According to the UN, the indigenous population refers to “Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them.”

Indigenous peoples are amongst the most consistently marginalized and outcast groups of people in the world. Indigenous peoples are more likely to have a disability, suffer from long-term health problems (HIV, Tuberculosis, Malaria), experience isolation from government services, and ultimately more likely to die younger than their non-indigenous counterparts. Indigenous people are also more likely to suffer from a mental illness and other public health issues such as, addiction, alcoholism, drug abuse, depression and a climbing increased suicide rate. Indigenous people will be the first to be touched by the consequences of climate change, as they rely heavily on nature and natural resources to provide them with their housing, food and clothing. They face eviction from their native lands, and are excluded by environmentalists in the decisions made toward the very thing that is evicting them, conservation acts. Indigenous communities are among the poorest in the world. They face widespread discrimination due to the generations of systematic and social racism, targeted cultural and physical ethnic cleansing and a drastic change in their traditional way of living that was both sudden and radical.

There are approximately 370 million indigenous peoples that reside in over 70 countries worldwide. Amongst Cameroon’s population of 20 million people, there are three main communities that self-identify as indigenous: The hunter gatherer “Pygmies”, the Mbororo pastoralist which consists of The Wodaabe, The Jafun, and The Galegi aka The Aku, and the Kirdi mountain communities, roughly 46,000 people. These communities reside along the forested borders with Gabon, the Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic, the Northern, North-Western, Western, and Eastern Regions of Cameroon, and Adamawa.

Member states should be encouraged to enlarge their outreach of national health systems to provide holistic health and education programs fit precisely towards their nation’s indigenous peoples. Said programs should recognize primary issues including, immediate support for communities devastated by mental illness and suicide, and provisions of basic medical supplies and medications for treatable diseases. All this should be done while respectively acknowledging the marred relationship the indigenous people have with the government. Member of states should also promote indigenous rights by respecting their native land rights, and conserving their environment by including them in the discussion of the consequences of climate change.

The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of indigenous peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted by the General Assembly on September 13th 2007. Cameroon voted in favor of this Declaration. The UN describes the Declaration as setting “an important standard for the treatment of indigenous peoples that will undoubtedly be a significant tool towards eliminating human rights violations against the planet’s 370 million indigenous people and assisting them in combatting discrimination and marginalization.” The UNDRIP also underlines in article 24 that “indigenous people have the right to traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices…[and that they also] have an equal right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, [and that] states shall take the necessary steps with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of that right.” In spite of this effort, changes have yet to be noticed and there is still a long way to go. The UN Declaration of Indigenous People aimed to protect the indigenous people’s rights, articles 10, 26, 29, and 30 speak on basic rights, conservation tactics, and use of military on grounds that won’t interfere with indigenous people’s territories. The WHO has also created several initiatives passing a number of resolutions explaining their intention to taking health disparities between indigenous and non-indigenous populations head-on. The united Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) was adopted by the UN with a mandate to represent the entirety of the world’s indigenous population. The forum follows the standard state-level grouping of the UN (Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, Western Europe, and other countries). Representatives are chosen to speak for one of the following seven sociocultural regions: Africa, Asia, Central and South America and the Caribbean, The Arctic, Eastern Europe, Russian Federation, Central Asia, and Transcaucasia, North America, and the Pacific. Many NGO’s have contributed to the evolution of indigenous people’s human rights. The Centre for Environment and Development is and NGO based in Cameroon that supports the community rights for the forest people, the Pygmies. Their mission is to contribute to the protection of rights, interests, culture and aspirations of indigenous and local forest communities in Central Africa, by promoting environmental justice and sustainable management of natural resources in the region.

Though Cameroon has a respectable wealth of natural resources and good agricultural conditions in many of its regions, poverty and all of its consequences prevails still in the indigenous communities. Mortality rates in the Pygmy communities are very high as well as fertility rates. Due to the rapid loss of the forests, Pygmy communities are further deprived of their right of using their ancient healing medicines, their renowned traditional herbal pharmacopoeia. It contains compounds active against several diseases including helminthiasis, guinea worm, jaundice, malaria, diarrhea, toothache, and cough. As the Pygmy community begins to spend more and more of their time outside the forest in fixed settlements we begin to see an increased rate of malaria and parasites accumulate because of the poor sanitation and the overcrowded environment. The main causes of childhood death in the pygmy community is measles accounting for 8-20% of all deaths. There is a paucity of epidemiological data on mental illnesses in Cameroon. The stigma surrounding mental health is very prevalent among the non-indigenous and indigenous population. Many tribes and communities believe that mental health is a spiritual curse on the family or individual. There is a major lack of mental health facilities in the country, thus explains ignorance of mental health etiology. Protecting the lands of indigenous people from the effects of climate change is crucial. Cameroon Vision 2035, the country’s 2009 development plan, includes actions such as protecting and ensuring sustainable management of forest ecosystems, fighting desert encroachment, and promoting regional projects like the Niger Basin and the Lake Chad Basin. These are strides in the right direction.

Cameroon was the first country in Africa to initiate discussions on making a National Action plan on the implementation of the UN Declaration of rights of indigenous people in 2015. The country has recently begun to recognize the indigenous population. Government is slowly trying to mend the relationships with the 280 tribes of the ethnically diverse indigenous community. The indigenous communities right to land and resources, where illegal land grab, forced displacement and limited access to natural resources are the key issues the government is deciding to focus on.