

The impact of COVID-19 on the rights of indigenous peoples under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Tēnā koe Mr/Madam Chair

E ngā mana, e ngā reo o ngā tōpito o te ao - tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā tātou katoa.

New Zealand welcomes the opportunity to meet with the Expert Mechanism and Pacific and Asia members, to learn from their experiences of COVID-19 and its impact on their indigenous peoples.

During the 1918 flu epidemic, Māori died at seven times the rate of non-Māori. With this in mind, the Government took immediate action against COVID-19, moving to lockdown after the first case was discovered in February this year. We have contained the number of deaths to 25.

In March, the Government released \$56.5 million for a Māori-specific response, including \$30m for Māori Health services and \$15m to support vulnerable families.

Some tribal leaders across the country front-footed the response to the pandemic by controlling access to tribal areas, visiting elders, delivering food parcels and ensuring families were able to maintain contact. These locally-led initiatives eased the negative impact of COVID-19 during the lockdown and afterwards.

It became clear the response needed to be centrally-enabled and Māori-led at the local and community level, and that the Government had to work with Māori to adjust its response to the pandemic. For example, checkpoints were carried out with the support of the police, local authorities, civil defence, and the local community. Tribal organisations issued guidelines for traditional burials, restricting the number of people attending. Subsequently, national guidelines for traditional burials were developed in partnership with Māori experts.

In many respects, the Government complied with directions from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Public service announcements were available in the Māori language and the Government provided funding to enable innovation and locally tailored solutions.

Some aspects of the response could have been better. For example, some Māori healthcare providers faced difficulties accessing personal protective equipment, and disaggregated data on the impact of COVID-19 on Māori were initially difficult to obtain.

COVID-19 magnified the inequalities between Māori and non-Māori in New Zealand, for example, social disconnection, financial strain, lack of good quality housing, poor employment opportunities and outcomes, and reduced overall physical and mental health.

COVID-19 also highlighted the resilience of Māori communities during the crisis. The pandemic has reinforced the importance of collaboration between the Government and indigenous communities to ensure we achieve impactful, equitable and sustainable health and economic outcomes for Māori.

The Government has a unique opportunity to:

- devise new ways to work with Māori communities and organisations in delivering tangible and lasting benefits to families and communities; and
- ensure our economy creates wealth and achieves wellbeing for Māori, in accordance with Māori worldviews and values.

New Zealand is committed to developing a Declaration plan. We want this process to reflect the partnership between the Government and Māori, focus on supporting the wellbeing of indigenous populations and present a clear path towards the realisation of their self-determination.

We want to do this right and take the time needed to ensure the process is consistent with best practice under the Declaration and the Treaty of Waitangi. We thank the parties for their patience. Tēnā koutou katoa.

Te Puni Kōkiri
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