

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE RUSSIAN NORTH AND COVID-19

CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING THE SDGS

REGIONAL REPORT

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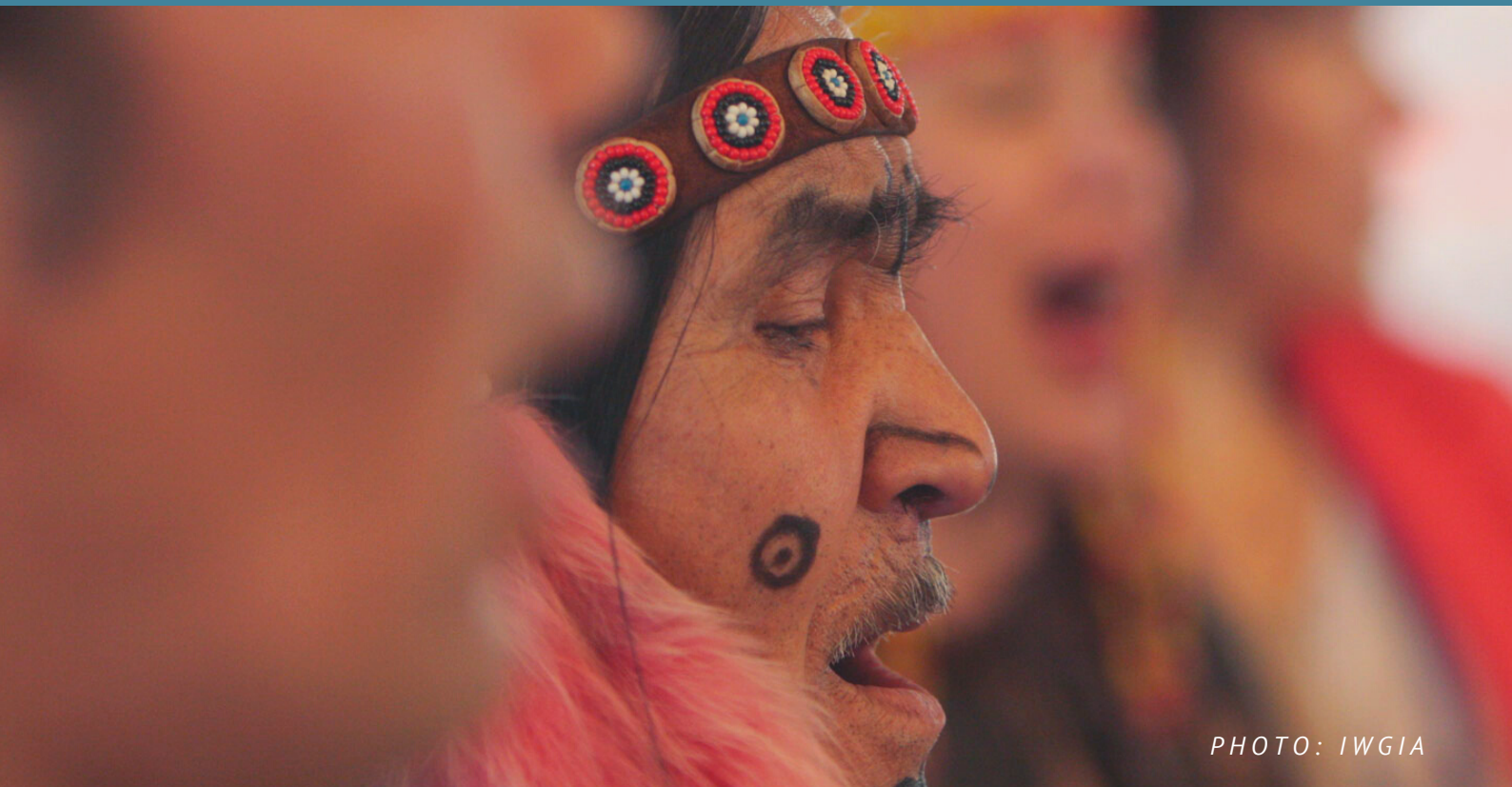


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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Russia at the end of March 2020, later than most European countries. This gave the government time to prepare adequately for the health and economic crisis. Russian authorities implemented some measures to prevent the spread of the virus, including closing the border with China, but these failed to stop the infection, which started from big cities linked closely with European capitals and resorts.

The Russian Federation is a vast country that has weak and expensive transport linkages between regions. This situation prevented the quick spread of the virus in remote territories of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East where indigenous peoples live. However, the coronavirus was later brought to the northern regions by workers of industrial companies who regularly come to traditional lands of indigenous peoples, which are rich in natural resources such as oil, gas, and other raw materials.

Over time, the virus reached remote indigenous territories. However, there were not many coronavirus outbreaks in indigenous communities, fortunately, because of the quarantine measures for the workers of extractive industries who were not able to visit nearby villages. At the same time, extractive companies did not stop work and failed to implement adequate preventive measures against the pandemic. These industrial projects therefore continue to be the primary source of COVID-19 in Russia's Northern territories where indigenous peoples live.

The healthcare system in Russia was not prepared well for the virus spread, also because it was reformed recently by the Russian Government. This resulted to a catastrophic reduction of the medical facilities, especially in rural and remote regions that are home to indigenous peoples.

The response measures implemented by the Russian government put some indigenous communities in a grave situation because of the disconnect between different parts of society. According to numerous independent researches, the state economic support of Russian citizens during the forced quarantine downtime was not adequate. Its distribution was hampered by numerous bureaucratic obstacles that were especially difficult for vulnerable groups, including indigenous peoples.

Even during the COVID-19 crisis, some state officials tried to use the response measures to promote their own political agenda, while violating free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples and their right to self-determination, which is reflective of a long-time trend of rollback of rights recognition in today's Russia.

In general, the outbreak of COVID-19 became a severe threat to the sustainable development of indigenous peoples of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East. The remoteness and isolation--due to inaccessibility of transportation--of indigenous communities became an advantage during the first phase of the COVID-19 spread but could be aggravating factors in the future.



