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Community-led mutual aid relief efforts launched around the Navajo Reservation to supply vulnerable households with essential materials, food, water, and fuel, August 2020. Photo Courtesy of Janene Yazzie.

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COVID-19 AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN NORTH AMERICA

By Andrea Carmen, Executive Director and Rochelle Diver, Environmental Program Coordinator, International Indian Treaty Council

Indigenous Peoples in North America are profoundly concerned about the spread of the COVID-19 virus in their territories and the resulting loss of life and related impacts on their communities, families, and future generations. We are reminded, as we face this new crisis, the devastating impacts on our Peoples of past pandemics brought in by European and American settlers, miners, and missionaries. In some cases, such as the case of the smallpox-infected blankets brought by the government as “gifts” to Indian Nations, were purposely introduced as acts of genocide.

Indigenous Peoples in North America (the United States and Canada) have suffered violations of their inherent right to health for centuries, making them disproportionately vulnerable to new infectious diseases.



Resource exploitation, destruction of traditional food systems and toxic contamination of Indigenous Peoples' lands, air, and waters have caused disproportionate disease rates including cancers and asthma which compromise immune and respiratory systems among all ages. Poverty, overcrowding, and long-standing lack of access to health care and even potable water in some remote communities in both the US and Canada, have further increased vulnerabilities.

The current COVID-19 crisis highlights these ongoing human rights violations as Indigenous Peoples have the highest rates of deaths among all ages. Tragically, the highest death rates are among Indigenous elders, who are the wisdom, language and knowledge holders for their Nations. Even before the pandemic hit, many Native Nations were considered "food deserts with limited access to nutritious and traditionally used foods in the best of times in addition to basic food staples. For example, in Southern Arizona, the Tohono O'odham Nation, with the 2nd largest federally recognized land base of 2.8 million (the size of the US State of Connecticut) acres, has only one grocery store.

The lack of access to traditional foods and increasing dependency on high-sugar, high fat foods, has resulted in diet-related illnesses, particularly diabetes. Native Americans have the highest prevalence of this deadly and debilitating disease, which in some tribes affects up to 80% of the members, further increasing their vulnerabilities to COVID-19 and other viruses.

As many local grocery stores were depleted at the start of pandemic, Indigenous Peoples were also experiencing the impacts of Climate Change causing extreme heat waves and droughts as they struggled to find sources of fresh, safe, and healthy foods.



IITC Staff member Chris Honahnie delivers seeds from the San Xavier Community Farm in Tucson to the Dine Nation in New Mexico on June 4th 2020.

While the disproportional impacts highlight the outcomes of ongoing and past human rights violations. In addition, new human rights violations directly impacting Indigenous Peoples are being carried out by both the US and Canada, using the COVID-19 pandemic as justification.

For example, the pandemic has been used by American and Canadian federal and provincial governments and corporations to roll back environmental safeguards and fast track development projects that Indigenous Peoples have long opposed.

In Canada on April 1st, 2020, the Alberta Provincial government committed over 1 billion Canadian dollars for the construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline to bring tar sands oil from Alberta through the US heartland, committing to begin construction immediately despite the pandemic.

This transnational pipeline is strongly opposed by Indigenous Peoples all along its route, as a violation of their cultural, environmental, and Treaty rights. Alberta's Energy Minister actually told an industry group that this is a good time to build tar-sands-oil pipelines because coronavirus restrictions limit gatherings of protesters to 15 people!



Oglala Lakota citizens at a checkpoint on the borderlands of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, May 2020. Photo Courtesy of Philip Yellow Hawk and NDN Collective

In March 2020, the state of South Dakota USA along the proposed Keystone XL pipeline route long opposed by Indigenous Nations in both US and Canada, also adopted “anti-protest” laws, expanding the definition of “critical infrastructure” to include oil, gas and utility equipment, and declaring “substantial interruption or impairment” of that equipment as a felony.

That month a federal judge ruled that California can pursue climate litigation against fossil fuel companies in state court, where its chances of success are far better than at the federal level. Also in May, a federal judge ruled in favor of a bid to move forward with a uranium mine south of the Grand Canyon, in opposition to the long standing position of the Havasupai Tribe whose lands, waters and sacred sites would be directly impacted.

Other recent environmental rollbacks by the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), happened behind closed doors while impacted communities, Indigenous and non-Indigenous were locked down or otherwise distracted by the pandemic growing toll.

These included easing fuel-efficiency standards for new cars, freezing rules for soot air pollution, proposals to drop review requirements for environmental toxics including liquefied natural gas terminals and leasing public property to oil and gas companies to increase extractive activities.

The Trump administration’s utter lack of action to curb the growing health impacts of the pandemic in the US was not accompanied by lack of attention to opportunities to further weaken any environmental protections which still in place after 3 years of its anti-environment policies.

In the US, efforts by some Tribal Nations to protect their own Tribal Citizens from infection were met with government repression. On May 8th 2020 the governor of the State of South Dakota, Trump ally Kristi Noem, issued an official letter threatening the Oglala Lakota and Cheyenne River Sioux Nations with legal action if they did not remove the checkpoints they had set up on state roads leading into their lands to protect their citizens from exposure to COVID-19. On June 22, Cheyenne River Chairman Harold Frazier reported that the US federal Bureau of Indian Affairs was “threatening to withdraw law enforcement funding if he does not remove the checkpoints.” These Tribal Nations were not intimidated by these threats and maintained the checkpoints for the protection of their citizens and the assertion of their Sovereignty and Treaty Rights.

