

# Background Guide



WAMUNC XXVI

ORGANIZATION  
OF AMERICAN STATES



## Letter from the Chair

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the Organization of American States committee at WAMUNC 2024! My name is Desi Clickenger, and I am so excited and thankful to be your chair and to meet you all. I am a first-year undergraduate student at The George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. I am planning to major in International Affairs and a double minor in Theatre and Film Studies. I have done Model UN since I was a high school freshman, joining the officer team as a sophomore and serving as President of the club my senior year. I helped organize our annual conference last year, taking us to WAMUNC 2023, so I was exactly in your shoes this time last year. I was part of the East African Federation, 2043 committee, and I had a great time with every aspect of the conference, from the riveting discussions to the delegate dance. I hope you guys have a similar level of enjoyment this year, and I can't wait for us to have fun, productive, and respectful conversations in this committee.

Best Regards,

Desi Clickenger



## Committee Description

The Organization of American States (OAS) was founded in 1948 by several governments in the Americas (CFR.org Editors). In the context of the Cold War, the organization was an instance of alliance-building on the part of the United States, seeking to consolidate its hemispheric influence and avoid the spread of communism. The OAS was also founded in order to foster economic ties and bolster security in the region, seeking cooperation in areas ranging from social advancement to extensions of democracy. The OAS came to being a year after the establishment of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, providing a base for cooperation through a defensive military alliance (CFR.org Editors).

The OAS' main body, its General Assembly, meets annually, while it holds a Summit of the Americas every two to four years, where heads of state and delegations meet to engage the most pressing contemporary issues facing the region (CFR.org Editors). As the principal institution that works for the advancement of the Americas as a whole, the Organization of American States has special interests in human rights, democracy, security, and development. As delegates to this committee, you will be exploring two issues at the intersection of these various concerns. Movements for indigenous rights are increasingly visible and active, calling on states to address these important minority groups from the Inuit peoples of the Arctic to the Mapuche in Patagonia. Facing even more global attention is what some call a migration crisis, with governments in both Latin America and Northern America facing many dilemmas on how to respond to large-scale migration of people, especially from Latin America to the United States.

### **Topic A: Inter-American Commission on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**

The Organization of American States defines indigenous peoples as “culturally distinct groups who maintain an ancestral bond to the lands where they live or wish to live” (“Indigenous Peoples”). The OAS has previously published the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which asserts the importance of indigenous peoples to the OAS and the Americas at large (OAS General Assembly). The OAS also recognizes that historical injustices, namely colonization and dispossession of lands, have wronged indigenous peoples and pushed them to a place of underdeveloped marginalization where they have little say in meeting their needs and interests. The historical treatment of indigenous peoples and the ongoing lack of attention towards their struggles has led to certain pressing contemporary issues this committee seeks to address.

#### ***Humanitarian & Cultural Degradation in Indigenous Communities***

On a global level, indigenous people make up around 5% of the world's population but 15% of the world's extremely poor (Hall and Gandolfo). 43% of indigenous people in Latin America live in poverty, more than twice the proportion of non-indigenous people (World Bank Group). Providing adequate social services to indigenous communities is also of note, as they have much lower access to sanitation and electricity. Indigenous people in cities face polluted and insecure dwellings and exclusion from high-paying jobs with benefits. Indigenous people are subject to the digital divide, systematic violence, and the pay gap, with the latter two factors greater for Indigenous women (“UN expert”). These large-scale demographic trends are worrying, and yet

each indigenous community is unique and perceives ideal development differently, complicating strategies of assistance.

Education can help indigenous people find better career opportunities and thus better conditions, however, that is not a wholesale guarantee and education has been associated with a loss of indigenous languages and cultures (World Bank Group). Indeed, indigenous peoples hold much of the world's cultural and linguistic diversity, which is recognized as a key element to secure by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues ("Culture"). However, this traditional knowledge is threatened by discrimination, loss of land access, and political exclusion. Sustainable agriculture, environmental stewardship, and language revitalization are all essential programs led by and for indigenous peoples who often do not receive enough funding. Additionally, indigenous communities are sometimes wary of outsiders interfering with their culture, making this a complex area for governments to intervene in.

### ***Land Rights and Indigenous Sovereignty***

Not only are indigenous communities home to great cultural diversity that is tied to their ancestral lands, but those ancestral lands contain about 80% of the world's biodiversity ("Land Rights"). Despite usually being seen as "custodians of the earth", indigenous peoples face limited or lack of access and acknowledgment of their rights to lands, territories, and resources ("Land Rights"). Since COVID-19 there has been an uptick of encroachment onto indigenous lands, from governments and outsiders. Consensual cooperation among indigenous groups, states, and private actors is instrumental, however many conflicts have emerged over native land rights. Climate change, resource extraction, and agricultural lands are all issues of contention for delegates to bear in mind.

