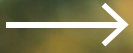


Thematic Brief

# INDIGENOUS PEOPLES



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# Welcome!

Are you looking to mainstream gender and diversity in development projects? This guide shares key information about development with identity for **Indigenous Peoples** and how to design projects to foster this type of development.

You can also explore our other topic-based toolkits to learn more about the IDB Group's gender perspective and the diverse population groups it prioritizes in its operations: Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendants, people with disabilities, and the LGBTQ+ population.



## DEFINITION

# Who are Indigenous Peoples?

The **IDB Operational Policy on Indigenous Peoples** (GN-2386-8) uses three criteria to define an Indigenous population or person:

**1**

They are descendants of populations that inhabited Latin America and the Caribbean at the time of the conquest or colonization

**2**

Regardless of their legal status or current residence, they retain some or all of their own social, economic, political, linguistic and cultural institutions and practices

**3**

They recognize themselves as belonging to Indigenous or pre-colonial cultures or peoples

The policy has two key directives. The first requires the Bank to use its best efforts to support the development with identity of Indigenous Peoples. The second creates safeguards designed to prevent or minimize exclusion and adverse impacts that Bank operations might generate with respect to Indigenous Peoples and their rights.

Similarly, the IDB Environmental and Social Policy Framework recognizes Indigenous Peoples as distinct social and cultural groups that may have some of the following characteristics, to various degrees:



They self-identify as members of a distinct cultural group, and others recognize this identity.



They share a collective attachment to geographically distinct or ancestral territories and natural resources. In some countries, these territories are called comarcas (counties) or resguardos (reserves).



They have their own laws and cultural, economic, social, or political institutions.

The Environmental and Social Policy Framework also says that Indigenous Peoples may use a language that is different from the official language or languages of the country where they live. **But under several international frameworks, this is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition, as many Indigenous Peoples have lost their language, especially in urban settings.**<sup>1,2</sup>

Not all groups with their own language are Indigenous Peoples. Other ethnic groups in the region also have their own languages, such as Afro-descendant communities that preserve creole languages, or migrant-descendant communities like the Nikkei, people of Japanese descent; the Túsán, the Chinese-descendant community in Peru; or the Rrom in Colombia.

For that matter, not everyone who speaks an Indigenous language identifies as Indigenous. Paraguay is a good example. Approximately two-thirds of the population speaks Guaraní—an Indigenous language—even though only 2.3% of the population identifies as Indigenous.<sup>3,4</sup>



## Remember:

The term “Indigenous peoples” is not used uniformly in every country in Latin America and the Caribbean.

For example, Ecuador uses the terms “nationalities” and “Indigenous peoples.” Bolivia uses “Indigenous nations” and “native Indigenous peoples.”

In Chile and Peru, the terms “Indigenous peoples” or “native peoples” are preferred, while Paraguay mainly uses “Indigenous peoples.” “Autochthonous peoples” is another common term in the region.



1 - Us, H., Mendoza, C., & Guzmán, V. (2021). [Pueblos indígenas en Guatemala: Desafíos demográficos, lingüísticos y socioeconómicos: Análisis comparativo de los censos 2002 vs 2018](#). Inter-American Development Bank.

2 - Bocarejo, D., Araujo, M. C., & Albertos, C. (2021). [Brechas y desafíos socioeconómicos de los pueblos indígenas de América Latina: Retos para el desarrollo con identidad](#) (Technical Note No. IDB-TN-2280). Inter-American Development Bank.

3 - Instituto Nacional de Estadística. (2023). [Censo indígena 2022 – Libro verde: IV Censo Nacional Indígena, resultados finales de población y viviendas \[PDF\]](#).

4 - Instituto Nacional de Estadística. (2024). [Resultados Finales del Censo Nacional de Población y Viviendas 2022\[report\]](#).

