



Voices of Indigenous Children and Adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean

An Insight into their Situation

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Executive summary

1. General context

More than 54.8 million Indigenous people live in Latin America and the Caribbean, including 18 million children and adolescents. This population continues to face multiple structural violations of their rights, rooted in centuries of discrimination, exclusion and territorial dispossession.

This report is the result of a collaborative effort by the Fund for the Development of Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean (FILAC), the Indigenous Youth Network, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). It responds to an urgent need: to understand and shed light on the realities faced by Indigenous children and adolescents in the region.

Desde una mirada intercultural y basada en derechos humanos, el documento busca posicionar en la agenda pública los desafíos estructurales que obstaculizan el cumplimiento de los derechos individuales y colectivos de las niñas, niños y adolescentes indígenas en la región.

The objective is clear: to amplify their voices, acknowledge their realities, and offer concrete proposals for their comprehensive development.

This report focuses on critical issues such as survival, health and development, protection, climate change, cultural revitalization, relevant education and meaningful participation, based on the direct testimony of its protagonists: Indigenous children and adolescents.

The preparation of this report followed a mixed-methods approach: a **quantitative** approach, with data disaggregated by ethnicity, gender and territory; and a **qualitative** approach, through participatory processes, intercultural dialogues and workshops held with children and adolescents in their communities. Their participation was guided by strict ethical **standards and culturally appropriate methodologies** that ensured safe, respectful spaces for the free expression of Indigenous children and adolescents.

The voices that inform this report come from diverse Indigenous territories reflecting the region's diversity: Rosario (Argentina), Corque Marka (Bolivia), Muellamues (Colombia), Otavalo (Ecuador), Palín (Guatemala), Juchitán de Zaragoza (Mexico) and Alto Mishahua (Peru).

This report not only presents evidence; it also puts forward proposals and calls on States to uphold the rights of all Indigenous children and adolescents, ensuring that no one is left behind.

Their voices are already being heard. Now is the time to listen and act.

2. Key findings

Health and nutrition

- Maternal, infant and child mortality rates remain significantly higher among Indigenous populations than non-Indigenous populations.
- Cultural and geographic barriers continue to limit access to health services.
- Indigenous communities report elevated levels of global and severe chronic malnutrition in children under five, in contrast to the non-Indigenous population.

Education

- There are major disparities in both access to education and the quality and cultural relevance of educational content and methodologies.
- On average, Indigenous students in sixth grade score 38 points lower than their non-Indigenous peers and experience higher rates of grade repetition.
- The implementation of bilingual intercultural education remains limited and insufficient.

Protection

- The convergence of multiple risk factors, such as ethnicity, gender, age, language, geographic location and migration status, heightens the vulnerability of Indigenous children to various forms of violence, including physical and psychological punishment, child labour, sexual abuse and exploitation and trafficking.
- Lack of civil registration, particularly in rural and migratory contexts, constitutes a violation of rights and limits access to essential services vital for the development of Indigenous children and adolescents.

Gender and adolescence

- Indigenous populations experience high rates of child marriage and early unions, along with a high prevalence of adolescent pregnancy.
- Indigenous adolescents face numerous inequalities and barriers in accessing and completing formal education, participating in leadership roles within their communities and entering paid employment.

Environment and territory

- Significant disparities persist in access to safe drinking water and sanitation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, even in urban settings.
- Climate change has exacerbated food insecurity among Indigenous communities and is causing forced displacement and migration.

Meaningful participation

- In homes, schools, communities and national contexts, the voices of Indigenous children and adolescents remain largely excluded from decision-making processes.



Strategic advocacy proposal

General objective

Closing the structural gaps that affect the rights of Indigenous children and adolescents by strengthening public policies through a rights-based, intercultural and territorially sustainable approach.

Key recommendations

1. Data and evidence

- Include ethnic identification in censuses, surveys and administrative records.
- Collect data disaggregated by age, sex, urban-rural location and ethnicity.

2. Intercultural health and nutrition

- Expand access to intercultural primary healthcare services, incorporating traditional knowledge.
- Implement comprehensive nutrition strategies targeting rural communities and Indigenous populations in urban areas.

3. Intercultural and multilingual education

- Guarantee access to bilingual intercultural education from early childhood.
- Invest in teacher training with a focus on cultural and linguistic relevance.
- Integrate content that acknowledges the history, culture and worldview of Indigenous Peoples.

4. Culturally relevant protection

- Recognize and strengthen community-based protection systems to prevent all forms of violence against Indigenous children and adolescents.
- Improve the infrastructure and accessibility of civil registration services in remote and border areas.
- States, in partnership with Indigenous Peoples, must take measures to eliminate institutional violence within health, education, child protection and social protection systems, and address pressures and violence related to territorial and socio-environmental conflicts.

5. Gender equality and adolescence

- Strengthen culturally appropriate and comprehensive sexual education programmes to reduce adolescent pregnancy.
- Governments, along with health and education sectors, should work collaboratively with Indigenous Peoples and their traditional authorities to eradicate harmful practices such as child marriage and prevent violence against Indigenous children, including gender-based violence.

6. Water, sanitation and climate change

- Ensure safe and sustainable access to water and sanitation in schools attended by Indigenous students.
- Recognize ancestral knowledge as tools for reducing climate-related risks and increasing resilience..

7. Meaningful participation

- Governments and Indigenous Peoples should undertake a comprehensive analysis of the structural barriers that hinder the full participation and civic engagement of Indigenous children and adolescents, ensuring that this process is guided by an intercultural perspective.
- Develop strategies to ensure the inclusion of Indigenous children and adolescents living in rural areas, those in migration contexts, those with disabilities, and those without internet connectivity.
- Promote the active participation of Indigenous adolescents in leadership and decision-making spaces.



Call to action

It is urgent that governments, multilateral organizations, civil society, the private sector, and Indigenous Peoples come together to guarantee the rights of Indigenous children and adolescents, recognizing their diversity, worldview and transformative potential.

Implementing these recommendations is not only a matter of addressing a historical debt, but also a vital opportunity to build a more just, inclusive and sustainable region.





Juchitán de Zaragoza, Mexico

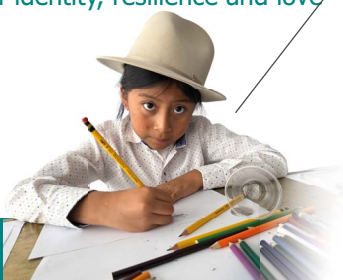
In Juchitán, children and adolescents raised their voices to question cultural practices that perpetuate inequality. Through a critical and deeply reflective lens, they expressed dissatisfaction with entrenched gender roles and stereotypes within their community. They highlighted the unequal distribution of household responsibilities and the rigid expectations placed on women and men, opening the door to a much-needed and courageous intergenerational dialogue.



Poqomam, Guatemala

Children proudly identified as members of the Poqomam People, reaffirming their cultural identity through traditional clothing, their native language and a deep spiritual connection with Mother Nature.

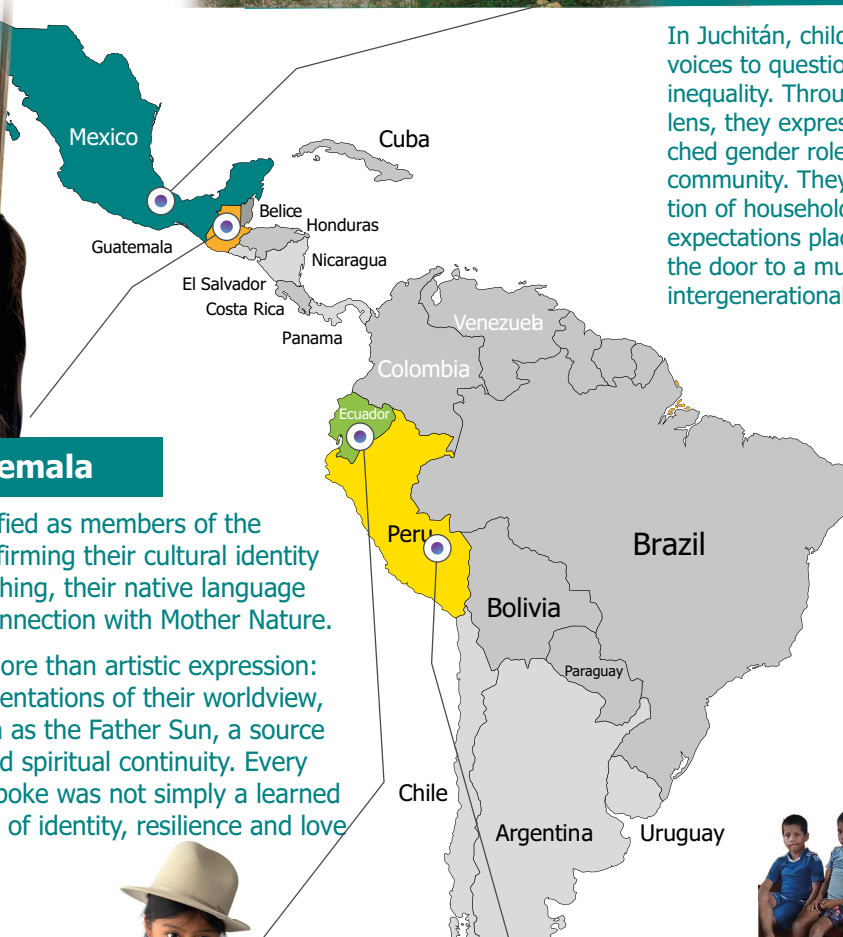
Their drawings were more than artistic expression: they were living representations of their worldview, depicting symbols such as the Father Sun, a source of energy, guidance and spiritual continuity. Every Poqomam word they spoke was not simply a learned term, but a declaration of identity, resilience and love for their roots.



Otavalo, Ecuador

With profound pride, Kichwa children in Otavalo affirmed their identity by sharing their traditional clothing with respect and solemnity. These garments are more than attire; they are living symbols of dignity, belonging and ancestral memory, worn with awareness and commitment.

All participants understood and used essential words in the Kichwa language, which they view as fundamental to preserving their identity and collective wisdom. Most learned the language from their grandmothers, who passed down not only vocabulary, but also affection, history and a way of seeing the world.



Alto Mishahua, Peru

The first word they learn in their native language is *nuwawacapia* – “I love you” – a powerful reflection of the affectionate bond with their grandmothers. For these children, speaking their ancestral language is not just a means of communication, but a way of feeling, of belonging and of connecting.

Each word is filled with memory, tenderness and resilience. They associate their language with positive emotions, care, identity and rootedness. Where others may hear only vocabulary, they live an emotional legacy.





Introduction

The objective of this document is to shed light on the situation of Indigenous children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean, from a human rights perspective and in recognition of the right of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination and sovereignty within their territories and communities.

In the most unequal region in the world, the deep-rooted structural inequalities that have long characterized the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean continue to manifest in discriminatory practices. These practices subordinate and exclude Indigenous Peoples from access to public goods and services, while imposing a development model that has resulted in the loss of their lands, natural resources and ancestral territories.

In this context, addressing the living conditions of Indigenous children and adolescents requires acknowledging the systemic impoverishment experienced by their communities, which has undermined their survival, well-being, identity and freedom, both individually and collectively.

One of the main challenges in preparing this report was the lack of up-to-date, comparable and reliable data to fully understand the scale of the inequalities affecting Indigenous children and adolescents in the region. To address this gap, a comprehensive documentary review was carried out, analysing data on the Indigenous population from studies focused on children's rights to health, education, protection and social services, among others.

This quantitative approach was complemented by qualitative information gathered through consultations with Indigenous children and adolescents in Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela. With the valuable participation of the Network of Indigenous Youth of Latin America and the Caribbean, a series of intercultural workshops was conducted with groups of children aged 5 to 11 and adolescents aged 12 to 18. These workshops were coordinated by local facilitators who had received prior training. Facilitators also held informational sessions with traditional community authorities and obtained informed consent from adults, guardians and the participating children and adolescents.

This document is organized into three sections. The first provides an overview of Indigenous Peoples in the region. The second presents the voices of Indigenous children and adolescents regarding their rights to good health, access to quality and culturally relevant education, protection, meaningful participation in decisions that affect their lives and the right to live in clean, healthy and safe environments. The third and final section outlines the main findings and offers recommendations to guide the development of public policies aimed at closing the gaps that hinder the realization of the rights of Indigenous children and adolescents. These recommendations are grounded in an intercultural and inclusive approach that respects their worldview and ancestral values.



