

General Assembly Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural)

Topics

- Rights of indigenous peoples
- Literacy for life

The [General Assembly Third Committee](#) focuses its discussions on social, humanitarian and cultural concerns that arise in the General Assembly, although its work often overlaps with that of other United Nations organs, including the Economic and Social Council and its subsidiary bodies. Human rights, education and cultural preservation are typical issues for the Third Committee. Notably, the Third Committee would not discuss the legal implications of human rights matters, as those are discussed by the Sixth Committee, nor would it call for special studies or deploy monitors, as those tasks are handled by the Human Rights Council. The Third Committee also adheres to the purview guidelines of the General Assembly as a whole.

Topic A: Rights of indigenous peoples

Courtesy of American Model United Nations

Indigenous peoples make up about [six percent of the global population](#) and have long faced marginalization and discrimination. The historic injustices faced by indigenous peoples as [a result of their colonization and the dispossession of their lands](#) created the conditions that restrict development in accordance to indigenous peoples' needs and interests. Persisting systematic discrimination is among the catalysts of [forced evictions from ancestral lands and limited access to education, health care and housing](#) for indigenous peoples.

In 1982, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights formed the [Working Group on Indigenous Populations \(WGIP\)](#) to study international standards for indigenous rights due to concerns of oppression and to provide a platform for Indigenous peoples to share their experiences with the United Nations. In 1989, the International Labour Organization created the [Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention](#), which recognized indigenous peoples' self-determination and outlined rights pertaining to education, healthcare and equal employment opportunities. However, the binding nature of the Convention and its emphasis on indigenous autonomy made it unpopular—only 24 States have ratified the Convention. The United Nations declared 1993 as the [International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples](#) with the theme “Indigenous People – a new partnership” and stressed the need to make full use of the contributions of indigenous peoples towards sustainable

national development. Further, the [Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action](#) called for the formation of a permanent place for indigenous peoples within the United Nations system in the same year. In 1994, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed and launched the [International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples](#), promoting the United Nations' commitment to protecting the rights of indigenous peoples and recognizing the need for a permanent forum for indigenous peoples and [adequate financial resources to support the design and implementation of projects](#) on health, education, housing, employment, development and the environment.

In 2000, the United Nations established the [Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues](#) as an advisory body to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to provide expert advice and recommendations on indigenous issues to ECOSOC, [prepare and disseminate information](#) on indigenous issues and [promote the integration and coordination of activities related to indigenous issues](#) within the United Nations system. In 2005, the United Nations General Assembly declared [the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples](#) to promote non-discrimination and the inclusion of indigenous peoples, their participation in decisions that directly or indirectly affect their lives, land and cultural integrity, and to [re-define development policies to be culturally appropriate](#). The United Nations General Assembly established [The Trust Fund for the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples](#) to promote and support projects, workshops, and seminars by indigenous peoples organizations and implement the objectives of the Decade. Twenty projects received grants from the Trust Fund in 2006, of which [six supported indigenous women's and youth's livelihood](#). In 2007, the United Nations adopted the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (UNDRIP). UNDRIP serves as the most comprehensive statement on the rights of indigenous peoples, affirming that [indigenous peoples are equal to all people](#), recognizing the importance of [protecting indigenous peoples from discrimination and forced assimilation](#) and reaffirming the [right for indigenous peoples' self-determination](#).

In 2014, the United Nations General Assembly organized the [World Conference on Indigenous Peoples](#) to share strategies for implementation and perspectives on UNDRIP. The outcomes of the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples emphasized [support for capacity-building of indigenous youth, the empowerment of indigenous women](#), and ensuring equal access to the high standards of physical and mental health. Additionally, the United Nations General Assembly requested the development of a [system-wide action plan](#) to meet the implementation demands and recommendations of UNDRIP.

The relationship between indigenous peoples and the environment also leaves indigenous peoples particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Often located in

ecologically sensitive areas, Indigenous peoples face [high risks of climate change induced displacement](#) due to rising sea level and extreme weather events. Despite the continued efforts of the United Nations and other international organizations in recognizing the need for establishing improved, coordinated and coherent implementation of programs, Indigenous peoples still account for about [nineteen percent](#) of people living in poverty. [Indigenous women and youth are particularly vulnerable](#) as they are disproportionately impacted by the lack of access to education and employment opportunities, and [limited access to justice by the State or customary justice systems](#). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the harmful effects of marginalization and discrimination as Indigenous peoples faced [high risks of transmissions with limited access to adequate healthcare and vaccinations](#), leaving them more vulnerable to infections. With already high [food insecurity](#) due to loss of ancestral land and territories, indigenous peoples were further unable to practice their traditional livelihoods due to lockdowns posing greater challenges to access to food.

Although the international community has made progress in ensuring access to education and increasing literacy among indigenous populations, [the lack of representation of Indigenous peoples and lack of respect for Indigenous peoples' diverse culture](#) within these organizations can lead to limited capacity in catering to pressing threats faced by indigenous people, their cultures and traditions. As such, [educational materials that provide accurate and fair information](#) on indigenous peoples and their ways of life are particularly rare and critical systems of communication, including [indigenous languages, continue to face great threats of extinction](#). To help draw attention to and combat the loss of language and cultural exchange for indigenous peoples, in 2020 the United Nations General Assembly declared 2022-2032 as the [International Decade of Indigenous Languages](#). The rights of indigenous people remains a priority for the United Nations under the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) affirming the commitments to combating hunger, removing obstacles and meeting the needs of people with complex humanitarian needs, and increasing access to education. However, governments continue to struggle with managing differences in sustainable development processes in line with international expectations against traditional indigenous needs and practices. Development projects including [conservation and green-economy projects](#), although necessary for securing a suitable future for all people, tend to take place without the consultations or consent of indigenous people and often lead to the [displacement, dispossession, violence and systematic discrimination of indigenous people](#).