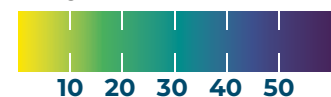
More than **53 million Indigenous people** live in Latin America and the Caribbean, representing about **10% of the population**. The countries with the largest Indigenous populations are **Mexico, Peru, Guatemala, Bolivia, Chile, and Colombia**. Indigenous people make up the largest share of the population in Guatemala, Bolivia, and Peru. There are more than **800 Indigenous groups and more than 420 different languages** in the region.



#### Love data?

Access dashboards, databases, and indicator libraries about Indigenous peoples and other groups on the IDB site for Data and Indicators for Latin America and the Caribbean!

#### Indigenous population (%)



■ Data not available

## KEY CONCEPTS

# What concepts do you need to know when working with Indigenous Peoples?



### Ethnicity

A community of people who share a set of social characteristics through cultural heritage or collective memory, such as language, culture, religion, institutions, values, habits, and customs.



### Indigenous community

A collection of families or groups living together that identify themselves as belonging to an Indigenous group. They share a common identity and values, their own social organization, a cultural past and kinship, history and/or territorial rights, forms of government and administration, and regulatory and legal systems that distinguish them from other communities. This concept varies based on the current legislation in each country.



### Indigenous Peoples in voluntary isolation and initial contact

Indigenous Peoples in voluntary isolation are peoples or groups within them that do not maintain continuous ties with the majority non-Indigenous population and generally deliberately avoid any type of contact with those outside their community. This also includes groups that, having had previous sporadic interactions with non-Indigenous societies, have decided to return to isolation, intentionally breaking those ties.



### Ethnodevelopment

An approach that seeks to implement Indigenous models of social, economic, political, and cultural development, in contrast to integration and assimilation approaches and the Western development model. This approach is based on Indigenous Peoples exercising their collective rights to determine their own future, based on their historical experiences, cultural resources, and worldviews, in keeping with their values, aspirations, and life plans.



## Development with identity

A process that includes strengthening Indigenous Peoples, acting in harmony with their environment, managing territories and natural resources, and creating and exercising authority and respect for their cultural, economic, social, and institutional rights and values, in accordance with their own worldview and conception of wellbeing and governance. This concept is based on the principles of equity, comprehensiveness, reciprocity, and solidarity.



## Cultural relevance

Consideration of beneficiaries' sociocultural characteristics when designing and implementing public interventions, recognizing and valuing cultural diversity as a source of mutual enrichment.



## Interculturality

A process in which different political, economic, social, and linguistic models of various cultures interact and connect equitably. Differences are not just tolerated; they are the starting point for exploring ways to work together.



## Free, prior, and informed consent

The fundamental right of Indigenous Peoples to make decisions about any public or private measures that could directly affect them or their lands. This spans project design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.



## Worldview

An overall vision or concept of the universe— a way of seeing or interpreting the world based on certain beliefs, perspectives, notions, images, and concepts in a specific culture.



## Ethno-engineering

A discipline that values Indigenous Peoples' traditional knowledge as a source of inspiration for sustainable engineering practices that respect the environment. It uses a participatory methodology to adapt infrastructure projects to Indigenous Peoples' specific cultural characteristics.<sup>5</sup>

Two excellent references to learn more about these concepts and more are:

Guía de conceptos clave para el trabajo con pueblos indígenas  
Albertos y Martín (2021)  
(in Spanish)

[See guide](#)

and the Caja de Herramientas from CELADE and ECLAC  
(in Spanish)

[See toolbox](#)

5 - Zegers, M. C., Tressler, J., Massa, I., Tyrer, C., Albertos, C., Rodríguez Porcel, M., Sánchez, J., & Ulloa, M. (2022). [Guía de etnoingeniería: Lineamientos para la incorporación de la etnoingeniería en los sectores vial, educación, salud y protección social y turismo](#). Inter-American Development Bank.

# Ethno-racial identity: What are **self-identification**, **self-recognition**, and **self-ascription**?

**Self-identification, self-recognition, and self-classification** refer to how Indigenous Peoples and individuals perceive their own identity. These concepts have been more recently applied to Afro-descendant peoples and individuals as well. However, each term emphasizes something slightly different. **Self-identification** and **self-recognition** emphasize personal identity. **Self-ascription highlights collective belonging** to a people or community.

