

REVIEW

IDENTIFYING INDIGENOUS PEOPLES FOR HEALTH RESEARCH IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT: A REVIEW OF PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Objectives. Identifying Indigenous Peoples globally is complex and contested despite there being an estimated 370 million living in 70 countries. The specific context and use of locally relevant and clear definitions or characterizations of Indigenous Peoples is important for recognizing unique health risks Indigenous Peoples face, for understanding local Indigenous health aspirations and for reflecting on the need for culturally disaggregated data to plan meaningful research and health improvement programs. This paper explores perspectives on defining Indigenous Peoples and reflects on challenges in identifying Indigenous Peoples.

Methods. Literature reviews and Internet searches were conducted, and some key experts were consulted.

Results. Pragmatic and political definitions by international institutions, including the United Nations, are presented as well as characterizations of Indigenous Peoples by governments and academic researchers. Assertions that Indigenous Peoples have about definitions of indigeneity are often related to maintenance of cultural integrity and sustainability of lifestyles. Described here are existing definitions and interests served by defining (or leaving undefined) such definitions, why there is no unified definition and implications of "too restrictive" a definition. Selected indigenous identities and dynamics are presented for North America, the Arctic, Australia and New Zealand, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and Africa.

Conclusions. While health researchers need to understand the Indigenous Peoples with whom they work, ultimately, indigenous groups themselves best define how they wish to be viewed and identified for research purposes. (*Int J Circumpolar Health* 2007; 66(4):287-307)

Keywords: Indigenous Peoples, definitions, international, health research

INTRODUCTION

Although definitions of Indigenous Peoples are complex and contested, conservative estimates are that more than 370 million Indigenous Peoples are living in 70 countries around the globe (1). Indigenous Peoples may be alternatively termed Aboriginal, tribal or minority peoples. Despite different terminologies and means of identification, Indigenous Peoples are among the most disadvantaged and marginalized people in the world, and are among those at greatest risk of suffering poor health.

In Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Americas, it is relatively easy to identify indigenous communities, based on the fact that they occupied the land before the arrival of European settlers, while Indigenous Peoples in other countries may have endured domination by populations from neighbouring countries or from within. In regions of Asia (e.g., India) and Africa, most people consider themselves indigenous having achieved decolonization and self-determination from European colonial powers (2). Thus, there is no universal definition of Indigenous Peoples that applies equally well in all countries.

In this paper, we hope to help international health researchers by describing the context and challenges of identifying Indigenous Peoples, and provide issues surrounding definitions of indigeneity in the different global regions. We recognize that our efforts in this regard may also serve other research disciplines that affect Indigenous Peoples.

We do not attempt to select or impose one prevailing definition of Indigenous Peoples; rather, our aim is to describe the various definitions that institutions have used to define

them; summarize academic approaches to the characterization of Indigenous Peoples; review critiques of existing definitions, particularly by Indigenous Peoples; provide a review of how indigenous groups have defined or characterized themselves; and describe the various interests at stake in defining (or leaving undefined) the concept of “Indigenous Peoples.” An overview of the different perspectives on defining or characterizing Indigenous Peoples is shown in Table I.

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2007 does not contain a definition, primarily because of a lack of agreement on the contents of a definition. Various criteria for indigenous definitions, some rooted in both historical and common usage, are used in some but not all areas (3,4). Legal definitions have different purposes than definitions from a perspective of health or advocacy, or from an anthropological or other academic disciplinary perspective (A. Eide, personal communication, February 2007). Differing approaches to documenting indigeneity reflect different interests and perspective on three issues: (1) Is there or should there be a generic definition of Indigenous Peoples which is or should be universally applicable? (2) Is a given group “indigenous” or should it be recognized as an indigenous group? (3) Is a given individual an indigenous person? Whereas governments and institutions take the approach of “defining” Indigenous Peoples for political and pragmatic reasons, indigenous populations are much more focused on advocacy and on “asserting” indigenous identity for cultural and survival as a marginalized minority.

Table I. Varied perspectives on defining or characterizing Indigenous Peoples.

United Nations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues: considers all perspectives - International Labor Organization: definition accepted by other UN agencies (WHO, FAO, UNEP, UNICEF): seek legal definitions - Agencies cannot easily criticize policies of member states
National Governments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Require legal definitions - May prefer to not identify and thereby marginalize/colonize and integrate - May request self-identification with census - May be concerned with treaty and other “rights” if identified - Require health data disaggregated by culture to address subpopulation health risks - May consider indigeneity as part of national identity - May accept and build national and local indigenous institutions
Indigenous Peoples and Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-identification is the only constant - Some may prefer not to be identified due to risk of discrimination - May not want to be “romanticized” and considered as living “in the past” - Want to assert indigenous identity for advocacy to improve health and wellness - Need the local context of a definition to serve specific purposes - Prefer that there is no global single definition
Academics in Health Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Must work with government agencies and funding guidelines - May require identification within culture/ecosystem for research study of risk - May want to address health data disaggregated for indigeneity - Concern for urban migration and changing population size/location/ecology - May want to provide data to assist advocacy to improve health of Indigenous Peoples

Researchers must be aware of this tension and ensure their work does not further marginalize or “make invisible” the people with whom they work or deny them their right to define themselves. This paper is intended to provide useful information to support recognition of Indigenous Peoples in international research. A key focus is on locally derived and contextual definitions of indigeneity.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Literature and Internet searches were conducted during 2006. Key experts were consulted for missing information, particularly for African and Asian issues.

