

**United Nations Committee on
Social, Humanitarian, and
Cultural Issues (SOCHUM)
Background Guide**

**Cleveland Council on
WORLD AFFAIRS**





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Background Guide

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The United Nations Committee on Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Issues (SOCHUM) is one of the General Assembly's six main committees and is known as the "Third Committee". It was established at the same time as the rest of the GA, in 1945.¹ SOCHUM is responsible for a wide range of issues, the most notable of which includes, but is not limited to, human rights, social development, and the protection of marginalized groups (such as women, children, Indigenous people, refugees, and ethnic minorities²).

Today, SOCHUM meets annually from October and November to tackle emerging issues³ and produce draft resolutions for the GA.

Topic I: Gender Equality and Labor Rights in MENA Markets

Statement of the Issue:

The Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) comprises around 20 countries, making up 6% of the world's population⁴. The region's large quantities of natural resources, particularly oil (58% of the global supply⁵) and natural gas (43% of the global supply⁶), results in many countries in the region to be extremely wealthy and supported by many Western countries despite their authoritarian governments.

¹ Kurtas, "Research Guides: UN Documentation: General Assembly: Main Committees."

² "UN General Assembly - Third Committee - Social, Humanitarian & Cultural."

³ "73rd Session - Documents - Social, Humanitarian & Cultural Issues (Third Committee) - UN General Assembly."

⁴ Chen, "Middle East and North Africa (MENA)."

⁵ el-Badri, "[The MENA Region in the International Arena.](#)"

⁶ el-Badri, "[The MENA Region in the International Arena.](#)"



Countries in the MENA region have been taking major steps to diversify their economies as the impacts of climate change continue to accelerate and general pitfalls of being dependent on natural resources for economic growth reveal themselves. The construction of large-scale infrastructure projects to create a tourism-based economic base is one of the most popular means to diversify. With this type of development requiring large amounts of unskilled labor, countries have generally turned to migrants to fill this gap, and as of 2019, the ILO estimated that there were over 24.1 million migrant workers in a selection of 12 MENA countries, making up over 41.4% of the worker population in these states⁷.

In addition, the labor force participation rate of women in the workforce in the MENA region remains comparatively low, sitting at just 19% in 2021, compared to a rate of 70% for men⁸. Among migrant workers, women make up just 17% of the labor force⁹. Boosting women's participation in the workforce is essential for their economic independence, and provides benefits for their families and workplaces, such as increased growth, productivity, and incomes. Overall, in the MENA region, the IMF estimates that the gender gap in employment is preventing as much as a 20% increase in general welfare and an over 60% increase in marketable output¹⁰.

History:

International cooperation on the issues of labor rights predates the UN, with the League of Nations founding the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1919 and recognizing that labor rights were a critical part of international cooperation¹¹. After the creation of the UN, the ILO became its first specialized agency in December 1946. The ILO is structured so that each company has four representatives: two from government, one from industry, and one representing the workers¹². Since its integration in the UN, the ILO has

⁷ "Labour Migration | International Labour Organization."

⁸ World Bank, "Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate) - Middle East & North Africa | Data."

⁹ World Bank, "Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate) - Middle East & North Africa | Data."

¹⁰ Lagarde and Ostry, "Economic Gains from Gender Inclusion: Even Greater than You Thought."

¹¹ "History of the ILO | International Labour Organization."

¹² "How the ILO Works | International Labour Organization."

passed several important conventions, such as the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (1958), the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (1981), and the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (1999), aimed at committing countries to protecting their most marginalized populations such as minorities, women, and children¹³. In 2011, the ILO adopted the Domestic Workers Convention¹⁴, whose signatories agreed to provide a minimum wage, decent working conditions, and clear contracts. Notably, no MENA countries have ratified the convention¹⁵.

One of the foundations of some MENA countries' economies is the kafala ("sponsorship") system, which was initially instituted in the 1950s to provide Gulf countries with a large pool of labor that could be increased during booming economic times and easily expelled in hard times¹⁶. The kafala system initially mainly applied to migrants coming from other MENA countries, such as Egypt, but the makeup of migrant workers today overwhelmingly comes from other parts of Africa or South Asia because of trends by kafala users to prefer these countries to avoid spreading pan-Arab ideology that could undermine Gulf monarchies¹⁷. Particularly egregious aspects of the kafala system include the confinement of migrant workers to dormitories, the confiscation of migrants' travel documents, imposition of debt via recruitment fees, and the connection of migrants' immigration status to their employers, which can be exploited in a variety of ways, including selling the migrant's labor to another employer while remaining the official "sponsor". In addition, the kafala system requires employers' permission for migrants to leave their job or leave the country.