The three terms share the prefix self and reinforce the principle that **groups or individuals are the ones who determine their identity, without the need for external validation.**

This idea is supported by international instruments like **Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization** and the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**, which establishes in Article 33 that:

**“Indigenous Peoples have the right to determine their own identity of membership in accordance with their customs and traditions.”**

## In summary:

### → **Self-identification**

This is the most commonly used term in human rights, public policy, and court rulings throughout the region, whether the subject matter is Indigenous peoples or Afro-descendants.

### → **Self-recognition**

This term is particularly important in Colombia and Brazil, where it has been legally recognized in connection with the collective rights of Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants.

### → **Self-ascription**

This term is used less frequently, except in Mexico, where it is the constitutional term for recognizing Indigenous peoples.

# Language matters!

**Remember:** Language reflects beliefs and social norms. Using the correct language can change existing stereotypes and bring visibility and recognition to these groups.

- **Indigenous Peoples are not necessarily minorities.** In some countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, the share of the population that identifies as Indigenous is high: roughly a quarter of the population in Bolivia and Peru, and one-fifth in Mexico. Indigenous People may make up a small share of the national population but be a majority or sizeable proportion of the population in some departments or municipalities.
- **Indigenous:** the word “Indigenous” can be used as an adjective, but not as a noun. Avoid using phrases like “an Indigenous” to refer to someone who belongs to an Indigenous group. Instead, say “an Indigenous person,” “an Indigenous woman,” or “an Indigenous man.” This also applies to other expressions like “Indigenous language,” “Indigenous science,” “Indigenous practices,” or “Indigenous culture.”
- **Call groups by their name:** when speaking about a specific Indigenous group, use the group's specific name and make sure it is used appropriately. For example, when speaking about Indigenous people in specific comarcas in Panama, use “the Ngäbe-Buglé and Guna peoples” instead of general terms like “Indigenous Peoples of Panama.”
- **Dialect or Indigenous language:** a dialect is a variant of a language that has lexical, grammatical, or phonological differences from other variants. In the past, Indigenous languages were sometimes pejoratively called dialects to minimize their importance. Referring to an Indigenous language as a dialect is not only incorrect (from a linguistic standpoint), but also discriminatory. Don't do it! Always use language.



**The word “Indigenous”  
can be used as an adjective,  
but not as a noun.  
Avoid using expressions  
like “an Indigenous.”  
Instead, use  
“Indigenous person.”**

## MAIN GAPS

# Where do things stand now?

Indigenous Peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean face pronounced gaps in access to energy, water and sanitation, transportation, health, education, land, and other services. They experience:



### Elevated levels of poverty with high intergenerational persistence

The percentage of Indigenous people living in poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean is more than double that of the rest of the population.<sup>6,7</sup> Recent estimates show that children who grow up in poverty are more likely to be poor when they become adults and start their own households if they are Indigenous than if they are not.



### Fewer economic opportunities

Although Indigenous people are employed at similar rates as their non-Indigenous or non-Afro-descendant counterparts, they are often employed in the informal sector, in low-quality jobs with lower pay.<sup>8</sup>



### Reduced access to education and poor academic performance

Indigenous Peoples' access to education has recently improved in countries like Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay, but challenges remain. Attendance and completion rates fall as schooling progresses. Fewer students attend secondary school, and even fewer pursue higher education. This effect is amplified in rural areas. Notably, for Indigenous populations, the education gaps affect girls and young women, whereas the regional average shows a slight gap that impacts boys and men.<sup>9</sup> There is also a gap in standardized test performance, mainly in areas like math, language, and science.<sup>10,11</sup>

6 - Bustelo, M., Frisancho, V., & Viollaz, M. (2023). [Unequal opportunities for Indigenous Peoples and African descendants](#). Inter-American Development Bank.