RESULTS

Definitions adopted by international institutions – pragmatism and politics

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) is the body within the United Nations with the “mandate to discuss indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights”(5). The UNPFII’s official website definition reads as follows:

Indigenous Peoples are the inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to other people and to the environment. Indigenous Peoples have retained social, cultural, economic and

political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live. Despite their cultural differences, the various groups of Indigenous Peoples around the world share common problems related to the protection of their rights as distinct Peoples. Indigenous Peoples around the world have sought recognition of their identities, their ways of life and their right to traditional lands, territories and natural resources; yet throughout history, their rights have been violated. Indigenous Peoples are arguably among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of people in the world today. The international community now recognizes that special measures are required to protect the rights of the world's Indigenous Peoples. (1)

In 2004, a background paper from the secretariat of the UNPFII focused on the concept of Indigenous Peoples and asserted that, while there is no formally accepted universal definition of "Indigenous Peoples" within the United Nations, "historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territory" is important and would consist of one or more of the following: (a) occupation of ancestral lands, or at least of part of them; (b) common ancestry with the original occupants of these lands; (c) culture in general, or in specific manifestations (such as religion, living under a tribal system, membership of an indigenous community, dress, means of livelihood, lifestyle, etc.); (d) language (whether used as the only language, as mother-tongue, as the habitual means of communication at home or in the family, or as the main, preferred, habitual, general or normal language); (e)

residence on certain parts of the country or in certain regions of the world; and (f) other relevant factors.

On an individual basis, an indigenous person is one who belongs to these indigenous populations through self-identification as indigenous (group consciousness) and is recognized and accepted by these populations as one of its members (acceptance by the group). This preserves for these communities the sovereign right and power to decide who belongs to them, without external interference (6).

Two important keywords stand out in the above UNPFII definition: *distinct* and *dominant*. Indigenous Peoples normally espouse different or "distinct" cultural, economic and political ways of life than that of the dominant societies in which they reside. The word "dominant" in this definition does not imply "majority" but signifies the segment of society that is overlooking and commanding from a superior position.

The World Health Organization as well as other United Nations agencies (FAO, UNEP, UNICEF) use the definition of Indigenous Peoples that was formulated by the International Labour Organization (ILO) (7).

The ILO Conventions Nos. 107 and 169 are the only general, binding interstate treaties concerning Indigenous Peoples. The characterization of Indigenous Peoples is commonly cited and widely accepted on an international scale. Article 1 of ILO Convention No. 169 (1989) states:

Tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special

laws or regulations; Peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonization or the establishment of present state boundaries and who irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions. (6)

Article 1 also indicates that “self-identification as indigenous or tribal shall be regarded as a fundamental criterion for determining the groups to which the provisions of this Convention apply” (4). Also:

The two terms “indigenous peoples” and “tribal peoples” are used by the ILO because there are tribal peoples who are not “indigenous” in the literal sense in the countries in which they live, but who nevertheless live in a similar situation – an example would be Afro-descended tribal peoples in Central America; or tribal peoples in Africa such as the San or Maasai who may not have lived in the region they inhabit longer than other population groups. Nevertheless, many of these peoples refer to themselves as “indigenous” in order to fall under discussions taking place at the United Nations. For practical purposes the terms “indigenous” and “tribal” are used as synonyms in the UN system when the peoples concerned identify themselves under the indigenous agenda. (6)

The World Bank approved a revised policy on Indigenous Peoples in 2005, which reads:

Because of the varied and changing contexts

in which Indigenous Peoples live and because there is no universally accepted definition of “Indigenous Peoples,” this policy does not define the term. Indigenous Peoples may be referred to in different countries by such terms as “indigenous ethnic minorities,” “aboriginals,” “hill tribes,” “minority nationalities,” “scheduled tribes,” or “tribal groups.” (8)

For purposes of this policy, the term “Indigenous Peoples” is used in a generic sense to refer to a distinct, vulnerable, social and cultural group possessing the following characteristics in varying degrees: (a) self-identification as members of a distinct indigenous cultural group and recognition of this identity by others; (b) collective attachment to geographically distinct habitats or ancestral territories in the project area and to the natural resources in these habitats and territories; (c) customary cultural, economic, social, or political institutions that are separate from those of the dominant society and culture; and (d) an indigenous language, often different from the official language of the country or region. (8)

These definitions are not exclusive to groups who have suffered colonization and they include “tribal peoples” and some “ethnic minorities” as well. In general, from the point of “hard law” (an international convention in the United Nations or a national law), there is a need for a definition to determine the scope of the law’s application for special purposes. However, from the point of view of “soft law,” such as that contained in the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, an explicit definition can be avoided to provide states a

margin of choice to determine which groups are indigenous (A. Eide, personal communication, February 2007).