The kafala system has been widely called out by a steady stream of news coverage, especially since the award of the 2022 World Cup to Qatar. In 2014, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights called for the abolition of the kafala system in the wake of estimates that thousands could die in the process of construction for the World Cup¹⁸.

¹³ "ILO Conventions | International Labour Organization."

¹⁴ "Convention C189 - Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)."

¹⁵ "Ratifications of ILO Conventions: Ratifications by Convention."

¹⁶ "REFORM of the KAFALA (SPONSORSHIP) SYSTEM."

¹⁷ Robinson, "What Is the Kafala System?"

¹⁸ Gibson, "UN Calls on Qatar to Abolish Kafala Migrant Worker System."

NGOs such as Human Rights Watch have also long monitored the kafala system in countries such as Lebanon and Jordan, where conditions for migrant women are particularly bad.

Looking outside the Gulf states, recent conflict in diverse areas from Libya to Syria to Yemen has led to an influx of internally displaced people (IDPs), with over 12.6 million of them by the end of 2022¹⁹. Many IDPs are unable to contribute significantly to the economy due to a variety of factors ranging from lack of identification to mental health impacts from the effects of the crises ²⁰. In North Africa, it is estimated that informal employment accounts for two-thirds of the workforce²¹ and about 30% of GDP²². This informal employment is highly concentrated in sectors such as services²³, which were devastated by the impacts of COVID-19 and the resulting lockdowns, forcing many to choose between risking exposure to COVID-19 or starving.

Analysis:

In general, labor regulations in the MENA region create a largely inflexible labor market and make mobility between jobs very difficult. These systems also build in a large underclass generally consisting of migrants and domestic workers, with several MENA countries lacking a minimum wage²⁴ for private-sector employees, and even more explicitly excluding migrants and domestic workers²⁵. Even MENA countries with a minimum wage, such as Jordan, explicitly set the minimum wage of migrant workers at a lower amount than that of citizens. The lack of unemployment benefits combines with an

¹⁹ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), “A Decade of Displacement in the Middle East and North Africa.”

²⁰ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), “A Decade of Displacement in the Middle East and North Africa.”

²¹ Cardarelli et al., “Informality, Development, and the Business Cycle in North Africa.”

²² Saoudi, “Formalizing the Informal Sector: A Fundamental Policy for the Economic Stability of the MENA Region.”

²³ Saoudi, “Formalizing the Informal Sector: A Fundamental Policy for the Economic Stability of the MENA Region.”

²⁴ Hatayama, “Too Strict? A Stocktaking of Labor Regulations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region.”

²⁵ “Better Work Jordan Urges CSOs, Media to Strengthen Workers’ Voices | International Labour Organization.”



overreliance on severance pay²⁶ to strongly encourage workers to stay in jobs as long as possible, making any change to the system difficult.

By far, the biggest area of need in remedying this situation is ensuring protection of migrant workers, who suffer under the previously described kafala system. However, Gulf states have found little incentive to change from their domestic populations. Migrant workers, are coming from other parts of the world such as Africa and India lack the ability to participate politically in host countries, are seen as second-class citizens²⁷. Moreover, migrant workers in the kafala system receive wages that are low, but ultimately are much higher than those in their home countries.

For women in particular, employment in MENA countries is difficult to maintain successfully. MENA contains nine of the remaining 19 countries where women need their husbands' permission to get jobs²⁸. In addition, women are almost exclusively employed in domestic home labor, which limits both the quality and the quantity of their opportunities. This is without considering laws that create inequalities between men and women by providing no maternity leave, forbidding women from owning property, and denying them equal shares in inheritance²⁹. All this builds to an estimate from the World Economic Forum that it will take over 100 years to reach gender equality if we continue to see lack of intervention. Current efforts by the World Bank focus on investment in women's education (particularly in STEM fields), closing the gap in micro-financing of women's startups (there is an estimated US\$16 billion gap in credit available for female entrepreneurs), and enforcing equal opportunity laws while working to change social norms³⁰.

Unfortunately, Gulf states remain generally unwilling to enact significant change, opting instead to cover up human rights abuses, such as those in the kafala system, with tactics such as sportswashing, a practice where nations such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar promote themselves as global sports destinations to improve their global image. Notably,

²⁶ Hatayama, "Too Strict? A Stocktaking of Labor Regulations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region."

²⁷ Chulov and Safi, "'We're Poor People': Middle East's Migrant Workers Look for Way Home amid Pandemic."

