



THE UNITED NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

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Backgrounder

Indigenous Languages

At present, 96 per cent of the world's approximately 6,700 languages are spoken by only 3 per cent of the world's population. Although indigenous peoples make up less than 6% of the global population, they speak more than 4,000 of the world's languages.

Conservative estimates suggest that more than half of the world's languages will become extinct by 2100. Other calculations predict that up to 95 per cent of the world's languages may become extinct or seriously endangered by the end of this century. The majority of the languages that are under threat are indigenous languages. It is estimated that one indigenous language dies every two weeks.

Indigenous languages are not only methods of communication, but also extensive and complex systems of knowledge that have developed over millennia. They are central to the identity of indigenous peoples, the preservation of their cultures, worldviews and visions and an expression of self-determination. When indigenous languages are under threat, so too are indigenous peoples themselves.

The threat is the direct consequence of colonialism and colonial practices that resulted in the decimation of indigenous peoples, their cultures and languages. Through policies of assimilation, dispossession of lands, discriminatory laws and actions, indigenous languages in all regions face the threat of extinction. This is further exacerbated by globalization and the rise of a small number of culturally dominant languages. Increasingly, languages are no longer transmitted by parents to their children.

Language rights of indigenous peoples

Article 13 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their languages, oral traditions, writing systems and literatures. Further, it provides that States shall take effective measures to protect this right, including through interpretation in political, legal and administrative proceedings. Articles 14 and 16 state indigenous peoples' rights to establish their educational systems and media in their own languages and to have access to an education in their own language.

Indigenous peoples' language rights are also guaranteed under the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (No. 169) of the International Labour Organization. Other relevant international instruments are the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, among others.

Revitalization and development of indigenous languages

Some indigenous peoples are successfully revitalizing and developing their languages through their own initiatives. Native Hawaiians have promoted Hawaiian language medium education -- public schools





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where the curriculum is taught entirely in Hawaiian -- to revitalize their language, which was on the brink of extinction in the 1970s and was re-established as an official language of the State of Hawaii in 1978.

Interplay between government and indigenous peoples has also been important in the case of the Itelmen language in Kamchatka, in the Russian Federation. There, based on constitutional rights, the Kamchatkan government has initiated various native language development programmes, such as mass media broadcasts and cultural competitions in addition to indigenous language classes in school. At the same time, community-led initiatives have used new technological opportunities to disseminate indigenous language songs through online music channels and smartphone applications in Itelmen.

On the other hand, many others are fighting a losing battle. Most governments are aware of the language crisis and have introduced legislation, policies and programmes to address it. However, greater efforts are needed. In Chile, there are legislation and policies aimed at protecting nine indigenous languages, but they only allow for teaching four of the languages in schools and only when there is a presence of more than 20 per cent of indigenous students (the majority of indigenous peoples in Chile live in urban areas, where they are a small minority).

Lack of resources is frequently cited as a reason for inadequate actions. Funding is often provided only for the recording of languages, including transcribed, translated, and annotated audiovisual recordings, while only limited funds are diverted to language revitalization programmes.

UN responses to the indigenous language crisis

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has consistently drawn attention to threats against indigenous languages and pushed for actions to promote and protect the languages. As early as 2003, the Permanent Forum recommended that governments introduce indigenous languages in public administration in indigenous territories, where feasible. In 2005, the Forum recommended that UN country offices make efforts to disseminate their activities in publications in indigenous languages. Over the years, the Permanent Forum also recommended that States support the creation of indigenous language and cultural studies centers in universities, and encouraged the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to support such initiatives.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the General Assembly in 2015, aims to ensure equal access for indigenous peoples to all levels of education and vocational training under the Sustainable Development Goals Target 4.5. Use of indigenous languages in education and training has been strongly put forth as an approach to meet this target.

Most recently, in response to a recommendation from the Permanent Forum in 2016, the UN General Assembly proclaimed 2019 as the **International Year of Indigenous Languages** to draw attention to the critical loss of indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve, revitalize and promote them at the national and international levels. UNESCO is serving as the lead agency for the Year.

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