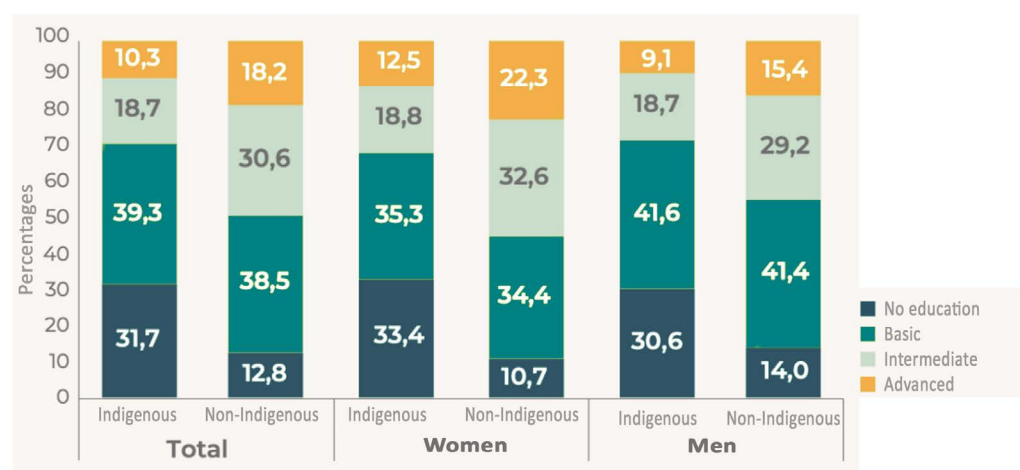


Overview of Indigenous Peoples in the region

Approximately 54.8 million Indigenous people live in Latin America and the Caribbean, belonging to more than 800 communities. Of this total, 18 million are children and adolescents¹. According to World Bank data, nearly 80 per cent of the region's Indigenous population, approximately 34 million people, reside in Mexico, Guatemala, Peru and Bolivia².

While countries in the region have made notable progress in recent decades, deep inequalities persist, and in some cases, have even widened. As a result of a long history of systemic discrimination and exclusion, Indigenous Peoples are one of the most vulnerable groups.

Figure 1. Economically active Indigenous vs. non-Indigenous population by level of educational level and sex (%)



Source: Implementing the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169: Towards an inclusive, sustainable and just future, 2019. Note: Data used is the most recent available.

Among the economically active Indigenous population, 31.7 per cent have no education and 39.3 per cent have only completed basic education. In contrast, the figures for the non-Indigenous economically active population are 12.8 per cent and 38.5 per cent, respectively. These disparities have significant implications for the quality of employment available to Indigenous people, the income they earn and their opportunities for socioeconomic mobility³.

Approximately 43 per cent of the Indigenous population lives in poverty, more than double the rate observed among the non-Indigenous population. Furthermore, 24 per cent of Indigenous people live in extreme poverty, a rate 2.7 times higher than that of their non-Indigenous counterparts.⁴

Indigenous children and adolescents experience the highest poverty rates in the region. In 2020, nine out of ten Mexican children and adolescents who spoke an Indigenous language lived in poverty, five of whom were living in extreme poverty.⁵ In 2019, 72.5 per cent of Indigenous children and adolescents in Brazil had at least one unmet basic need, compared to 49.2 per cent of their non-Indigenous peers⁶.

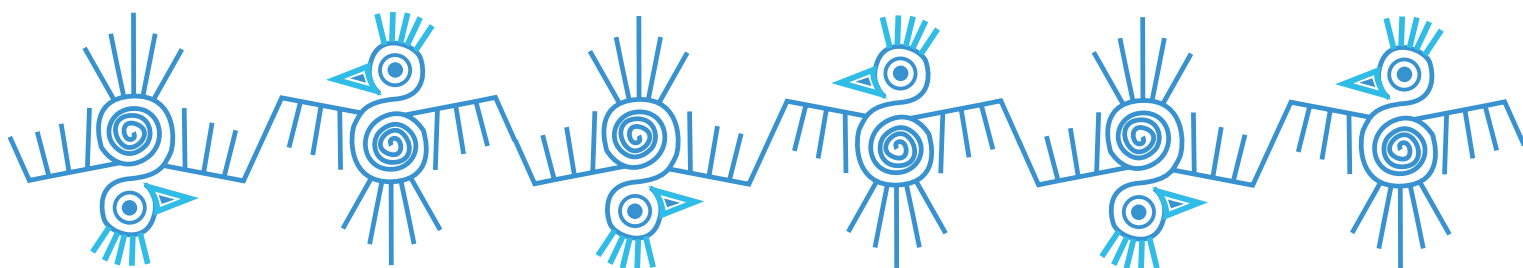
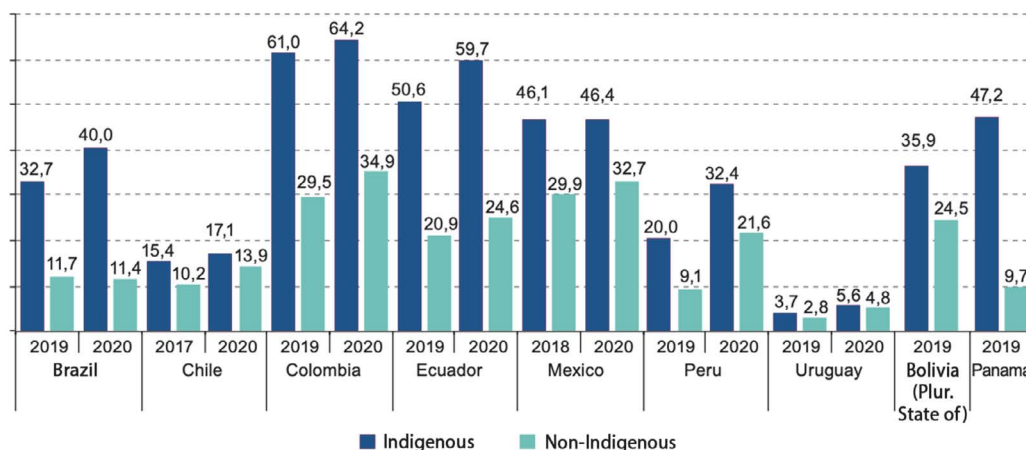


Figure 2. Incidence of poverty among Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations (%)



Source: Hacia una recuperación económica transformadora de América Latina – Abya Yala: desafíos para garantizar los derechos colectivos de los Pueblos Indígenas, ECLAC, 2023.⁷

In this context, the simple fact of being born to Indigenous parents significantly increases the likelihood of growing up in a poor household. This perpetuates intergenerational cycles of poverty that hinder the full development of Indigenous children and adolescents.

Beyond the lack of access to essential services, infrastructure and public goods, other factors such as age, being a girl, an adolescent, or an Indigenous woman, living in rural areas and speaking a language other than the official language, play a critical role. The interaction of these variables increases the vulnerability of Indigenous children and adolescents, exposes them to multiple rights violations and prevents them from reaching their full potential.

For Indigenous Peoples, territory transcends the geographical dimension: it is a historical, social, cultural and spiritual space where collective and individual relationships are formed and sustained. It is an essential part of their identity, intrinsically linked to harmony with ecosystems and society as a whole. Despite the centrality of territory to Indigenous life and culture, migration has also long been part of their historical and traditional practices.

Some studies consider that Indigenous migratory movements began as survival strategies undertaken by families seeking land before and during colonization and as an ongoing process of resistance to colonization.⁸ Today, however, the migratory flows of Indigenous people – whether international or national, long-term, seasonal, or circular – respond to worsening conditions of poverty caused by land dispossession, violence, climate change, environmental degradation and lack of economic opportunities.⁹ Among other consequences, this has resulted in nearly 49 percent of the Indigenous population in Latin America now living in urban areas.¹⁰

Although Indigenous Peoples have historically developed a deep understanding of ecological systems and practiced low-impact, sustainable methods for managing natural resources, they are disproportionately affected by the triple planetary crisis: climate change, biodiversity loss and the pollution of traditional water sources.

In their ancestral territories, Indigenous communities face constant pressure from extractive industries (such as mining and hydrocarbons), hydroelectric and large-scale infrastructure projects, as well as intensive agro-industrial and forestry production models. These pressures have triggered socio-environmental conflicts, often resulting in the criminalization of Indigenous resistance and the militarization of their territories.

These conditions have heightened the vulnerability of Indigenous communities, many of whom are forced into social and climate-induced migration. This displacement disrupts their traditional ways of life, contributes to the loss of ancestral knowledge and practices and creates profound imbalances in their communities, with serious consequences for the survival, identity and development of Indigenous children and adolescents.





Situation of the rights of indigenous children and adolescents

Health and well-being

For Indigenous Peoples, health is understood as a state of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual balance between the individual, the community and the natural world. The Earth and nature are not only sources of sustenance but are also integral to their identity as a unified whole. From this perspective, health and well-being go beyond the mere absence of disease; they encompass spirituality, culture, community and a close relationship with ecosystems. Accordingly, the right of Indigenous children and adolescents to health must be viewed in connection with the exercise of other rights and through two interconnected dimensions: individual and collective.¹¹

This implies, on one hand, guaranteeing that Indigenous children and adolescents can attain and maintain the highest possible standard of physical and mental health through access to timely, quality and culturally appropriate healthcare. On the other hand, it requires substantial improvements in the living conditions that affect the health of Indigenous Peoples, including the recognition of their right to cultural integrity in health matters. This right extends beyond the use of traditional knowledge, therapeutic practices and medicines; it also includes the protection of their territories, which are essential to their survival and subsistence, as well as to their individual and collective health.¹²

Voices of indigenous children in Oaxaca (Mexico)

Chinanteca children living in predominantly rural areas highlighted the central role of older women in health and healing: *"When we are sick, our mothers and grandmothers take care of us."* In their drawings, they connected disease prevention with everyday habits: *"When we play in the rain and don't bathe or change our clothes, we can get the flu and a cough, so I always bathe after getting wet in the rain."*

They also identified health risks, such as *"dirty water and poorly washed food,"* which they recognized as important to avoid in order to prevent illness. The role of grandmothers goes beyond care, affection, and support during sickness; it includes the transmission of ancestral knowledge about traditional medicine, particularly to girls: *"My grandmother taught me that herbs can cure coughs and colds."*



Voices of indigenous children in Oaxaca (Mexico)

The experiences of children living in rural areas differ from those of their Zapotec peers in Juchitán de Zaragoza, an urban municipality in the same state of Oaxaca. When asked what came to mind when hearing the word "health," the children spoke of vaccines, medicines, and germs.

In a drawing activity focused on what makes them sick, one child jokingly suggested, *"Let's draw a bacterium, right? Like COVID-19."*

When asked what helps them recover from illness, the children made limited references to traditional knowledge. Instead, they mentioned doctors, pharmacies, syrups, pills, and vaccines – but above all, their parents. One child explained: *"I drew myself going to school, but because I had a cough from the virus, my mom noticed and gave me medicine and chamomile tea."*



In the context of the social determinants of health, deep ethnic inequalities rooted in poverty, inadequate housing and limited access to education, water, sanitation and hygiene negatively impact the health of Indigenous children and adolescents. These challenges are compounded by food shortages and food insecurity, driven by ecosystem degradation, the expansion of agribusiness and extractive industries in their territories and the effects of climate change. The convergence of these factors further deteriorates the health and overall quality of life of Indigenous children and adolescents.¹³ Therefore, as a collective right, the health of Indigenous Peoples is intrinsically linked to the preservation of their natural resources and territories, the protection of their culture – including ancestral knowledge, traditional practices and medicine – and the recognition and respect for their worldview.

However, as noted by the World Health Organization, asymmetrical power relations and systems of domination in Latin America and the Caribbean have resulted in certain ethnic groups – such as Indigenous Peoples – systematically experiencing various forms of discrimination, including institutional racism. In this context, ethnic exclusion interacts with other structural determinants, such as gender, deepening health inequalities in a region known for its rich ethnic and cultural diversity.¹⁴

Although Latin America and the Caribbean have made considerable progress in recent decades in improving vital statistics related to maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health, significant disparities remain between countries and among population groups, particularly affecting Indigenous Peoples.

Estimates based on various data sources reveal that Indigenous women face a higher risk of dying from pregnancy- and childbirth-related causes compared to the rest of the population. For example, in the Plurinational State of Bolivia, the 2012 census reported a maternal mortality ratio of 650.5 deaths per 100,000 live births among Indigenous women, compared to 372.8 among non-Indigenous women –meaning that an Indigenous woman is nearly twice as likely to die during pregnancy, childbirth, or the postpartum period.¹⁵ In Ecuador,¹⁶ vital statistics from 2013 show a maternal mortality ratio of 56.9 per 100,000 live births for the general population, compared to 122.2 per 100,000 live births for Indigenous women.¹⁷

It is essential to expand access for Indigenous pregnant women to quality health services that incorporate an intercultural health approach. This means fostering dialogue that integrates the ancestral and spiritual knowledge and practices of Indigenous grandmothers and midwives.

The analysis of infant mortality (children under one year old) and child mortality (children under five years old) is a key indicator of a country's level of development and a reflection of persistent social inequalities. According to various studies by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), data from the 2010 census and the most recent surveys show that infant mortality among the Indigenous population consistently remains higher than among the non-Indigenous population¹⁸.

For example, a 2020 study covering 10 countries revealed the greatest disparities in Panama, where infant mortality among the Indigenous population is more than three times higher than among the non-Indigenous population. In Venezuela, the rate is nearly double.

Child mortality follows a similar pattern, with rates consistently higher among Indigenous children under 5 years old compared to their non-Indigenous peers in all countries with available data. In Ecuador and the Bolivian Republic of Venezuela, for instance, the risk of death for an Indigenous child is 70 per cent higher than for a non-Indigenous child¹⁹.