Definitions by academic institutions – advocacy and “other”ism

Not surprisingly, the “academic” definitions of Indigenous Peoples differ from those of large governmental institutions. Academics who become involved in research with Indigenous Peoples often become advocates for such populations while at the same time, due to their academic orientation and perhaps cultural differences, they must remain distanced – thus creating an environment for differentiating the “other” from the general societies with centralized government authorities by which they are both dominated and defined by their relations with the state (9).

Referring to the need for health research among Indigenous Peoples, Stephens et al. do not specifically define Indigenous Peoples but point to distinguishing features and conditions common to them, which may serve the same purpose. Mentioned are that Indigenous Peoples (a) are among the poorest and most marginalized groups; (b) have worse health and social indicators than others in the same society; (c) have a conception of health that is holistic in that it encompasses the health of the whole community and of the ecosystem in which they live; and (d) often have a weak position within national state governing structures (10).

The type of academic research being carried out can also help mould a definition for a specific project. For example, McGill University’s Centre for Indigenous Peoples’ Nutrition and Environment (CINE), which conducts research on Indigenous Peoples’ traditional food systems, has at the very core of its working defi-

nition of Indigenous Peoples the crucial factor of knowledge of the land and food resources that are rooted in historical continuity within the region (11).

Academic researchers are required to abide by government regulations and guidelines from their home institution as well as in the country of the research. This includes guidelines for the ethical conduct of research (12). When addressing health disparities, researchers often need to clarify culture and ecosystem identities for addressing any risk the research may pose to subpopulations (10).

Indigenous Peoples’ assertions of defining indigeneity – cultural integrity and sustainability

The great diversity of Indigenous Peoples in the world makes it impossible to agree on a conclusive single definition, yet there are general perceptions in the literature that reflect a consistent point of view that an indigenous lens focused on self-definition, is vital (11). Reinforcing the importance of an indigenous lens, Maori scholar Te Ahukaramu Charles Royals contrasts world views, reflecting that whereas the Western (Judeo-Christian) view visualizes God as external and in heaven “above” and the Eastern world view that focuses “internally and concentrates on reaching within through meditation and other practices,” the indigenous world view regards people “as integral to the world, with humans having a seamless relationship with nature [that] includes seas, land, rivers, mountains, flora and fauna” (13).

The importance of self-definition (as well as self-identification and acceptance by the community), for example, was reflected by the 2002 national assembly of Métis in

Canada when it unanimously adopted a definition of what constitutes a “Métis”: “Métis means a person who self-identifies as Métis, is of historic Métis Nation Ancestry, is distinct from other Aboriginal Peoples and is accepted by the Métis Nation” (14).

Indian activists in Mexico have asserted that to be an Indian is not “just to have a particular physical appearance...[I]t is also to speak an Indian language, to live on ancestral land, to practice traditional customs, and to hold the age-old values of the community within which you live” (15).

However, others prefer to retain their identity as “Indian” even though they may no longer live in ancestral lands or practise traditional languages or culture because of displacement by colonizing or capitalist forces that have driven them to move into urban, non-traditional areas (15).

At a meeting in Thailand in 2000, Indigenous Peoples affirmed their collective identity:

We are Indigenous Peoples proud of our heritage and traditions and systems. We are Peoples with dignity and rights, with integrity and humanity, and determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to generations after us such heritage, traditions and systems...

We are Indigenous Peoples grouped – together and in Diaspora – into nations and communities around the world with a memory of colonialism and a continuing experience of plunder, assimilation and discrimination, domination and marginalisation, of oppression and exploitation. The different countries from where we come are nation-states whose controlling paradigm of governance is national sovereignty. Our

Indigenous nations continue to exist in the margins of the nation-state. Our marginalisation deprives us of creative and effective participation in the national decision-making processes. (16)

The Indigenous Peoples Seattle Declaration, created in 1999 at the Third Ministerial Meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO), sponsored the following statement:

Indigenous peoples, undoubtedly, are the ones most adversely affected by globalization and by the WTO Agreements. However, we believe that it is also us who can offer viable alternatives to the dominant economic growth, export-oriented development model. Our sustainable lifestyles and cultures, traditional knowledge, cosmologies, spirituality, values of collectivity, reciprocity, respect and reverence for Mother Earth, are crucial in the search for a transformed society where justice, equity, and sustainability will prevail. (17)

Although many Indigenous Peoples and groups have asserted their unique identity, some persons and groups, due to stigma or historical lack of safety associated with being indigenous, may not identify themselves as indigenous. This may be to avoid institutional economic and social discrimination and racism (10). However, some persons who claim to be indigenous when not accepted by an indigenous group may do so to qualify for certain affirmative-action programs, and some indigenous individuals may adopt external and government-derived definitions of “indigenous” in order to access needed resources.

Some countries establish a formal definition of Indigenous Peoples with the view to excluding

some indigenous groups from influence and political participation. This is one reason why many indigenous groups across the globe voice strong opposition to being defined by external bodies outside of their respective communities, and prefer the concept of self-definition (18).