Questions to consider from your country's perspective:

- How can governments encourage language revitalization for Indigenous peoples and support knowledge resilience across indigenous groups that speak different languages?
- What mechanisms need to be in place to ensure the rights of indigenous women and youth within the cultural frameworks of indigenous cultures?
- How can efforts to mitigate climate change incorporate the traditions and practices of indigenous peoples, particularly in ecologically sensitive areas?

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Topic B: Literacy for life

Courtesy of American Model United Nations

Literacy is an essential component of the right to education and focuses on developing proficiency in reading, writing and numeracy throughout life. Access to these skills works to empower individuals and expand access to resources for greater freedoms and enjoyment of other rights. An estimated 763 million adults lack basic literacy skills, with two-thirds being women, and about 250 million children are out of school, and at risk of failing to acquire the same skills. Since 1979, providing universal education to significantly reduce international illiteracy for all people, regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status, ability, race or location has remained an approach to maintaining worldwide peace. Developing literacy in individuals increases sustainable development, enables greater participation in the labor market, improves child and family health and nutrition, reduces poverty, and expands life opportunities. In 1987, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 1990 as the international Literacy Year, recognizing the importance of eliminating illiteracy as a prerequisite for the right to education and social and economic advancement. The United Nations further noted the need to remove gender-related differences in adult literacy and made efforts to address the disparities in access to education particularly for women.

In 2000, the World Education Forum adopted the Dakar Framework for Action, to set tangible targets and reaffirm commitments by the international community to achieve education for all. In 2002, the United Nation Millennium Campaign restored focus on literacy under Millennium Development Goal 2 by targeting efforts towards universal completion of primary education for children and access to all other levels by 2015. In conjunction, the United Nations Literacy Decade: Education For All, established in 2003, promoted and prioritized literacy for all groups and encouraged governments to increase development of national plans to enact the goals outlined by the Dakar Framework for Action. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) led the implementation of the United Nations Literacy Decade, worked to enhance collective efforts for literacy development and created the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment as a strategic framework and key operational mechanism for achieving the goals and purposes of the United Nations Literacy Decade. During this period, the definitions of literacy expanded to include new technology and information media and the emergence of knowledge economies. Intergenerational engagement with educational materials increases educational capital within households and contributes to the acquisition of literacy tools. In 2009, UNESCO produced a data-driven global report on adult learning and education as an implementation checkpoint for Member States and, through the UNESCO

Institute of Lifelong Learning, promoted literacy implementation as a [family activity that cultivates a literate environment](#) across generations.

In 2013, UNESCO presented the report on the [Implementation of the International Plan of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade](#) and noted steady progress towards Education for All with governments executing intensive and sustained efforts for the promotion of literacy. UNESCO provided recommendations to improve the actionable goals of the United Nations Literacy Decade, calling on governments to address [new and changing literacies beyond the conventional concepts of literacy](#), including the use of the internet and other advancing information technologies to keep up with the changing information landscapes and upgrade the skills of all people. UNESCO further reiterated the importance of evidence-based advocacy and the scalability of literacy programs. In 2015, the United Nations adopted the [Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) where Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) was established to promote quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Recognizing that increasing numbers of people are facing educational interruptions due to forced displacement, armed conflicts, climate emergencies and other crises, Member States launched [Education in Crisis Situations: A Commitment to Action](#) during the [2022 Transforming Education Summit](#), in an effort to improve educational access, quality, equity and inclusion for [222 million children and youth](#).

In 2022, the United Nations General Assembly established the United Nations Youth Office to lead engagement and advocacy for the advancement of youth issues across the United Nations. The United Nations General Assembly encouraged Member States to support [upscaling quality and inclusive education, skills development, capacity-building and training to bridge the digital divide](#) in their societies. Globally, marginalized populations often do not have adequate access to technology, which threatens [their continued access to crucial institutions and programs](#) when conditions—like pandemics—cease their in-person support, which requires Member States to proactively ensure sustainable access for all. Recognizing the impacts of COVID-19 and the shift towards online learning, the United Nations General Assembly stressed the importance of [a return to school for children and youth](#) to maintain the concerted focus of the United Nations and partner organizations on increased and improved literacy through the implementation of early childhood, youth and adult literacy programs.

While access to education and increased literacy amongst individuals persists and remains a focus of the United Nations, the United Nations struggles to reach communities with marginalized languages and adapt educational priorities to accommodate [the economic and social development needs of communities that are under-resourced](#). The

expansion of the digital ecosystem produces new challenges and requires [the creation and implementation of strategies to address digital literacy](#) and the broadening of the baseline of what is needed for information processing, stretching the resources required to implement programs. Gender disparity continues to be a hurdle in the progress to increase literacy with women and girls facing greater challenges to accessing education. The United Nations continues to pursue solutions that include [policy-level interventions that focus on introducing and sustaining gender-responsive](#) educational environments.

Questions to consider from your country's perspective:

- How can people affected by major displacement events be included and supported in next-step recommendations for literacy acquisition while experiencing changing language and cultural contexts?
- How can the United Nations continue to support the sustainable and scalable implementation of literacy programs that address the disparities women and girls face in accessing quality education?
- What measures can be taken to address the challenges of a growing digital ecosystem to bridge existing gaps in access to the internet, social media and digital training tools?

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