

Date and venue: December 16, 10:00 am, GA Hall

Audience: Member States and Indigenous Peoples

Duration of the speech: 5 minutes

Main speakers: PGA, Mr. Eliot Minchenberg, Director of the UNESCO Office, ASG Maria-Francesca Spatolisano, Mr. Alexey Tzykarev, Member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, MSs, Indigenous Peoples

Media presence: yes?

Brief background: The United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 74/135 proclaiming the period of 2022-2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL). The General Assembly then adopted resolution 75/168, deciding “to convene a high-level event during 2022, organized by the President of the General Assembly, for the launch of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages [...]”. The International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032 aims to draw attention to the critical loss of indigenous languages, and the urgent need to preserve, revitalize and promote them, and to take urgent steps at national and international levels

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates and Representatives of Indigenous Peoples,

Today, we meet **to launch** the Decade of Indigenous Languages at the General Assembly.

The aim of this event is to help **protect and promote** indigenous languages.

And to reflect upon how the next decade will shape their **preservation**.

In 2007, this body adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizing the right “to **revitalize, use, develop and transmit** to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures.”

This is important precisely as languages are **vectors of knowledge**.

Knowledge that is invaluable, **not only** to the communities it belongs to, but to **the whole** of humanity.

Because, to use a famous old adage, “language is **the dress of thought**”.

With **each** indigenous language that goes extinct, **so too goes the thought**: the culture, tradition and knowledge it bears.

That matters because we are **in dire need** of a radical transformation in the way we relate to our environment.

Through indigenous languages, we can all learn from indigenous peoples.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have just returned from the Biodiversity COP in Montreal.

And I have left that Conference with the certitude that if we are to successfully protect nature, we **must listen** to indigenous peoples, and we must do so in their own languages.

According to FAO, Indigenous Peoples are **guardians** to almost 80% of the world’s remaining biodiversity.

Yet **every two weeks**, an indigenous language dies.

This should ring our alarms.

Because, as said by the American linguist Michael Krauss, “When ... a language goes extinct, it’s like dropping **a bomb on the Louvre**”.

The world is in the midst of an unprecedented set of interlocking crises.

And as I have said before: Governments **do not** have a monopoly over good ideas.

Indigenous people are **keepers**, and their languages are **channels** of potentially **life-saving** knowledge.

Excellencies,

This is the crux of what is at play here.

The discrimination and marginalization of indigenous communities are issues we must urgently solve.

Many of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals have direct linkages to the human rights commitments outlined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Therefore, **I call upon** Member States to work with indigenous communities to:

1. **Safeguard** indigenous peoples' rights – like access to education and resources in their native tongues – or access to clean water and sanitation.
2. Ensure that indigenous peoples and their knowledge are **not exploited**, and secure their free, prior, and informed **consent** when harnessing their knowledge or languages.
3. And perhaps most importantly, **meaningfully consult** indigenous peoples, engaging with them in every stage of decision-making processes.

Dear colleagues,

Language represents the **dialogue of cultures** and the **culture of dialogue** that the United Nations was founded to embody.

I hope fruitful conversations come out of today's discussion, and I look forward to hearing your suggestions for the next decade.

I leave you with the wise words of Chief Seattle of the Duwamish: "This we know, the earth does not belong to us; **we** belong to the earth. ... **All things** are **connected** like the blood which unites a family. So hold in your mind the **memory** of the land. And with all your strength, with all your heart, **preserve it** for your children, and love it."

He spoke these words in the language of **Lushootseed**, which today is on UNESCO's Critically Endangered List.

In Chief Seattle's language, let me thank you, guardians of indigenous languages, for your unwavering efforts.

*"Hawa **Toobs** Chalep" – Thank you.

*"Ask qua-**deeee** to-boo shled tchud" – I am grateful to you.

***For practicing pronunciation:**

<https://soundcloud.com/twulshootseed/twulshootseed-pleasantries>