²⁸ Hatayama, "Too Strict? A Stocktaking of Labor Regulations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region."

²⁹ Moghadam, "Women's Limited Economic Participation & Empowerment in MENA."

³⁰ "Middle East and North Africa Gender Innovation Lab."

the 2022 Qatar World Cup was very controversial for several reasons, not least of which was the widespread use of migrant labor in construction of the stadiums. The government of Qatar estimates that hundreds of migrants died in this process³¹, only after years of claiming that the numbers were significantly lower, and even this number is generally agreed to be an undercount³². The Guardian estimated that 6,500 migrant workers died in the lead-up to the World Cup³³. Despite the controversy, the 2022 World Cup continued the trend of ever-increasing viewership of the World Cup³⁴, both on-site and broadcasted.

Conclusion:

The UN has been unrelenting in its opposition to the kafala system, repeatedly calling for its abolition in countries where it remains prevalent. The ILO has proposed reforms to the kafala system that work towards its dismantlement. One example is ending the privatization of the recruitment system, allowing for greater government oversight of migration, and cutting employers' sole control over migrants' visa statuses. More incremental reforms address specific aspects of the kafala system piecemeal, such as giving migrant workers the ability to quit their jobs, or freedom of movement. International organizations have also considered what can be done after the repatriation of migrant workers. ~~They have calling-called~~ on countries of origin to provide appropriate healthcare, especially for any post-traumatic stress that migrants may experience during their time abroad.

Delegates should aim to consider solutions that can go forward with different tiers of assent, such as those described above. However, they should be aware of several pitfalls that can emerge with commonly proposed solutions. For example, placing immigration restrictions on migration to the Gulf may have the unintended consequence of pushing migration underground, encouraging human trafficking and worsening conditions further. As with Model UN committees in general, considering the incentives of all actors involved will be critical; balancing the needs for labor of MENA countries, higher-paying labor for

³¹ Gambrell, "Qatar Says Worker Deaths for World Cup 'between 400 and 500.'"

³² "Q&A: Migrant Worker Abuses in Qatar and FIFA World Cup 2022 | Human Rights Watch."

³³ Pattison and McIntyre, "Revealed: 6,500 Migrant Workers Have Died in Qatar as It Gears up for World Cup."

³⁴ "Commercial."

migrants, adequate worker conditions (including addressing gender disparities) to provide workers with a viable path to upward socioeconomic mobility, and SOCHUM's powers as an advisory body will be the essence of this committee.

Questions to Consider:

1. What systemic barriers prevent adequate labor protections in MENA, particularly for gender minorities? How can your solution work around the desires of MENA countries to maintain a source of cheap labor for economic development?
2. How should SOCHUM respond to continued growth in migration with escalating conflict in the MENA region?
3. What measures can SOCHUM take to close the equality gap for women in the workforce?

Topic II: Future Action on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Statement of the Issue:

According to the World Bank, there are around 476 million Indigenous people across the world, making up 6% of the global population³⁵. However, they account for 19% of the world's extreme poor³⁶ due to systemic challenges and a history of inequality and exclusion. One challenge is that Indigenous Peoples have legal ownership of just 11% of the world's land, equaling about one-third to one-half of the land they live on³⁷ and are governed by just informal tenure arrangements that are nevertheless critical for managing areas and resources³⁸.

A few key characteristics are shared among many Indigenous peoples, identified in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)³⁹. Indigenous peoples tend to be unified by their connections to ancestors before colonization or the emergence of other peoples, distinct languages and cultures, and a connection to their environment. Above all, contemporary Indigenous groups reclaim the term as defining a shared struggle for self-determination and rights⁴⁰. As a result, "Indigenous group" covers an extremely diverse umbrella, ranging from small, uncontacted Amazon tribes to the Greenlandic Inuit that make up 88% of Greenland's population⁴¹.

In addition, Indigenous peoples have an indispensable role in maintaining global environments and cultures. It is estimated that Indigenous peoples speak more than 4,000 languages⁴² and their traditional territories encompass around 80% of its biodiversity⁴³. This is all under threat as Indigenous Peoples continue to face various challenges such as

³⁵ World Bank, "Indigenous Peoples."

³⁶ World Bank, "Indigenous Peoples."

³⁷ Veit and Reyntar, "By the Numbers: Indigenous and Community Land Rights."

³⁸ "Indigenous Peoples and Tenure | Governance of Tenure | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations."

³⁹ United Nations, "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples."

⁴⁰ Athaydea et al., "Definition of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities for the Science Panel for the Amazon."

