



## CONCEPT NOTE

### **High-level event for the closing of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages**

### **“Indigenous languages matter for peace building, sustainable development and reconciliation”**

17 December 2019

General Assembly Hall  
United Nations Headquarters  
New York

10.00 – 13.00

15.00 – 18.00

**On Tuesday 17 December 2019, the President of the General Assembly will convene a High-level event for the closing of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages, in line with General Assembly resolutions [73/156](#).**

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## **Background**

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*The critical situation of indigenous languages directly affects their users. This situation also carries a special and wider significance for all of us because of their role and relevance in peace building, good governance, sustainable development and reconciliation.*

Language is one of the fundamental preconditions for human development, dialogue, reconciliation, tolerance, diversity and the peaceful existence of human societies. People need language to communicate with one another and to pass on, from generation to generation, knowledge, ideas, beliefs and traditions, which are essential for their recognition, well-being, evolution and peaceful co-existence.

Despite their immense value, languages continue to disappear at alarming rates. Indigenous peoples use a vast majority of today's endangered languages. Reasons for the endangerment of indigenous languages vary across different communities and locations, but all represent a tremendous challenge to indigenous peoples. These reasons include policies that prioritize linguistic assimilation over multilingualism, educational disadvantage, illiteracy, enforced relocation, migration or other manifestations of discrimination and disadvantages. This risks a language being weakened to the point of disappearance.

Public policies on indigenous languages, backed by the necessary resources can create an enabling environment for support, access and promotion of indigenous languages. The survival of these languages, however, will depend on the prosperity and political influence of the language users and their ability to speak and use them in all spheres of life. Language policies, therefore, need to be complemented by policies that empower indigenous peoples politically, economically and socially so that they can make their livelihoods without having to give up their language and culture or to migrate out of economic need.

In practical terms, the risk is that parents and elders can no longer pass on indigenous languages to their children and that indigenous languages fall out of daily use. The advantage in recognizing and supporting indigenous languages is to strengthen dignity, heritage, peaceful relations and sustainable development. The issues around indigenous languages could have much broader consequences, affecting politics, law and justice, health, cultural practices and identities, climate change, access to education, jobs, information and communication, social life and wider participation in sustainable development.

## **United Nations response**

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In September 2007, the United Nations General Assembly, through its resolution 61/295, adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Declaration provides a comprehensive framework of minimum standards for economic, social and cultural well-being and rights of the world's indigenous peoples. The Declaration recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples to revitalize, use, protect, preserve and transmit their histories, languages and oral traditions to future generations. It further grants the right to indigenous peoples to establish media and educational systems in their own languages.

Since its inception, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has expressed concern for threatened indigenous languages and has been formulating and advocating policies to overcome the critical situation that they face (see E/C.19/2008/3 and E/C.19/2016/10). These reports described the dire situation of indigenous languages today and call upon indigenous peoples, the United Nations system

and Member States to take action to stem further deterioration and provide support to preserve languages in danger of extinction. The Permanent Forum endorsed the recommendation emanating from the expert group meeting in 2016 for an international year to draw attention to the urgent need to protect indigenous languages. On that basis, the General Assembly, in its resolution 71/178 on the rights of indigenous peoples, proclaimed 2019 the International Year of Indigenous Languages and invited UNESCO to serve as the United Nations lead agency for the International Year.

The outcome document of the 2014 High-level plenary meeting of the UN General Assembly, known as the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, reiterated the important and continuing role of the United Nations in promoting and protecting the rights of indigenous peoples. Member States committed to develop, in consultation with indigenous peoples, policies, programmes and resources to preserve and promote indigenous languages. Resolution 73/156 also requested the President of the General Assembly to support initiatives relevant to the successful celebration of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages.

## **Progress made**

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The 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages is an important international cooperation mechanism dedicated to raising awareness on the critical loss of indigenous languages, and the urgent need to preserve, revitalize and promote them, as well as mobilize different players and necessary resources to take coordinated and long-term oriented action around the world.

For the articulation of the major objectives of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL2019), UNESCO, as a lead UN agency, facilitated the development of an Action Plan for the International Year and established a Steering Committee<sup>1</sup> for its organization. The Action Plan is being implemented in consultation and cooperation with Member States, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as well as indigenous peoples and a range of different stakeholders.

