



## Applying the UNHCR age, gender and diversity policy to

# MINORITIES & INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

*Venezuelan refugees from the Warao and Eñepà ethnic groups take part in an exhibition of art, dancing and culture at the UNHCR Pintolândia shelter in Boa Vista during the 16 Days of Activism*

This tipsheet is one of a series of six aimed at applying the specificities of the AGD approach. It highlights the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as those relating to age, gender, disability, religion, ethnicity and physical appearance) combine or intersect. It draws our attention to the impact of various overlapping social identities or intersectionality<sup>1</sup> in our work with groups of concern to UNHCR; more specifically, persons with disabilities, youth, children and adolescents, minorities, indigenous people, older persons and LGBTIQ+ persons. This tipsheet should be read in conjunction with UNHCR Need to Know Guidance [Working with national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples in forced displacement](#), which includes additional information for the implementation of these recommendations.

## Who are we talking about?

There is no internationally agreed definition as to which groups constitute **minorities** or **indigenous peoples**.

For UNHCR, **minority** refers to an ethnic, national, religious or linguistic group, fewer in number than the rest of the population, whose members share a common identity. However, the characteristics

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<sup>1</sup> **Intersectionality** is a theoretical framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities (e.g. gender, sex, race, class, sexuality, religion, disability, physical appearance, height, etc.) might combine to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege. Intersectionality identifies advantages and disadvantages that are felt by people due to a combination of factors (Oxford English Dictionary).

that define minorities vary widely between contexts. Minorities are usually non-dominant in comparison with majorities in the economic and political spheres of their countries.

**Caste-based groups** facing discrimination on account of their profession and descent are also considered minorities, in the sense that they often face the same challenges as minorities. While this term is usually associated with South Asia, there are communities facing such discrimination in other regions as well.

[Convention No 169 of the International Labour Organization \(ILO\)](#) of 1989 defines “peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions.” Indigenous peoples can generally demonstrate a historical continuity with pre-invasion or pre-colonial societies, in terms of occupation of ancestral land, ancestry, language or cultural beliefs and practices. Like minorities, indigenous communities tend not to be dominant.

Finally, there is a possibility that forcibly displaced populations belonging to a majority in their country of origin may end up in a **minority-like situation**. This is especially true if they arrive in a location where persons of the same ethnic, religious, linguistic or indigenous community are treated in a discriminatory manner by the local majority. Although these forcibly displaced communities will not suffer from the debilitating effects of past discrimination, they may now be at risk of exclusion and marginalization.

## Why does it matter?

Minorities and indigenous peoples can often be overlooked in situations of forced displacement. In many societies, minorities and indigenous peoples are marginalized socially, economically, politically and culturally. They may be victims of severe human rights violations, including violations of collective and individual rights, violence, conflict, ethnic or religious persecution and even genocide. They are often dependent on the natural resources of collective lands and territories that they have used sustainably for generations; climate change, armed conflict, irregular mining, violence, discrimination and other events that directly impact the availability of natural resources may have forced them to leave their ancestral lands. Furthermore, the status as minority and gender often intersect, meaning that minority persons may face very different situations from one another depending on their gender identity; the social and cultural roles assigned to their gender in their community may accentuate inequalities and increase risks of discrimination.

In addition to the human rights principles prohibiting discrimination and affirming equality of all, and established economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR), there are specific rights for minorities and indigenous people that should also be upheld in humanitarian settings: the right to be included, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion and to use their own language.

At the same time, it is critical not to frame the experiences of minorities and indigenous peoples only in terms of frailty and dependency, but rather to recognize the role they play in the preservation of

knowledge, language, traditions, beliefs and cultures, including the sustainable use of land and natural resources, including in humanitarian settings.

## What can UNHCR do?

The UNHCR response should fully include minorities and indigenous peoples, including dedicated resources for their protection and support. Refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced and stateless persons who are members of minorities and indigenous peoples are likely to be affected both by the immediate events leading to their forcible displacement and by the legacy of discrimination. Below is a list of actions required if minorities and indigenous peoples are to be fully included in a safe and meaningful way in UNHCR interventions. Actions are organized around the three key areas of engagement of the 2018 AGD policy.

### AGD inclusive programming

- Ensure that conditions are secure for persons to identify themselves as belonging to specific ethnic groups, including indigenous peoples. Make sure that persons not wishing to self-identify are not forced to do so, especially in situations where they may be at risk.
- Promote and support the collection of fully disaggregated data on minorities and indigenous persons of concern by sex, age and disability, as well as data relating to the capacities they have and the specific risks and barriers they may face. Data should be collected on a needs base only, in a sensitive and confidential manner. It should be explained why data is being gathered and how it will be used.
- Design targeted programmes, where appropriate, to address the specific protection challenges faced by minorities and indigenous peoples.
- Plan for and foster inter-community dialogue and peaceful coexistence initiatives, where possible.