Indigenous groups have also argued that popular and stereotypical notions of indigenous identity are “locked in the past” and freeze Indigenous Peoples in time and “in some noble savage state” (19,20). A recent study maintained that “[s]tereotypical western imagery tends towards romanticised images of peoples untouched by modernity...” (21), or even from a past that never existed (22). One indigenous leader from Ecuador complained, “Why can’t I be Quechua running COICA, the biggest multinational indigenous organization in the Americas? All they [Western academics] see are the externals – dress, language, socio-economic condition” (19). These characterizations do not match the present-day reality of the heterogeneity among Indigenous Peoples in terms of social organization, cultural beliefs and practices, population sizes and relative integration into national societies (23).

It is important to accept that definitions and identities of Indigenous Peoples are not static, but change over time. Definitions portraying indigenous groups as living exclusively on isolated territorial land are also problematic because many who have lost their homelands and/or traditional means no longer live in isolation. For example, almost one-half (49%) of Aboriginal Canadians lived in urban areas in 2001 (24).

Indigenous groups have argued that it is misleading to assume they all have a similar identity, and that it is more fruitful to work on locally derived and contextual definitions. In

United Nations forums, Indigenous Peoples have consistently challenged the need for a worldwide definition, and that seeking one “right” definition is both counterproductive and damaging (20,22). The notion of being Indian in Latin America is interpreted in various ways: “Indianness means different things to different people. And, of course, at the most elementary level, Indianness is something only experienced by people who are Indians. It is how Indians think about themselves and is internal, intangible, and metaphysical” (25).

Interests served in defining (or not defining) Indigenous Peoples

The process of defining and recognizing Indigenous Peoples is not only difficult, but it is also highly contested, making it difficult for health researchers to identify the community being researched. In Latin America some governments wish to underestimate the percentage of the population that is indigenous to minimize Indigenous Peoples’ political roles and to deny them access to land and other resources (18). Jaimes suggests that “the federal government has an interest in the statistical examination of indigenous people, thereby leading to an end to treaty and trust responsibilities” normally established with the collective populations (26).

Definitions made within the United Nations avoid questioning the authority of member nation-states and their sovereignty. These may differ from indigenous-derived definitions that are often overtly critical of nation-states and their systems of control and decision-making. Africa and some parts of Asia are problematic when it comes to defining and recognizing its indigenous communities. The unwillingness of nation-states to recog-

nize Indigenous Peoples has consequences for researchers:

...In other areas, the data is incredibly sparse, so for example, Africa where even recognizing that there are people who call themselves Indigenous...for example, the San [Peoples] in Botswana...the Government of Botswana doesn't even recognize that concept, everyone is Indigenous, so there is almost no data. And what that means is that you basically have to go to anthropologists, to NGOs; and what we found is in many regions of the world, the anthropologists have been collecting data that the epidemiologists should have been collecting for many years. (27)

In contrast, some countries formally recognize Indigenous Peoples. In Bolivia, Indigenous Peoples are not only acknowledged in the constitution but they are also included in a Regulatory Decree, which defines them as:

...the human community descended from populations that were settled prior to the conquest or colonization and are located within the current boundaries of the state; they have a history, an organizational structure, a language or dialect, and other cultural characteristics that identify their members as belonging to a given socio-cultural unit; they maintain territorial ties by managing their habitat and their social, economic, political, and cultural institutions...Indigenous peoples are those whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations. (28)

In Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, Indigenous Peoples are formally recognized by state structures, usually meaning they are self-identified in national censuses, making it easier to conduct research and to report on their poorer health status.

Thus, while some governments have evaded defining Indigenous Peoples and creating statistical measures, others have taken a more proactive approach and included them in constitutions, laws and decrees. The level of recognition may vary as statistics depend on a common definition of "indigenous" resulting in concealing problems of poor health conditions and food insecurity. This has negative implications for researchers who experience difficulty in identifying research questions as well as in research implementation. "Different governments use very different ways of identifying Indigenous people, which has been one of the problems for researchers trying to work out what's going on in terms of the health of Indigenous People" (27).

Reflections of Indigenous Peoples at national levels

It is difficult to find one common and valid definition for Indigenous Peoples at the global level because of the very different history, traditions, conditions and so on in the various countries. This is illustrated in the following national descriptions.

North America

Canada

The term "Aboriginal people" (Canada Constitution Act 1982, Section 65) describes the three groups making up Canada's indigenous population; Indians (First Nations), Métis and the Inuit.

In 2001, 1.3 million Canadians reported having at least some indigenous ancestry, representing 4.4% of the total population. Forty-nine percent of the Aboriginal population lived in urban areas, and this has been steadily increasing (24). The historical development of a relationship with Canada has been distinct for each of these Aboriginal peoples.

The First Nations make up about two-thirds of the Aboriginal population in Canada, with the proportion living on Indian reserves (lands designated for exclusive use by First Nations communities) at about 31% in 2001 (24). First Nations persons included in an official Indian Register are recognized as Indians under the Indian Act (also called Status Indians) and are entitled to certain rights and benefits under the law, such as hunting and fishing on unoccupied land, and to receiving free post-secondary education. A band council consisting of an elected chief and councillors conducts community business that takes care of such issues as education, water, sewer systems and roads (29,30). Aboriginal political bodies such as the Assembly of First Nations have been successful in having these rights enforced.