On 27 January 2019, UNESCO hosted an Official Launch event at its Headquarters in Paris which provided a global forum for a constructive debate in which high-level speakers addressed new paradigms for safeguarding, promoting and providing access to knowledge and information for indigenous languages' users. On 1 February 2019, the President of the General Assembly convened a high-level event in New York providing a unique opportunity for Member States, indigenous peoples and other stakeholders to begin the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages by exchanging views and good practices about the preservation, promotion and revitalization of indigenous languages.

During its 18<sup>th</sup> session in 2019 the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues held a discussion on indigenous languages. Among others, the Permanent Forum recommended the General Assembly to proclaim an International Decade on Indigenous Languages. During the celebration of the 2019 International Day of Indigenous Languages, the three UN mechanisms on indigenous peoples also expressed support for the proclamation of the International Decade on Indigenous Languages. The Human Rights Council held an Annual Panel Discussion on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in September 2019.

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<sup>1</sup> Members of the Steering Committee include the following Member States, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as well as indigenous peoples and a range of different stakeholders.

Nearly 900 activities taking place around the world have been registered on the online platform dedicated to the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages. The global calendar includes awareness-raising campaigns, capacity-building workshops, academic conferences, intergovernmental meetings, theatrical, musical and artistic performances, hackathons and online events, as well as celebrations of international days, international award ceremonies etc. 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages has also enjoyed important visibility through a dedicated [website](#), and has been widely covered by international media and an ongoing social media campaign.

As a follow up to the UN General Assembly Resolutions 73/156 (op 24 and 25) and building on the strength of the Action Plan for organizing the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages ([E/C.19/2018/8](#)), The Steering Committee for the organization of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages with the support of UNESCO, launched a global consultative process for the elaboration of a Strategic Outcome Document. Several important international and regional meetings were held bringing together representatives of the Member States, indigenous peoples, UN-system organizations, language advocates, experts, academia and other public and private partners to reflect on language revitalization, support, and access and promotion aspects. The outcomes of those events contributed to the preparation of the above-mentioned document. Furthermore, an open drafting group was established for the consolidation of different views. Online consultations through a dedicated online platform also helped to integrate additional comments and contributions received from a large group of indigenous peoples, intergovernmental organizations, research institutions, national and regional organizations, and individual experts. The [Strategic Outcome Document](#) (Ref.: UNESCO, General Conference, 40 C/68) is the product of a collaborative effort of different stakeholders providing an overview of the key issues, challenges, recommendations and future actions.

An outcome of the coordinated and collaborative global efforts from a variety of stakeholders, the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages concluded with increased awareness on the critical situation of many indigenous languages worldwide and different stakeholders mobilized for future joint actions around the world.

## **Objective of the High-level event**

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The General Assembly, in its resolution 73/156, requested the President of the General Assembly to convene a High-level event of the General Assembly to mark the closing of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages. This event will be held on 17 December 2019 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, USA.

The overarching objective of the one-day event is to fulfill the terms of the Resolution. It aims to bring together Member States, indigenous peoples, UN-system organizations and other relevant stakeholders to take stock of the current situation of indigenous languages worldwide, analyze existing challenges and assess progress made, and share key conclusions and lessons learnt about the preservation, promotion and revitalization of indigenous languages.

Specifically, the High-level event aims at:

- Providing a global platform for dialogue between indigenous peoples, Member States, UN-system organizations and other stakeholders in line with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples;
- Confirming a joint commitment, galvanizing existing efforts and progress made, as well as forging new partnerships to empower indigenous language users;

- Discussing ideas, challenges and good practices on how to support, provide access and promote indigenous languages; and
- Exploring new avenues for sustainable and long-term action.

## Format

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The High-level event will take place in the General Assembly Hall from 10:00 - 13:00 and 15:00 - 18:00 and will consist of **an opening segment, a plenary segment, and a closing segment**. The draft programme will be made available shortly.

The High-level event will begin with a **traditional welcoming ceremony**. In the **opening segment**, the President of the General Assembly, the Secretary-General of the United Nations or his representative, UNDESA, UNESCO and other high-level distinguished speakers will deliver their remarks. The Co-chairs of the Steering Committee for the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages will participate in the opening and closing segments. Representatives of mechanisms on the rights of indigenous peoples will speak at the opening segment.

During the **plenary segment** and to ensure maximum participation, Member States are encouraged to limit their statements to three minutes for individual delegations and five minutes for statements made on behalf of a group of States. Representatives of the seven socio-cultural regions of indigenous peoples<sup>2</sup> are invited to speak for five minutes each. Observers of the General Assembly and other United Nations entities will also be given the opportunity to speak for three minutes each.

