



THE PRESIDENT  
OF THE  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

30 June 2020

Excellency,

In accordance with General Assembly resolution 73/156, entitled “*Rights of indigenous peoples*”, it is my pleasure to transmit the summary report of the High-level Event for the Closing of 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages, which convened on 17 December 2019.

I thank you for your delegation's commitment to the advancement of the rights of the indigenous people and for your contribution towards making the High-level meeting a success.

I avail of this opportunity to express my solidarity with Member States who are fighting COVID-19 and extend my sincere condolences for their loss.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'T' followed by a flourish.

Tijjani Muhammad-Bande

All Permanent Representatives and  
Permanent Observers to the United Nations  
New York

# **High-level Event for the Closing of 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages**

**17 December 2019**

**United Nations Headquarters, New York**

## **Background**

In line with 2018 General Assembly resolution 73/156, the President of the 74th session of the General Assembly, His Excellency, Tijjani Muhammad-Bande, convened a High-level Event for the Closing of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages, which took place on 17 December 2019.

Languages are an integral part of human identity and inseparable from the realization of internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms. Languages are also one of the preconditions for human development, reconciliation, diversity and the peaceful existence of human societies. The protection, support and promotion of linguistic diversity and multilingualism is therefore crucial for the achievement of human rights, peace, development, good governance and reconciliation in our societies.

Despite their immense value, languages are disappearing at alarming rates. Today 40 per cent of the world's estimated 6,700 languages are in danger, the majority of which belonging to indigenous people. These issues around the extinction of indigenous languages point to a significant cross-cutting pattern of disadvantage and discrimination affecting indigenous people in a wide range of areas, including politics, law and justice, health and education, and other rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Reasons for the endangerment of indigenous languages vary across different communities and locations. They include complex issues such as educational disadvantage, the lack of policies that prioritize multilingualism, illiteracy, enforced relocation, migration or other manifestations of discrimination and disadvantages. Nonetheless, public policies on indigenous languages, backed by the necessary resources, can create an enabling environment for support, access and promotion of indigenous languages, indigenous peoples politically, economically and socially.

'Leaving no one behind' is an integral part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including equal opportunities for quality education, employment, health care, safe environment, justice and political participation for all people and all segments of society. The

preservation of indigenous language is detrimental to the inclusion and participation of indigenous people in society, as well as to the realization of their full collective rights.

## **The 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages**

The International Year of Indigenous Languages was proclaimed in 2016, by the United Nations General Assembly (resolution 71/178) based on a recommendation by the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The Permanent Forum expressed concern that 40 per cent of the world's estimated 6,700 languages were in danger of disappearing, the majority of which belong to indigenous people.

The IYIL2019 was 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 through coordinated and long-term action around the world. The Action Plan for the International Year was formulated and 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.

More than 800 action-oriented activities took place around the world as part of IYIL2019, including awareness raising campaigns, capacity-building workshops, academic conferences, intergovernmental meetings, theatrical, musical and artistic performances, hackathons and online events, as well as celebrations and award ceremonies.

The Steering Committee for the organization of the IYIL2019 also launched a global consultative process for the elaboration of a Strategic Outcome Document. Several international and regional meetings were held, bringing together representatives of Member States, indigenous peoples, UN-system organizations, language advocates, experts, academia and other public and private partners. The Outcome Document was released in December 2019 and provides strategic direction and specific recommendations for future global actions, based on the extensive consultations and activities, which took place during IYIL2019.

## **The objective of the High-level Closing Event**

The General Assembly, in 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.

The objectives of the High-Level event were to:

1. Provide a global platform for dialogue between indigenous peoples, Member States, UN-system organizations and other relevant stakeholders to take stock of the current situation of indigenous languages worldwide
2. Confirm a joint commitment, galvanizing existing efforts and progress made, as well as forging new partnerships to empower indigenous language users;
3. Analyze existing challenges and assess progress made and share key conclusions and lessons learnt about the preservation, promotion and revitalization of indigenous languages.
4. Explore new avenues for sustainable and long-term action in line with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples;

The high level event will also contribute to the robustness and reinforcement of the many standard-setting tools adopted by the international community, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (1989), and the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples (2014). It will also reinforce the commitment of all relevant actors to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as the vision of the African Union Agenda 2063.

