



DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
Division for Social Policy and Development
Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

**International Expert Group Meeting on the theme
Indigenous Languages: Preservation and Revitalization: Articles 13, 14 and 16 of the
United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**

19 to 21 January 2016, New York

Concept Note

Prepared by the Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Division for Social Policy and Development
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A. Introduction

Indigenous languages are key to ensure the continuation and transmission of culture, customs and history as part of the heritage and identity of indigenous peoples.

‘It is usually estimated that there are between 6,000 and 7,000 oral languages in the world today. Most of these languages are spoken by very few people, while a handful of them are spoken by an overwhelming majority of the world. About 97% of the world’s population speaks 4% of its languages, while only 3% speaks 96% of them (Bernard 1996: 142). A great majority of these languages are spoken by indigenous peoples, and many (if not most) of them are in danger of becoming extinct.’¹ As highlighted by the United Nations Secretary-General at the opening of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2011 – one indigenous language dies every two weeks.

The extinction of each language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural, historical, and ecological knowledge. Each language is a unique expression of the human experience of the world.²

There are significant factors in the erosion of indigenous languages and cultures, including structural discrimination and social exclusion, the continuing process of globalization, the involuntary displacement from ancestral lands and territories, and increasing urbanization that serve to further threaten the continuation of indigenous cultures.

Another factor is the long legacy of educational policies in colonized countries. It includes policies such as forcibly removing indigenous children from their families and placing them in boarding schools that resulted in cultural alienation, loss of language, disruption in family and social structures, and increased community dysfunction.³ This has corroded and weakened indigenous peoples’ culture, traditions and practices. Their spiritual connections to the land is tied to livelihoods and food systems, oral histories, and traditional knowledge systems that have an important role that needs to be taken into account.

The loss of indigenous languages signifies loss of traditional knowledge as well as the loss of cultural diversity and spirituality. Indigenous languages are treasures of vast traditional knowledge concerning ecological systems and processes and how to protect and use some of the most vulnerable and biologically diverse ecosystems in the world.⁴ In the same way, indigenous languages are not only means of communication, they have their own intrinsic value, as demonstrated in literature, music and other forms of artistic expression.

There is growing concern about the loss of culture while at the same time an increasing recognition that indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their own cultural traditions, customs and knowledge.⁵

¹ State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, 2009, p. 57

² UNESCO 2003

³ E/C.19/2009/CRP1, Indigenous Peoples and Boarding schools: A comparative study, p. 49

⁴ E/C.10/2008/3, p. 11-13

⁵ E/C.19/2013/3, p. 20

B. Background and context

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) is an advisory body of the Economic and Social Council, with the mandate to discuss issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights. At its fourteenth session in April-May 2015, the Permanent Forum recommended a three-day international expert group meeting on the theme “Indigenous languages: preservation and revitalization (articles 13, 14 and 16 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples)”, which was approved by the Economic and Social Council (decision 2015/43).

Following up on this, UN DESA/DSPD is organizing the expert group meeting on “Indigenous languages: preservation and revitalization (articles 13, 14 and 16 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples)” hereinafter referred as the “expert group meeting”, at United Nations Headquarters in New York from 19 to 21 January 2016. This is the second international expert group meeting on indigenous languages organized by the UN DESA. It will build upon the findings and recommendations of the 2008 expert group meeting on the principles of cultural diversity and indigenous languages as a way to promote intercultural dialogue and affirm indigenous peoples’ identity⁶.

Since its inception, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has expressed concern for the threatened indigenous languages and has been formulating and advocating policies to overcome this critical situation. One of the strategies identified to support and encourage cultural diversity and to preserve and promote indigenous languages, distinct identities and traditional knowledge is the use and management of the information and communication technologies by indigenous peoples.

In May 2008, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at its seventh session welcomed the recommendations of the expert group meeting on languages and recommended that States and United Nations agencies engage with indigenous peoples to develop strategies to implement the recommendations of the report.