Indigenous Peoples in Russia



Figure 1. The map of the small-numbered indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation

The Arctic, Siberian, and the Far East regions comprise two-thirds of Russia's territory, which are home to 45 indigenous minority peoples with a population of approximately 280,000. This equals roughly to two percent of the population of these regions or 0.2 percent of the population of the entire country. Apart from the extractive industries, the most distinctive trait of the economies of those regions is the continuing importance of the indigenous peoples' traditional economies, which was and continues to be the most essential historically-established component of the northern ecosystems. Many indigenous communities continue to live a traditional nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life and develop their traditional systems of communal resource management and mutual support. These systems have allowed them to survive in some of the world's harshest climate conditions for centuries.

According to Russian law, indigenous peoples in the regions are called "Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation." This is a collective term for peoples "numbering less than 50,000 people; living on ancestral lands, maintaining the traditional way of life, economic activities and crafts and perceiving themselves as separate ethnic groups."

Their traditional livelihoods are based on fishing, hunting, reindeer husbandry, sea hunting, and gathering. More than two-thirds of the indigenous peoples continue to live in rural areas where these activities are indispensable sources of food and income. Due to their traditional livelihoods, most of the indigenous peoples of the Russian North, especially those who preserve a nomadic way of life, usually need much more territory for subsistence than other populations. Indigenous peoples in Russia remain one of the poorest among the population. Their social and economic development, as well as their life expectancy, are far below the national average.

Indigenous peoples in Russia and the Sustainable Development Goals

Indigenous peoples' realities and aspirations for sustainable development in Russia are not different from those in other states. Indigenous communities in Russia have a lower level of welfare than other populations of the country. They have poor control of their traditional lands and natural resources, and they are also susceptible to climate change and other economic, social, and environmental crises. Their food security, access to traditional natural resources, lower level of education and access to basic services, pollution, and grabbing of the communities' traditional lands by industrial companies are all essential issues for indigenous peoples in the Russian Federation, as well as the other goals stipulated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Considering the local Russian context, many indigenous peoples in Russia live in harsh Arctic conditions that limit the food sources for indigenous communities. For example, reindeer for the Arctic reindeer herders is the primary source of food and clothing, transport, and housing. Many indigenous peoples in Russia are small-numbered and several of them, like Entsies or Orochis, number several hundred individuals only.

It is not the aim of this short report to describe in detail the challenges and specific implementation of every Sustainable Development Goal from the perspective of Russian indigenous peoples. A brief presentation of the state policy on the sustainable development of indigenous peoples in Russia, however, is very relevant and is discussed in this report.

The realization of the Sustainable Development Goals with regards to indigenous peoples in Russia has its own specifics. It is worth stating that in 2005 during the first period of President Vladimir Putin's term, the Russian Federation became one of the initiators of declaring the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples (2005-2014) in the UN. Russia also became the first country in the world, which organized the national steering committee for the realization of the Second International Decade.

According to international obligations related to the realization of the Second International Decade, the Russian government in consultation with the Russian Association of the indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), approved the Federal Concept of the Sustainable Development of indigenous peoples. This Concept became a forward-thinking document that included several progressive statements and identified state's obligations regarding indigenous peoples' rights to lands, resources, and self-determination.



For example, the Concept included, among others, references on developing special territories of indigenous peoples' traditional nature use with their participation in co-governance of such territories; "priority access" for indigenous peoples to hunting and fishing areas if there is competition with commercial companies; involving "duly authorized representatives" of indigenous peoples into the assessments of drafts of the state's resource development programs on indigenous peoples' territories; and consultations with indigenous peoples "before" the start of industrial and extractive projects on indigenous peoples' territories. The medical care section of the Concept included the article on "strengthening the basic infrastructure of stationary medical care institutions in places of indigenous peoples' traditional residence."

The Russian government also approved several mechanisms for the realization of this Concept. These included the crafting of federal legislation with the aim "to protect rights of indigenous peoples on their traditional way of life and their living environment" according to the "generally recognized rules of international law," as well as organizing the statistical monitoring of the indigenous peoples' development according to the "international recommendations in the field of indigenous rights protection."

Indigenous peoples' expectations after the approval of the state's Concept on their sustainable development were high. Gennady Shchukin, the indigenous elder from Taimyr, described these expectations in a short interview:



Figure 2. Gennady Shchukin - the IP elder from Taimyr

After accepting the Concept of the sustainable development of indigenous peoples, we expected that the state would realize the ambitious aims, which were included in the document, in practice. First of all, we thought to secure traditional lands for indigenous communities through this Concept with our own participation in its governance on equal terms with state and business representatives.

We thought that the state finally decided in favor of indigenous peoples [specially in relation to] a very sensitive issue of competing with commercial companies for fishing and hunting resources. This is a great problem and a shame when wealthy businessmen come to our traditional lands and buy on auctions the right to fish and hunt on our traditional lands while our indigenous hunters who are poor and have no money to buy the licenses [are considered] 'poachers' on their historic lands.

Nevertheless, finally, that initiative [where shared in] big forums and good presentations in Moscow and New York. The government did not implement its own messages declared in the Concept about the indigenous lands, priority access to natural resources, and our prior consent. All good plans were reduced finally, and after a while, the legislation even became worse than before. [R]eal indigenous leaders [do not] expect [anything] good from the law today. We are only afraid that the situation with our rights will be even worse in the future.

If we consider the plans for realizing the Concept, we can mention that the first plan followed the intent of the Concept rather accurately. In the First Plan of the Concept realization (2009-2011), the Russian government included a whole chapter on “developing the regulatory and legal framework,” which consisted of several necessary legislative acts that would significantly improve the situation of indigenous peoples and their rights in Russia.

For example, the authorities decided to develop the drafts of the federal laws on “priority access” of indigenous communities to the fishing and hunting areas and resources on their traditional lands; approving the system of reimbursement by the industrial companies to compensate for lost revenues for indigenous communities due to business activities on indigenous peoples’ traditional lands; creation of the “model territories of the indigenous peoples’ traditional nature use” on the federal level; and changing the principles of the official statistical census with the aim to include the principle of disaggregated data on indigenous peoples.

These acts were later developed by several federal ministries, but they were never implemented, except for the methodology of calculating indigenous peoples’ lost revenues as a result of the business activities on indigenous peoples’ traditional lands. This methodology was rather accurate and could help indigenous peoples to negotiate with business companies; however, its use was only voluntary for companies. If they do not want to use the methodology or pay any compensation, indigenous communities have no leverage to require them to comply.

In later versions of the plan (2012-2015 and 2016-2025), the Russian government excluded the chapter on improving the legislation. It limited itself to mere generalities such as “improving the quality of life of indigenous peoples,” “creating conditions for improving the demographic indicators of indigenous peoples,” and so on.