Figure 3. Infant mortality rate among Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in 10 Latin American countries, per 1,000 live births

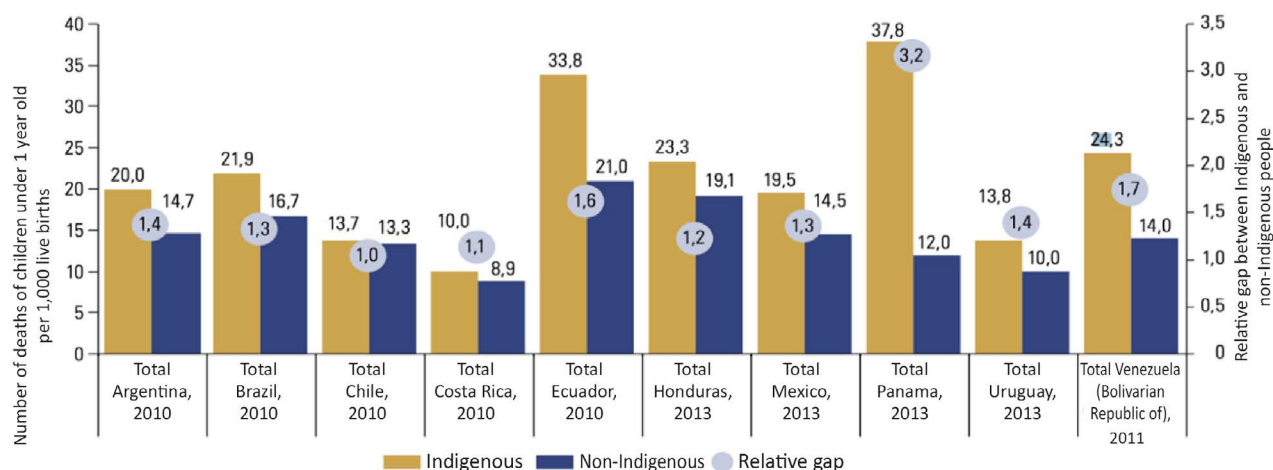
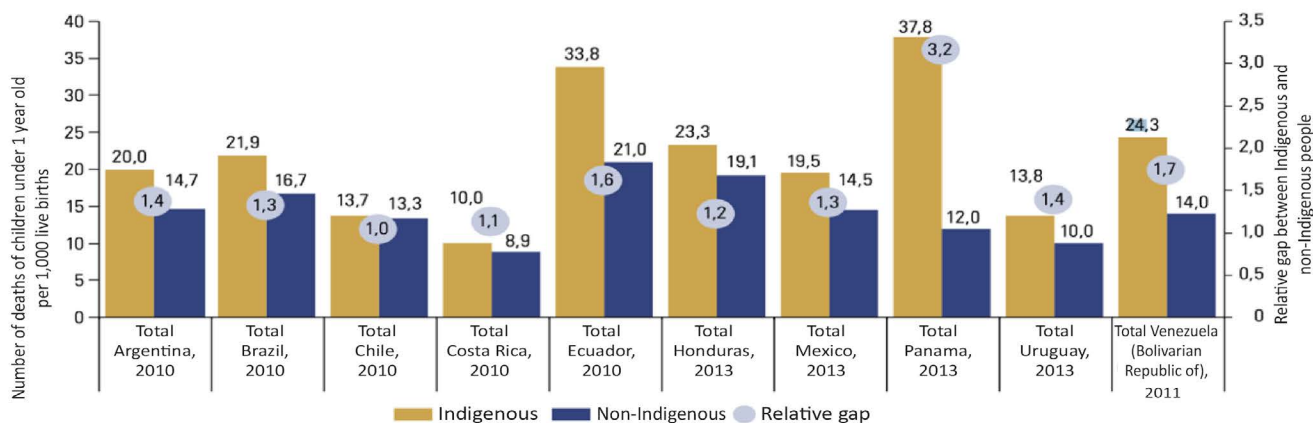
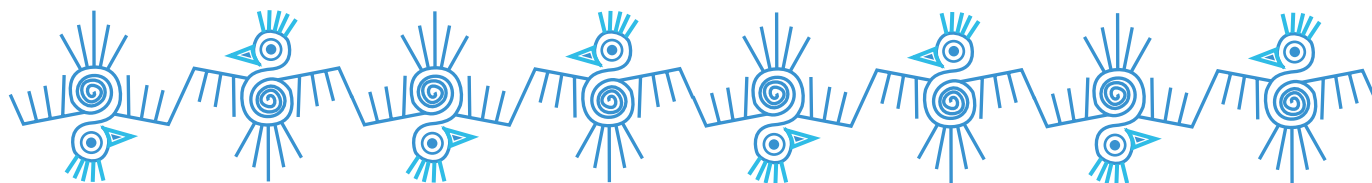


Figure 4. Under-five mortality rate among Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in 10 Latin American countries, per 1,000 live births



Source: Los Pueblos Indígenas de América Latina - Abya Yala y la Agenda 2030 para el Desarrollo Sostenible: tensiones y desafíos desde una perspectiva territorial, ECLAC and FILAC, 2020.²⁰



In Brazil, a recent study by the Science for Children Centre (NCPI) confirms the persistence of these gaps. Although the neonatal mortality rate among Indigenous children (under one month of age) declined between 2018 and 2022, it remains 55 per cent higher than that of their non-Indigenous peers. During this same period, child mortality in Indigenous populations remained stable, with 34.9 deaths per 1,000 in 2018 and 34.7 in 2022 among children under the age of four, substantially exceeding the rates recorded for non-Indigenous children, which were 13.3 and 14.2 per 1,000, respectively.²¹

In terms of diseases, available data show that Indigenous communities continue to experience high prevalence and mortality rates from communicable diseases such as dengue, Zika, malaria and tuberculosis, as well as from noncommunicable diseases like diabetes, which are often associated with malnutrition and obesity. In the region, people who self-identify as Indigenous accounted for 13 per cent of all malaria cases and 7 per cent of deaths from this cause between 2010 and 2016.²²

Although many Indigenous women disproportionately suffer from noncommunicable diseases, they often lack access to essential health services and basic health education. In Indigenous communities, maternal and child health conditions are closely linked to the development of noncommunicable diseases and their associated risk factors. Specifically, perinatal malnutrition and low birth weight increase the risk of obesity, hypertension, cardiovascular disease and diabetes later in life. Likewise, maternal obesity and diabetes during pregnancy pose both short- and long-term health risks for mothers and newborns alike.²³

Despite a systematic lack of data, various local studies on Indigenous Peoples report mental health issues not only at the individual level but also collectively, stemming from forced displacement, loss of land and territory, the weakening of social values and community bonds, as well as experiences of isolation and discrimination.²⁴

In 2012, a study conducted by UNICEF and the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, which compared the Guaraní (Brazil), Emberá (Colombia) and Awajún (Peru), revealed a significant predominance of female suicides (89.85 per cent), along with a high number of unsuccessful attempts among women. These outcomes were closely linked to the abuse, neglect and deception they experience.²⁵ The study also identified key factors triggering suicide among Indigenous adolescents and youth, including cultural imbalances caused by

the erosion of traditional practices and customs due to territorial loss, unresolved grief related to armed conflict, alcohol consumption and the weakening of social support networks.

In terms of sexual and reproductive health, data from the 2010 census indicate that the percentage of adolescents aged 15 to 19 who have already given birth is higher among Indigenous populations than among non-Indigenous populations.²⁶ While early motherhood in Indigenous communities may represent the continuity of both biological and cultural reproduction, which is continuously under threat, it is essential to recognize that early pregnancy is a significant contributor to adolescent and neonatal morbidity and mortality. During adolescence, pregnancy increases the risk of premature birth, preeclampsia, placental abruption and anaemia, among other complications. For newborns, it heightens the likelihood of low birth weight and elevated morbidity and mortality compared to the general population.²⁷

Voices of indigenous children from Pastos Peoples (Colombia)

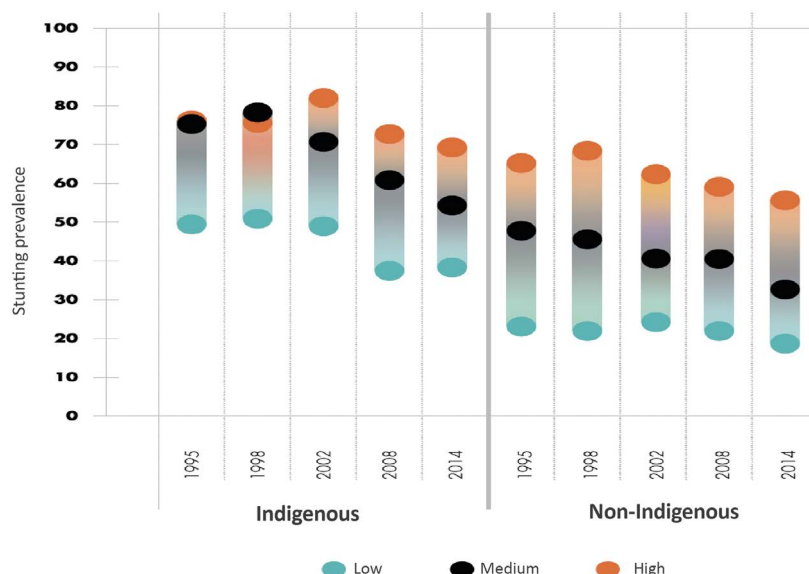
Children shared the traditional knowledge they have learned to take care of their health: *"[...] some plants and trees I know are medicinal – the plants with fruit."*

One girl mentioned some traditional medicines: *"[...] for example, chamomile, verbena, mint, and also a plant called acetaminophen, which is also medicinal."*

"There are also fruit-bearing plants, such as gooseberries and strawberries, among others, and trees such as pumamaki, pandala, and amarillo."

Nutrition and food security

Figure 5. Prevalence of stunting in children under five years old, by ethnic group and wealth tercile in Guatemala, 1995 and 2014



Source: Strategy and plan of action on ethnicity and health 2019-2025, PAHO, 2019.²⁸

One of the leading causes of death among children under five years old is malnutrition. According to Brazil's Special Secretariat for Indigenous Health, since 2008, 55 per cent of child deaths due to malnutrition have occurred among Indigenous children, which coincides with the findings of the 2010 population census.²⁹

A 2014 regional study revealed that in five of the seven countries analysed, the prevalence of both global and chronic malnutrition among Indigenous children was double or more than that of their non-Indigenous peers. The study also found that ethnic disparities were even greater in cases of severe chronic malnutrition and global malnutrition levels.³⁰

Stunting, measured as low height-for-age, is a key indicator of long-term child malnutrition. In Guatemala, an intersectional analysis of ethnicity and household wealth showed that, in 2014, stunting among Indigenous children remained higher than the levels observed among non-Indigenous children in 1995, reflecting a 20-year lag in the nutritional status of Indigenous children (see Figure 5).³¹

With regard to migratory flows, available



Voices of indigenous children from the Mishiagua River (Peru)

When asked about their favorite foods, indigenous children from a rural settlement on the banks of the Mishiagua River (Peru) mentioned items like soft drinks, cookies, apples, bananas, oranges, grapes, mangoes, and strawberries. This community primarily engages in agriculture and supplements its local production with food purchased in the city, which is located 5–6 hours away by river.

When asked about the fruits available in their territory, they mentioned local foods that are also their favorites, such as bananas, papayas, unguiraw, caimito, aguaje and coconuts.

In this way, the consultation workshop served as an opportunity to appreciate the region's native foods and fruits, and to recognize that products like soft drinks and cookies are both unhealthy and more expensive.

evidence indicates that Indigenous populations on the move are more likely to live in poverty, have access only to precarious or poorly paid employment and face the compounded effects of xenophobia and

discrimination. For example, the Warao Indigenous people who have settled in remote rural areas of Guyana near the Venezuelan border live in conditions marked by inadequate sanitation and extremely limited health services, which place Warao children and adolescents at greater risk of malnutrition.³²

For Indigenous Peoples, food systems are a core component of a broader set of integrated elements that support human development in harmony with nature. These systems, transmitted from childhood through ceremonies, songs and ancestral myths, are not only vital for meeting individual needs but are also crucial to ensuring collective survival. Therefore, securing their collective rights to land, territory and natural resources is essential for the survival, health and well-being of Indigenous children and adolescents.

The way of life of Indigenous Peoples is a model of the capacity to produce food sustainably while conserving ecosystems. Although Indigenous communities often inhabit territories rich in biodiversity and natural resources, their food and nutritional security is increasingly threatened by climate change, food shortages, water pollution and soil degradation.

The deep spiritual, cultural and social ties that Indigenous communities maintain with their food systems strengthen their identity and constitute their collective right to food autonomy and sovereignty. This right includes the ability to make decisions about and manage food production, distribution and consumption in a holistic way, along with other elements essential to their development and well-being.



Inclusive, quality and relevant education

Education is an enabling right, as it supports and promotes the realization of other human rights, such as the rights to health, nutrition, work and participation in social and cultural life. For this reason, learning is a critical factor in the transformation of societies and countries, as it reduces poverty, narrows inequality gaps, fosters social mobility, drives ecological and sustainable development, promotes health and strengthens the creation of social capital, among other benefits.

From early childhood, education empowers all children and adolescents to grow and develop on equal footing. Ensuring the same starting point and equal access to learning opportunities not only allows children and adolescents to reach their full potential but also enables their communities and countries to benefit from their contributions as citizens.

