



Task Force 6  
Accelerating SDGs: Exploring New  
Pathways to the 2030 Agenda



# INVESTING IN INDIGENOUS CHILDREN'S HUMAN CAPITAL TO SECURE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FOR ALL

June 2023

**Shaabana Naik**, Postgraduate Student, University of Tokyo

**Dil Rahut**, Senior Research Fellow and Vice-Chair of Research,  
Asian Development Bank Institute

**Daniel Suryadarma**, Research Fellow, Asian Development Bank  
Institute

वयुधैव कुटुम्बकम्

ONE EARTH • ONE FAMILY • ONE FUTURE



# Abstract



International and civil society organisations have underscored that indigenous people are poorer and more food insecure than most others (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2019; International Labour Organization). These outcomes are deep-rooted, stemming from unrecognised rights, lack of political representation and voice, and generations of marginalisation. Although the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) process is an improvement over the Millennium Development Goals in its attention to indigenous groups (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017), much remains to be done. SDG targets will only matter if the indigenous groups can also achieve them.

Efforts to improve the well-being of indigenous people should prioritise their children. The intergenerational link of poverty can only be broken if indigenous children are healthy, intelligent, and have the agency to

improve their well-being. Therefore, adequate investments in healthcare and quality education are the necessary foundations. Beyond that, special care is needed to ensure that all policies and interventions are grounded in the culture and traditions of indigenous groups. Considering the voice and opinions of indigenous groups will increase the chance that investments and programmes are effective, efficient, and sustainable.


This policy brief recommends the G20 consider three activities to achieve these goals: (i) provide technical and financial support for member countries to implement an annual, representative, multiple indicator household survey of indigenous groups, especially children, in their countries; (ii) increase the voice of and attention to indigenous people, and; (iii) support member countries in designing and rigorously evaluating interventions to address specific challenges faced by indigenous children.



# **The Challenge**



# **1**




**D**espite comprising just 5 percent of the global population, indigenous people make up 15 percent of the world's impoverished population (IFAD, 2019). In Vietnam, for example, 72 percent of ethnic minority groups are in the three lowest income deciles (Dang, 2014), and have a lower chance of escaping poverty (Glewwe et al., 2002). In comparison to non-indigenous children, poverty is a strong determinant for indigenous children's inferior outcomes, but it is not the only reason. The debilitating role of poverty is compounded with, among others, challenges regarding cultural and geographical contexts (Pinstrup-Andersen & Watson, 2011).

Children from indigenous communities are often underweight (Villena-Esponera et al., 2019). In Northeast India, home to the largest number of tribes in the country, up to 8.9 percent of children are severely wasted (Dinachandra Singh et al., 2015). The rate of severe wasting in India as a whole, in comparison, is 5.1 percent. In Brazil, the stunting rate of indigenous children has significantly declined over the past four decades, but is still higher than that of non-indigenous children (Horta et al., 2013). Indigenous

children also have higher mortality rates (Santos et al., 2020), and have lower vaccination rates (Dang, 2014).

Indigenous children have lower access to quality education due to poverty, lack of infrastructure, and discrimination (Hernandez-Zavala et al., 2006). The quality of schools attended by them is usually lower than that of schools attended by non-indigenous children. These lead to inferior learning outcomes. Levitan and Post (2016) find that the reading and mathematics skills of students in Peru and Ecuador who speak an indigenous language at home are lower than those who do not. As such, indigenous children have lower prospects in securing quality and meaningful jobs that allow them to lift themselves out of poverty.

Indigenous children also have a lifestyle that leads to worse health outcomes. Evidence from Australia shows that indigenous adolescents are less likely to engage in physical activities (Macniven et al., 2017) and have a higher smoking prevalence (White et al., 2009). Younger indigenous groups in urban areas in South America are more likely to have a drinking problem (Seale et al., 2010). These outcomes are caused by poverty,



but a study in the US finds that group trauma is also a major determinant (Heart, 2003).

In summary, there is irrefutable evidence and consensus that children from indigenous groups have worse outcomes than non-indigenous groups. There is a vast chasm between indigenous children's current situation


and where they need to be if Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are to be met in this generation. Unfortunately, there is not much evidence that the situation has significantly improved. There is also a dearth of policies or interventions targeted explicitly at indigenous children, relative to the enormity of the challenge.



# **The G20's Role**

# **2**





**T**he G20 is uniquely placed to play a central role in the effort to improve the outcomes of indigenous groups in general, and their children in particular. A number of G20 members have some of the most active policies on indigenous groups globally. In addition, hundreds of indigenous groups live in China, India, and Indonesia. Therefore, there are many activities that G20 members can do together. Collaborative efforts among G20 members, as well as engagement with non-G20 countries with substantial indigenous populations, could bring about significant progress towards achieving the SDGs by 2030. This underscores how critical it is for G20 countries to address the needs of indigenous groups to realise the SDGs.

The G20 can assume the roles of convenor, funding innovator, and knowledge exchange hub to ensure that indigenous groups' voices are heard and indigenous children's needs are met.