Considering the present-day underlying problems of indigenous peoples’ sustainable development in Russia, we can consider several key issues:

- Access to traditional lands and natural resources is challenged by faulty legislation, which laid the ground for competition between indigenous communities and commercial companies through open auctions to obtain fishing and hunting grounds. Indigenous communities--lacking competency and financial resources--lose their territories and resources while business corporations aggressively use its links with authorities and employ corrupt practices to obtain control over indigenous peoples’ traditional lands.
- Land grabbing, degradation and pollution because of the activities of industrial companies, have now become a great challenge for indigenous communities, even in most remote areas of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East. The rapid deforestation, illegal logging, and the latest climate change-related problems (e.g., permafrost thawing) have placed some communities of indigenous peoples in danger of extinction.



- Indigenous peoples in Russia are excluded from the decision-making processes in relation to industrial and infrastructural projects on their traditional lands. They have inadequate participation in legislative processes. Most state decisions on indigenous peoples' development, including decisions on their languages, cultural heritage and traditional knowledge, are taken without their free, prior and informed consent.
- Indigenous peoples do not have equal access to justice, which is nowadays not independent and, to a great extent, is controlled by authorities. In most cases, indigenous communities have no capacity to even file cases in courts to challenge the actions of authorities and businesses.
- Indigenous communities in Russia are unable to achieve their own sustainable economic growth. They are unable to freely use the natural resources to develop their traditional economies sustainably (e.g., fishing). They also could not use modern commercially-viable equipment such as small fishing vessels because of a lack of financial resources and restrictions from authorities who consider such equipment "non-traditional" for indigenous peoples.
- Indigenous peoples in Russia have poor access to basic services, including education, medical care, recreation, and others. The level of such services in remote indigenous villages is much lower than in urbanized areas of Russia, and has been reduced even more during the last decades because of the educational and medical care reforms. These reforms have resulted to shutdown of schools and hospitals in small settlements to "improv[e] efficiency" of the state services.
- According to Forbes Magazine, the Russian Federation is among the Top 5 states with the most billionaires, while medium incomes are less than US\$500/year/month. The real income of most of the populations are much lower. The minimum rate of labor income in Russia is \$170 per month, but many indigenous peoples receive even lower income. Assuming that almost all significant Russian private wealth was created by the trading of natural resources extracted from indigenous peoples' lands, we can consider Russia as one of the world's leaders on welfare inequality in which indigenous peoples are the most discriminated in society. This situation is compounded by the fact that Russia is considered a developed country today, and therefore its vulnerable sectors could not apply for international aid programs as compared to developing economies.

- The other challenge is the absence of precise statistics, which authorities often manipulate according to their political interests. For example, Russia has no disaggregated data on the income of indigenous peoples but only have statistics on medium income in territories of indigenous peoples, including income of oil workers, state bureaucrats as well as indigenous reindeer herders and other social groups with modest income.
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There are many other regional issues related to indigenous peoples' sustainable development in Russia. These include gender issues, preservation of indigenous cultures, intellectual property challenges, and others. Some of them, which are not too political, like language preservation and organizing festivals of indigenous cultures, are discussed and promoted by authorities, while other issues are not surfaced. Nevertheless, in general, we can conclude that during the last decades, the Russian Federation has stepped backwards in the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights to lands, resources, and self-determination, and as a result, is undermining the sustainable development of the indigenous peoples' present and future generations.

The impacts and challenges of COVID-19 to indigenous peoples' well-being and sustainable development

The first case of COVID-19 was reported in Russia on 31 January 2020, when two Chinese citizens in Tyumen (Siberia) and Chita (the Russian Far East) tested positive for the virus. However, both cases were contained. Early prevention measures undertaken by the Russian Federation included the closing of the border with China and transporting Russian citizens from Wuhan, China. In March, however, several Russian tourists brought the infection to Moscow from Italy and Spain.

Figure 3. New COVID-19 cases in the World (29 June 2020 TOP 10 countries)

All	Europe	North America	Asia	South America	Africa
#	Country, Other	Total Cases	New Cases	Total Deaths	New Deaths
World					
Figure 3. New COVID-19 cases in the World (29 June 2020 TOP 10 countries)					
1	USA	2,001,011	+44,734	120,703	+340
2	Brazil	1,370,488	+25,234	58,385	+727
3	Russia	641,156	+6,719	9,166	+93
4	India	567,536	+18,339	16,904	+417
5	UK	311,965	+814	43,575	+25
6	Spain	296,050	+200	28,346	+3
7	Peru	282,365	+2,946	9,504	+187
8	Chile	275,999	+4,017	5,575	+66
9	Italy	240,436	+126	34,744	+6
10	Iran	225,205	+2,536	10,670	+162

On 28 March, President Vladimir Putin declared a "non-working period," which had been extended twice, lasting until 11 May. During this period, the Russian Federation closed its international borders and declared additional safety measures, including canceling public events, closing schools, theatres, and other public facilities. By 17 April, cases were confirmed in all regions of the Russian Federation. Russia was relatively late in suffering a severe outbreak of COVID-19, but as of this writing, has become the country with the third most cases in the world, after the United States and Brazil. According to official figures as of 4 June, Russia has 441,108 confirmed cases, 204,623 recoveries, and 5,384 deaths. About a half of the confirmed cases of infection and deaths are located in Moscow.

At the same time, the virus death rate in Russia is three times lower than the world's average, and in the beginning of June 2020 was 14th in the world. According to the independent researchers, this phenomenon could be connected with statistical manipulation by the Russian officials.

The real statistics on deaths from the virus could be obtained indirectly. For example, the mortality rate of Russian medical workers from COVID-19 is one of the highest in the world (16 times higher than in other countries with comparable proportions of the COVID-19 epidemic). Also, in Russia, an unusually high mortality rate was recorded in April and May 2020 due to other reasons (primarily because of the so-called "community-acquired pneumonia"). The cause of death of people who were sick by COVID-19 was often indicated by other diseases, such as diabetes mellitus, strokes, heart attacks, etc.