The Métis Nation evolved out of relations between Indian women and European men on lands of west-central North America. The Métis developed their own unique culture, traditions, language (Michif), way of life, collective consciousness and nationhood (31). The Métis Nation makes up about one-third of the Aboriginal population in Canada and stretches across the country, with the majority living in the West. The Métis National Council is constituted by provincial member organizations (in the central and western provinces of Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia). Most Métis live in cities and large

rural centres, while some live in Métis villages (often located next to First Nation communities). The Métis have had a Bill of Rights and democratic elections since the late nineteenth century.

The Inuit live in the Northwest Territories (Inuvialuit), Nunavut, Quebec (Nunavik) and Labrador (Nunatsiavut). Inuit make up 5% (45,070) of the overall Aboriginal population in Canada (24). They traditionally lived a nomadic lifestyle based on hunting, fishing and gathering, but now live in year-round permanent communities that range from a few families to a few thousand people (32). In the 1960s and early 1970s, they formed a national representative organization, the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK). The Inuit achieved success in settling a long-standing land claim that resulted in the 1999 creation of a new territory called Nunavut, which means “our land” in the Inuktitut language. The Nunavut population is 85% Inuit, and has established a territorial governing structure (33).

United States of America

In the United States, the terms American Indians/Alaska Natives and Native Americans are used to refer to the indigenous population who are defined as the original inhabitants of what now constitutes America, although “Indian” is still in common use by those who use this term to define themselves (32,34). The American Indians/Alaska Natives population is reported as 4.1 million (1.5%), of which 2.5 million (0.9%) identified their race as solely American Indian or Alaska Native (34). The largest groups are Cherokee, Navajo, Choctaw, Sioux and Chippewa (35), and the 3 states with the largest Native American populations are California, Arizona and Oklahoma (36).

The United States federal government has officially recognized 562 tribes, groups “bound together by blood ties who are socially, politically and religiously organized; who live together in a defined territory, and who speak a common language or dialect” (36,37). The various tribes and the federal or state governments have government-to-government relationships, as prescribed in the American constitution, in treaties, agreements and statutes, and in numerous court cases (36). Each tribe sets its own membership criteria, and separate government departments use different criteria for the eligibility of services and/or programs that are geared towards Native Americans (37). Tribes can be conceptualized as sovereign entities that have the right to enforce civil and criminal laws, to tax, to establish membership, to license and regulate activities, to zone and to exclude persons from tribal territories (36).

American Indians/Alaska Natives live on reservations, which were established in the mid-1800s when the American government pursued a policy that had the goal of relocating various tribes from their ancestral homes to parcels of lands established specifically for their inhabitation. As elsewhere, more and more Native Americans are moving from reservations to cities, with nearly 70% of American Indians or Alaska Natives now living in urban areas (38).

The Arctic: Indigenous Peoples of the North

The vast region of the Arctic, including parts of Canada, United States (Alaska), Norway, Finland, Sweden and Russia, is home to numerous and diverse groups of Indigenous Peoples. Among the many groups are the American Alaska Natives; the Canadian,

Greenlandic and Siberian Inuit; the Saami of Scandinavia; and the Chukchi and Nenets of Siberia. People living in this region of the world are sometimes referred to as “Northern Peoples.” Because northern Indigenous Peoples’ settlements transcend national boundaries, it is often difficult to give an exact figure of the total population; however, approximately 4 million people live in the circumpolar north (39,40). Today, the majority of northern Indigenous Peoples live in permanent year-round housing units (41).

Political mobilization has created representative organizations and positive developments in rights and recognition. As noted earlier, the Inuit in Canada settled a land claim with Canada and formed a new territory called Nunavut in 1999. Norway’s Sámi Indigenous Peoples, in 1989, formed a Sámi parliament and developed a Sámi national anthem and flag. In 2005, Norway passed the Finnmark Act, which gave the Sámi parliament and the Finnmark County Council joint responsibility in the administration of Finnmark County. The County now belongs to the people of the province, both Sámi and Norwegian, (42,43). In Greenland, the Home Rule Act grants all of its residents in the country a degree of autonomy from the decisions made in its capital, Copenhagen. Since Inuit make up 80% of the Greenlandic population, this is perceived as Inuit self-government (44). At this time in Russia, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Far East and Siberia “is working to link 30 [I]ndigenous minority groups and present a united voice to official, Moscow-led, governance” (40).

The Arctic Council was established in 1996 as a forum of 8 nation-states with the purpose to “protect the Arctic environment and promote

the economic, social and cultural well-being of northern peoples” (41). Especially relevant is the Council’s mandate of fostering cooperation between national governments and Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous populations are represented by the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, the Sámi Council, the Arctic Athabaskan Council, the Gwich’in Council International, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North and the Aleut International Association. These indigenous organizations work together through the Indigenous Peoples Secretariat.

Australia

In Australia various terms are used to describe Indigenous Peoples: “Aboriginal Australians,” “Aborigines,” “Natives” and, more recently, “indigenous Australians” have all been used to refer to the first inhabitants of Australia whose traditional lands extended throughout mainland Australia, Tasmania and numerous offshore islands. Many indigenous Australians prefer to be referred to according to their local group names, such as Wa’s Nyoongar, Wongi and Tamitji people and the Koori people of south-eastern Australia (45). The “Torres Strait Islanders,” whose lands are situated on the Torres Strait Islands between northernmost Australia and the island of New Guinea, have a heritage and cultural history which is distinct from mainland indigenous Australians.

