequate resources supporting local states to enforce land rights or a restitution-based legal framework if land has been inappropriately taken.
* Reparative economic justice and inclusion; making ends meet is one of the oldest struggles for indigenous people. Delegates may examine ways to promote economic empowerment through financing, education and job creation. Investigating if reparative justice mechanisms might be employed to remedy economic marginalization is also included on the list.
* Preservation of culture and language; colonialism frequently eroded the elements of indigenous cultures and languages. Policies that either support the revival of their culture and languages or official efforts to protect critically endangered indigenous languages through community-led programs, educational material and media representation should be considered by member states. This might include providing funding or technical assistance to support indigenous groups to lead these efforts themselves.
* Protection of indigenous interests and autonomy; many indigenous communities still lack sufficient political power or recognition to be able to protect its own interests effectively. Delegates could explore ways on building indigenous political representation within government structures. These measures may be crucial in enabling indigenous individuals to regain control of decisions which directly impact their lives.
* Healthcare and social support; delegates should also tackle the necessity of better healthcare and social support systems among indigenous communities. This encompasses honouring traditional medicine and incorporating it into mainstream healthcare frameworks, but also addressing the epidemic-level challenges to addiction mental health issues and health disparities. Culturally sensitive healthcare is key to ensure accessibility and trust.

**Bloc Positions:**

Canada

Canada has a progressive approach toward addressing the impacts of colonialism on Indigenous communities, although challenges remain. The government has implemented policies to support indigenous land rights, strengthen economic position and cultural preservation. The nation is a founding member and endorses the United Nations Declaration on The Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). For many decades, First Nations people were not provided with full access to human rights protection – due in part to section 67 of the *Canadian Human Rights Act*. The legislation was finally repealed in 2008; this means that First Nations individuals can now make complaints of discrimination to the Canadian Human Rights Commission.[[8]](#footnote-8)

USA

United States’ relationship with its Indigenous communities is often marked by insufficient funding for programs aimed at addressing disparities. The U.S. government recognizes certain Indigenous tribes (such as the American Indians and Alaska Natives[[9]](#footnote-9)) as sovereign nations with a degree of self-governance. The U.S. has not formally adopted the UNDRIP, however, it acknowledges some of its measures.

New Zealand

New Zealand has a proactive stance on Indigenous rights, highlighted its relationship with the Māori community. The nation has successfully progressed in incorporating Māori language and culture at a national level, however, challenges remain regarding health, educational, and economic status. New Zeeland has also endorsed the UNDRIP and has incorporated many of its principles into domestic law.

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom, as a former colonial power, has Influenced colonial legacies worldwide, although it does not have recognized indigenous populations within its territory. The nation has advocated the UNDRIP in 2007, however, it did so with reservations, particularly involving articles containing land and resources rights, territory sovereignty and self-determination.

Bolivia

Bolivia was the first country in the world to incorporate UNDRIP into domestic law and later, its Constitution. The Constitution, adopted in 2009, goes further than any previous legislation in Bolivia in securing rights and freedoms for the nation’s Indigenous peoples. Article 30 of the Constitution establishes the right to participation and prior consultation for Indigenous peoples in decisions that may affect their territories, natural resources, or cultural heritage. The Bolivian Plurinational Legislative Assembly, established in 2009, includes seven reserved seats for Indigenous people, who are elected by Indigenous customary law. This mechanism ensures that Indigenous peoples have a direct say in the country’s political decision-making processes.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Key terms:**

Indigenous Peoples

Original inhabitants who are ethnically distinct from groups that have subsequently colonized or migrated to a region. Indigenous peoples possess distinct cultural practices, languages and social organisations, which are usually closely linked with traditional lands.

Colonialism

Policy of obtaining, occupying and exploiting territories outside one's national borders, often entailing domination of indigenous peoples' information and exploitation of their resources.

Reparations

Something done to compensate for a wrong committed sometime back, such as by paying damages. In that respect, this would relate to monetary compensation, restitution of land, or even development aid for and with indigenous communities in the case of colonialism.

Land Restitution

This refers to the process whereby land is returned to its original or rightful owners. In the context of the indigenous community, it pertains to the return of those territories that were taken away during colonial expansion.

Right of peoples to self-determination

Right of peoples to determine their political status, to freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development, and independently manage their resources.

**Helpful articles:**

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World Health Organization (2024). *Global Plan of Action for Health of Indigenous Peoples*. [online] www.who.int. Available at: https://www.who.int/initiatives/global-plan-of-action-for-health-of-indigenous-peoples.

1. ‘‘Colonialism vs. Colonization – What’s the difference?’’ 11 November 2024 [Colonialism vs. Colonization — What’s the Difference?](https://www.askdifference.com/colonialism-vs-colonization/) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘‘What are the most prevalent modern effects of the legacy of colonialism on Indigenous communities in Canada?’’ 11 November 2024 [The Modern Effects of Colonialism on Indigenous Communities in Canada by Celia Irving :: SSRN](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4060051) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Indian Act is a Canadian federal law that governs in matters pertaining to Indian status, bands, and Indian reserves. ‘‘The Indian Act’’ 11 November 2024 [The Indian Act](https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_indian_act/) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘‘Impact of Colonisation on indigenous Australians’’ 12 November 2024 [Impact of Colonisation on Indigenous Australians | Evolve Communities Pty Ltd](https://www.evolves.com.au/impact-colonisation-indigenous-australians/) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ‘‘UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’’ 12 November 2024 [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples | OHCHR](https://www.ohchr.org/en/indigenous-peoples/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples#:~:text=It%20establishes%20a%20universal%20framework%20of%20minimum%20standards,rights%20to%20education%2C%20health%2C%20employment%2C%20language%2C%20and%20others.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ‘‘Implementing the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169: Towards an inclusive, sustainable and just future’’ 12 November 2024 [Implementing the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169: Towards an inclusive, sustainable and just future | International Labour Organization](https://www.ilo.org/publications/implementing-ilo-indigenous-and-tribal-peoples-convention-no-169-towards) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘‘Global Plan of Action for the Health of Indigenous Peoples’’ 12 November 2024 [Global Plan of Action for Health of Indigenous Peoples](https://www.who.int/initiatives/global-plan-of-action-for-health-of-indigenous-peoples) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ‘‘Indigenous Peoples and human rights’’ 13 November 2024 [Indigenous Peoples and human rights - Canada.ca](https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/rights-indigenous-peoples.html#a2b) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ‘‘Tribal Nations & the United States: An Introduction’’ 13 November 2024 [Tribal Nations & the United States: An Introduction | NCAI](https://archive.ncai.org/about-tribes#:~:text=American%20Indians%20and%20Alaska%20Natives%20are%20members%20of,sovereign%20since%20their%20first%20interaction%20with%20European%20settlers.) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ‘‘Indigenous Rights & the Voice’’ 13 November 2024 [Indigenous Rights & the Voice | Australian Human Rights Commission](https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/indigenous-rights-voice) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)