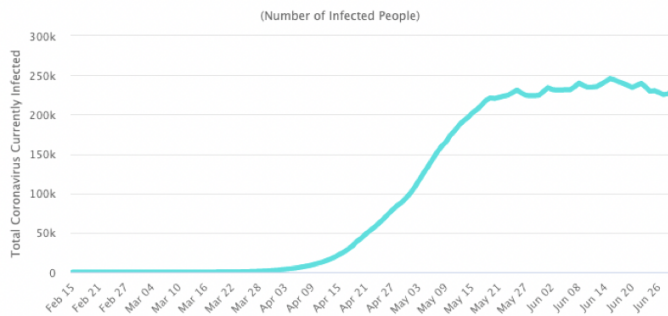


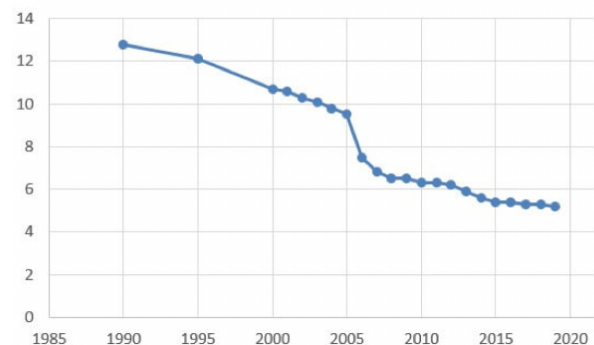
Figure 4. The number of active cases in Russia up to June 29 (the COVID-19 Plateau since May 15)

Russia's under-funded healthcare system, which was restructured several years before the crisis, was poorly prepared for a surge in coronavirus cases: protective equipment such as masks and gloves were often lacking, and there are not enough beds and other necessary equipment and medical supplies for intensive-care patients, especially in remote rural territories. A lot of medical care workers reported that they were poorly protected from the virus and had not received the required salary payments from the state.

Since 2004, the Russian government organized the healthcare reform "to strengthen the effectiveness and improve the governance" of the state's healthcare system and reduce the "non-effective" medical settings. There was much criticism concerning this reform among experts, but one of the biggest challenges was the shutdown of the medical institutions around the country. According to the State Statistic Agency, the number of hospitals which were closed in Russia from 2005 till 2018 was more than 4,000 (9,479 in 2005 and 5,257 in 2018).

Figure 5. Decreasing of number of hospitals in Russia (1990-2020)

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The largest number of closed medical facilities are located in rural areas. In the cities, 25 percent of the total number of the hospitals were closed, but in rural areas 75 percent of the total number of facilities were shuttered. Remote areas of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East populated mostly by indigenous peoples suffered the most from the closure of the medical facilities due to the size of the territory, harsh climatic conditions, and the low transport accessibility of the indigenous communities. In one of the villages in Chukotka, Amguema, the local hospital was closed in 2016. Authorities had to transfer the country doctor to the hospital in another village, Egvekinot, which was 90 kilometers away. According to local residents, it takes from 6 to 12 hours to get there in the wintertime because of the constant snowdrifts.

In the Russian Arctic, about 80 percent of the population live in cities but among indigenous peoples of the Russian Arctic, only about one-fourth of their population reside in cities, with the majority residing in remote villages. We can therefore conclude that the medical care reform in Russia affected the indigenous population of small villages in the remote regions of the Russian North the worst.

Figure 6. Decreasing of number of hospitals in Russia (2005-2018)

	2005	2010	2015	2016	2017	2018
В городских поселениях						
Число больничных организаций	5820	4959	4397	4351	4297	4275
из них негосударственные	286	216	239	263	288	309
из них частной формы собственности	...	110	176	203	236	252
Число коек в больничных организациях: всего, тыс.	1365,9	1186,1 ¹⁾	1060,1 ¹⁾	1041,0 ¹⁾	1026,9 ¹⁾	1018,7 ¹⁾
из них в негосударственных организациях	32,1	20,2	21,8	22,2	23,0	24,4
из них частной формы собственности	...	3,4	12,1	12,7	14,6	16,5
на 10 000 человек населения	130,3	112,5	97,6	95,5	93,9	93,1
Число центральных районных больниц ²⁾	1046	1027	829	815	809	801
Число районных больниц ²⁾	148	112	230	242	225	224
Число участковых больниц ²⁾	40	18	4	9	6	5
В сельской местности						
Число больничных организаций	3659	1349	1036	1006	996	982
из них негосударственные	7	8	6	3	6	10
из них частной формы собственности	...	5	4	2	5	7
Число коек в больничных организациях: всего, тыс.	209,5	153,4 ¹⁾	161,9 ¹⁾	156,2 ¹⁾	155,8 ¹⁾	154,1 ¹⁾
из них в негосударственных организациях	0,3	1,6	2,3	1,3	2,4	2,6
из них частной формы собственности	...	0,68	0,6	0,2	0,6	0,8
на 10 000 человек населения	55,6	40,9	42,7	41,4	41,5	41,3
Число центральных районных больниц ²⁾	688	727	597	573	563	560
Число районных больниц ²⁾	119	79	185	183	193	194
Число участковых больниц ²⁾	2591	382	65	59	52	42

We must also consider that indigenous peoples' health in Russia is far worse than the health of the country's general population. Social diseases are widespread in the indigenous communities in Russia, including alcoholism and tuberculosis (TB). For example, the TB rate in regions where indigenous peoples live is 9.5 percent higher than the Russian average, and in some regions like the Chukotka autonomous okrug, the rate is twice higher. The mortality rate from TB, which is 4.5 times higher than the Russian average, is even more illustrative of the poor condition of the health system at the remote regions where indigenous peoples live.

The internal messages from inside the Russian medical community showed that the healthcare system was generally poorly-prepared to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. If big cities like Moscow, with resources, reacted quickly to the new challenge, the local authorities in remote areas, where indigenous peoples live, do not have enough resources to react appropriately to the pandemic. The federal government tried to respond to the needs of the remote regions by establishing military field hospitals, organized by the Russian Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Emergency Situation.

Such hospitals were organized in Zabaikalsk, Krasnoyarsk, Murmansk and some other regions. However, in some cases, these efforts led to the higher spread of viruses in remote areas where indigenous peoples live. For example, the mass virus infection in the Kamchatka region started among contractors of the new military hospital who were invited by the Ministry of Defense from other regions of Russia.

The other source of the COVID-19 in regions where indigenous peoples live were tourists from Europe, South East Asia or central regions of Russia; but the main source of the virus in regions of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East came from shift workers invited by large industrial companies to construct new business facilities or extract natural resources. There were several cases around the Russian Arctic where the virus spread in restricted industrial camps of the oil and gas companies. In some regions these camps became the main source of the local COVID-19 infection.