The political dimension of indigenous communities is most prominent here. Indigenous communities are allowed to have rights to certain territories because they are recognized as political units. Laws vary from country to country, as does the level of self-determination and self-governance afforded to indigenous groups. When talking about 'sovereignty' in international affairs, it usually refers to independent states, whereas the term 'indigenous sovereignty' carries a whole kaleidoscope of meaning with it, changing over time and from place to place (Shrinkhal). Indigenous attitudes towards sovereignty are also varied, as many traditional societies have different conceptions of property, territory, and governance than Western thinking. Still, it is valuable for delegates to consider the degree of political self-determination and inclusion within the wider state that should be extended to indigenous peoples.

### ***Questions to Consider***

1. How can governments encourage development in indigenous communities that align with those communities' needs and conception of 'development'?
2. How can governments assist indigenous people in protecting their societies while respecting cultural boundaries and differences?
3. How do we ensure that indigenous land rights are respected while navigating conflicts with others who wish to use the land?
4. What should be the political status of indigenous peoples? Included in the national government? Self-governance? Independence?

## **Topic B: Inter-American Commission on Migration**

Migration has generally been found to be a boon for both migrants and the societies migrants flow into (“Migrant”). Migrants flee poor conditions and find broader opportunities, and states receive a boost of economic productivity, innovation, and diversity. Migration has increased over time, especially in the Americas. Within Latin America and the Caribbean alone, from 1990 to 2020 the region “grew the most in terms of human mobility” in the world (“Migrant”). Foreign-born Latin Americans in the United States increased from under a million in 1960 to almost 19 million in 2010 (Tienda and Sanchez). Despite the widely recognized positive impacts and huge scale of migration, it brings with it several challenges that states must address in order to create a more just and beneficial system for both migrants and welcoming states.

First of all, despite the inevitability and value of migration, it is worth examining why so many people are leaving their home countries in the first place. Political turmoil, economic decline, rising violence, climate disasters, and other factors push people to migrate elsewhere, and alleviating the root causes of emigration is something for delegates to consider even as we discuss the effects of migration (Roy). Home states, welcoming states, and all the countries and stops along the way all have a role to play in working with migrants to meet their needs and make the transition from one place to another less jarring, for the migrants and the countries.

### ***Accommodating Immigration***

Governments may already have limited ability to make sure their entire population has adequate resources, meaning substantive flows of people from elsewhere may create further pressures on society. States face the challenge of caring for even more citizens, which may worsen xenophobia due to actual or perceived societal strain (“Migrant”). Negative attitudes towards immigrants proliferate across the Americas; such attitudes include seeing new arrivals as an economic burden, rivals trying to take jobs, or outsiders who will degrade the nation’s culture or social fabric. This issue isn’t only attitudinal, as immigrants may encounter tangible discrimination and prejudice that slights their potential growth.

Additionally, the legal status of migrants and the journeys they take aren’t straightforward. A utopian society would have migrants arrive in their legal transport method of choice and quickly and/or easily receive the documents they need to work or live in their new country, but the reality is much different. Immigration policy in the United States, a main destination for Latin American migrants, holds a deterrent stance and a huge backlog of asylum hearings to the tune of 1.6 million, leaving Mexico to process and simply deal with the American hopefuls (Facundo). However, push and pull factors remain despite government policy, meaning migrants try to immigrate anyway, illegally entering other countries. Going through shady pathways, migrants face corrupt actors and criminals trying to take advantage of them at every turn, and even in more peaceful areas find themselves corralled in crowded camps.

### ***Humanitarian Concerns of Migration***

Going off of that idea, for anyone the process of moving from one home to another can be emotionally, logistically, and financially draining, and Inter-American migration is often especially difficult. By the nature of their situation, migrants are mostly poor and carry little

possessions, and yet they face exploitative prices from vendors of anything from food to camping gear. They also encounter infrastructure that fails to accommodate them, and a series of borders that threaten to stop or deport them (Roy). Migrants often have to wait in aforementioned holding camps that trap migrants who don't have enough funds for release. Camp conditions aren't ideal, and tragic disasters such as deadly fires have broken out at detention facilities (Facundo).

The illegality of other routes has increasingly turned many migrants from South America and the Caribbean to crossing the Darién Gap, an essentially lawless, undeveloped, stretch of jungle straddling Colombia and Panama (Roy). The wet and mountainous environment confronts hungry and thirsty travelers with wild animals, insects, diseases, a lack of safe drinking water and other amenities, landslides, and pervasive heat and humidity. Exacerbating natural exhaustion and medical issues is the presence of several criminal groups seeking to extort, rob, sexually assault, or traffick unprotected migrants. Even when emerging on the other side, humanitarian assistance is limited. International funds and NGOs have tried to step in to provide aid, but more engagement in this issue from all concerned parties is necessary to fully alleviate the migratory struggle.

### ***Questions to Consider***

1. How can this committee address the root causes of migration and the role that home states play in facilitating migration?
2. In what ways can or should nations improve the legal migration process and integrate immigrants into their societies justly and without prejudice?
3. How can migrant injury, struggle, and death be avoided? What sorts of amenities can be provided to migrants and who has the responsibility to provide them?
4. In particular, what can be done about the Darién Gap, improving access to basic services and decreasing the power of criminal organizations in the region?

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