⁴¹ "Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) - IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs."

⁴² United Nations, "Indigenous Languages."

⁴³ Sobrevila, "The Role of Indigenous Peoples in Biodiversity Conservation."

anthropogenic climate change, prospective exploitation of their land, and all without rigorous legal and practical protections for their ways of life.

History:

While clearer legal definitions of what an Indigenous group is took centuries to emerge, Indigenous groups are among the longest-surviving civilizations to exist (a major reason that some Indigenous Peoples are often referred to as “First Nations”). Indigenous peoples have often struggled with other groups in the area, particularly colonial governments such as the United States and the British Commonwealth. Colonization’s lasting impacts on Indigenous groups were both incredibly damaging in the short-term (for example, the large disease outbreaks that resulted from Spanish colonization in the 16th century that wiped out many Indigenous groups) and retain long legacies that have not truly been reckoned with. As an example, the United States’ forced displacement of its Native Americans onto relatively poor-quality land that comprises the reservation system today continues to reverberate. Native Americans often facing the choice of leaving the reservation (reservations are government land and banks will not give mortgages on them) or facing an acute housing shortage⁴⁴. Assimilation programs in Western-style governments have done considerable damage on the continued survival of Indigenous cultures. Examples include, Indigenous children being abused in “Indian Residential Schools”, forcibly separated from their parents, and forbidden from any expressions of their heritage⁴⁵.

Other parts of the world also have large Indigenous populations. For example, China recognizes 55 ethnic minorities⁴⁶ in addition to their majority Han Chinese group, though there remains around 640,000 people whose ethnicity is unrecognized by the Chinese government⁴⁷. In addition, they are notorious for the promotion of standard simplified Mandarin Chinese and actively suppress many “mother tongues” of Indigenous peoples,

⁴⁴ National Low Income Housing Coalition, “Native American Housing.”

⁴⁵ Sierra, “The History and Impact of Residential Schools.”

⁴⁶ “China - IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs.”

⁴⁷ “China - Minority Rights Group.”

such as the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang⁴⁸. In Thailand, hundreds of thousands of Indigenous people are unable to obtain citizenship due to a lack of adequate documentation, especially for older people⁴⁹. The region's history of conflict has also contributed to widespread displacement of Indigenous Peoples, with the most recent example being the coup and resulting civil war in Myanmar⁵⁰.

As awareness of Indigenous peoples' contribution to environmental protection emerged, the UN began to strongly encourage international awareness and action to support Indigenous groups. In 1982, the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples was created by the UN as a sub-body of the Human Rights Commission (today the Human Rights Council)⁵¹. Later, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) was established in 2000 to give Indigenous issues a greater voice in the UN as a whole⁵².

The UN General Assembly adopted the landmark Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, where they outlined key rights of Indigenous Peoples such as self-determination, life, security, education, language, and legal protection⁵³. A key concept explained in UNDRIP is the right of Indigenous Peoples to have "free, prior, and informed" consent – in short, ensuring that Indigenous Peoples can properly respond and voice their concerns with any new development that directly affects them⁵⁴. Notably, it also provides a more inclusive definition of Indigenous groups: no exact definition, which recognizes Indigenous groups' self-identification, along with several guidelines that assert that Indigenous Peoples have a traditional bond and reliance on the land they inhabit as well as a shared history of struggle against colonization.

Analysis:

⁴⁸ "China: Xinjiang's Forced Separations and Language Policies for Uyghur Children Carry Risk of Forced Assimilation, Say UN Experts."

⁴⁹ Chandran, "I Waited All My Life': Elderly Indigenous People Struggle for Thai Citizenship."

⁵⁰ "Future Bleak for Rohingya in Bangladesh, Myanmar | Human Rights Watch."

⁵¹ "WORKING GROUP on INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS to HOLD ANNUAL SESSION in GENEVA | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases."

⁵² Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Establishment of a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues Economic and Social Council Resolution 2000/22."

⁵³ United Nations, "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples."

⁵⁴ "What Is Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)? |."

While progress has been made to ensure equality for Indigenous Peoples, there remains a legacy of discrimination in most of the modern-day countries they inhabit. Representation at the UN is challenging for Indigenous peoples since their input in the General Assembly is limited by the lack of recognized sovereignty for Indigenous groups. In addition, protection of uncontacted tribes is a challenge for the UN, as action is stymied by unwillingness to cooperate because of centuries of negative experience with industrialized societies.

Dependence on government aid is feared because of the likelihood that it will eventually lead to assimilation as their prosperity would shift to follow the paradigm of an industrialized country as opposed to their previous lives that focused on self-subsistence.