For example, in the Murmansk region, the construction camp for the new liquid natural gas facility of the NOVATEK company near Belokamenka village, officially registered 2,045 coronavirus infections on May 11 out of the 2,416 total cases in the whole region. Similar cases were registered in several other northern regions including the Krasnoyarsk Krai (gold-mining company “Polus” camp near Eruda village), the Yamal region (“Novatek” company LNG project in Sabetta), Yakutia Republic (“Gazprom” company Chayanda natural gas project), and Kamchatka peninsula (shift workers of fishing companies).



Figure 7. Field hospital in Krasnoyarsk krai

The industrial companies responded rather quickly to the virus's spread in their field camps and cut off interaction between their workers and residents of the nearby local settlements, strictly limiting the entry and exit from the industrial camps. The companies, however, did not stop work at their industrial sites, and workers shared in their social networks that inside the industrial camps, companies did not comply with the virus safety measures in the workplace. Thus, coronavirus infection in the extractive companies' industrial camps continue to be the primary source of COVID-19 in the Russian Arctic regions. This influenced the general statistics in these regions. For example, in the Murmansk region in April, about 70 percent of the total infected were under 45 years old.

Fortunately, those regions of the Russian Arctic, Siberia and the Far East have poor transport connection with the large urbanized areas in Central Russia. At the beginning of April, the head of the Tyva Republic announced that its first case of the COVID-19 infection was registered in remote village of Yrban in Todzhin municipal district where Tuvin-Todzhin indigenous peoples live (whose traditional economy is the hunting and forest reindeer herding). The tourist from Krasnoyarsk krai who previously visited the Moscow region came to Yrban village for fishing. He infected all family members of the house where he stayed for a night, including four adults and four children.

Bogorodskoye village is located 870 km from Khabarovsk at the Russian Far East. It is the center of the Ulchi municipal district, with a population of 3,000. The leading traditional economy of the Ulch indigenous peoples are fishing and hunting. The most important species for them traditionally are salmon, which they fish in the Amur river. At the beginning of April, the village registered its first COVID-19 case. The primary source of COVID-19 in Bogorodskoye was the municipal hospital. According to local media, local health workers were poorly protected, because they lacked personal protective equipment. At least 146 persons were infected. At least three persons, including a worker of the local hospital, died. The authorities sent a mobile group of medical workers, closed the village for quarantine for several weeks and organized a total disinfection of the local public premises. However, medical tests for neighborhood villages were not delivered. The quarantine was lifted in the middle May.

There are no other registered cases of COVID-19 in indigenous communities in Russia. The problem is that Russian authorities have no disaggregated data on indigenous peoples on virus spread as well as on other important indicators concerning the indigenous peoples' life and development. The other problem is that according to independent researchers, the statistical data on COVID-19 in Russia is manipulated by authorities due to political reasons.

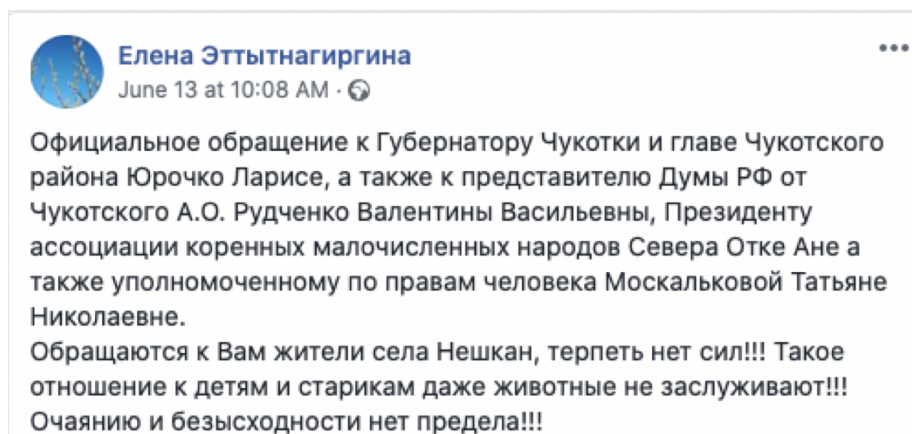


Figure 8. The appeal to Chukotka governor from Facebook

At the same time, many indigenous peoples' messages in social networks inform that their settlements or their families have COVID-19 cases. For example, in the middle of June, Elena Ettytnagirgina from Chukotka, in her Facebook account posted an appeal to the governor of the Chukotka autonomous region on a problematic situation in Neshkan village in where she mentioned that there were COVID-19 cases in Chukotsky municipal district, which included case of deaths.

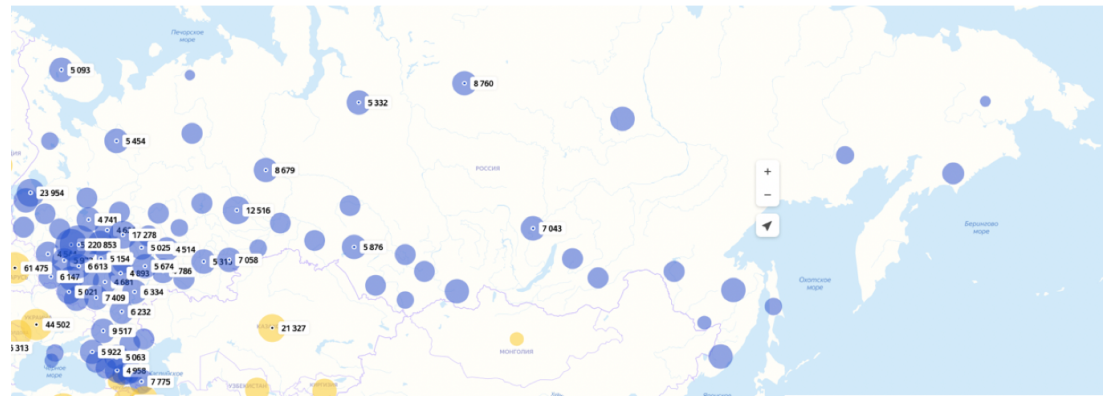


The elder of the indigenous peoples from Taimyr and the secretary of the Russian indigenous network “Aborigen Forum” Gennady Shchukin, who gave a short interview for this report, later became ill of COVID-19 in the Taimyr municipal center Dudinka and has been confined in the resuscitation department of the regional hospital.