Speakers are invited to focus their statements on the following **guiding questions** within the context of the implementation of the Action Plan:

- What concrete support can be given to facilitate a role of indigenous languages in peace building, sustainable development and reconciliation in our societies?
- What is necessary to ensure the intergenerational transmission of indigenous languages?
- What role can be played by indigenous peoples' organizations, Member States and the UN System in the preservation and revitalization of indigenous peoples' languages?

The **closing segment** will feature a statement by the President of the United Nations General Assembly. The Co-chairs of the Steering Committee for the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages will deliver a final statement followed by a cultural performance of indigenous artists (tbc.)

## List of speakers

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The list of speakers will rotate between Member States and Observers of the General Assembly and representatives of the seven socio-cultural regions of indigenous peoples<sup>2</sup>. Relevant United Nations entities will also be given the opportunity to speak. For inscription on the list of speakers, Member States, Observers of the General Assembly and United Nations entities are invited to contact the General Assembly Affairs Branch, Mr. Carlos Galindo (e-mail: [galindo@un.org](mailto:galindo@un.org), with copy to [gasespeakerslist@un.org](mailto:gasespeakerslist@un.org); tel: 1 (212) 963-5063) beginning on Monday, 2 December 2019.

Delegations wishing to circulate their statements electronically through the Paper Smart portal should send a copy of the statement at least 1 hour(s) in advance of delivery. PDF format is preferred. The

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<sup>2</sup> The socio-cultural regions are Africa; the Arctic; Asia; Central and South America and the Caribbean; Eastern Europe, Russian Federation, Central Asia and Transcaucasia; North America; and the Pacific.

date of the meeting and the agenda item should be indicated in the heading of the statement and in the subject line of the e-mail. The statements will be posted on the Paper Smart portal after delivery. Delegations are kindly reminded to provide 20 hard copies of the text for the technical services no later than 1 hour(s) before delivery of the statement.

In view of the time limitation for the plenary segment, delegations that did not have the opportunity to speak can upload their statements on the Paper Smart portal ([papersmart@un.org](mailto:papersmart@un.org)).

Any speaker may also make a statement in a language other than the official languages. In such cases, the delegation in question must provide either an interpreter from the non-official language into an official language, or a written text of the statement in one of the official languages, to be read out by a United Nations interpreter. Based on the interpretation or the written text that is accepted by the Secretariat as representing the official text of the statement, it will be interpreted into the other official languages by United Nations interpreters. When a written text is provided, the delegation concerned should make available to the interpreter someone who knows the language in which the statement is to be delivered and the official language into which it has been translated, to guide the interpreter through the translated text and to ensure synchronization between the speaker and the interpreter.

Detailed arrangements for interpretation from non-official languages, including access by non-United Nations interpreters to the interpreter booths in the General Assembly Hall, must be made in advance through the Meetings Management Section (telephone: 212 963 7351; email: [gmeets@un.org](mailto:gmeets@un.org)). The interpreter or the guide provided by the delegation should be brought by the delegation to the conference officers' desk in front of the General Assembly Hall 30 minutes prior to the delivery of the statement.

## **Seating arrangements**

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There will be free seating with designated generic seats for Member States, Observers of the General Assembly, United Nations entities and indigenous peoples on a first-come, first served basis.

## **Participants**

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Participants from indigenous peoples, NGO's in consultative status with ECOSOC, Academic institutions, and others can register online at [www.un.org/indigenous](http://www.un.org/indigenous).

The online registration for the High-level event will be open soon.

For more information please visit [www.un.org/indigenous](http://www.un.org/indigenous)

## **Outcomes**

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With the help of UNESCO, the President of the General Assembly will elaborate and circulate a summary of the discussions to all Member States and other stakeholders as an outcome of the event. Visibility efforts will be undertaken to amplify the messages through multiple social media channels. The webcasting will be provided by UNTV.

## Media and Outreach

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### **Websites:**

**UNPGA website**

### **Official website of the IYIL2019:**

<https://en.iyil2019.org/>

<https://fr.iyil2019.org/>

<https://es.iyil2019.org/>

### **UN Indigenous Issues :**

[www.un.org/indigenous](http://www.un.org/indigenous)

**Access UN webcast:** <http://webtv.un.org/>

### **Social media**

**Join the IYIL2019** #IndigenousLanguages #WeAreIndigenous #IYIL2019

**Twitter:** @IYIL2019

**Follow on Facebook:** [@indigenousslanguages](#) @IYIL2019

**Instagram:** @indigenousslanguages