The disconnect between Indigenous peoples and their representation is also stark on environmental issues. Indigenous groups often rely on their natural environments for their way of life and they face the brunt of climate change's most devastating effect, while at the same time contributing very minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions⁵⁵. Particularly in the Amazon rainforest, Indigenous groups live on land that is rich and abundant, which, combined with lacking legal protections, has led to waves of illegal activities such as construction, mining, logging, and over-farming that are a danger to both the Indigenous inhabitants and the global environment. These activities have broader global implications as well; Indigenous stewardship of land in the Amazon results in a 50% reduction in the amount of deforestation on that land⁵⁶. Even with legal activities taken under the intention of "conservation," settler governments will put some of the negative effects of the transition to renewable energy on Indigenous groups, for example, building wind turbines that encroach on their land⁵⁷. These actions are generally less effective and can even be detrimental. Indigenous Peoples have adapted to build synergy with their environment, and their stewardship is essential for maintenance of biodiversity in these areas. This practice of "green colonialism" continues to foster mistrust between Indigenous

⁵⁵ Uchoa and Beltran, "Lessons from Indigenous Leaders to Protect the Amazon Rainforest."

⁵⁶ Veit and Reyntar, "By the Numbers: Indigenous and Community Land Rights."

⁵⁷ Fjellheim, "Green Colonialism, Wind Energy and Climate Justice in Sápmi - IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs."

groups and UN member states, and care must be taken to better integrate the interests of Indigenous Peoples in decisions made to address the climate crisis.

There is often a gulf between legal recognition as defined by countries and self-identification (under the definition provided in UNDRIP). For instance, in the United States, hundreds of tribes remain unrecognized by the federal government, depriving them of critical government aid and resources⁵⁸, particularly in times of great need. International action to streamline the process of legal recognition and access to resources is critically important to close the gap in Indigenous Peoples' well-being. Some of this work overlaps with the UN's supervision of Non-Self-Governing territories, such as French Polynesia, whose population is 80% Indigenous. In French Polynesia, the UN has mediated between the pro-independence population of French Polynesia and the government of France, providing a forum for negotiation⁵⁹. While the situation is fluid, the UN's support of Indigenous Peoples in their quest to achieve self-determination is clear, even if they have avoided taking direct action in response to civil unrest such as that in New Caledonia (another French colony)⁶⁰.

Conclusion:

Indigenous groups feature prominently in the UNDP's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁶¹, being directly mentioned in Goal 2 (zero hunger) and Goal 4 (education), and are impacted by a wide variety of other goals. There are a multitude of UN collaborations that seek to incorporate the ideas of Indigenous Peoples into resolutions of broader global issues. Long-term outlooks should aim to incorporate suggestions directly made by Indigenous Peoples, taking care to secure collective rights beyond land rights (for example, health, education, culture), and to avoid a myopic view of societal development that focuses on conventional economic metrics such as GDP and industrialization⁶².

⁵⁸ O'Neill, "Unrecognized Tribes Struggle without Federal Aid during Pandemic."

⁵⁹ Decloitre, "France Ends 10-Year UN 'Empty Chair' Decolonisation Snub over Polynesia | Asia Pacific Report."

⁶⁰ Darnault, "New Caledonia: France Will Continue Its Cooperation with the United Nations and the C24."

⁶¹ "2030 Agenda and Indigenous Peoples | Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD)."

⁶² "Indigenous Peoples and the 2030 Agenda."

Notable recent action delegates can look to starts with the declaration of 2022-32 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. Through the development of individual nation-level action plans that encourage the promotion and survival of Indigenous languages⁶³. For example, increasing their visibility in society as a whole⁶⁴, including the general population. Countries are working to protect the heritages of their Indigenous populations and end their ostracization in wider society. Critically, delegates will have to build on these proposals in a manner that does not discount the voices of lower-profile or uncontacted Indigenous groups and to avoid broad generalizations, specifically focused on Indigenous Peoples living in modern-day Western countries.

Questions to Consider:

1. What can SOCHUM do to uplift the economic conditions of Indigenous peoples without intruding on their ways of life? How can it mitigate the commodification of cultural traditions?
2. How should SOCHUM protect the political rights of Indigenous peoples while maintaining national sovereignty of the UN member states where they reside?
3. To what extent can UN aid prevent the accelerating death of Indigenous culture, especially with respect to groups that are uncontacted or remain voluntarily isolated from the international community?

⁶³ "Action Plans for Indigenous Languages."

⁶⁴ "Norway's National Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032."



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