### **Message from the President of the General Assembly**

The inclusion and empowerment of vulnerable groups guided by the principle of ‘Leaving no one behind’ have been a central overarching priority throughout the mandate of the President of the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, His Excellency, Tijjani Muhammad-Bande. The celebration of the International Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019 was part of an integral set of efforts by the President to advance the recognition, inclusion and promotion of the rights of the 370 million indigenous people worldwide.

In his remarks at the High Level Event marking the end of the 2019 Year of Indigenous Languages, the President highlighted the importance of preserving indigenous languages in the modern world, underlined the efforts taken by the United Nations to fulfill this commitment and called on all stakeholders to come together and rededicate themselves to the cause of preserving all languages.

The President of the General Assembly called attention to the fact that 6 per cent of the world population speaks one or more of the 4,000 currently existing indigenous languages. He noted with great concern, that each month two indigenous languages are being lost, and therewith, the people who speak them are losing a significant part of their identity and culture.

He explained how the protection of indigenous languages is crucial to the advancement of the rights and aspirations of indigenous people, as well as to the broader preservation of humanity's common heritage and peaceful co-existence. Languages carry with them scientific insights, hints of wisdom, and the manifestations of the communities' hopes as members of the humankind. His Excellency also pointed out that languages also play an important role in addressing global challenges, by enabling people to think systematically about their place in the universe, and especially, about how this worldview could be developed to find solutions to pressing problems.

The President stressed that the United Nations has undertaken concrete efforts to proactively address the challenges facing indigenous languages. He highlighted that the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the General Assembly in 2007 was an important milestone to advance the rights and aspirations of indigenous people, including the right to use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages and traditions. Among the markers of progress are also 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 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages is by itself evidence of the international commitment to fight for the preservation of endangered languages.

Building on the strengths of multi-stakeholder cooperation, the President called for more global collaboration between governments, education and research institutions, the private sector and civil society to insure indigenous languages against extinction. He asked Member States to fulfill the declaration and take effective measures, in consultation with indigenous peoples, to enact policies and laws aimed at preserving and strengthening indigenous languages, and combatting prejudice and discrimination of indigenous peoples more broadly. Reinforcing his commitment to SDG4: Quality Education, the President also declared that schools have a major role to play and encouraged them educators to integrate indigenous languages into their curricula.

Finally, the President encouraged all communities to be proud and inspired by their languages and culture, and to continue to preserve their cultural heritage and ensure the intergenerational transmission of their knowledge. He also expressed gratitude to UNESCO and all other agencies and stakeholders for their efforts in organizing a successful 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages and devising a comprehensive Strategic Outcome Document.

### **Speakers and key messages**

The High Level Closing of the Year of Indigenous People brought together Member States; indigenous peoples' representatives, including the designated representatives from the seven sociocultural regions; the indigenous-specific United Nations three-party mechanisms and other

agencies; academia; the private sector and civil society organizations. The event took into consideration geographical balance and equal participation for men and women, youth, persons with disability and displaced persons.

The event featured an innovative and inclusive seating arrangement with free, alternating seating with designated generic seats for Member States and Observers, United Nations entities, indigenous peoples and organizations, on a first-come, first served basis. The speaking order was also alternating between government and UN officials, and indigenous representatives, with a careful consideration to giving the floor to more than one indigenous representative per socio-regional group.

The opening and closing segments included high level speakers such as Mr. Liu Zhenmin, the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs; Ms. Marie-Paule Roudil, the Director for UNESCO New York and Ms. Yalitza Aparicio, the UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Indigenous Peoples. Addressing the audience were also the four Co-Chairs of the Steering Committee of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages and the Chairpersons of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The key messages from the wide range of stakeholders could be summarized as follows:

- Indigenous peoples' languages are an integral part of their identity and cannot be separated from the realization of internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms for all. The recognition and preservation of indigenous languages are essential to ensure the human development and the full participation of indigenous communities in all social, educational, political and economic aspects of society.
- The protection, support and promotion of linguistic diversity and multiculturalism are also crucial to broader global efforts to promote peace, development, good governance, the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want.
- Existing mechanisms do not adequately reflect the needs of indigenous languages and its users, who are being left behind from development efforts. All Member States are called on to enact effective laws and mechanism, in consultation with indigenous peoples, to combat discrimination and promote inclusion, understanding and good relations among indigenous peoples and other segments of society.
- The successful support for indigenous rights and languages will require enhancing the participation of indigenous peoples themselves into decision-making processes, particularly indigenous women and youth, through their own governance structures and representative bodies.