Indigenous elders in general are under the greatest risk due to the devastating impact of the virus on older persons, potentially impacting on the survival of the extremely small number of some indigenous peoples in Russia. Indigenous elders who are often the last remaining bearers of traditional knowledge have a crucial role in teaching and transmitting indigenous languages and traditions to future generations. There are indigenous peoples in Russia with only a few elders who can speak their languages, such as among the Itelmens in Kamchatka. In case of loss of these elders, such peoples are under the risk of losing their whole cultures. In the case of indigenous peoples, this is aggravated by the fact that all generations often share a common household, which facilitates the spread of the virus, such as in Yrbán village in the Tuva Republic. This problem is aggravated by the weak healthcare system in rural and remote areas, as well as by social isolation faced by indigenous elders and the disabled due to a lack of support services in remote rural villages.

The virus pandemic also negatively influences the indigenous communities indirectly. For example, in Yamal, the local reindeer herders discussed the impossibility of buying food and essential goods in local villages during the spring. Usually, nomadic reindeer herders visit cities and settlements during their annual spring migrations to the summer pastures in the North to buy food and other basic goods, including medical supplies. However, this year the regional authorities prohibited the entry of reindeer herders to the settlements, wary of their contacts with the shift workers in the gas and oil industries and the possibility of spreading the virus infection in the tundra. Reindeer herders also use the opportunity of the annual celebration of the Reindeer Herder Day (Den Olenevoda) in spring to visit urbanized areas to buy food and supplies and sell some of their products, such as fish and reindeer meat. This year, however, the Reindeer Herder Day was canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This put reindeer herders in a problematic situation of shortage of food and other essential goods. This situation aggravated the unusually warm weather during the winter, which did not allow for the construction of winter snow roads to some villages that are vital for the supply of the goods.

Figure 9. The map of COVID-19 cases in Russia on 29 June 2020



There were also several messages from the regions where indigenous peoples live, including from Kamchatka and Khanty-Mansiysk regions. Indigenous communities in the region are involved in the tourist business on the local level, but due to the absence of tourists as a result of the pandemic, they have suffered gravely.

The negative impact of the virus on indigenous peoples can also be gauged from the indirect impacts. For example, in the Khanty-Mansiysk region, local volunteers who provided food for the low-incomes families during the quarantine received several requests from indigenous families who were experiencing food shortage. This was due to travel restrictions between indigenous communities and urbanized areas.

In general, the remoteness of the indigenous territories became a significant advantage of the local indigenous communities during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in Russia. However, at a later stage (for example, during the potential second wave of the pandemic), the indigenous communities' remoteness could become an aggravating factor that could promote the spread of coronavirus among the local population.

Description of the impacts, consequences and challenges of response measures on indigenous peoples' well-being and sustainable development

President Putin and the Russian government declared several measures to combat the crisis, including financial support to Russian citizens and businesses. In addition to the closure of borders with other states, the Russian government banned public events and gatherings in the Russian cities since the end of March. Since then, Russian citizens were only allowed to go out to buy food or medicines or to walk pets up to a radius of 100 meters from their homes. Residents of the capital and several other Russian regions were also required to apply for a digital pass before using their cars or public transport. To ensure that shops do not run out of food, on 2 April Russia, which is the world's top wheat exporter, decided to restrict cereal exports.

A distinctive feature of the Russian quarantine measures, during which most public activities were banned, was the introduction of the "Non-working days" and "Self-imposed isolation" regimes that did not exist in Russian legislation. These regimes were introduced by special presidential decrees and by several extraordinary legal acts of the federal and regional governments, instead of the legitimate and well-recognized "The Quarantine" and "The State of Emergency" legal frameworks which existed in the Russian legislation.

According to the "Non-working days" and "Self-imposed isolation" modes, workers who were not involved in sensitive and critical public services and production (like medical workers, food producers or police officers), must "self-isolate" at their homes. However, they would still receive full salaries from their employers. According to experts in the field of labor legislation, this was done by the government so that it does not bear financial obligations to the Russian citizens for the almost two months of their forced lockdown.

In this situation, workers who receive state salaries or who work for big corporations were not impacted financially as their employers continued to pay them salaries during the lockdown. However, this quasi-legal regulation introduced by the special decrees of President Putin and regional governments affected the small business extremely negatively, including entrepreneurs and their employees. The small business owners were not able to pay salaries as their businesses shut down due to the restrictions, and their workers did not receive any payments as a result.

The Russian government did not support the small business and the general population of the country except for several modest steps. These included postponing some obligatory tax payments, payment of Ruble (RUB) 10,000 (Euros 130) to families with children, restructuring of home mortgage loans, and some others financial instruments. Those businesses which would not lay-off their staff shall receive financial support from the state in the future, but based only on the lowest state's rate of RUB12,310 (Euros 160) per worker per month as subsistence rate. This however does not cover the real salaries in most sectors of the economy (not to mention other obligatory expenses, such as rental of premises, payments for utilities, payment of loans, etc.)

A lot of businessmen also noted that they would not be able to avail of the state's financial support in the future as their businesses may have to close due to bankruptcy. Thus, millions of workers and small business entrepreneurs around the country did not or could not potentially receive salaries from their employers or any payments from the state.

At the same time, all stakeholders mentioned significant bureaucratic obstacles to receive unemployment benefits or other state's payments, as well as the tendency of the bureaucrats to reduce the obligatory state's payments to the people. There are several cases around the country where people were not able to receive the promised state's payments or received severely reduced payments than officially promised by the Russian government.

The ability of indigenous peoples to receive the state's compensation benefits for lost revenues is even lower because of the lower education level, insufficient access to relevant information, and poor infrastructure in remote villages.

It is also worth mentioning that a substantial number of indigenous peoples' representatives work in traditional economies and the informal sector, which are not considered official employment. These groups are therefore unable to claim unemployment benefits or apply for any other kind of financial assistance from the state, which only extends support to those on the official payroll.

The state of distribution in employment among indigenous peoples is reflected in the unequal allocation of the state's compensation benefits among indigenous communities. In Russia, indigenous women are more involved in the economic sector, financed by the state budget, such as in community schools, kindergartens, administration, medical facilities. The less urbanized indigenous men, on the other hand, are more involved in traditional economies outside the settlements, e.g., hunting, fishing, reindeer herding. With the "self-imposed isolation" measure declared by President Putin, persons who officially work for the state have bigger chances of receiving compensation than those who have no official employment or are self-employed.