However, in the region with the highest levels of inequality in the world, structural disparities continue to shape education systems, with devastating consequences for the most vulnerable population: Indigenous children and adolescents.

Inequality gaps in learning outcomes are associated with factors such as socioeconomic status, Indigenous

status and child labour, among others. Regarding this situation, UNESCO has pointed out that the region is experiencing “a vicious circle of disadvantages that threatens to perpetuate the reproduction of social inequalities through education, rather than promoting equality and social cohesion.”³³

The gap in early childhood education/preschool attendance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children exceeds 10 percentage points. The widest disparity is observed in Colombia, where only 31.7 per cent of Indigenous children attend an early childhood education centre, compared to 54.9 per cent of their non-Indigenous peers.³⁴ Indigenous children and adolescents also encounter greater barriers to accessing both primary and secondary education compared to the non-Indigenous population.

Data from the 2019 Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (ERCE 2019) show that the proportion of third-grade students receiving intercultural bilingual education is low across the region, particularly in Costa Rica, Brazil, Colombia and Paraguay. By sixth grade, the proportion of Indigenous students receiving such education increases, especially in Paraguay, Guatemala, Panama, Ecuador and Colombia (see *Table 1*).

Voices of indigenous adolescents from Rosario (Argentina)

An adolescent boy living in a neighborhood inhabited by Indigenous Peoples from the Chaco region – primarily the Qom, and to a lesser extent the Moqoit and Pilagá – shared his experience of discrimination at school:

"Yes, several times [they discriminated against me], [...] but I didn't pay any attention or I told the teacher to avoid problems."

"[...] just because I was from here [the neighborhood], they called me toba. [...] They discriminate against you because of the color [...] of your skin. They called me 'black toba'."

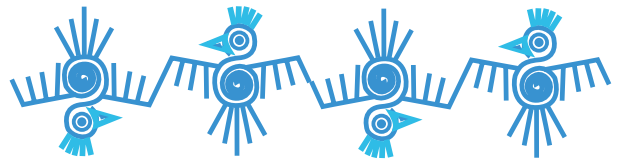


Table 1. Proportion of Indigenous students in third and sixth grade in Bilingual Intercultural Education

Countries	Third grade			Sixth grade		
	Number of questionnaires	Estimated score	Estimation error	Number of questionnaires	Estimated score	Estimation error
Argentina	306	2,0%	0,2%	206	8,2%	3%
Brazil	156	1,0%	0,1%	236	6,0%	2,8%
Colombia	347	3,2%	0,7%	245	20,5%	10,9%
Costa Rica	86	0,7%	0,2%	102	20,1%	8,5%
Ecuador	3.251	15,7%	0,6%	1.479	20,7%	4,7%
El Salvador	1.488	7,4%	05%	652	4,4%	1,8%
Guatemala	4.650	26,9%	0,6%	2.173	43,4%	3,9%
Honduras	924	7,0%	0,5%	620	12,5%	4,2%
Mexico	629	4,7%	0,5%	355	26,1%	7,7%
Nicaragua	1.015	7,6%	0,7%	500	18,8%	4,4%
Panam	1.235	8,3%	0,6%	835	41,1%	6,1%
Paraguay	489	3,6%	0,2%	226	83,1%	3,7%
Peru	2.202	12,0%	0,5%	958	25,2%	5,2%

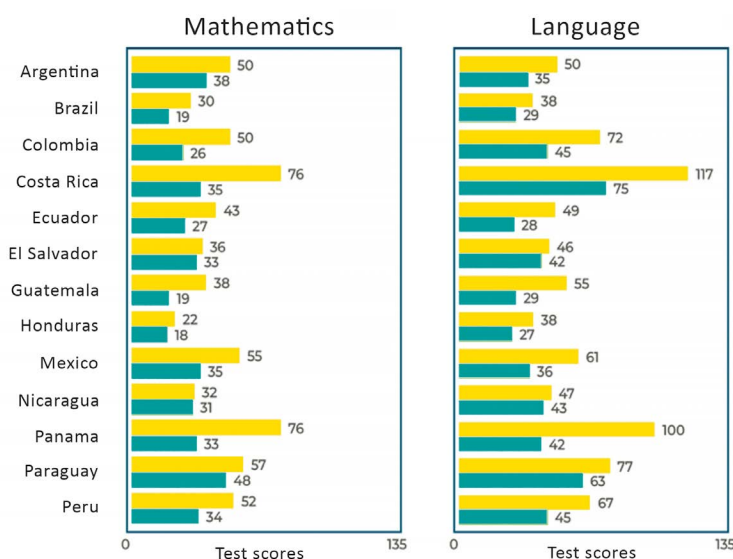
Source: Estudio Regional Comparativo y Explicativo (ERCE 2019), UNESCO 2019.³⁵

However, the evidence suggests the need to expand access to Bilingual Intercultural Education starting from the preschool level, in order to strengthen educational trajectories throughout the life course.

A study analysing the ERCE 2019 databases found significant differences in academic performance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in both third and sixth grades, even after controlling for socioeconomic status.

The findings show that, on average, Indigenous sixth-grade students score 38 points lower than their non-Indigenous peers. In sixth-grade mathematics, the performance gap ranges from 22 to 76 points. Similar disparities are observed in language arts, where the differences range from 38 to 117 points, consistently disadvantaging Indigenous students.³⁶ (see *Figure 6*).

Figure 6. Performance differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous sixth-grade students (average figures)



Source: Inequality, Education and Skills in Latin America: Evidence from the Regional Learning Assessment, IDB, 2024.

This study found that the main observable factors contributing to differences in sixth-grade performance in mathematics and language include access to books at home, parents' expectations, parental support for learning, and students' own academic aspirations.

In contrast, differences in sixth-grade science performance are predominantly associated with unobservable factors derived from Indigenous status, indicating that Indigenous students face discrimination, cultural bias, or systemic barriers that hinder their learning.³⁷

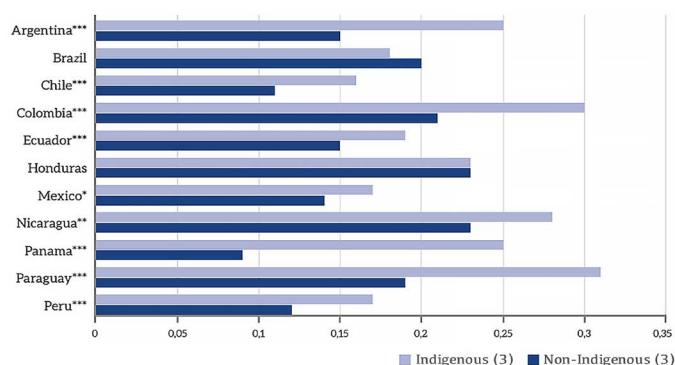
Other factors contributing to the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students include high rates of grade repetition and child labour. Grade repetition is one of the

most critical variables affecting academic performance due to its significant negative consequences on learning and its strong impact on school dropout rates.

An analysis using data from the Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (TERCE 2013) found that grade repetition is a structural issue. Beginning in third grade, the percentage of students who have repeated a grade ranges from 9 to 23 per cent among non-Indigenous children and from 16 to 31 per cent among Indigenous children.³⁸ (see *Figure 7*).

Child labour reduces students' educational opportunities by limiting study time, increasing the likelihood of grade repetition and school dropout and heightening vulnerability across various aspects of their development.

Figure 7. Difference in repetition rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous third-grade students (self-identified)



Source: Inequidad en los logros de aprendizaje entre estudiantes indígenas en América Latina: ¿Qué nos dice TERCE?, UNESCO, 2017.



While there are circumstances under which no child or adolescent should engage in labour, it is important to recognize the role that work can play in the socialization and integration of Indigenous children and adolescents within their communities. Nevertheless, the high rates of participation in economic activities among this population are largely explained by the hardships faced by many Indigenous families living in vulnerable conditions.³⁹ (see *Figures 8 and 9*).

Figure 8. Difference in child labour rates among Indigenous and non-Indigenous third-grade students (self-identified)

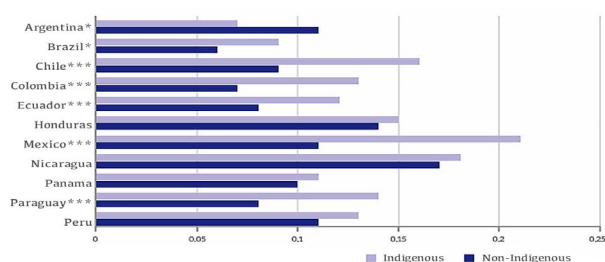
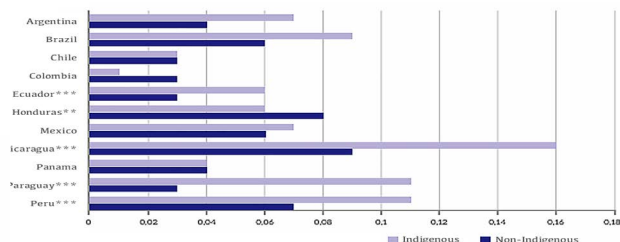


Figure 9. Difference in child labour rates among Indigenous and non-Indigenous sixth-grade students (self-identified)



Source: Inequidad en los logros de aprendizaje entre estudiantes indígenas en América Latina: ¿Qué nos dice TERCE?, UNESCO, 2017.

In addition to these challenges, Indigenous children and adolescents face systemic barriers such as curricula that fail to recognize their culture and language, limited cultural relevance in educational content and materials and a shortage of teachers trained to support ethno-educational teaching and learning processes.

Some studies have identified that the precarious living conditions of Indigenous families, the lack of access to secondary and higher education near Indigenous territories and rural areas and the perception that "becoming someone" means speaking Spanish fluently and avoiding agricultural work, lead many Purépecha, Mixtec, Zapotec and Nahuatl adolescents in Mexico to leave school and migrate to urban areas in search of income to support the education of their younger siblings.⁴⁰

Evidence shows that a lack of fluency in the language of instruction is one of the greatest challenges for Indigenous students. For instance, a study in Mexico found that several agricultural areas employing temporary Indigenous workers lacked nearby schools and that some Indigenous students who were enrolled eventually dropped out due to difficulties learning in Spanish.⁴¹ However, many schools that offer intercultural bilingual education differ from other schools only in that they provide a few hours of instruction in the language and culture of the students' communities.⁴²

Voices of indigenous adolescents from Rosario (Argentina)

"[...] We always have free time because we don't have teachers. We've been asking for a Qom language teacher, but they're never at the school when we need them."

"[...] Sometimes we ask the school president to tell them, but I don't know if he ever does – he doesn't seem to listen when we make requests. Today, we had free time again [...] we were supposed to have a Qom language class, but the teacher wasn't there."

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Intercultural education is a fundamental right for the comprehensive development of Indigenous children and adolescents, as it recognizes the value of their diverse traditions, languages, cultures and values, strengthening them as sources of identity that support engagement with other worldviews. However, the implementation of bilingual intercultural education across the region remains insufficient, with negative consequences for the quality of learning experiences and the retention of Indigenous children and adolescents in formal education systems, particularly among those who have been internally displaced or have migrated internationally.

Language – as the primary link to cultural identity – and lived community experiences are essential to transmitting ancestral knowledge and values. They also shape how Indigenous children and adolescents learn about history, nature, the environment, their responsibilities to the world and the elements that shape their spiritual connection.