The Australia 2001 Census identified “Aborigines” and “Torres Strait Islanders” as comprising 2.4% of the Australian population, with 30% living in major cities (48). Persons identifying as having “Aboriginal” origin made up approximately 90% of the indigenous population. Persons of “Torres Strait Islander origin”

comprised 6% and those with both “Aboriginal” and “Torres Strait Islander” origin comprised the remaining 4% (46).

Indigenous Australians have suffered acutely since the arrival of colonial settlers in 1788. The 1860 Victorian Board of Protection of Aborigines established a system of reserves with the power to force indigenous Australians to move away from their traditional lands onto designated areas where they would be controlled in almost every activity, including work and earnings, clothing, diet, marriage and religion (47). Civil rights for Indigenous Peoples were restricted and indigenous Australians were contracted for cheap labour (48). In 1967, a nation-wide referendum removed the barriers to formal involvement of the state in dealing with Aboriginal affairs and indigenous Australians began to be enumerated by census (49). Self-determination and government has been discouraged by the national government, and in 2004 Australia’s most prominent indigenous organization (the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) was dismantled (49).

New Zealand

New Zealand’s Indigenous Peoples are popularly identified as the “Maori,” however, they prefer the term “Tangata Whenua” or “people of the land” (14). New Zealand’s Maori/Tangata Whenua constitute 14% of the total population, and approximately 83% reside in urban centres (50).

In 1840, New Zealand joined the British Empire via the Treaty of Waitangi, whose signatories were the British Crown and Maori Chiefs. The fact that Maori Chiefs were involved in the signing of the treaty ensured New Zealand’s indigenous population certain

rights. In fact, two versions of the treaty were drafted at the time of signing, one in the Maori language and the other in English. As a result, there were different interpretations with respect to the nature and extent of Crown obligations towards the Tangata Whenua. Nevertheless, the Tangata Whenua were granted full citizenship rights and universal suffrage, yet their social and health conditions have been substandard when compared with the overall New Zealand population (49).

Latin America and the Caribbean

In Latin America, Indigenous Peoples are generally recognized as those groups that are the descendants of the first inhabitants of the territory (51). Approximately 34 million Indigenous Peoples from 450 different ethno-linguistic groups live in Latin America (including Mexico) and the Caribbean, composing 8% of the region's population (52,19). In Bolivia, Indigenous Peoples make up an estimated 81% of the population, while in Argentina they are a very small minority (53). Despite being unable to generalize the dynamics between Indigenous Peoples and the general population for the whole of Latin America, land is a critical common component of indigenous identity. "A plot of land is, for most Indigenous people, a symbol of their right to live – the place where they grow the subsistence crops that ensure their survival. Many traditional Indians [in Latin America] believe that if they do not eat the potatoes or maize that are their staples, they will somehow lose their 'Indianness'" (19).

Indigenous organizations have pressured governments for recognition in their constitutions and legislation, and some countries, for example Colombia, have done so. Bolivia,

Guatemala and Honduras have ratified the International Labour Organization's definition of Indigenous Peoples as described in its Convention No. 169 (18). At the same time, some Latin American governments do not collect national indigenous statistics or self-identification information in census data (53). In countries where these statistics are collected, they are not always based on the same definition of indigenous and may result in concealing problems that are of particularly relevance to indigenous groups (i.e., poor health conditions and food insecurity). This is also problematic for researchers because it makes it difficult to identify issues and conduct relevant investigations.

In Mexico and Peru, identifying oneself as a Mestizo (mixed European/Amerindian) has come to be used as a cultural label to identify people who are not following their traditional ways of life (clothing, customs and indigenous language) but who have adopted European dress and customs. Research has shown that Latin Americans "tend to whiten themselves" and may call themselves Mestizos as opposed to indigenous (53). Mestizos have historically held the middle ground between white European descendants and Indigenous Peoples. At one time, they were the "overseers, administrators and craftsmen" of the estates, while the labour force working under them was divided between those of African/Caribbean descent and Indigenous Peoples (53). The very identification of Latin Americans as Mestizos instead of as Indigenous Peoples leads to an underestimation of the indigenous population. However, in the past decade there has been a revival of indigenous pride and political organizations, so there may be more people identifying as indigenous in coming years (53).

Asia

Identifying which groups are indigenous in this region is difficult, since some states have been reluctant to recognize groups as indigenous (3). Nonetheless, it is estimated that 75% of the world's Indigenous Peoples reside in Asia (2). Many Indigenous Peoples in Asia are said to have endured domination within their own countries or by their neighbouring countries.

Asia contains many countries which are divided by the United Nations into South Asia (i.e., India and China), Central Asia (i.e., Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) and Western Asia (i.e., Saudi Arabia and Iraq). There are 2 organizations that are important to Indigenous Peoples in Asia: the Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP), located in Chaing Mai, Thailand, and the Tebtebba Foundation – Indigenous Peoples' International Centre for Policy Research and Education, located in Baguio City, Philippines. Although exploring indigenous issues in all of Asia's countries falls outside the scope of this paper, we describe circumstances in 3 specific countries: India, China and Thailand.

