



HIGH LEVEL EVENT TO MARK THE END OF THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE

Date: 17 December 2019

Venue: General Assembly Hall United Nations Headquarters

Time: 10.00 a.m.

OPENING REMARKS BY H.E. TIJJANI MUHAMMAD-BANDE, PRESIDENT OF THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates and Participants.

It gives me great pleasure to be at this important event and to share my views on a subject of great import, that is, the threat facing indigenous languages in the contemporary world.

In 2007, the General Assembly adopted the declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. This important milestone was based on the recognition of the right of indigenous peoples to, inter alia, revitalize, use, develop, and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral-traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures.

The declaration calls on states to take effective measures, in consultation and cooperation with the indigenous peoples concerned, to combat prejudice and eliminate discrimination and to promote tolerance, understanding and good relations among indigenous peoples and other segments of society. It also calls for the enactment of policies and laws aimed at preserving and strengthening indigenous languages.

The United Nations has clearly been at the vanguard of articulating efforts to proactively address the challenges facing indigenous languages in the modern world. The challenges persist nonetheless. Every fortnight, at least one indigenous language vanishes from the face of the earth. This translates into two extinct indigenous languages each month.

The status-quo is indeed grave. The surviving 4,000 indigenous languages are spoken by a mere 6 percent of the total world population. Equally noteworthy is the fact that 15 percent of the poorest people on our planet are indigenous.

Some may ask why the extinction of an indigenous language, people, or culture in far-away regions, should be a matter of great importance. Some may question humanity's concern with the extinction of any particular way of life, and why the United Nations should prioritise such a matter.

Indigenous peoples and languages matter for a number of reasons. First is the part that language plays in enabling a people to think systematically about its place in the universe, and especially, about how this worldview could be developed and leveraged to find solutions to pressing problems.

Indigenous traditions have served as dependable means of acquiring knowledge and transmitting same across generations.

This is the case with the knowledge of herbal medicine, tools fabrication, food processing and preservation, government and public administration, and dispute settlement. Modern pharmaceutical breakthroughs rarely happen except by building on the achievements of the past.

It is also generally accepted that human progress hinges on constant interactions between and among the range of languages and traditions existing in the world.

Linguistic diversity is essential to the preservation of humanity's common heritage. Unfortunately, the diversity which we acknowledge as critical to humanity's survival is imperiled with every language that goes extinct. With the death of languages, the indigenous people who speak them lose a significant part of their identity.

Among the markers of progress are the creation of a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples, the organization of the Interactive Informal Hearing with Indigenous Peoples, and the sensitization of the international community to the plight of indigenous peoples.

The United Nations has been largely instrumental in raising international awareness about indigenous languages, and about the measures that need to be adopted to halt their extinction.

As far back as 1982, the UN established the Working Group on Indigenous Population. The 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages is by itself evidence of the United Nations' commitment to the preservation of endangered languages.

It is my hope that with the cooperation of education and research institutions as well as private sector and civil society stakeholders, decisive action will be taken to insure indigenous languages against extinction.

Rather than look for whom to blame for the extinction of these languages, the world should focus attention on the measures to apply to ensure the survival of the remaining ones. At the very least, the indigenous peoples should be imbued with the pride and confidence to speak their languages.

The schools have a major role to play here. By integrating indigenous languages into their curricula, they would have fulfilled the vital mission of shielding the languages from external onslaught and internal decay.

I urge all indigenous communities to be inspired by the fact that their languages are their cultures, and that their cultures are the manifestations of their hopes as members of the humankind. A people that lets go its language has, knowingly or by default, relinquished its cultural identity rights.

Excellencies,

As we mark the closing of the international year of indigenous languages, it is important that we rededicate ourselves to the cause of promoting these languages. We must realize that in languages are scientific insights, hints of wisdom, and community practices that move civilizations from one stage to another.

Finally, I express my gratitude to UNESCO and other agencies for preparing the strategic outcome document of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages.

Thank you all for your patience and attention.