## Concrete Outcomes

The Strategic Outcome Document of the International Year of Indigenous Languages builds on insights from open global consultations and the collaborative activities and events throughout the year. It provides a strategic direction and specific recommendations for future global actions. Through this Outcome Document, all stakeholders, including Member States, indigenous peoples, the UN and other intergovernmental organizations, academia and cultural organizations, the private sector as well as youth and indigenous women organizations, reasserted their commitment to:

1. Support the principle of the protection, support, maintenance and revitalization of languages including indigenous languages;
2. Promote linguistic diversity and multilingualism, and strengthen access to indigenous languages in education, science, culture, communication and information, technological, and economic and political development, and other domains;
3. Develop appropriate language resources and tools, as well as improve service provision in indigenous languages;
4. Mainstream – within broader socio-cultural, public, ecological, economic, political, legal and ethical domains – the knowledge systems and values of indigenous peoples alongside their distinctive worldviews and way of life, as well as the vital role of the languages themselves.

Overall, the IYIL 2019 celebration and outcome document contributed to the robustness and reinforcement of the many standard-setting tools adopted by the international community, including specific provisions to promote and protect the rights and cultures of indigenous people. This added to the wide range of efforts by the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council to advance the right of indigenous people to participate in decision-making processes on issues which would affect them in accordance with their own procedures, based on the recommendations of the 2017 Resolution.

Throughout his mandate, the President of the General Assembly has also organized formal and informal multistakeholder consultations on enhancing the inclusion and political participation of indigenous people, particularly indigenous women, youth, persons with disabilities, displaced persons and older indigenous persons. Stakeholders who participated in these processes include Member States; indigenous peoples' representatives, including the designated representatives from the seven sociocultural regions; the indigenous-specific United Nations three-party mechanisms and other agencies, academia, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and civil society organizations.

The Dialogue Meeting on Enhanced Indigenous Peoples' Participation at the UN on 27-30 January 2020 in Quito also set up a concrete mechanism to ensure the enhanced participation of indigenous peoples in the United Nations. The dialogue decided that all formal and informal consultations and negotiations on enhanced participation of Indigenous Peoples in the General Assembly as well as the Human Rights Council must be conducted in an open, inclusive and transparent manner. Furthermore, indigenous representatives from all seven indigenous regions will appointment two official indigenous advisors to the President of the General Assembly to represent them in future UN processes on enhanced participation.

The President also worked with the UN Secretary General, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, as well as other stakeholders to organize inclusive consultations and meetings on indigenous issues to take place during the 19th and 20th session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. These events aim to raise awareness and facilitate dialogue amongst Indigenous Peoples, the UN and Member States, as well as other relevant stakeholders, and promote the inclusion and participation of indigenous people in international, national and local political processes.

## **Conclusion**

The United Nations General Assembly, with the support of numerous other United Nations entities, has worked extensively over the past decades to create and implement robust international instruments and standards to promote the collective right to self-determination, dignity and well-being of indigenous people worldwide. As an integral parts of these efforts, the celebration of 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages aimed to raise global attention on the the critical significance of indigenous languages, and their critical status, and mobilize all sectors of society to take appropriate action across the world.

The High-Level Closing Event of 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages aimed to provide a global platform for dialogue between indigenous peoples, Member States, the UN system and other stakeholders in order to share ideas, challenges and good practices on how to support, provide access and promote indigenous languages. The event also aimed to revitalize the joint global commitment to promote the empowerment and inclusion of indigenous people and galvanize targeted, long-term action from all stakeholders in this regard.

This event reinforced the principle of 'leaving no one behind' of the 2030 Agenda as well as the central priority of the 74<sup>th</sup> President of the General Assembly to advance the social, economic and political inclusion of all vulnerable and marginalized groups. The President's actions around indigenous issues also supported UN broader efforts to mobilize all stakeholders and resources for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as all other imperative international frameworks.