It is important to bring to the attention of this expert group meeting that the Permanent Forum in 2003 recommended that a world conference on indigenous peoples in the information society be organized on the occasion of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Following this recommendation, a Global Forum of Indigenous Peoples and the Information Society was organized and the Geneva Declaration and a Plan of Action⁷ was adopted, which along with WSIS outcome documents⁸, provide guidance to all stakeholders interested in using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to help improve indigenous peoples’ well-being. This commitment was renewed in the 2005 Tunis

⁶ For more details see report E/C.19/2008/3.

⁷ E/C.19/2004/3, Part B

⁸ Resolution 59/220

Commitment⁹. Indigenous peoples also organized their WSIS Indigenous thematic planning conference for Tunisia in Canada¹⁰.

In 2014, WSIS+10 identified indigenous peoples, their knowledge as pathways to develop innovative processes and strategies for locally-appropriate sustainable development. It also identified actions lines to strengthen cooperation and seek responses to the challenges and to the implementation of the Geneva Plan of Action.

In December 2015, a high level meeting of the General Assembly of the World Summit on Information Society will be held in accordance to resolution A/RES/68/308. An intergovernmental agreed outcome document will be adopted and this will also inform the expert group meeting in January 2016.

In recent years, there are some examples of ICTs being applied by indigenous peoples to strengthen, preserve and revitalize indigenous knowledge, languages and cultures. However, there is a need to assist indigenous peoples to decide what ICTs they need and to assess what (formal) education is needed to have access to the knowledge of this new technology.

It is important to highlight what initiatives are currently taking place to ensure the survival of indigenous languages.

The present expert group meeting will take such developments into account and identify policy actions into the future.

C. Normative Framework

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples¹¹ (The Declaration) adopted by the General Assembly in 2007, explicitly mentions languages in articles 13, 14 and 16.

Article 13

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected and also to ensure that indigenous peoples can understand and be understood in political, legal and administrative proceedings, where necessary through the provision of interpretation or by other appropriate means.

Article 14

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.

⁹ Tunis Commitment, 2005, p. 22-32, WSIS-05/Tunis/Doc/7-E

¹⁰ Report of the WSIS Indigenous thematic planning conference for Tunisia, 2005
<https://www.itu.int/wsisis/docs2/thematic/canada/final-report-indigenous.pdf>

¹¹ A/RES/61/295 adopted by the UN General Assembly, 13 September 2007.

3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

Article 16

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish their own media in their own languages and to have access to all forms of non-indigenous media without discrimination.

2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that State-owned media duly reflect indigenous cultural diversity. States, without prejudice to ensuring full freedom of expression, should encourage privately owned media to adequately reflect indigenous cultural diversity.

In addition to the specific references to language, the Declaration enumerates a series of other rights relevant to this issue, including: to self-determination and the right of indigenous peoples to determine their own cultural development (art. 3); against assimilation and destruction of indigenous peoples' cultures (art. 8); to prevention of, and redress for, forced assimilation, dispossession of their lands, territories and resources (art. 8); to belong to an indigenous community or nation in accordance with indigenous peoples' traditions and customs (art. 9); to practise and revitalize indigenous peoples' cultural traditions and customs (art. 11); to teach their cultural and religious traditions and to repatriation of their human remains (art. 12); to "maintain, control, protect and develop" their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions (art. 31); to determine their own identity and membership; and to promote, develop and maintain their institutional structures and their distinctive customs, spirituality, traditions, procedures, practices, juridical systems or customs (art. 34).

Also of particular relevance to indigenous peoples is International Labour Organization Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, 1989. The ILO Convention No. 169 addresses languages in article 28, stating that indigenous children shall "... be taught to read and write in their own indigenous language or in the language most commonly used by the group to which they belong." Article 28 goes on to state that "Adequate measures shall be taken to ensure that these peoples have the opportunity to attain fluency in the national language or in one of the official languages of the country" and that "measures shall be taken to preserve and promote the development and practice of the indigenous languages of the peoples concerned."

Various other international legal instruments have also been adopted as a response to the rapid and even accelerating disappearance of languages globally such as: UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace (2003); UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003); UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (and Action Plan) (2001); Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (1993); Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); UNESCO Recommendation on the development of adult education (1976); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966); International Convention on the

Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965); the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) among others¹².