### Accountability to affected people

- Map out minorities and key stakeholders, including rights groups and other members of the civil society in the host country/community, as they can be valuable partners in the implementation of a protection and solution strategy for persons of concern to UNHCR belonging to minority groups.
- When organizing a meeting with a minority or indigenous individual or group, make sure that measures are in place to ensure their security and privacy.
- Implement culturally and linguistically appropriate and accessible communication and information measures to reach out to indigenous people and linguistic minorities.
- Enhance two-way communication with all community groups, including those of minorities and indigenous people and ensure that there is participation and engagement from the host communities in order to prevent discrimination and xenophobia against minority and indigenous groups.
- When possible, use interpreters from the same community as the minority or indigenous people, ensuring that they have received appropriate orientation and training and have signed

the applicable code of conduct. Provide individuals and communities with simple and easily accessible information on anti-fraud policies and free services, including interpreting.

- Provide minority and indigenous forcibly displaced communities with the opportunity to remain together in order to maintain their cultural heritage and identity, if they wish to do so (in some situations, a protection risk assessment may be required). This principle should also be applied in the context of durable solutions, provided that it does not interfere with the individual's right to individual choice.
- Build the capacity of UNHCR personnel and partners to identify culturally appropriate behaviour, to uphold individual and collective rights and to acknowledge, identify and address the specific protection concerns of persons from social, ethnic, national, religious and linguistic minority groups and indigenous people.

## Gender equality<sup>2</sup>

- Enable the involvement and meaningful participation of minorities and indigenous peoples, including persons of different ages, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), among others, in decision-making, programming and leadership, giving them the means to voice their opinions. Ensure that all voices are heard and taken into consideration.
- Ensure equal access to high-quality education for all school-age girls and boys that recognizes the diversity of cultures, traditions and languages of minorities and indigenous peoples including, where possible, access to mother-tongue education for minority and indigenous displaced children. At the same time, they should be included in regular education programmes to prevent isolation.
- Ensure that persons belonging to minorities and indigenous people have access to and control over food, core relief items, cash-based interventions and livelihood options on an equal basis as others, taking into account the challenges faced by intersectional groups such as women, persons with disabilities and older persons.
- Take steps to address the barriers that persons belonging to minorities and indigenous peoples, including women and girls, may face in accessing documentation; take into account issues of statelessness, discriminatory nationality and citizenship legislation.
- Promote awareness and understanding of the individual and collective rights of minorities and indigenous peoples, monitor the occurrence of harmful traditional practices and prevent and eliminate all forms of violence, including GBV, and discrimination against minorities and indigenous peoples, including women and girls.
- Ensure that response and referral mechanisms are made accessible, confidential and safe for all persons with a minority or indigenous background, and with considerations to other aspects of their identity, who are at risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse, gender-based violence (GBV)<sup>3</sup> and violence based on ethnic background, as these areas may intersect.

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<sup>2</sup> In line with what is stated in the Age, Gender and Diversity Policy, although the Commitments focus on women and girls; attention is also paid to gender inequalities that affect men and boys as well as other genders.

<sup>3</sup> In line with what is stated in the Policy on the Prevention of, Risk Mitigation, and Response to Gender-Based Violence.

# Key resources

## International legal framework

- [Inter-American Convention against Racism, Racial Discrimination and Related Forms of Intolerance](#), 2013
- [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, report on the situation of people of African descent in the Americas, OEA/Ser.L/V/II. Doc.62](#), 2011
- [General recommendation No 34 of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on racial discrimination faced by people of African descent](#), 2011
- [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#), 2007
- [Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities](#), 1992
- [Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169](#), 1989
- [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#), 1965
- [Documents of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent](#)
- [Durban Declaration and Programme of Action and Durban Review Conference Outcome Document](#)

## UNHCR policy

- [Age, Gender and Diversity \(AGD\) Policy](#), 2018
- [UNHCR Policy on the Prevention of, Risk Mitigation, and Response to Gender-Based Violence](#), 2020

## UNHCR guidance

- [Understanding Community-Based Protection](#), 2013
- [Working with National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and Indigenous Peoples in Forced Displacement](#), 2011

*This resource is a living document that will be updated to reflect ongoing UNHCR work on the inclusion of minorities and indigenous peoples and application of the resource in the field. UNHCR colleagues and partners can send questions and feedback to **UNHCR HQ Community-Based Protection Unit**, at [hqts00@unhcr.org](mailto:hqts00@unhcr.org).*