7 - World Bank. (2015). [Indigenous Latin America in the Twenty-First Century: The First Decade](#). World Bank.

8 - Bocarejo, D., Araujo, M. C., & Albertos, C. (2021). [Brechas y desafíos socioeconómicos de los pueblos indígenas de América Latina: Retos para el desarrollo con identidad \(Technical Note No. IDB-TN-2280\)](#). Inter-American Development Bank.

9 - Arias Ortiz, E., Giamb Bruno, C., Morduchowicz, A., & Pineda, B. (2023). [The State of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean \(Technical Note No. IDB-TN-02708\)](#). Inter-American Development Bank.

10 - Näslund-Hadley, E., & Santos, H. (2022). [Skills Development of Indigenous Children, Youth, and Adults in Latin America and the Caribbean \(Technical Note No. IDB-TN-02410\)](#). Inter-American Development Bank.

11 - Näslund-Hadley, E., & Alonzo, H. (2024). [How Inequal Is Learning in Latin America? An Analysis of Socioeconomic and Indigenous Skill Gaps \(CIMA Brief No. 27\)](#). Inter-American Development Bank.



## Declining vitality in their Indigenous languages

One in five Indigenous groups in Latin America and the Caribbean has already lost their native language.<sup>12</sup> The number of speakers of other languages is gradually decreasing due to the challenges of teaching new generations.<sup>13</sup> The challenges, especially in multicultural contexts, include inadequate resources, exclusion of Indigenous languages and cultures, the difficulty of adapting educational content to students' cultural diversity, and insufficient training for bilingual teachers. Intercultural bilingual education is one key to overcoming these challenges. This practice promotes respect for native cultures and languages and fosters more inclusive and equitable education, allowing students to learn in their native language while building skills in the official language.<sup>14</sup>



## Gaps in health outcomes

Indigenous people face barriers to accessing and using health services, largely due to ineffective coverage of those services, lack of cultural relevance, and difficulties accessing services in their own languages. These gaps are reflected in higher rates of maternal-infant mortality, malnutrition, and teen pregnancy, as well as a higher incidence of infectious diseases and mental health problems.<sup>15</sup>

**Bilingual education promotes respect for native cultures and languages and fosters more inclusive and equitable education**

12 - Del Popolo, F. (Ed.). (2017). [Los pueblos indígenas en América \(Abya Yala\): Desafíos para la igualdad en la diversidad](#) (Libros de la CEPAL, No 151; LC/PUB.2017/26). Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

13 - Us, H., Mendoza, C., & Guzmán, V. (2021). [Pueblos indígenas en Guatemala: Desafíos demográficos, lingüísticos y socioeconómicos: Análisis comparativo de los censos 2002 vs 2018](#). Inter-American Development Bank.

14 - UNESCO. (2021). [Políticas de educación intercultural bilingüe: Estudios sobre políticas educativas en América Latina \(Laboratorio Latinoamericano de Evaluación de la Calidad \[LLECE\]\)](#). United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

15 - Inter-American Development Bank. (2022). [Gender and Diversity Sector Framework Document \(GN-280013\)](#). Inter-American Development Bank.



## Deficient infrastructure and gaps in access to essential services

In almost every country in the region, Indigenous people have less access to potable water, sanitation, and electricity.<sup>16</sup> They also face challenges related to digital inclusion, including low digital literacy rates, difficulty accessing devices like mobile phones and computers, and limited internet connectivity. They also face barriers when accessing and using digital platforms, which are rarely adapted for their linguistic and cultural contexts.<sup>17</sup>



## Challenges with land recognition and titling

Although Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendants administer an estimated one-third of the territory in Latin America, many communities do not have formal acknowledgment of ownership of their lands, territories, and natural resources. They also face several obstacles when accessing justice and making their voices heard in political and decision-making processes.<sup>18</sup>



## Climate change

There is a narrative that Indigenous Peoples are more vulnerable to climate change due to their geographic location<sup>19</sup> and limited access to resources and basic services<sup>20</sup>. However, more rigorous evidence is needed to validate and better understand these connections. Some empirical studies on Brazil<sup>21</sup>–<sup>22</sup> and in other countries—such as Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and Panama<sup>23</sup>–<sup>24</sup>—demonstrate the importance of land rights and Indigenous administration for environmental conservation.