Beyond this legal framework, various international expert bodies within the United Nations system have analysed and made recommendations on the issue of indigenous languages. This includes the following:

- In 2008, the Executive Board of UNESCO at its 180th session held a thematic debate on “Protecting Indigenous and endangered languages and the role of languages in promoting Education For All (EFA) in the context of sustainable development”¹³ as a response to the initial decision to prepare a convention for the protection of indigenous and endangered languages¹⁴. At present, UNESCO is in the process of developing a policy on engaging with indigenous peoples.¹⁵
- In 2012, the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) prepared a study entitled the “Role of languages and culture in the promotion and protection of the rights and identity of indigenous peoples”¹⁶. This study outlines international and regional standards on indigenous peoples’ rights to language and culture, describes the relationship between indigenous cultures and languages to their self-determination and rights to their lands, territories and resources and analyses indigenous peoples’ languages and identities and cultures and identities, including challenges faced in the promotion and protection of indigenous language and cultural rights. The study includes the Expert Mechanism’s Advice No. 3 on indigenous peoples’ languages and cultures.
- In 2014, the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples in her report to the Human Rights Council¹⁷ identified the removal of indigenous children from their families and communities and placing them in non-indigenous environments, and forbidding them to speak their own languages or practise their cultural traditions as ongoing practices to suppress or eliminate indigenous identity and assimilate indigenous peoples into the dominant culture.
- In addition, the Independent Expert in the field of cultural rights¹⁸ has examined cultural and language rights as they relate to indigenous peoples noting that the approach taken by indigenous peoples stimulates further thinking on the subject, as they view culture as holistic and all-inclusive, such that “each and every human rights topic includes a cultural dimension”¹⁹

¹² E/C.19/2008/3, Annex IV

¹³ UNESCO, 180EX/INF.8

¹⁴ UNESCO, 176 EX/59.

¹⁵ <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/2015/agencies-info/UNESCO.pdf>

¹⁶ A/HRC/21/53.

¹⁷ A/HRC/27/52

¹⁸ A/HRC/14/36

¹⁹ A/HRC/14/36.

D. Objectives of the Meeting:

The main aim of the expert group meeting is to build on the advances already made and to bring in additional elements as a means to ensure the following:

1. Analyse the context and characteristics of language lost and the importance of the intergenerational transmission of indigenous languages to ensure the success of its reversal; [UNDRIP, Art. 13]
2. Share initiatives and strategies undertaken for, with and by indigenous peoples to recover, use, revitalize and disseminate indigenous languages, including the use of information and communication technologies; [UNDRIP, Art. 16]
3. Propose strategies and further plans to strengthen indigenous languages, including through State educational systems; [UNDRIP, Art. 14]
4. Propose recommendations to States, the United Nations system, in particular UNESCO, indigenous peoples and other partners to foster synergies for the survival, revitalization, use and promotion of indigenous languages to advance the rights of indigenous peoples.

The final report and recommendations of the expert group meeting will be submitted to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at its May 2016 session.

E. Proposed Themes for discussions:

Four major themes of discussion are proposed as follows. Under each of the themes are some preliminary questions that have been identified for consideration and to stimulate discussion.

Theme 1: Analyse the context and characteristics of indigenous languages;

Theme 2: Initiatives and strategies undertaken for, with and by indigenous peoples to recover, use, revitalize and disseminate indigenous languages;

Theme 3: Lessons learned from State educational systems to strengthen or accommodate indigenous languages;

Theme 4: What more can be done to support the survival, revitalization, use and promotion of indigenous languages.

Positive examples and challenging situations will be used during the discussion to illustrate the various themes.

F. Participant Contributions:

The Expert Group Meeting will bring in indigenous peoples, United Nations system agencies, programmes and funds, Member States and non-government organizations and academics that are knowledgeable on languages and indigenous peoples.

International indigenous experts will prepare papers to present at the meeting on one or more of the themes listed above.

Experts are requested to submit their papers (8 pages maximum) to the organizers by 4 January 2016 so that the papers can be distributed before the meeting. Experts will also be informed in due course of the Program of Work for the Expert Group Meeting and the appropriate time to present their papers during the meeting.

G. Working Language:

The working language will be English (interpretation in other UN languages is not provided, and will depend on availability).

H. Contact Information:

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