On June 22, Cheyenne River Chairman Harold Frazier reported that the US federal Bureau of Indian Affairs was threatening to withdraw law enforcement funding if he does not remove the checkpoints.” These Tribal Nations were not intimidated by these threats and maintained the checkpoints or the protection of their citizens and the assertion of their Treaty Rights.



IITC's Food Sovereignty COVID relief project supports Indigenous family and community gardens in Southern Arizona. IITC Photo.

In another example also in May 2020, a federal judge ruled in favor of a bid to move forward with a uranium mine south of the Grand Canyon, in opposition to the long standing position of the Havasupai Tribe whose lands, waters and sacred sites would be directly impacted.

In the face of the mounting crisis and the lack of positive and respectful government responses, Indigenous Peoples and Nations in North America have turned to their own solutions, increasing efforts to re-establish and expand their food sovereignty and the use of traditional medicines and healing practices.

Our traditional knowledge holders and practitioners have presented solutions to mitigate impacts, to better protect us from disease and to prepare our future generations for a secure and sustainable future.

Local efforts by Indigenous community members, such as the Navajo-Hopi COVID Relief Effort based in Gallup, New Mexico were launched to take donated food to vulnerable families and elders, when local off-reservation stores were depleted or were even closed to Navajo families from the reservation as a response to the pandemic.

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Another example of response to the food crisis faced by Indigenous Peoples, the "Native Seed and Food Sovereignty Project for COVID-19 Relief" was launched in Tucson, Arizona. In collaboration with the International Indian Treaty Council, Yoemem Tekia Foundation (YTF), San Xavier Coop Farm (SXCF), and the O'odham Mutual and Cultural Aid (OMCA) based in and adjacent to the Pascua Yaqui and Tohono O'odham Nations.

The project, which has recently expanded to include other organizations and communities, supports Indigenous Peoples' food sovereignty and restoration of traditional seed, food and medicinal plant use.

The project also facilitates and supports the establishment of family and community gardens for reservation households to supply and supplement their food needs and provide access to fresh traditionally grown foods (beans, squash, chiles, corn etc.).

IITC is working with these partners to obtain seed sources; help build distribution networks for food, seeds, and seedlings; organize inter-tribal exchange of skills, knowledge, seeds and seedlings; distribute emergency meals and food boxes; develop and expand traditional seed banks; increase youth involvement in traditional food production and inter-generational knowledge sharing; and construct and enhance family and community gardens through coordination of the involved projects in response to the pandemic and for long-term health and resiliency.

In North America and around the world, Indigenous Peoples hold the solutions and tools to successfully steward our lands and protect the health of our peoples and communities. However, now, more than ever, the rights of Indigenous Peoples as affirmed in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, must be respected in all efforts to address this crisis.

These include our rights to the productive capacity of our environments and a halt to toxic contamination of our lands; rights to health including both equal access to state health care services and to our traditional medicines and practices; Free, Prior and informed consent regarding both development and administrative measures; and the right to participate in decision-making regarding the planning, development, and implementation of programs aimed at safeguarding the health of our Peoples that will build sustainable, resilient and just solutions, now and post COVID.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples dedicated his annual report to the UN General Assembly to the impacts of the COVID-19 on the rights of Indigenous Peoples. The report gives an overview of existing initiatives undertaken by Indigenous Peoples and others to ensure that the rights and needs of Indigenous Peoples are considered, addressed and respected in the fight against the pandemic.

Please find the SR report and the global submissions, at <https://bit.ly/3pArUUp>.



Yaqui elders receiving PPE in Tucson, Arizona.

Finally, to further these discussions and support Native Nations in North America, the International Indian Treaty Council had launched two series of weekly webinars focusing on the COVID-19 Pandemic and the rights of Indigenous Peoples, beginning on Friday, April 24th and October 9th, 2020.

Topics addressed by Indigenous Peoples representatives from North America and other regions included Food Sovereignty, Environmental Health and Justice, the links between COVID-19 and the Climate Crisis, the impacts of the pandemic on Indigenous women, children and persons with disabilities, and perspectives of Indigenous youth. To listen to the recordings of these webinars we invite you to visit IITC's web site at www.iitc.org.

With prayers for the health and well-being of all our relations, and with words from International Chief Wilton Littlechild, who reports that cases are also now rising in Maskwacis, where his Ermineskin Cree Nation and three other First Nations are located in Alberta, Canada where remains positive that strict measures to lockdown the Indigenous territory as well traditional ceremonies and health knowledge will protect his Nation in the long run.

“One of the impacts of the pandemic is that Indigenous rights were overridden or ignored by government policy makers. They didn't recognize our knowledge and traditional practices as real solutions. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Article 24 affirms our rights to our traditional medicines and practices including healing ceremonies and other traditional health knowledge. The government tried to stop our Sundances, one of most important healing ceremonies for our Cree Nation. But we carried them out anyway, with physical distancing and other measures that were put in place by our own ceremonial leaders. Yes, this is a health crisis and an economic crisis, but from our perspective, this is also a spiritual crisis. This understanding presents the solution: When Indigenous Peoples' rights and traditional knowledge are respected, we can be a significant part of this solution.”