

# THE UNITED NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

TOGETHER WE ACHIEVE

Backgrounder

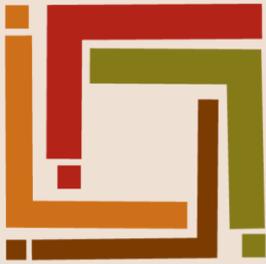
## Indigenous languages

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has long been concerned with the risk of extinction of indigenous languages. Upon the Forum's recommendation, two expert group meetings have been held at United Nations Headquarters -- in 2008 and 2016 -- to galvanize action at the international and national levels, to raise awareness of the impending and ongoing loss of linguistic diversity and thereby traditional knowledge and cultural heritage, and to identify specific policy advice to revitalize and maintain indigenous languages.

On the opening day of its fifteenth session, which will take place at United Nations Headquarters in New York from 9 to 20 May, the Permanent Forum will discuss a report from the second international expert group meeting on indigenous languages, held on 19-21 January 2016. The report (E/C.19/2016/10) cites the following facts on the situation of indigenous peoples' 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.
- 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 vast majority of the languages that are under threat of disappearing are indigenous languages. It is assessed that one indigenous language dies every two weeks.
- This pressing threat has been described as the most critical issue faced by indigenous peoples today. Indigenous languages are critical markers of the cultural health of indigenous peoples. When indigenous languages are under threat, so too are indigenous peoples themselves.
- Indigenous languages are not only methods of communication, but also extensive and complex systems of knowledge. Indigenous languages are central to the identity of indigenous peoples, the preservation of their cultures, worldviews and visions and an expression of self-determination.
- The threat of extinction of indigenous languages is generally seen as the direct result of colonialism and colonial practices that resulted in the decimation of indigenous peoples, their cultures and their languages. Through policies of assimilation, forced relocation, boarding schools and other colonial and post-colonial policies, laws and actions, indigenous languages in all regions face the threat of extinction.
- Globalization and the rise of a small number of culturally dominant languages have exacerbated the threat to indigenous languages.





# THE UNITED NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

TOGETHER WE ACHIEVE

## Recommendations

In its report, the expert group makes the following recommendations, among others, addressed to indigenous peoples, the United Nations system, and States:

### Indigenous peoples:

- Indigenous peoples are encouraged to develop awareness-raising campaigns aimed at Governments, legislators, policymakers, educators and society in general to address commonly held misconceptions and a general lack of awareness about indigenous peoples' languages
- Indigenous peoples should establish a global fund to support indigenous languages, such as community-driven language revitalization projects, recording of critically endangered languages and the compilation of good practices for language revitalization. Such a global fund should be supported financially by States, the private sector, the United Nations system, civil society and other donors.

### United Nations system:

- The General Assembly should proclaim an international year of indigenous languages and an international decade of indigenous languages.
- A global award for language revitalization should be established to recognize efforts made to teach, revitalize, promote and strengthen indigenous languages in each of the seven socio-cultural regions. Such an award should be established by the UN in cooperation with indigenous peoples and in partnership with civil society and the private sector.
- UNESCO should intensify efforts to promote indigenous language preservation and revitalization, as well as education in indigenous mother tongues, to map indigenous languages and to develop and adopt a policy of engagement with indigenous peoples

### States:

- States should recognize the linguistic rights of indigenous peoples and should develop language policies to promote and protect indigenous languages, including the provision of quality education in indigenous mother tongues.
- States should provide sustainable and long-term funding for language revitalization initiatives and organizations designed and delivered by and for indigenous peoples.
- States should provide intercultural education for all, not only for indigenous children, thereby ensuring that non-indigenous peoples learn indigenous languages and cultures where appropriate.
- States should promote job creation for speakers of indigenous languages.

**For more information** on the UN and indigenous peoples, please see [www.un.org/indigenous](http://www.un.org/indigenous).