16 - Bocarejo, D., Araujo, M. C., & Albertos, C. (2021). [Brechas y desafíos socioeconómicos de los pueblos indígenas de América Latina: Retos para el desarrollo con identidad](#) (Nota técnica No IDBTN2280). Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo.

17 - Us, H. (2022, Agosto 5). [La triple barrera para reducir brechas digitales para pueblos indígenas](#) [Entrada de blog]. Blog ¿Y si hablamos de igualdad? Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo.

18 - Bocarejo, Araujo y Albertos, Brechas y desafíos socioeconómicos, 2021.

19 - Oelz, M., Dhir, R. K., & Harsdorff, M. (2017). Indigenous peoples and climate change: From victims to change agents through decent work (pp. 1–56). International Labour Office, Gender, Equality and Diversity Branch.

20 - Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2022). Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (H.-O. Pörtner, D. C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E. S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Lösche, V. Möller, A. Okem, & B. Rama, Eds.). Cambridge University Press.

21 - Nepstad, D., Schwartzman, S., Bamberger, B., Santilli, M., Ray, D., Schlesinger, P., Lefebvre, P., Alencar, A., Prinz, E., Fiske, G., & Rolla, A. (2006). Inhibition of Amazon deforestation and fire by parks and indigenous lands. *Conservation Biology*, 20(1), 65–73.

22 - Baragwanath, K., Bayi, E., & Shinde, N. (2023). [Collective property rights lead to secondary forest growth in the Brazilian Amazon](#). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 120(22).

23 - Alejo, C., Meyer, C., Walker, W. S., Gorelik, S. R., Josse, C., Aragon-Osejo, J. L., Rios, S., Augusto, C., Llanos, A., Coomes, O. T., & Potvin, C. (2021). [Are indigenous territories effective natural climate solutions? A neotropical analysis using matching methods and geographic discontinuity designs](#). *PLOS ONE*, 16(7), e0245110.

24 - Bonilla-Mejía, L., & Higuera-Mendieta, I. (2019). Protected areas under weak institutions: Evidence from Colombia. *World Development*, 122, 585–596.

## INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

# Which **international instruments protect and promote the rights** of Indigenous Peoples?

Below are some of the most important instruments in the international legislative framework that recognize and protect the rights of Indigenous Peoples.



1989 ●

### [Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention \(No. 169\) of the International Labour Organization](#)

Se centra en la no discriminación, y reconoce los derechos de los pueblos indígenas al desarrollo, a su derecho consuetudinario, a sus tierras, territorios y recursos, al empleo, a la educación y a la salud. También establece el derecho a la Consulta y Consentimiento Libre, Previo e Informado (CCLPI). El Convenio describe cuáles son las características de los pueblos o grupos a los que aplican sus disposiciones a partir de tres criterios: las condiciones sociales, culturales y económicas diferenciadas, la descendencia de poblaciones que habitaban los países de manera previa a la colonización y la conciencia de la identidad indígena o autoidentificación.

2001 ●

### [Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity](#)

Proclaims as principles that:

- i) Cultural diversity is the common heritage of humanity;
- ii) Cultural and political pluralism are necessary to ensure harmonious interaction, development, and exchange between groups with plural cultural identities;
- iii) Cultural diversity is a factor in economic, spiritual, moral, and intellectual growth, among other dimensions. Article 4 establishes that States must defend human rights and fundamental freedoms— particularly those of Indigenous Peoples—to promote cultural diversity

2006 ●

### [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)

Protects rights and liberties such as equality and non-discrimination; cultural integrity and collective rights; self-determination; autonomy; participation, consultations, and consent; possession of, relationship to and conservation of lands, territories, and resources; development with identity; reparations and compensation. It also establishes measures for States to follow to respect and promote these rights.