As convenor, the G20 can increase and sustain attention on giving priority to indigenous children by utilising the context and convening power of its members. Indigenous groups are also affected by global phenomena, such as climate change and increasing

economic instability. In the case of climate change, indigenous people are affected more severely, given their rural location and agricultural livelihood. Consequently, their children are disproportionately affected, and the link of intergenerational poverty remains unbroken.

An innovative financing facility is needed to increase investments in programmes and policies targeting indigenous children. The recently launched International Finance Facility for Education was designed so that a US\$140 million funding could translate to US\$1 billion (International Finance Facility for Education). While the amount of funding needed to bring indigenous children's outcomes to parity with non-indigenous children and beyond is yet to be estimated, it is likely to reach billions of dollars. The G20 members, all middle-income countries or richer, could pioneer a similar innovative financing approach by providing the necessary seed funding. The fund could be managed by a multilateral development bank, or by a newly created institution.

Millions of indigenous people reside in the G20 member countries. Moreover, many G20 members are global leaders





in their attention and efforts to improve the welfare of indigenous groups. These facts put the G20 in a unique position as both the supplier and the user of knowledge and insights on


ways to improve the health and learning outcomes of indigenous children. In addition, the G20 could disseminate the knowledge to countries outside the G20.



# **Recommendations to the G20**

# **3**





In taking on the role detailed in the previous section, the G20 should use its members' rich knowledge and insights to do the following:

**Provide technical and financial support for member countries to implement an annual, representative, multiple indicator household survey of indigenous groups, especially children, in their countries**


The first step to increasing awareness of the outcomes of indigenous children is by shedding light on the facts regarding their health, education, and other outcomes. Data also serve as the foundation of any subsequent programme or policies to improve a particular set of outcomes.

The data collection should be designed to allow major socioeconomic indicators to be disaggregated by indigenous groups, allowing a comparison between their outcomes and those of non-indigenous groups. Brazil's experience is a case in point here. Horta et al. (2013) state that in the early 1990s, Brazil began allowing

census respondents to self-identify as indigenous. In the same period, a healthcare system was created to enable data collection on the health outcomes of indigenous people. It was followed up by the first national survey of indigenous people's health and nutrition in 2008. Such information allowed the government to begin implementing programmes that are tailored to different indigenous groups.

Repeated annually, such a survey could serve as the basis for monitoring progress toward SDGs or other targets. When designed in a way that it could be combined with other data sources, such as remote sensing data or administrative data from village officials, schools, and hospitals, and made accessible to the general public, the resulting database would allow policymakers, civil society organisations, and researchers to work together to understand areas that require attention and evaluate the effectiveness of programmes and policies.

Administratively, a unit within an international organisation could be mandated to carry out these activities, with funding provided by G20 member countries.



## **Increase the voice of and attention to indigenous people**

Often, programmes and policies that pertain to indigenous groups, especially children, while well-meaning, are designed and implemented without sufficient input from the indigenous groups themselves. The results of such initiatives have usually been negative on balance, carrying long-term unintended detrimental consequences such as indigenous children suffering from long-term trauma. History also shows that countries have implemented development programmes that resulted in indigenous groups losing their land without receiving just compensation. The loss of traditional land has often been accompanied by a loss of dignity and identity.


To ensure that indigenous people's voices are heard, G20 leaders should consider establishing an indigenous people's engagement group. As part of its mandate, the engagement group can facilitate the creation of two institutions; first, cultural centers that aim to strike a balance between improving the well-being of indigenous children, reducing social and economic isolation experienced by indigenous

youth, and preserving good traditional practices and ways of life, and second, a forum where state indigenous affairs agencies could share lessons and insights with each other, and other stakeholders. Best practices, lessons learned, and new ideas can be discussed in these fora.

In addition to the new engagement group, the existing G20 Sherpa-track working groups relevant to children, such as the education, cultural, and health working groups, should be mandated to discuss and address the needs of indigenous children specifically.

Support member countries in designing and rigorously evaluating interventions to address specific challenges faced by indigenous children

The significant gaps in health and education outcomes that indigenous children face must be rapidly narrowed for which financial resources are necessary but not the only mandate. The mission to implement programmes and policies that will benefit indigenous children is more complex as it is layered with the requirement to ensure that the programme or policy is culturally sensitive and appropriate.



Programmes that are proven to be effective when applied to non-indigenous groups would have to be modified or reformulated to suit the specific needs of indigenous groups.

To achieve the above, the G20 should create an initiative to develop the capacity of policymakers in the member countries. The initiative can take advantage of the lessons learned by policymakers in countries with a more established record of indigenous people-specific efforts, helping policymakers from other countries avoid making the same kind of mistakes. In addition to increasing the

chance of success, such an initiative can also reduce effort duplication.