The quarantine measures have also severely disrupted indigenous-owned businesses in communities, their economic development, and their trade relations with buyers of their traditional goods (e.g., fish and reindeer meat), which put them at risk of falling deeper into economic isolation. Decisions on quarantine measures in Russia, which were developed in a top-down manner with no consultations with affected communities, also violated the freedom of movement, which is for many indigenous peoples, especially for nomadic ones, more essential than for the population of urbanized areas.

A significant challenge for indigenous communities was the policy of distance learning in schools, which was introduced by the Russian authorities this spring as a COVID-19 response measure. Online education became an insurmountable problem for many indigenous children in remote rural areas due to limitation with internet access, lack of communication devices, high price for communication services, and lack of school personnel experience for online teaching. Many remote indigenous villages have no internet connection. For example, about a third of schools in Yakutia was forced to continue offline education after the federal government issued an order on distance online school education. Some economically-developed regions, like oil- and gas-rich Yamal region where Nenets indigenous people live, were able to provide school laptops for every student. In other regions however, indigenous peoples were forced to use phones or visit schools to receive papers.

The government's COVID-19 response measures are increasing the regional inequalities between indigenous groups in different regions of the country in general. For example, school children in Yamal, during their forced break in school learning, received "emergency quarantine food packages," which could be comparable with best experiences in Western countries. In Karelia Republic, which is not so economically developed and where Veps indigenous people live, school "food packages" were much more modest (see the picture).



Figure 10. The "quarantine food packages" for schoolchildren in Karelia and Yamal

We could also consider several special response measures of the Russian authorities with the aim to protect and support indigenous communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Yamal, local authorities helped to provide food and essential goods for the remote villages and provided additional payments for reindeer herders to support them during the COVID-19 breakout. Regional authorities also decided to provide subsidies to indigenous communities involved in tourist business "to modernize basic infrastructure" and create alternative tourist programs for the local Yamal residents who would not be able to leave the region for summer vacations due to the restrictions. Moreover, local volunteers published a leaflet on the dangers of the coronavirus and prophylactic measures in the local Nenets language.

In Khabarovsk Krai, reacting to the emergency in Borodskoye village, regional authorities sent medical troops to help the local hospital in fighting the virus and organized a total disinfection of the local public premises.



Figure 11. An officer of the Ministry of Emergency Situation disinfects a school building in Bogoroskoye village (Khabarovsk Krai)

In Kamchatka, the indigenous communities, responding to the reduction of the tourist flow from other Russian regions and from abroad, decided "to refocus the tourist activities on internal tourism" and provided cheaper programs for residents of the Kamchatka cities who were also not able to leave the peninsula for summer vacations. In several regions including Taimyr region, local authorities sent additional mobile medical troops to remote villages to check the health of the indigenous residents, including providing testing for COVID-19.

With regards to special COVID-19 measures towards the indigenous peoples, the federal government limited itself by sending a letter of information to the regional authorities about the dangers of the virus pandemic to indigenous communities. In this letter, the Russian Federal Agency of Ethnic Affairs (FAEA) stated that due to the remoteness of indigenous peoples' communities, their low social mobility, and lack of access to relevant information and public services, there is a health threat not only to individuals but also to the small-numbered indigenous peoples as a whole.

In this regard, the Federal Agency instructed the regional authorities to pay attention to sustainable communication with remote indigenous communities, to monitor their health status, essential goods supplies, and access to public services, including medical services and distance learning for schoolchildren.

Also, Russia prepared a report on COVID-19 in the Arctic regions for the Arctic Council. They mentioned the potential difficulties for indigenous peoples who may suffer from the coronavirus under conditions of natural isolation among indigenous communities in the High North and the lack of immune resistance.

At the same time, authorities tried to use the COVID-19 measures, to promote their own political agenda while disregarding indigenous peoples' opinions and their free, prior, and informed consent. For example, in the middle of May, authorities of the oil-rich Nenets autonomous okrug and the economically weak Arkhangelsk oblast signed an agreement of merger of these two constituent entities of the Russian Federation into one broader region. They justified this initiative to address the depressed oil prices on the world market due to the COVID-19 crisis. According their arguments, both regions were in dire economic situation, and only the process of merging the regions could save the local economy.

Regional authorities declared the process of merging between two regions without any consultations with Nenets indigenous people, as well as with the other non-indigenous population. Local residents, both indigenous and non-indigenous, initiated protests around Nenets okrug against the merger, despite the prohibition of mass gatherings in the region because of the COVID-19 quarantine measures.

Figure 12. Nenets woman protests against the merging of Nenets autonomous okrug and Arkhangelsk oblast



After several weeks of confrontation, authorities declared that they would "postpone the process" of political merging of two regions and start "to work out a joint program of the economic and social development".

Nenets indigenous peoples make up approximately 18 percent of the regional population in the Nenets autonomous okrug. However, according to independent researchers, the main reason which pushed the authorities to step back from the merger was the mass protests of the non-indigenous population of the regional center Naryan-Mar as those people would lose their oil income in case the regions' union pushes through.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Indigenous peoples of the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East are a vulnerable group that did not suffer much from the COVID-19 directly because of the remoteness of the traditional indigenous territories. At the same time, indigenous communities in Russia were hit by the pandemic indirectly, also because of the challenges connected with the response measures implemented by the state.

The virus spread reflected negatively on the indigenous peoples' sustainable development agenda and added additional challenges in the process of the implementation of their collective rights to lands and resources, their economic development, and self-determination. In combination with other negative global factors, e.g., the economic crisis, climate change, it could be a significant threat to the very existence of whole indigenous cultures, for example, in the case of small numbered indigenous peoples.

As indigenous communities could not be isolated from the main society, governments should urgently elaborate policy packages to strengthen the healthcare systems in indigenous communities and, in the case of Russia, restore the medical facilities in remote rural areas according to the modern requirements of disease prevention. Authorities should fully include indigenous communities into the response packages of economic support, considering that many resource-producing economies, including Russia, generate their state budgets through trading of natural resources that are extracted from indigenous territories.

To implement such actions governments must include indigenous peoples in the elaboration process of such strategies with full respect of their right to free, prior and informed consent.