## THE IDB'S APPROACH

# Indigenous Peoples in IDB projects

At the IDB, our work with Indigenous Peoples is guided by development with identity. This means we recognize Indigenous models for governance, wellbeing, cultural identity, and relationships with land and natural resources. The IDB Gender and Diversity Sector Framework includes three lines of action with evidence-based policies and strategies to improve the living conditions of Indigenous Peoples in the region:

### Line of action 1: Address gaps that arise from structural factors

- **Compensatory policies**

  - Affirmative policies to reduce the underrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples in education, procurement, and politics.
  - Support for land titling programs that enable investment in physical and human capital and help mitigate climate change.
- **Enabling environment policies**

  - Environmental stewardship programs that foster development with identity among Indigenous Peoples.
  - Investments to close the internet access gap.
- **Differentiated programs and services**

  - Education, training, and healthcare activities that are culturally adapted to meet the specific needs of Indigenous Peoples, such as intercultural bilingual education or intercultural health services.
  - Intercultural services to prevent gender-based violence and meet the needs of survivors.
  - Biocultural stewardship programs that protect livelihoods, traditional practices, and biodiversity.
- **Universal policies**

  - Programs that promote access to effective contraceptive methods.
  - Non-contributory pensions for low-income individuals.
  - Quality preschool education.

## THE IDB'S APPROACH

### Line of action 2: Reduce biases against Indigenous Peoples

- **Policies to prevent unequal treatment**

  - Legal and regulatory frameworks that prohibit discrimination based on ethnicity.
- **Policies to reduce bias in service delivery**

  - Interventions to change social norms, reduce discrimination based on ethnicity, and positively impact academic performance and career choices for Indigenous people.
- **Measuring unequal treatment**

  - Generating knowledge about political instruments to eradicate unequal treatment in areas that lack data, such as housing, credit, and legal services.

### Line of action 3: Strengthen institutional capacity to design and execute policies

- **Support to mainstream an Indigenous Peoples perspective in all sectors**

  - Technical assistance, knowledge products, and operations to support institutions that focus on Indigenous Peoples to design, implement, and evaluate programs and policies to advance their equity agenda.
  - Systematic dialogue and technical support to establish coordination mechanisms, mobilize public investments, and budget with a focus on Indigenous Peoples in key ministries.
- **Improve the availability and quality of data on Indigenous Peoples in official statistics and administrative records**

  - Strengthened national statistics offices and key ministries to improve the production of statistics about Indigenous Peoples in censuses, household surveys, and administrative records.
  - Support for analytical work related to best practices and knowledge about collecting important data for Indigenous Peoples.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

# Want to learn more?

## Check out these references:

- The [IDB Environmental and Social Policy Framework](#), which reflects the Bank's commitment to environmental and social sustainability and includes explicit guidelines for Indigenous Peoples
- The [IDB Gender and Diversity Sector Framework Document \(GN-2800-13\)](#), which analyzes the structural challenges faced by women and diverse population groups
- The [IDB Group Gender and Diversity Action Plan](#) and its annexes:
  - Annex II – [Data on diverse population groups and a review of legal frameworks by country](#).
  - Annex III – [Strategic areas for action in gender and diversity](#).
  - Annex IV – [Guidelines for IDB projects that support gender and diversity](#).
- Recent IDB studies about Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendants:
  - [Brechas y desafíos socioeconómicos de los pueblos indígenas de América Latina: Retos para el desarrollo con identidad](#) (2021, Technical Note IBD-TN-2280, in Spanish)
  - [Unequal Opportunities for Indigenous Peoples and African descendants](#) (2023)
- The [IDB Gender and Diversity page](#)
- The [Database of Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants in Latin America and the Caribbean](#), developed by CELADE/ECLAC.
- The Indigenous Peoples section of ECLAC's [Caja de herramientas: Políticas sociales e institucionalidad para la igualdad](#) (in Spanish)

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