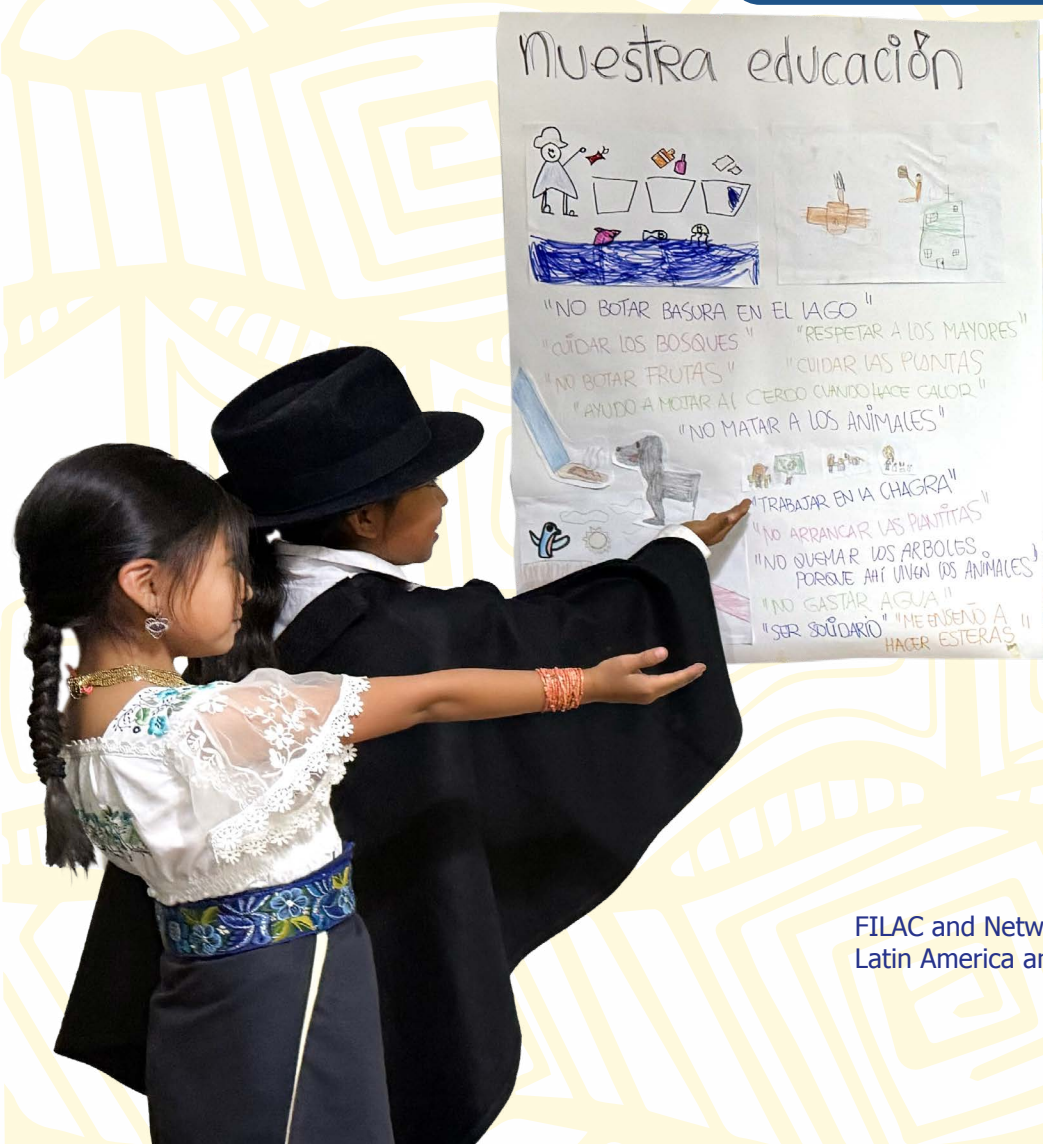
Voices of indigenous children from Otavalo (Ecuador)

In their communities, children learn principles from their grandparents, such as caring for the lake, trees, forests and animals, including feeding them:

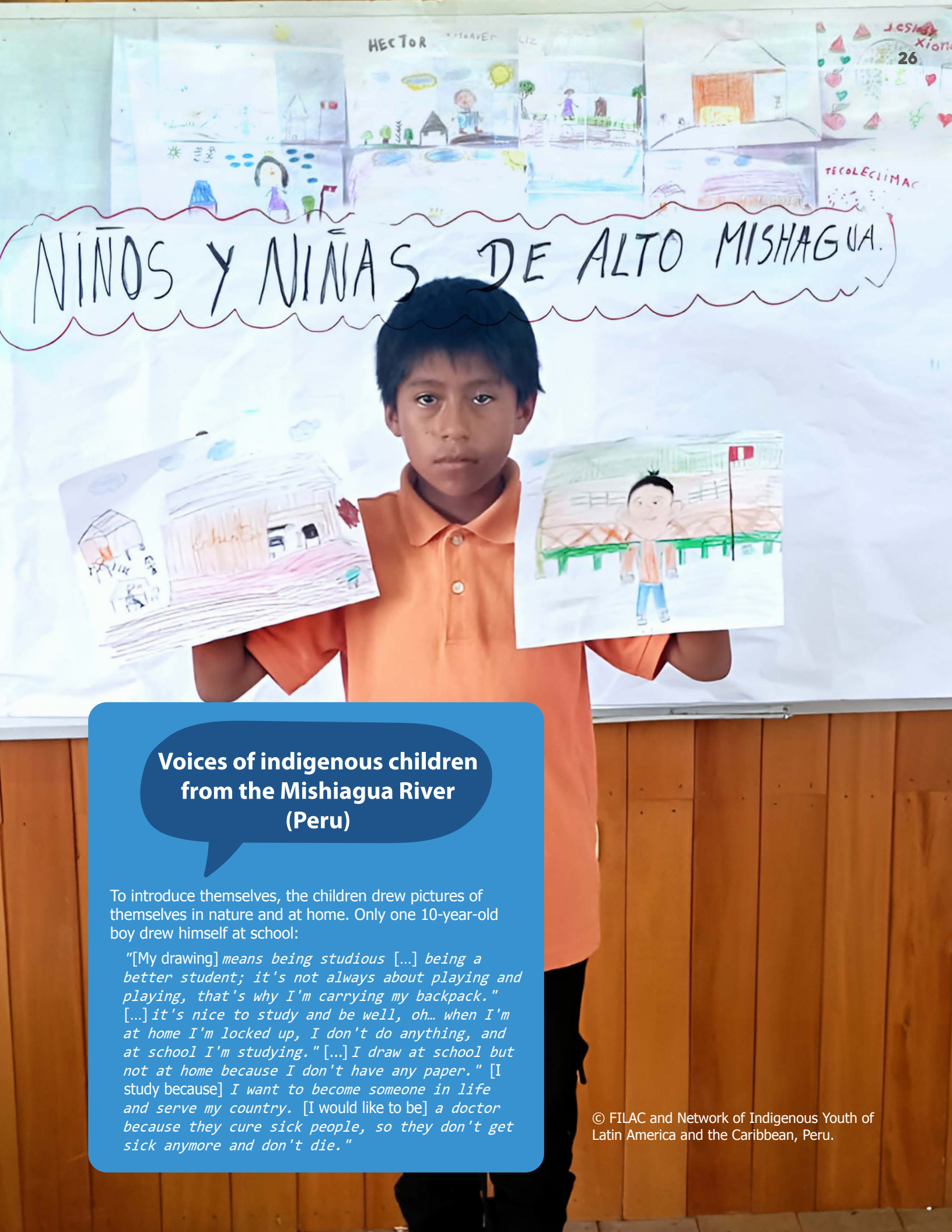
"In my community, I learn about respect for my grandparents and caring for nature."

From their parents, they learn to work, take care of the house, say thank you, avoid littering or wasting water, and make mats.

Children mentioned that they accompany adults to observe their work in the *chagra* (vegetable garden). They also participate in tasks such as cutting *tatora* reeds and helping with the *minga*, while listening to cultural stories, such as the story of the "crying lagoon," which teaches them to be cautious when playing near the San Pablo lagoon.



FILAC and Network of Indigenous Youth of Latin America and the Caribbean, Ecuador.



NIÑOS Y NIÑAS DE ALTO MISHAGUA.

Voices of indigenous children from the Mishiagua River (Peru)

To introduce themselves, the children drew pictures of themselves in nature and at home. Only one 10-year-old boy drew himself at school:

"[My drawing] means being studious [...] being a better student; it's not always about playing and playing, that's why I'm carrying my backpack." [...] it's nice to study and be well, oh... when I'm at home I'm locked up, I don't do anything, and at school I'm studying." [...] I draw at school but not at home because I don't have any paper." [I study because] I want to become someone in life and serve my country. [I would like to be] a doctor because they cure sick people, so they don't get sick anymore and don't die."

Protection of Indigenous children and adolescents

In recent years, countries have strengthened civil registration services by expanding their availability in public hospitals, eliminating associated costs and improving the interconnection between birth registration and social welfare systems to facilitate access to social protection mechanisms. However, birth registration continues to be a challenge in Indigenous communities. The absence of birth registration violates the right of Indigenous children to a name and legal identity, exposing them to multiple risks and limiting their access to essential healthcare, education and protection services. Contributing factors include cultural barriers, a lack of institutional and staff sensitivity toward Indigenous cultures and traditions and the geographic dispersion of Indigenous populations in remote or cross-border migration areas.⁴⁴

In Latin America and the Caribbean, children and adolescents face various forms of violence in their daily lives—both within and outside the home and at school. Two-thirds of children and adolescents between the ages of 1 and 14 are subjected to at least one form of violent discipline at home, and one in four women is a victim of domestic violence. Violence is a structural issue in the region, driven by high levels of inequality

and exclusion, the presence of organized crime and armed groups, sociopolitical conflict, corruption and deeply rooted cultures of machismo and impunity.⁴⁶

Although the main sources of data on violence against children are health records and administrative reports, these only capture a small portion of the violence that may actually be occurring. In remote areas where many Indigenous populations live, the number of health facilities and other service providers is limited, further hindering the identification, documentation and reporting of domestic violence or abuse against Indigenous children and adolescents.⁴⁷

In this context, the lack of data and studies that allow for an understanding of the phenomenon of violence against Indigenous children and adolescents, both within and outside communities, hinders States' ability to ensure their protection in coordination with Indigenous Peoples' own child protection systems, which are grounded in their worldview. These systems incorporate community-based mechanisms to address vulnerability through ceremonies, rituals and dialogue processes that emphasize mediation, peaceful conflict resolution and the restoration of family and community balance and harmony.

Figure 10. Proportion of third-grade students who have experienced bullying

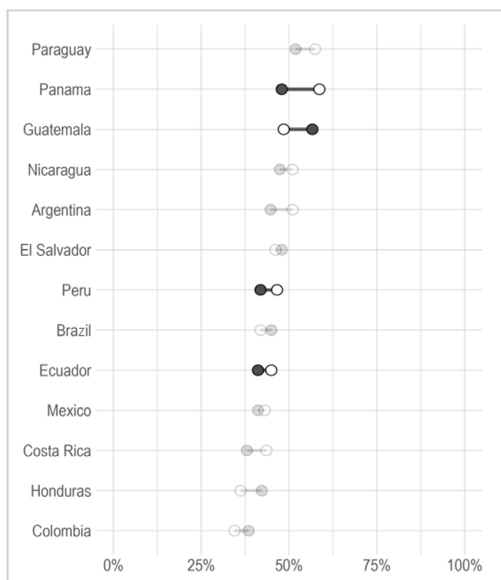


Figure 11. Proportion of sixth-grade students who have experienced bullying



Source: Estudio Regional Comparativo y Explicativo (ERCE 2019), UNESCO 2019.

In the field of education, Indigenous children and adolescents are more frequently exposed to bullying than their non-Indigenous peers.

For example, data from the 2019 ERCE study reveal that in Panama, Peru and Ecuador, a significantly higher percentage of Indigenous third-grade students reported being victims of bullying. Conversely, in Guatemala, non-Indigenous students reported higher levels of victimization.

In 2020, an estimated 88.2 million children and adolescents aged 5 to 17 were engaged in child labour across the region, representing 5.6 per cent of the population in that age group.⁴⁸ It is important to recognize that, from an early age, Indigenous children participate in collective activities, such as *mingas*, that teach responsibility, teamwork and cooperation. These activities help to strengthen community ties and support networks, thereby creating a protective environment for Indigenous children and adolescents.

Nonetheless, estimates from the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF indicate that child labour is more prevalent among Indigenous and Afro-descendant children and adolescents than among those from other backgrounds.⁴⁹ Furthermore, a report by ECLAC highlights that Indigenous children and adolescents are disproportionately involved in the worst forms of child labour.⁵⁰

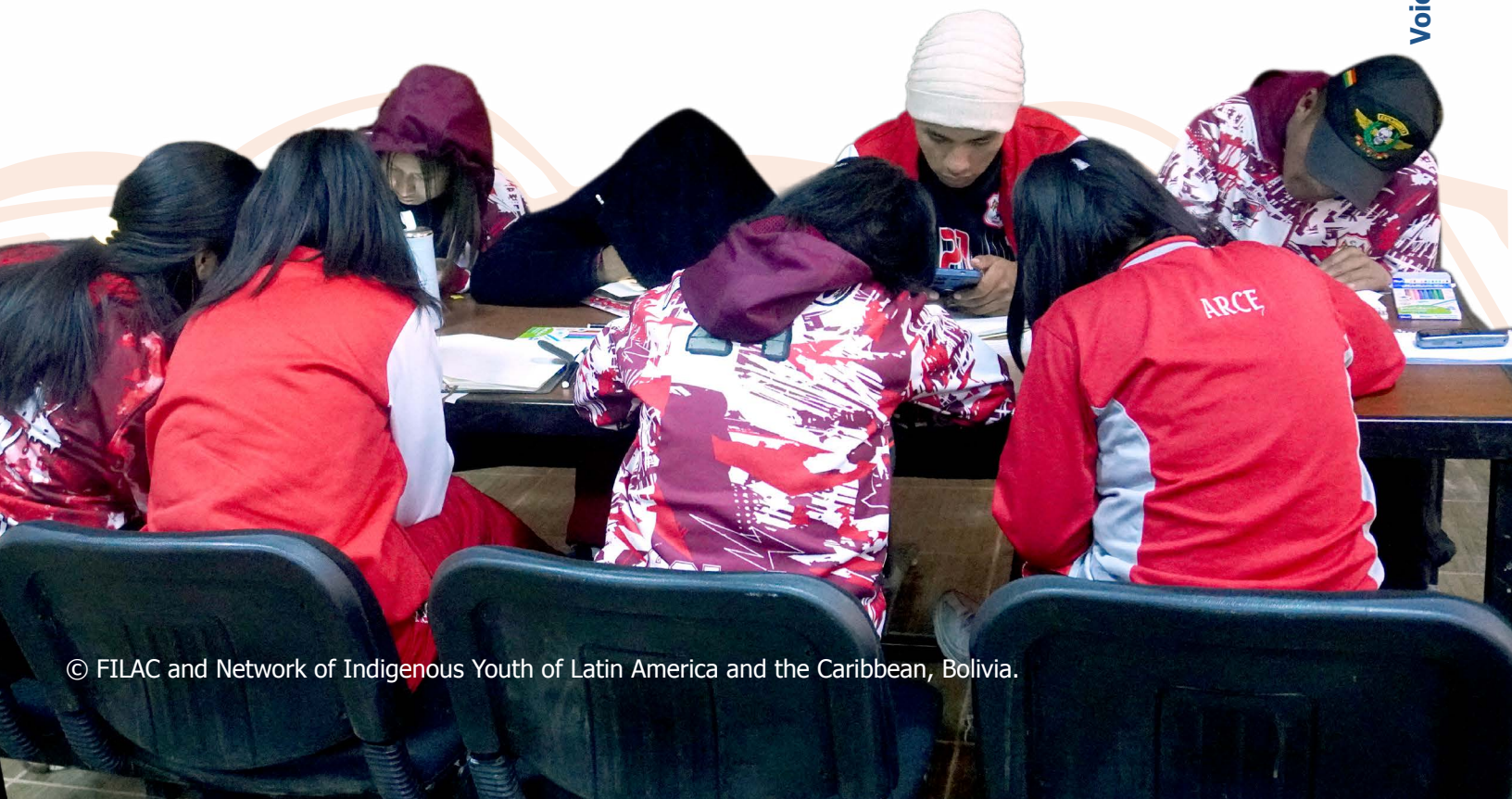
Indigenous children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation in Ecuador; to forced labour in agriculture,