The G20 must play a proactive role in ensuring that indigenous children's health and education outcomes and other measures of well-being improve significantly. They cannot be further left behind as G20 members strive to meet the SDGs. Given the specific geographical, cultural, and historical circumstances surrounding indigenous children, programmes and policies may need to be tailor-made. The work must start now, so the entrenched link of intergenerational poverty can be broken in this generation.

Attribution: Shaabana Naik, Dil Rahut, and Daniel Suryadarma, "Investing in Indigenous Children's Human Capital to Secure Sustainable Development for All," *T20 Policy Brief*, June 2023.

## References

---

- Dang, Hai-Anh. "Vietnam: A Widening Poverty Gap for Ethnic Minorities." In *Indigenous Peoples, Poverty and Development*, edited by Gillette Hall and Harry Patrinos, 304-343. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Dinachandra Singh, Konsam, Manoj Alagarajan, and Laishram Ladusingh. "What Explains Child Malnutrition of Indigenous People of Northeast India?" *PLOS ONE* 10, no. 6 (2015): e0130567, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0130567>
- Glewwe, Paul, Michele Gagnolati, and Hassan Zaman. "Who Gained from Vietnam's Boom in the 1990s?" *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 50, no. 4 (July 2002): 773-792.
- Heart, Maria Yellow Horse Brave. "The Historical Trauma Response among Natives and Its Relationship with Substance Abuse: A Lakota Illustration." *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 35, no. 1 (2003): 7-13.
- Hernandez-Zavala, Martha, Harry Anthony Patrinos, and Chris Sakellariou. *Quality of Schooling and Quality of Schools for Indigenous Students in Guatemala, Peru, and Mexico*. Policy Research Working Paper 3982. Washington DC: World Bank, 2006. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/acc3be06-462d-502d-9b7d-585a0fb4b56a>.
- Horta, Bernardo L., Ricardo Ventura Santos, James R. Welch, Andrey M. Cardoso, Janaina Vieira dos Santos, Ana MarluCIA Oliveira Assis, Pedro CI Lira, and Carlos E.A. Coimbra Jr. "Nutritional Status of Indigenous Children: Findings from the First National Survey of Indigenous People's Health and Nutrition in Brazil." *International Journal for Equity in Health* 12, no. 23 (2013). <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23552397/>.
- International Finance Facility for Education. "How does it work?". <https://iff-education.org/how-does-it-work/>
- International Fund for Agricultural Development. *Partnering with Indigenous People for the SDGs*. Rome: IFAD, 2019. [https://www.ifad.org/documents/38714170/41390728/policybrief\\_indigenous\\_sdg.pdf/e294b690-b26c-994c-550c-076d15190100](https://www.ifad.org/documents/38714170/41390728/policybrief_indigenous_sdg.pdf/e294b690-b26c-994c-550c-076d15190100).
- International Labour Organization. *Sustainable Development Goals Indigenous Peoples in Focus*. Geneva: ILO, n.d.
- Levitan, Joseph and David Post. "Indigenous Student Learning Outcomes and Education Policies in Peru and Ecuador." In *Indigenous Education Policy, Equity, and Intercultural Understanding in Latin America*, edited by Regina Cortina, 27-49. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Macniven, Rona, Shane Hearn, Anne Grunseit, Justin Richards, Don Nutbeam, and Adrian Bauman. "Correlates of Physical Activity among Australian Indigenous and Non-indigenous Adolescents." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 41, no. 2 (2017): 187-192.

- 
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Briefing Note: Indigenous Peoples' Rights and the 2030 Agenda*. Geneva: OHCHR, 2017.
- Pinstrup-Andersen, Per and Derrill Watson. *Food Policy for Developing Countries: The Role of Government in Global, National, and Local Food Systems*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011.
- Santos, Ricardo Ventura, Gabriel Mendes Borges, Marden Barbosa de Campos, Bernardo Lanza Queiroz, Carlos E.A. Coimbra Jr, and James R. Welch. "Indigenous Children and Adolescent Mortality Inequity in Brazil: What can We Learn from the 2010 National Demographic Census?" *SSM Population Health* 10 (April 2020): 100537. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352827319303180>.
- Seale, J.Paul, Sylvia Shellenberger, Nelia Sanchez, Robert L. Vogel, Elibeth Villalobos, Fred S. Girton, Dana M. Seale, and Ike S. Okosun. "Characteristics of Problem Drinking in an Urban South American Indigenous Population." *Substance Use & Misuse* 45, no. 13 (2010): 2185-2202.
- Villena-Esponera, Maria Pilar, Rafael Moreno-Rojas, and Guillermo Molina-Recio. "Food Insecurity and the Double Burden of Malnutrition of Indigenous Refugee Epera Siapidara." *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 21 (2019): 1035-1042.
- White, Victoria, Toni Mason, and Viki Briggs. "How do Trends in Smoking Prevalence among Indigenous and Non-indigenous Australian Secondary Students between 1996-2005 Compare?" *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 33, no. 2 (2009): 147-153.



वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्

ONE EARTH • ONE FAMILY • ONE FUTURE