India

India is an immensely populated country in southern Asia with many tribes that are collectively known as *adivasi* or "original inhabitants." The Indian government officially recognizes many tribes and has them listed in its constitution as "Scheduled Tribes" (54). However, this term has gradually been replaced by Indigenous Peoples in informal speech in India, even though the Indian government has not ratified the International Labour Organization Convention

No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (55). Many non-governmental organizations as well as the United Nations have conceptualized the *adivasi* as being indigenous (56).

Scheduled Tribes are a sizeable minority of India's overall population and are spread across numerous Indian states, from the Himalayas to the west, north-east, central and south-east of the country, and form approximately 8.2 % of the country's population. India contains one of the largest indigenous populations in the world, numbering approximately 84.3 million people (54). These tribes are assumed to be the oldest ethnic sectors of the national population (54). Nevertheless, ascertaining which individuals or groups belong to or form Scheduled Tribes is a delicate and complicated issue in India. Debate arises regarding which group is a Scheduled Tribe, especially when the process of recognizing these groups translates into economic interests and voting blocks in parliament. The exact number of Scheduled Tribes varies from 250 to 593 (57).

In the Indian context, it is useful to understand that unlike castes, which form a complex and interrelated economic system in the country, Scheduled Tribes tend to form self-sufficient economic units and have been excluded from the mainstream class and caste structures into which they do not fit (57). The following characteristics have been used to help identify or characterize a tribe in India: (a) speak a tribal dialect; (b) live in isolation from the main social current of Indian society (i.e., in heavily forested areas); (c) practise animism as a religion; (d) follow occupations such as hunting and gathering of forest produce; (e) espouse nomadic

habits; and (f) practice swidden farming, which involves a temporary agricultural plot produced by cutting back and burning off vegetative cover (54). Although these criteria help give a picture of the Indigenous Peoples in India, they do not always apply in an accurate and straightforward way. For example, related to the degree of isolation, some tribes may actually live very close to castes making it very difficult to determine whether a community is in fact a tribe or part of a caste (58).

China

The People's Republic of China contains a total of 56 ethnic groups that have been identified and officially recognized, which vary greatly in their language, size, traditions and customs. The largest ethnic group is the Han, which makes up 92% of the overall Chinese population (59,60). The remaining 8% (104.5 million) are ethnic minority groups, many of whom are traditionally nomadic and engage primarily in agricultural or pastoral activities (61). Many of China's minority groups live along international borders such as the Tibetan Autonomous Region, the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (59). In addition, 40 out of the existing 55 recognized minority groups have ethnic counterparts abroad, which leads to the Chinese state's concern of their national loyalty (59).

China refuses to recognize that it has Indigenous Peoples within its geographical boundaries (62), and has sought a definition that makes it clear that "minority ethnic groups" or "minorities" are not "indigenous people" (63). This may be because minorities, under existing international instruments

and standards are only entitled to individual rights, whereas Indigenous Peoples justly attach considerable importance to collective rights (63). Since International indigenous organizations, Western scholars and intergovernmental entities prefer the World Bank's open-ended description of Indigenous Peoples as "social groups with a social and cultural identity distinct from the dominant society that makes them vulnerable to being disadvantaged in the development process" (63), China's minority ethnic groups often fit this description and as such can be conceptualized as Indigenous Peoples. The issues of land rights do not arise in the same way because all land in China is state owned and regulated.

Thailand

About 60 ethnic cultural groups with unique linguistic affiliations are distributed throughout Thailand. There is no Thai word conceptually similar to "indigenous," but people are grouped as, for example, the Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Akha, Mon, Lua and Mbri. While people of many cultural backgrounds form the Thai citizenry and have rights to land, houses and services (education, health, etc.) provided by the constitution, many are still fighting for Thai citizenship to access these resources and to exercise the right to vote.

A movement for local knowledge revitalization preserves the Thai national heritage and provides income through production of local products. Many people we would call "indigenous" are often called "hill tribes" or "village people" (56). Similar circumstances exist for "hill tribes" in Laos, Cambodia, Viet Nam and other countries in southeast Asia.

Africa

Nowhere is “indigenesness” more disputed than in Africa, where the majority of Africans claim indigeneity in comparison to white colonists (2,64). Definitions used to describe indigenous vary among south, central and northern Africans (65). Despite this, there are more than 14.2 million self-identifying Indigenous Peoples in Africa who have been categorized into three groups: (1) hunter-gatherers (e.g., Pygmy peoples of central Africa and the San of southern Africa); (2) fisher people; and (3) pastoralists (e.g., Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania; communities in Sudan and Ethiopia; Tuareg in western and northern Africa; and the Himba in Namibia) (8,64,66). However, these definitions exclude many tribal peoples who practise agriculture and who live throughout Africa. From the perspective of the Convention on Biological Diversity of the UN Environment Program and the Article 8J Collaboration, Indigenous Peoples have regarded terminology to be more inclusive if it refers to “indigenous and local communities” (67).