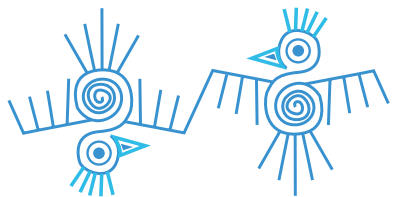
manufacturing, mining and the hotel industry in Guatemala and Honduras; and to false promises of better economic opportunities in Mexico City and other urban areas in Mexico. In Paraguay, trafficking networks use social media, chat rooms and text messages to recruit Indigenous children and adolescents for organized begging.⁵¹

Additionally, Indigenous adolescents from Honduras and Ecuador who migrate on a circular or long-term basis to earn income for their education or to support their families often endure low wages, mistreatment and widespread discrimination.⁵²

Adolescent boy from the Jivi Peoples, Amazonas province (Venezuela)

"Being a Jivi is difficult because from a young age, we are taught to work, to do many things in order to become someone in life. And it's really difficult [...] we're taught early on to work, to plant, to travel by curiara, to hunt, and to do other tasks in the community."





Protection with a gender perspective

In their communities, Indigenous girls, adolescents and women fulfil roles that are deeply rooted in their worldview and closely connected to their natural and spiritual environments. While these roles include those traditionally assigned to women, they are also part of a broader network of collective responsibilities assumed from childhood. As a set of rules, principles and procedures, these customs and traditions regulate social relationships and shape the functioning of community structures.⁵³

However, patriarchal values are also embedded in these customs and norms of social control among Indigenous Peoples. In her 2015 report, the Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, stated that Indigenous women, adolescents and girls are more vulnerable to domestic violence and significantly more likely to be victims of sexual violence than their non-Indigenous peers, with more than one in three experiencing rape during their lifetime. She also reported that in contexts of migration to urban centres, cases have been documented of Indigenous children being sold or trafficked – often attributed to community violence – as well as instances of trafficking of Indigenous women for purposes of exploitation.⁵⁴

In Latin America and the Caribbean, 21.2 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 were married or in a stable union before the age of 18 as of 2022.⁵⁵ The risk of child marriage or early union is greater for girls living in rural areas, in poverty and with limited access to education. In several countries, ethnicity is a significant factor associated with higher rates of child marriage (see *Figures 12 and 13*). Fifty-eight per cent of women who married as children gave birth before age 18 and more than 80 per cent did so before age 20.⁵⁶

In her 2015 report, the Special Rapporteur also addressed forms of violence justified by tradition, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation in certain communities in Central and South America. Indigenous girls and adolescents face structural conditions of poverty and inequality, as well as human rights violations, all of which are compounded by their gender and ethnic identity, which makes them even more vulnerable.⁵⁷

Figure 12. Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by residence, wealth quintile and education

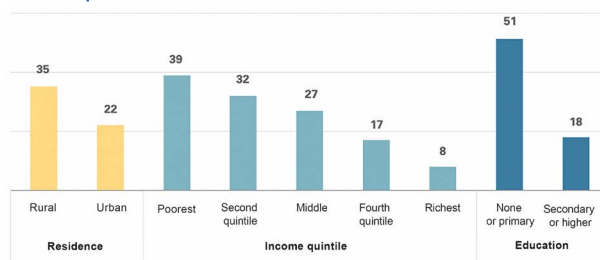
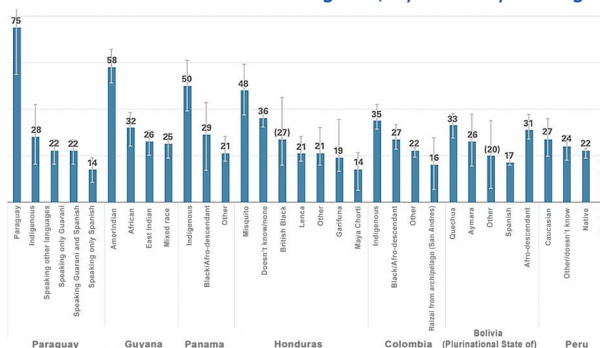


Figure 13. Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by ethnicity or language



Source: A Profile of Child Marriage and Early Unions in Latin America and the Caribbean, UNICEF, 2019⁵⁸.

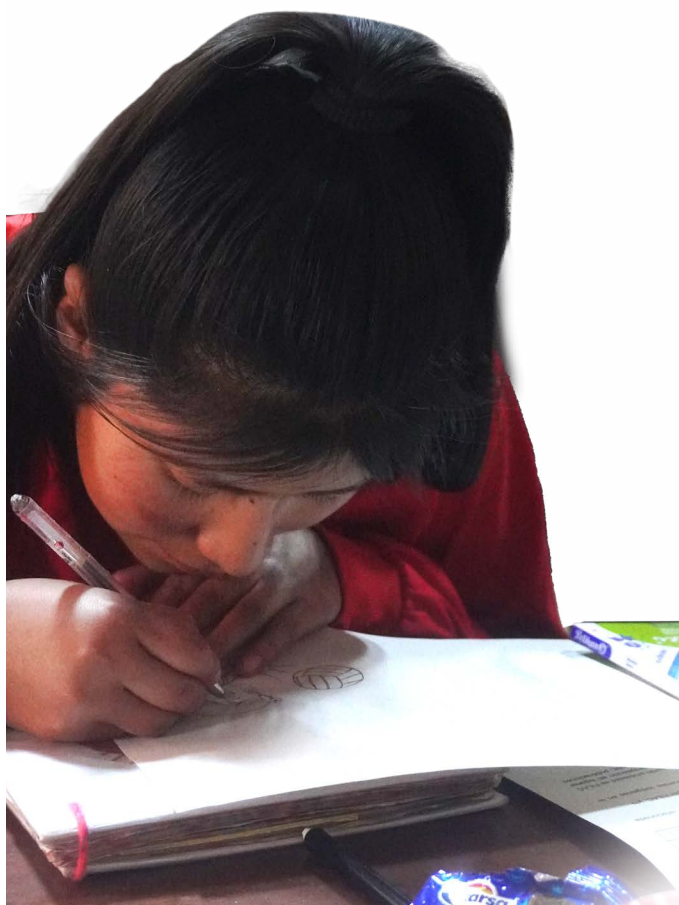
Voices of indigenous adolescents from the Jivi Peoples, Amazonas state (Venezuela)

Participants spoke about adolescent pregnancy:

"There have been many cases involving girls aged 10, 14 and 15. Some continue going to school, but others drop out. Well, [I think] they should take care of themselves and obey their parents to prevent this from happening again. And they should use contraception to avoid repeating this."

"Yes. I have three friends who got pregnant at 12 years old. I would see them around with their mothers and... with their children. Struggling to feed them, because it's becoming very difficult to live in this community, where you can hardly get anything. [I would tell the government] to help people, to support underage pregnant women. And to... to help their children with food."

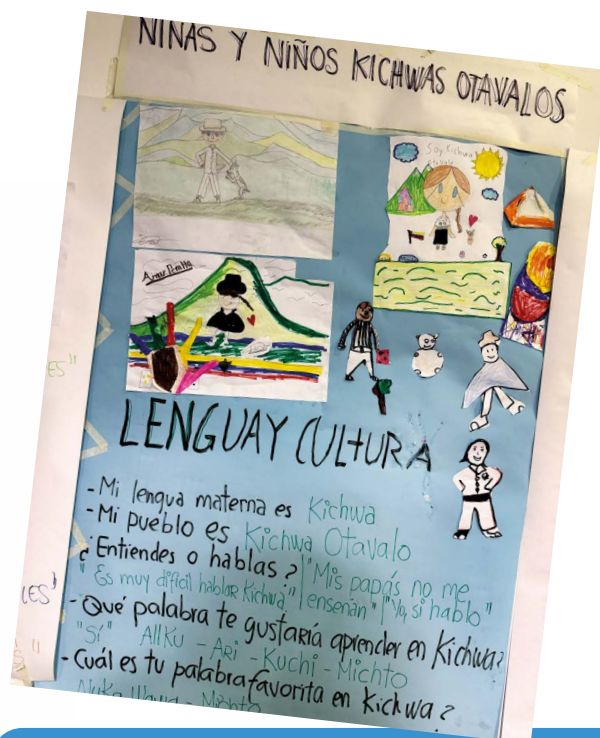
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Furthermore, early motherhood is closely linked to socioeconomic inequalities such as higher levels of poverty and lower levels of formal education, as seen among Indigenous Peoples. These conditions diminish the likelihood of Indigenous adolescents and young women breaking the intergenerational cycles of poverty and exclusion.⁵⁹

Although Indigenous women, adolescents and girls play a vital role in food security, biodiversity conservation and the application of sustainable agricultural practices within their communities, their unpaid labour and caregiving responsibilities often limit their rights to access quality formal education, participate in decisions that affect them, access paid employment and exercise leadership roles within their communities.



Voices of indigenous adolescent girls from Juchitán de Zaragoza (Mexico)

During the consultation workshop, the adolescents reflected on the gender-based division of roles:

"[...] some members of my family, just because they are men, aren't allowed to clean or wash clothes and dishes. And women do everything because they're women [...] and that's wrong, because men and women both have the right to clean and do all those things."

Based on the principles of their worldview, Indigenous women have developed their own methodologies to expose power dynamics both within and beyond their communities, as well as the external influences that reinforce them. These methodologies also serve to question and confront aspects of their worldview that generate violence. Given that these methodologies are based on sensitive knowledge of the local context, they are effective in gathering evidence to strengthen prevention measures and pathways for care and restitution of rights in cases of gender-based violence within and outside their communities.⁶⁰

Voices of indigenous adolescent girls from Juchitán de Zaragoza (Mexico)

"[...]Men say things to our faces, like we're useless, that we can't do anything without them, and so on... But it's the opposite. We wash, clean, cook, we do everything. Without us, men couldn't do anything. [...] They just go to work, and that's it."

"[...] They say things about me because I box, [...] that I'm a tomboy just because I like it. But no, I do that sport to defend myself. So if someone insults me or tries to hit me, I can protect myself. That's why I took it up."

"[...] They think we're weak and believe they have a right over us [...]. For example, in some places, you can't even dress the way you want. You have to cover yourself completely, like a sheet [laughs], like a 'modatela', with fabric down to the floor, so they can't even see your feet. Because apparently, you're the one provoking them, and it's always the woman's fault. [...] Those traditions remain: that women always have to behave, while men aren't held responsible for anything."



Right to meaningful participation

The participation of children and adolescents in decisions and matters that affect them is not only a right, but also a general principle of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, serving as a prerequisite for the exercise of all other rights.

For participation to be meaningful, the following conditions must be ensured.⁶¹

Space: Safe and inclusive opportunities that provide children and adolescents with the necessary space and time to form and freely express their views and opinions.

Voice: Access to appropriate information to form their views and choose the means to communicate their opinions.

Audience: Their views must be listened to with respect and seriousness by those with the power and authority to act on them, such as government officials, parents, social workers, healthcare professionals, etc.

Influence: Their views must be duly taken into account, and they should receive timely feedback on the outcomes and the extent of their influence.

