

Indigenous peoples in Canada

There are three constitutionally recognized Indigenous peoples in Canada: First Nations, Inuit and Métis. They comprise a relatively young population and experience a disproportionate burden of ill health. Historic and ongoing colonialism are considered to be the root of all causes of ill health for Indigenous peoples, resulting in a loss of land, culture, language, family values and spirituality, which contributes to despondency, loss of self-esteem, and loss of pride in cultural identity.

Socio-economic marginalization

Socio-economic marginalization relegates certain groups of people to positions of disadvantage within mainstream society, both socially and economically. It inhibits them from gaining equal access to resources and ignores their needs and desires, thus preventing them from developing to their full potential and becoming productive members of society (Schiffer & Schatz, 2008).³ The development goals that address this theme are Goals 1, 2, 4, 8, 9 and aspects of 10. The socio-economic marginalization of Indigenous peoples is demonstrated by high rates of poverty, food insecurity, and poor housing or homelessness, as well as unequal access to opportunities related to education, employment, land and property.

Challenges of the SDGs agenda to meet socio-economic marginalization experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada

- The SDG agenda fails to address Indigenous ownership of land, and the ability to benefit economically from food production on these lands.
- The absence of a national definition of poverty presents challenges in measuring SDG 1.
- Poor quality or inadequate housing and homelessness are not included in any of the SDGs.
- SDG 4 overlooks specific barriers affecting education for Indigenous peoples, including the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge (reading and mathematics) over Indigenous knowledge systems as well as chronic underfunding of federally supported Indigenous educational systems (infrastructure and resources).

Promotion of health and well-being

SDG Goal 3 and its targets highlight the need for a reduction in maternal and child mortality, communicable and non-communicable diseases, preventable injuries from accidents, and the abuse of substances such as alcohol, narcotic drugs and tobacco. Existing data indicates disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples on many health indicators, including birth outcomes, infant mortality, HIV/AIDS, respiratory infections, premature deaths and injuries, mental health issues like substance abuse and suicide, and chronic diseases like obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Limitations of the SDG 3 to meet the promotion of health and well-being of Indigenous peoples in Canada

- Current inequities in maternal health care for Indigenous women living in isolated communities (including prenatal care, midwifery and birthing centres) need to be addressed.
- Social origins of communicable illnesses, injuries and premature fatalities amongst Indigenous populations are complex and require specific action.
- There is a lack of enhanced indicators and surveillance strategies for immunization, water-borne diseases and respiratory illnesses for Indigenous populations.
- There is a lack of indicators on some of the major causes of premature mortalities for Indigenous peoples, especially indicators related to mental health issues that may be contributing to high rates of suicide in Indigenous populations.
- The ongoing deficit in health financing, training and retention of health care workers in Indigenous communities must be addressed.

Equality and social inclusiveness

In the SDG agenda, Goal 5 calls for an end to discrimination against women and girls, elimination of all forms of gender-based violence, recognition of unpaid and domestic work, equal and full participation in political, economic and public spheres of the country, and adoption of policies and legislation that promote gender equality and empowerment for women and girls.

³ Schiffer, K., & Schatz, E. (2008). *Marginalisation, social inclusion and health: Experiences based on the work of Correlation – European Network Social Inclusion & Health*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Foundation RegenboogAMOC. Retrieved August 23, 2017 from http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/11927/1/Correlation_marginalisation_web.pdf

This goal is especially pertinent to Indigenous women who are among the most marginalized populations in Canada and face multiple forms of discrimination.

Limitations to SDG 5 for Indigenous women and girls

- No national indicator related to pay equity for Indigenous women and girls exists, and those related to equity in opportunities (employment, education, etc.) are very limited.
- SDG 5 does not account for the complexity of violence against Indigenous women in rural and remote communities and the challenges that exist to leave violent situations.
- SDG 5 omits minority populations like LGBTQT and Two-Spirit people among Indigenous people, who experience multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization.

SDG target 10.3 focuses on eliminating discriminatory legislation, policies and actions. This is a dimension of inequity that is unique to Indigenous peoples in Canada, as no other ethnic group has been, and continues to be, subjected to such a long history of discrimination and human rights violations.

Limitation to SDG target 10.3 for Indigenous peoples in Canada

- Target 10.3 has only one indicator to measure progress on reducing inequality within and among countries. It fails to account for the deep power imbalances (including socio-economic marginalization and health inequities) which exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

SDG 16 addresses human rights and the ways political and legal systems can protect them. In particular, this goal calls for an end to violence, child abuse, as well as for non-discriminatory policies and inclusive representation and participation across all levels of governance.

Opportunities for SDG 16 to address high rates of violence against Indigenous women, child abuse, and incarceration

- Target 16.b requires the promotion and enforcement of non-discriminatory laws and policies, including reformation of the police system and policies that address racism. It also requires addressing issues of child and adult education, meaningful employment, and accessible health and social services if Canada is to effectively decrease the rates of Indigenous

offenders and make Indigenous communities and Canada more peaceful and safe for all.

The environment

SDG 6 addresses the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. While Canada has an abundance of water, many Indigenous communities do not have access to safe drinking water.

Opportunities for SDG 6 and Indigenous communities

- Canada must commit to investments in water infrastructure, engage in sustainable agricultural practices, protect the lakes and waters in partnership with Indigenous peoples, and end 100% of all drinking water advisories in First Nations communities by March 2021.

The importance of partnerships

Partnership remains one of the cornerstones of the SDG resolution, as demonstrated by Goal 17. Canada's long history with Indigenous peoples requires acknowledgment and action to right the wrongs that have been done, and to achieve the SDGs for Indigenous peoples by 2030.

Opportunities for successful partnerships and actions to achieve the SDGs for Indigenous peoples by 2030

- System-wide transformation is required, based on respectful relationships, engagement and consensus-building with Indigenous peoples, and community-driven and nation-based programs with Indigenous peoples (rather than for them).

Conclusions

While the SDG agenda is comprehensive enough to address many of the issues faced by Indigenous peoples, it is clear that in Canada, this cannot be achieved without addressing the unique issues affecting Indigenous peoples. The Agenda's silence on specific Indigenous issues like self-determination and governance, Indigenous land rights and ownership are particularly problematic as these issues are the foundations for inequality and poverty among Indigenous peoples. It is hoped that on a national level, Indigenous-specific targets can be drawn to ensure that Indigenous peoples are not left behind in the sustainability agenda.