To implement such measures effectively, states must gather all necessary information about indigenous peoples' development in a disaggregated manner and provide adequate, timely, and accurate information about their actions and response measures to indigenous communities.

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60. Российская Газета. Лучше быть умным и здоровым. Счетная палата проверила доступность качественной медпомощи и образования <https://rg.ru/2015/04/14/optimizatsiya-site.html>
61. Новая Газета. Провал оптимизации здравоохранения. Почему в 55 регионах России катастрофически сократилось число врачей: объясняет Евгений Гонтмахер <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/11/04/82612-proval-optimizatsii-zdravoohraneniya>
62. В России от коронавируса погибли не меньше 186 медиков – смертность среди них в 16 раз выше, чем в других странах. Исследование «Медиазоны» <https://zona.media/article/2020/05/19/martyrology>
63. Военные развернут лагерь на тысячу человек для заразившихся сотрудников золотодобывающей компании «Полюс» <https://echo.msk.ru/news/2645803-echo.html>
64. Полевой госпиталь в Красноярском крае передали Федеральному медико-биологического агентству России <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/forces/content/20205201821-yvz4T.html>
65. Коронавирус выявлен у 3 тыс. вахтовиков в Якутии https://www.znak.com/2020-05-03/koronavirus_vyyavlen_u_3_tysyach_vahrovikov_v_yakutii
66. Вспышка на Крайнем Севере. Что происходит с вахтовиками месторождения в Якутии, где говорили о 3 500 зараженных коронавирусом <https://zona.media/article/2020/05/11/gazpromvir>
67. Чаяндинское месторождение полностью вышло из карантина <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/711172>
68. В Усть-Большерецком районе коронавирус выявили у 29 рыбаков, приехавших на путину - Все подробности: <https://www.kam24.ru/news/main/20200603/74786.html#sthash.ISGws7ao.dpuf>
69. ГОК На Камчатке у 29 вахтовиков ГОКа «Аметистовый» выявили коронавирус <https://kam24.ru/news/main/20200602/74760.html#sthash.KI5sJ913.dpuf>
70. Большинство зараженных COVID-19 на Камчатке составили строители инфекционного корпуса Минобороны <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4328113>

71. Военные определили место под госпиталь для борьбы с COVID в Чите
<https://www.chita.ru/news/146513/>
72. «Какой там урок?». Учителя и школьники о
проблемах дистанционного обучения во время карантина <https://zona.media/article/2020/04/07/school>
73.
Как вынести такое безумие? Эксперимент
«удаленное обучение»
https://vl.aif.ru/society/kak_vynesti_takoe_bezumie_eksperiment_udalennoe_obuchenie
74. Более 600 школ обучались в режиме онлайн в
первый день дистанционных занятий в Якутии <https://yk24.ru/index/obshhestvo/bole-600-shkol-obuchalis-v-rezhime-onlajn-v-pervyj-den-distancionnyix-zanyatij-v-yakutii>
75. Житель Красноярска заразил коронавирусом
восемь жителей Тувы <https://baik24.ru/text/09-04-2020/099/>
76. Сводная бригада медиков прибыла в село
Богородское в Хабаровском крае <https://amurmedia.ru/news/933881/>
77. С хабаровского райцентра снимают карантин <https://todaykhv.ru/news/health/26692/>
78. Очаг коронавируса в Богородском Хабаровского
края удалось локализовать
https://hab.aif.ru/health/ochag_koronavirusa_v_bogorodskom_habarovskogo_kraya_udalos_lokalizovat
79. Нас просили не паниковать: жители
Богородского рассказали о реальной ситуации в селе
<https://www.dvnovosti.ru/khab/2020/04/16/113260/>
80. Изоляция на краю света <https://takiedela.ru/2020/04/izolyaciya-na-krayu-sveta/>
81. Карантин по коронавирусу сняли в селе
Богородское Хабаровского края <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/8478313>
82. Предприниматели-ханты рассказали, что несут
убытки из-за коронавируса - <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/3914>
83. В Карелии детям из малоимущих семей выдали
сухой паёк из гнилого картофеля, маргарина и двух сосисок <https://mstrok.ru/news/v-karelii-detyam-iz-maloimushchih-semey-vydali-suhoy-payok-iz-gnilogo-kartofelya-margarina-i>
84. Ямальские школьники получают вместо школьных
обедов продуктовый набор <https://regnum.ru/news/society/2899466.html>

85. Кочевники ЯНАО пожаловались на голод из-за пандемии коронавируса - <https://ura.news/news/1052428538>

«Мы – самая уязвимая и бедная категория»:

кочевники Ямала опасаются, что не переживут пандемию - <https://n24.ru/novosti/2020/04/23/kochevnikii-iamala-opasaiutsia-cto-ne-perezvivut-pandemiiu/>

Елена Эттытнагиргина. В разгар вспышки COVID-19, есть жертвы в Чукотском районе, в посёлках болеют, нет медикаментов в аптеке <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/4316>

Когда COVID-19 придет в тундру - <https://www.uralinform.ru/interviews/society/325656-kogda-covid-19-pridet-v-tundru/>

Далеких мест не бывает. «Коробки добра»

доставили представителям коренных малочисленных народов Севера в Сургутский район <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/4300>

Субсидии и пиар: регионы поддержат этнотуризм

коренных народов в условиях пандемии - <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/3937>

На Ямале создали памятку о коронавирусе на

ненецком языке <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/2304>

Северное влияние: COVID-19 может оказаться опаснее для

народов Арктики <https://iz.ru/1016936/anna-ivushkina-mariia-nediuk/severnoe-vliianie-covid-19-mozhet-okazatsia-opasnee-dlia-narodov-arktiki>

Жители арктических районов могут не выстоять

перед коронавирусом <https://www.uralinform.ru/news/society/328355-jiteli-arkticheskikh-raionov-mogut-ne-vystoyat-pered-koronavirusom/>

Ученые спорят о влиянии пандемии COVID-19 на

жителей Севера <http://ttelegraf.ru/news/uchenye-sporjat-o-vlijanii-pandemii-covid19-na-zhitelej-severa>

Меморандум об объединении Архангельской

области и НАО. Полный текст документа <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/3444>

Ассоциация КМНС Якутии получила ответ на свое

обращение из Архангельска: принято решение – процедуру объединения отложить <https://indigenous-russia.com/archives/4262>

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