The active participation of Indigenous children and adolescents begins within the family and extends to

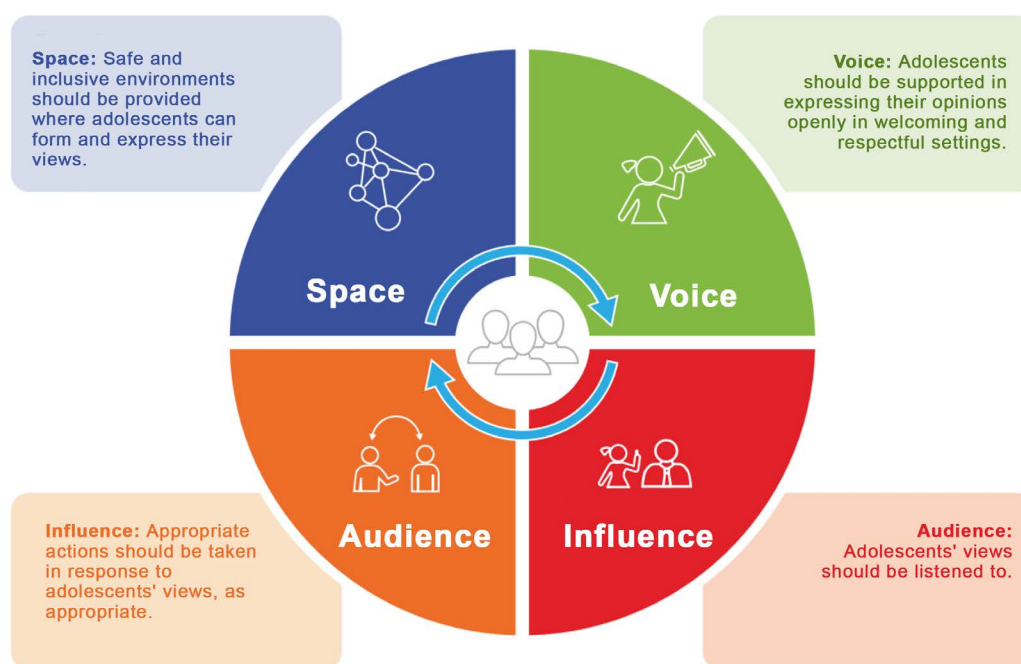
the community. From an early age, they accompany adults in daily tasks as part of their learning process, which continues into adolescence. However, there is limited evidence that Indigenous children and adolescents fully exercise their right to participate in decisions and matters that affect them, beyond their involvement in family and community work.

Systematic efforts are needed to ensure that participation strategies and civic engagement initiatives lead to real change, rather than reinforcing existing patterns of exclusion, discrimination and inequality. Although unintentional, consultations held with school-attending populations tend to exclude those who are out of school or face the greatest barriers due to ethnicity, disability, migratory status, language, socioeconomic conditions, or geographic location, including those in rural areas without digital access or in emergency and humanitarian contexts.

According to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the effective and ethical participation of children and adolescents must meet nine basic requirements.⁶²

- **Transparent and informative:** Children and adolescents should receive full, accessible, diversity-sensitive and age-appropriate information about their right to express their views, as well as the purpose and scope of their participation.

Figure 14. Characteristics of meaningful participation



Source: ENGAGED AND HEARD! Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement, UNICEF, 2020.

- **Voluntary:** Children and adolescents should never be coerced into expressing views against their wishes, and they should be informed that they can cease involvement at any stage.
- **Respectful:** Adults should acknowledge, respect and support children's and adolescents' ideas, actions and contributions to their families, schools, cultures and work environments.
- **Relevant:** Children and adolescents should have opportunities to draw on their knowledge, skills and experiences, and to express their views on issues that are relevant to their lives.
- **Friendly:** Environments and working methods should consider and reflect children's and adolescents' evolving capacities and interests.
- **Inclusive:** Participation opportunities should include marginalized children and adolescents of different ages, genders, (dis)abilities and backgrounds.
- **Supported by training:** Adults, children and adolescents should receive appropriate training and mentoring to support meaningful participation, enabling them to serve as facilitators and trainers.
- **Safe and sensitive to risk:** Children and adolescents should be involved in assessing and managing any risks associated with expressing their views and should know where to seek help if necessary.
- **Accountable:** Children and adolescents should receive clear feedback on how their participation has influenced outcomes and should receive support to share feedback with their peers.

The consultation workshops with Indigenous children and adolescents in the region provided them with a space to reflect on their daily lives, gain perspective on specific situations and express their views on issues that affect them.

Moreover, these spaces made a valuable contribution to the findings of this report. Although the limited availability of information on the right to participation prevents more in-depth analysis, it highlights the need to work with Indigenous Peoples on a more systemic exploration of the structural barriers faced by Indigenous children and adolescents. This would help to ensure their full participation and civic engagement in the future, from an intercultural perspective.



Voices of teenagers indigenous

Adolescent boy from the Pitaguary Peoples, State of Ceará (Brazil)

"Yes, in my territory there are two [...] quarries and a farm [...]. They exploit our land, and the farm invades part of our conservation area, [...] it draws water from our waterfall to sustain itself. The quarries are devastating the entire mountain range, breaking everything and causing deforestation. But we managed to shut down one of them, and now only one remains, which we are working to shut down permanently".

Adolescent boy from the Qom Peoples, Rosario (Argentina)

"They didn't want to enroll me here because, I don't know, [my parents] said they didn't teach anything. I told them, 'If you enroll me in this school, it's closer, they teach the language, and I want to learn it.' But they wanted me to go to the other one because they said this one doesn't teach much."

Adolescent boy from the Jivi Peoples, Amazonas province (Venezuela)

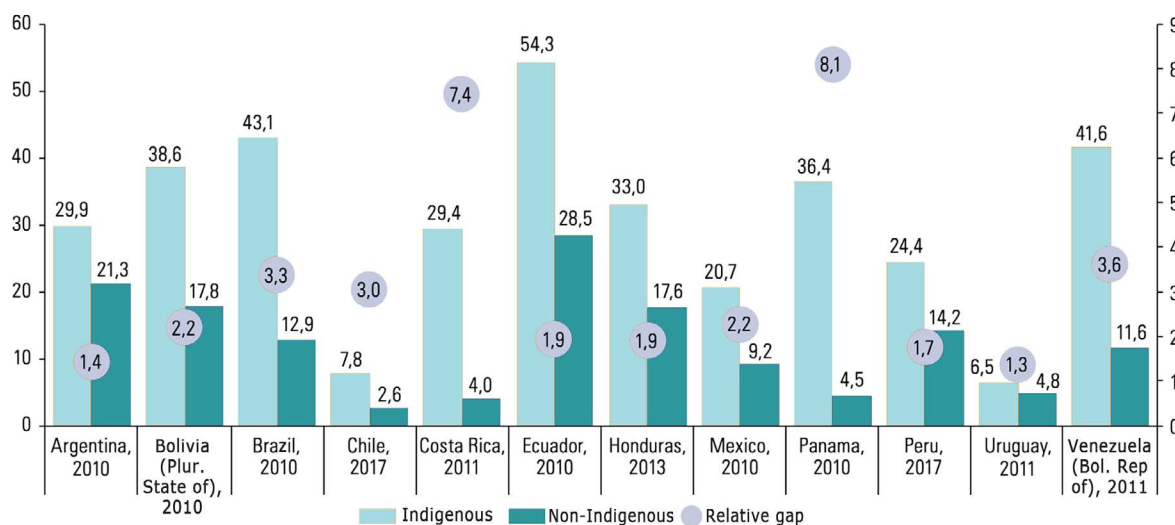
"Being a Jivi is difficult because from a young age, we are taught to work, to do many things in order to become someone in life. And it's really difficult [...] we're taught early on to work, to plant, to travel by curiara, to hunt, and to do other tasks in the community."



Clean, healthy and safe environments

According to a study by ECLAC analysing 12 countries in the region, Indigenous populations have less access to drinking water in their homes compared to non-Indigenous populations. Although Chile has the highest overall coverage, the proportion of Indigenous people without adequate access to water is three times greater than that of the non-Indigenous population.⁶³

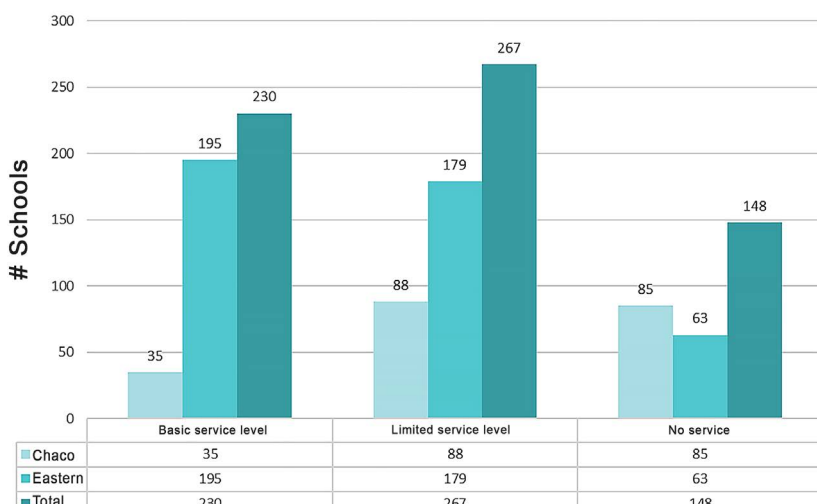
Figure 15. Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations living in dwellings with inadequate access to drinking water



Source: Los Pueblos Indígenas de América Latina - Abya Yala y la Agenda 2030 para el Desarrollo Sostenible: tensiones y desafíos desde una perspectiva territorial, ECLAC, 2020.

Although the magnitude of this deficiency is greater in rural areas for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, in all countries, the most adverse conditions are observed among Indigenous peoples. For example, in Ecuador, Honduras and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the proportion of the Indigenous population without access to drinking water is 20 percentage points higher than that of the non-Indigenous population. In Costa Rica and Panama, this proportion is four times higher.⁶⁴

Figure 16. Coverage of water, sanitation and hygiene services in Indigenous schools in the Chaco and Oriente regions of Paraguay



Source: Evaluación de los servicios de agua, saneamiento e higiene en instituciones educativas del Paraguay, UNICEF, 2021.

Voices of indigenous girls from the Pasto People in the Andes Mountains (Colombia)

Girls from the indigenous reserve of the Pasto People shared their knowledge of the climate and life in the Andes Mountains through their drawings:

"I [drew] the rain, the frost, the wind, and the heat. Rain can sometimes harm us because there can be floods, or we might get sick. Frost affects us too, because it can dry out the crops. The wind also affects us because [...] sometimes it can make us sick, and the heat dries out the crops."

"[...] for example, rain during a drought can be good for plants because it refreshes them and makes them grow, but if it rains too much, it becomes chaos because it can damage them. Strong winds, frost, and hail damage the crops in the chagra [...]: carrots, potatoes, cabbages, all the foods we grow in cold climates. [When it gets] very hot, there can be forest fires [...] because there is a lot of rubbish [...] and many animals lose their natural habitat."



It is estimated that only one in three schools in rural areas has access to water and sanitation services, and there is no available data on handwashing and hygiene facilities.⁶⁵ For example, a UNICEF study in Paraguay that assessed 645 Indigenous educational institutions in rural areas found that 56 per cent reported water shortages at some point during the year (see *Figure 16*).

Indigenous Peoples face significant gaps in access to these essential services due to the combined effects of climate change, increasing water demand and water pollution.

These gaps not only deepen gender inequality and broader disparities but also have far-reaching consequences for Indigenous children and adolescents living in rural areas. Among the most critical are school absenteeism among girls and adolescent girls due to a lack of appropriate menstrual hygiene facilities and reduced opportunities for study and personal development because of the time spent collecting water.

Climate change and Indigenous children

Serious threats persist in Latin America and the Caribbean. In Central America, Indigenous children are affected by water pollution and their families' forced displacement due to large-scale hydroelectric projects. In South America, recurring forest fires, deforestation and widespread illegal mining expose children and adolescents in Indigenous communities to air, water and soil pollution, obstacles that hinder their development in ancestral territories and endanger both their physical and cultural survival.

Indigenous peoples play a historic role as environmental defenders, custodians of ancestral knowledge and guardians of natural resources. Their traditional practices, passed down through generations, are rooted in a deep understanding of ecosystems and have significantly contributed to disaster risk reduction and the fight against climate change. In its sixth report in 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recognized that Indigenous knowledge is vital for reducing community vulnerability to climate change, and highlighted the need to uphold Indigenous territorial rights and self-determination.⁶⁷

Latin America and the Caribbean is particularly vulnerable to climate and environmental crises, such as hurricanes, droughts, heatwaves, landslides and floods, which destroy homes, schools and critical infrastructure for children, such as health services and water and sanitation facilities.⁶⁸



These include practices such as agroecology, sustainable fishing, bioconstruction and the preservation of ecosystems like mangroves, as well as species such as native Amazonian bees.⁷³ These practices contribute to mitigation efforts, improve adaptation responses and increase resilience to climate impacts. Moreover, the detailed environmental knowledge held by Indigenous Peoples complements scientific evidence, providing key information for anticipating and assessing climate change scenarios.⁷⁴

Voices of Indigenous Children and Adolescents in Latin America

Main findings and recommendations

The Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced continuous discrimination stemming from historical, social and cultural processes that began with the arrival of Europeans to the continent and were consolidated during the formation of nations. From this initial contact, the original inhabitants were dispossessed of their ancestral resources and territories, while discriminatory practices emerged that ultimately led to the subordination of Indigenous Peoples within Latin American social structures.⁷⁵ As a result, Indigenous Peoples have faced systematic impoverishment and social exclusion, which has had severe consequences for their living conditions and the realization of human rights, particularly among Indigenous children and adolescents.