Maasai pastoralists consider themselves as an indigenous minority in several east African countries, but legal recognition varies in different states (Eide, A. personal communication February, 2007). The Hausa majority in Nigeria forms the basis of government there (68). In Nigeria, the 3 major tribal/linguistic groups are the Hausa, the Yoruba and the Igbo, who all consider themselves indigenous, and the government administration includes all three (68). An Igbo will consider himself/herself as indigenous if he/she lives in an Igbo community, experiences a minimum of acculturation and has life patterns, agricultural practices and diet that are essentially Igbo (56).

African minority peoples have been displaced and oppressed (some argue internally colonized) by “ethnically-unrelated African peoples who have been their neighbours for a thousand years and longer” (2). For those who self-identify as indigenous, the situation can be grim. For example, Pygmy peoples “are frequently deprived of the legal protection to which other citizens are entitled.” They are sometimes not officially recognized as citizens in their state (69); excluded from electoral participation and public administration; unable to register their children’s births; or even “killed by one armed faction or the other simply for not having an identity card” (70,64). One African indigenous representative, in referring to the effects of colonization on minority tribal groups, stated that “they forced us against our will into the dominant tribes that claimed our lands, who in turn have made us their slaves. This has been perpetuated, even enforced, by post-colonial governments up until today” (70). Despite the lack of rights and recognition in many African countries, tribal peoples have attended indigenous forums at the United Nations to emphasize that recognition is required to ensure their survival (71).

Regardless of where their tribe lives and how they identify themselves, Indigenous Peoples in Africa often constitute minorities compared with the rest of the population. As well, their numbers are constantly in the decline due to conflicts such as the 1994 Rwandan genocide in which an alarming 30% of the Batwa Pygmy population was killed (69). The plight of many Indigenous Peoples in Africa is exacerbated by the political conflicts that exist in various nation-states where they often have a politically weak position.

Summary and conclusions

Defining or characterizing Indigenous Peoples is complex and contested. “The indigenous experience is both distinct yet diverse; many similarities are obvious yet significant differences can be identified...” (13). Acknowledging this reality creates a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the world’s Indigenous Peoples and of their current cultural, economic, social and political situations.

Although the absence of a unified definition of Indigenous Peoples can be problematic, researchers must understand the rationale and context for why there is not a unified definition and thus be aware of the implications of using “too restrictive” a definition when undertaking research projects about Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous Peoples have challenged the need of having a universal definition. José Martínez Cobo provides the following definition:

Indigenous communities, Peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories or parts of them (7).

However, not everyone accept the position that Indigenous Peoples must be defined as post-colonial or that they exist within an external government definition (Eide, A. personal communication, February, 2007). The International Labour Organization’s “statement of coverage” of Indigenous Peoples provides definitions that are widely accepted by many institutions, including the World Health Orga-

nization. The ILO definitions are flexible enough to encompass the diversity of indigenous populations in different world regions. Nevertheless, some scholars accept the position that there is not one singular definition that is universally applicable and that defining specific characterer and population traits cannot serve research purposes. Avoiding one legal definition will best preserve differing cultural perspectives. Self-identification is a (if not the only) fundamental criterion. A flexible approach to a “definition” may provide the necessary scope that promotes the fundamental values underlying the concept of Indigenous Peoples.

For research in a specific context, the development of local and clear definitions or characterizations of Indigenous Peoples is important, especially when discussing their health (21). For example, epidemiological research requires clear definitions for determining population estimates and disease rates, which are especially needed for knowing the risks of particular subpopulations. The type of research being carried out can also help mould a definition for a specific project, and many types of research involving population subgroups require data disaggregation, including research on many aspects of the Millennium Development Goals.

Ultimately, the responsibility for the formulation of a definition rests with indigenous communities. Researchers need to initiate a dialogue with indigenous groups about how they wish to be viewed and identified. Listening to and hearing Indigenous Peoples and responding to their priorities and concerns is an important aspect of health research with Indigenous Peoples, as is not viewing them as “problematic victims” with

a singular focus on pathologies and dysfunctions in their communities (21,72). Indigenous Peoples are protectors of vital traditional knowledge of medicinal natural substances (plants, animals, earth elements) that can help solve present-day diseases. Research is a two-way learning process; however, not having a universal and unified definition of Indigenous Peoples is not in itself an impediment:

The Lancet announced its plan to focus on indigenous health in 2005; we were warned that it would be “unwise” to devote a series of papers to the “supposedly special health problems” of groups that were impossibly hard to define. By identifying a people based on culture, language, or social organization, the “drift to racism,” Adam Kuper argued, “may be inevitable” (73). Although a serious charge, and certainly a possible risk, the overwhelming need for action on Indigenous Peoples’ health easily outweighs any potential harm. (74).

In this review, we have attempted to capture the major perspectives and challenges surrounding definitions of Indigenous Peoples in different parts of the world. We recognize the importance of disaggregating health data collected nationally or regionally by culture, so that measures for enhancing health status can be implemented effectively and appropriately. Even with this, there is a need to ensure that indigenous definitions prevail in the articulations of such national or regional definitions. It is also important to know and support the many health benefits of local indigenous cultures and to be able to address health risks, and their indicators, that are specific to the populations involved.

As researchers on the health of Indigenous Peoples, the authors encourage readers to understand who Indigenous Peoples are and to engage in health research that will promote the wellness of Indigenous Peoples wherever they live.

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