Thanks to the efforts and resistance of the Indigenous movement, important legislative progress has been achieved in recent decades, recognizing the individual and collective rights of Indigenous Peoples. These minimum standards, summarized in Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, establish rights related to non-discrimination; cultural integrity; ownership, use, control and access to land and resources; social development and well-being; and political participation and free, prior and informed consent.⁷⁶ However, the implementation and enforcement of these standards across countries of the region remain deficient.

Right of Indigenous children and adolescents to be seen and counted

One of the main challenges in addressing the situation of Indigenous Peoples is the limited availability of demographic data and information on this population in countries across the region. Nevertheless, the data that do exist reveal persistent inequalities and help identify trends and gaps to inform the formulation of policies, as well as the design and implementation of programmes and plans that benefit Indigenous children.

It is therefore recommended that, from the outset of data collection, official instruments disaggregate information by age, sex, urban-rural location, among other variables, and systematically incorporate standardized ethnic identification criteria.

Indigenous children's and adolescents' right to adequate health and nutrition

The implementation of improvements in health systems and the expansion of access to primary health care services have enabled one of humanity's greatest achievements in the 20th century: increased life expectancy. However, significant disparities persist between countries and groups, affecting populations such as Indigenous Peoples who suffer high levels of mortality and morbidity as a result of poor health services, inadequate nutrition, lack of access to water and sanitation services and exposure to various risks derived from poverty, among other causes.

Maternal and infant mortality rates remain significantly higher among Indigenous Peoples compared to the non-Indigenous population. Indigenous Peoples also face elevated levels of global and severe chronic malnutrition in children under five; high prevalence of communicable diseases such as dengue, Zika, malaria and tuberculosis; and non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, often linked to malnutrition and obesity. Additionally, they face serious mental health challenges that contribute to high suicide rates. Therefore, the fact that disparities in mortality and morbidity stem from preventable causes makes this issue a matter of social injustice and a violation of human rights.





Addressing this situation requires more than improving precarious living conditions, removing barriers to healthcare access, enhancing the quality of services and closing gaps in access to formal education. It also demands progress in the cultural adaptation of health systems to overcome the rejection of health services by Indigenous communities, often due to mistrust, language barriers and the lack of empowerment and participation, particularly of Indigenous women, children and adolescents.

Indigenous children's and adolescents' right to education

Available data shows that Indigenous children and adolescents have low access to early childhood education/preschool, primary and secondary education. Their learning outcomes are significantly below those of their non-Indigenous peers, and they experience higher repetition rates.

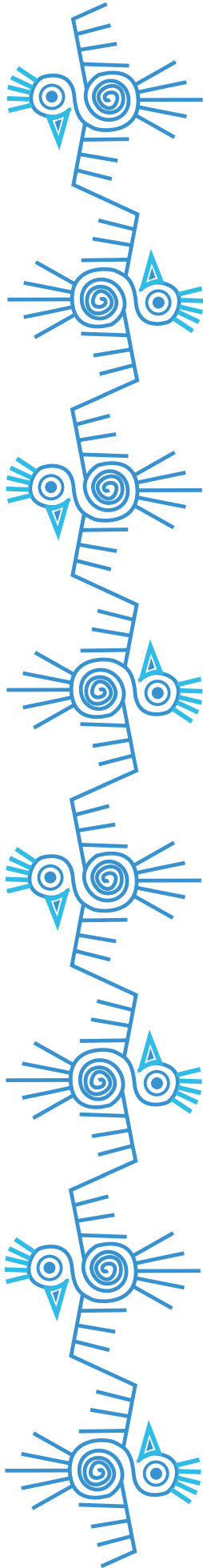
In addition, Indigenous students are often taught with curricula that do not reflect their cultures or languages and lack cultural relevance in terms of educational content and materials. Education provision is also limited, with an insufficient number of trained teachers who speak the various Indigenous languages of each country.

From the perspective of Indigenous Peoples, it is essential to expand coverage to ensure continuity in educational trajectories in the formal education system, from early childhood education through primary and secondary education and on to higher education.

Although progress has been made in the provision of bilingual intercultural education in the region, efforts remain insufficient. This is primarily due to the fact that many of these initiatives have not been implemented systematically or evaluated continuously. In addition, providing intercultural education requires acknowledging and addressing the root causes of educational inequality, such as poverty and social exclusion, which continue to affect Indigenous children, adolescents and their families.

Actions must be taken to raise awareness and combat racism, as well as ethnic, gender, social, and disability-based discrimination across all areas and levels of the education system. This first step not only fosters progress toward inclusive education but also helps prevent students from reproducing exclusionary social patterns and bullying behaviours within the school environment.

Ensuring the relevance and quality of the teaching and learning process for all students requires education systems to adopt a cross-cutting intercultural perspective, incorporating new epistemologies that reflect the worldviews, languages and other cultural expressions of Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant communities and other minorities. This approach makes it possible to recognize and value alternative ways of understanding the world that have historically been delegitimized and to dismantle representations and stereotypes rooted in domination and exclusion, which have contributed to persistent educational inequalities.⁷⁷



To advance in this direction, it is essential to integrate an intercultural perspective across all areas of education systems through the training of all teachers, regardless of their ethnic background, and school support staff. This will enable educational centres to plan, implement and monitor programmes and projects from a perspective of cultural diversity. In parallel, it is necessary to promote the initial and continuing training of bilingual teachers from Indigenous Peoples as a strategy to preserve and revitalize Indigenous languages, with the active participation of Indigenous families and organizations.

Right of Indigenous children and adolescents to protection

Indigenous children and adolescents are disproportionately exposed to various forms of violence within and outside their communities, such as physical punishment, sexual violence and abuse, and economic exploitation. These forms of violence are exacerbated by structural discrimination and limited access to reporting mechanisms, as well as to protection and restitution services when their rights are violated.

While Indigenous Peoples have their own protection systems grounded in their worldviews, patriarchal values and cultural practices that negatively impact the rights of Indigenous children and adolescents, particularly girls and adolescent girls, often persist within communities.

In remote rural areas, the limited coverage of health services and other benefits hinders the identification, registration and reporting of domestic violence and abuse cases involving Indigenous children and adolescents. As a result, determining the prevalence and incidence of violence in these populations is challenging. However, unlike many other countries, Panama has implemented a statistical registry in Indigenous regions, enabling the identification of cases of violence against Indigenous children and adolescents in regions such as Guna Yala and the Ngäbe Buglé comarca.

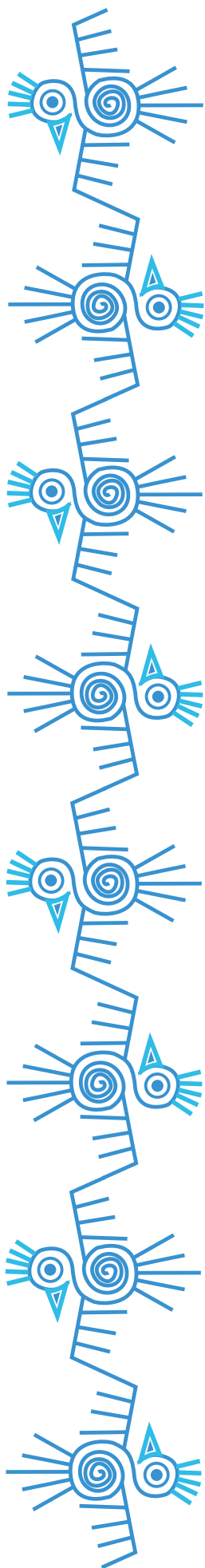
It is therefore essential that government representatives and professionals in the health and education sectors work collaboratively with Indigenous Peoples' organizations and traditional community authorities. Through participatory methodologies that reflect community needs and foster trust, efforts can be made to eliminate harmful practices such as child marriage and to prevent violence against Indigenous children, including gender-based violence.

In parallel, and in coordination with Indigenous Peoples, States must take concrete steps to eliminate institutional violence against Indigenous children, adolescents, their families and communities within health, education, child protection and social protection systems. Moreover, States must address situations of violence and pressure related to territorial and socio-environmental conflicts, ensuring the meaningful participation of Indigenous organizations at every stage of the process.

The right of Indigenous children and adolescents to clean, healthy and safe environments

Indigenous Peoples face significant gaps in access to essential water, sanitation and hygiene services, particularly in rural households and schools. These disparities have broad impacts on the health, nutrition and education of Indigenous children and adolescents, and expose them to diseases and risks of abuse when traveling to collect water.

It is essential for countries to develop policies, plans and programmes that guarantee Indigenous Peoples' right to water and sanitation, especially by



ensuring their free, prior and informed consent regarding the use of water resources in their territories. This is necessary to enable their participation in the planning, management and oversight of these services within their communities.

Indigenous children and adolescents are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change, as well as to environmental impacts resulting from certain development projects and industrial disasters. These include deforestation of surrounding areas, alterations in water flows, biodiversity loss and contamination from pesticides and herbicides used in agribusiness, all of which degrade their living environments and threaten their livelihoods.

The consequences of the ongoing climate and environmental crisis disproportionately affect Indigenous Peoples in the region. This is due to the disruption of their lands, damage to the resources critical to their survival and the erosion of traditional agricultural, hunting, fishing and grazing practices, which are deeply rooted in and dependent upon the environmental balance of their territories.

In its General Comment No. 26 on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change, the Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasizes that the life, survival and cultural practices of Indigenous children and adolescents, along with those of other minority groups, are often closely tied to their natural environment. The Committee therefore urges governments to protect these rights and involve Indigenous children and adolescents in all decisions related to their environment.⁷⁸

Countries must strengthen their analysis of climate-related risks that directly affect Indigenous Peoples, conduct regular assessments of how environmental decisions impact Indigenous children, and implement measures to address discrimination, mitigate environmental harm and reduce the inequalities that affect these children and adolescents.

States must also ensure that companies respect the rights of Indigenous children and adolescents by establishing laws, regulations and policies that prevent them from polluting ecosystems, harming livelihoods in Indigenous territories and concealing their environmental impacts.

A broad view of the rights of Indigenous children and adolescents

Although this document has presented evidence on the situation of Indigenous children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean, further analysis will be needed in the future to more deeply examine all the rights of Indigenous children and adolescents.

In particular, it is recommended to promote studies that explore the root causes of the exclusion and denial of Indigenous children's and adolescents' rights, analysing the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination based on ethnic origin, age, gender, rural or urban residence, migratory status and disability. Below are some key elements to consider in future research, drawing on the observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Despite the inalienable right of Indigenous children and adolescents to be free from discrimination, the Committee notes that countries must take positive measures to eliminate the conditions that lead to such violations, as non-discrimination is a general principle of fundamental importance for the realization of all rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁷⁹



According to the Committee, to effectively protect Indigenous children, States are obligated to:

- Incorporate the principle of non-discrimination into legislation, administrative practices and resource allocation, and implement educational measures to eliminate discriminatory attitudes and practices. This can be done through public information campaigns, dissemination material and educational curricula, aimed at both students and professionals, with a focus on the rights of Indigenous children and adolescents.
- Collect disaggregated data and information to identify Indigenous children and adolescents who require special measures to ensure the recognition and realization of their rights. Additionally, States must develop indicators for the purposes of identifying existing and potential areas of discrimination of indigenous children and adolescents, and to monitor changes over time.
- Identify gaps and barriers that hinder access by Indigenous children and adolescents to culturally appropriate services, including health, nutrition, education, sports, recreation, social assistance, housing, water and sanitation and juvenile justice. Based on this analysis, States should implement the necessary regulatory, budgetary and programmatic adjustments.

In preparing these special measures, the Committee recommends that States take into account the specific needs of Indigenous children and adolescents who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as those related to living in rural or urban areas, migratory status, gender inequality and disability, so that they may enjoy their rights on an equal footing with others.



In its General Comment No. 11, the Committee explicitly affirms the right of all children and adolescents to participate in their own cultural life, to practice their religion and to use their language (Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child). It further emphasizes that, for Indigenous children and adolescents, the implementation of this right must be aligned with the Convention's general principles: non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival and development, and the right to express their views and be heard. The Committee points out that this right is both individual and collective. It recognizes the shared values and traditions of Indigenous cultures and is closely linked to the enjoyment of ancestral territory and the use of natural resources.

The Committee also highlights the right of Indigenous children and adolescents to access information, including in their own languages, in order to effectively exercise their right to be heard. To this end, States must ensure equitable and meaningful access to both traditional media and the digital environment in ways that are beneficial for Indigenous children and adolescents.

Specifically regarding the digital environment, the Committee urges States to adopt comprehensive measures to prevent digital exclusion. This includes ensuring free and safe internet access in designated public spaces, and investing in policies and programmes that support affordable, age-appropriate access to digital technologies in educational centres, communities and households.⁸⁰

Furthermore, States should disseminate information, promote education programmes and conduct awareness campaigns on children's and adolescents' rights in the digital environment, with an emphasis on the opportunities and risks associated with digital products and services. Messages should include information on how Indigenous and non-Indigenous children and adolescents can benefit from digital content to build knowledge and skills, how to protect their privacy and prevent victimization and how to recognize a child or adolescent who is a victim of harm perpetrated online or offline and respond appropriately.⁸¹



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