



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES INDIGENOUS VOICES

Fact Sheet

## Indigenous Languages

*The issue of indigenous languages will be the focus of a half-day discussion on 24 April as part of the Seventh Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, to be held at UN Headquarters in New York from 21 April to 2 May 2008.*

### ❖ Languages under threat

Linguistic diversity is being threatened around the world, and this threat is acutely felt by indigenous peoples.

According to UNESCO, approximately 600 languages have disappeared in the last century and they continue to disappear at a rate of one language every two weeks. Up to 90 percent of the world's languages are likely to disappear before the end of this century if current trends are allowed to continue.

Moreover, fewer and fewer children are learning indigenous languages in the traditional way, from their parents and elders. Even when the parental generation speaks the indigenous language, they do not often pass it on to their children. In an increasing number of cases, indigenous languages are used only by elders.

### ❖ Why is the protection of indigenous languages important?

Saving indigenous languages is a matter of great urgency and is crucial to ensuring the protection of the cultural identity and dignity of indigenous peoples and safeguarding their traditional heritage.

- As a result of linguistic erosion, much of the encyclopedia of traditional indigenous knowledge that is usually passed down orally from generation to generation is in danger of being lost forever. This loss is irreplaceable and irreparable.
- Customary laws of indigenous communities are often set out in their languages, and if the language is lost the community may not fully understand its laws and system of governance that foster its future survival..
- The loss of indigenous languages signifies not only the loss of traditional knowledge but also the loss of cultural diversity, undermining the identity and spirituality of the community and the individual.
- Biological, linguistic and cultural diversity are inseparable and mutually reinforcing, so when an indigenous language is lost, so too is traditional knowledge on how to maintain the world's biological diversity and address climate change and other environmental challenges.



United Nations



### ❖ Language rights

Language rights are inadequately recognized in many countries, and are often neglected by national legislation and policy. Certain languages are given official status and recognition while the majority of languages, particularly indigenous languages, are denied legal recognition. Indigenous languages and their speakers are diminished and made to seem inferior, thus allowing for discriminatory policies and practices.

Aside from the basic **right to maintain and use their own languages**, indigenous peoples' language rights include:

- The right to be educated in their mother tongue.
- The right to have indigenous languages recognized in constitutions and laws.
- The right to live free from discrimination on the grounds of language.
- The right to establish and have access to media in indigenous languages.

### ❖ What can be done to protect and promote indigenous languages?

The survival and development of indigenous languages will require the will and efforts of indigenous peoples as well as the implementation of supportive policy, especially in the field of education, on the part of Member States.

Adopted by the General Assembly last year, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples - along with other relevant human rights standards - provides the foundation for developing policies and laws related to the promotion and strengthening of indigenous languages.

Measures needed to protect and promote indigenous languages include:

- Guaranteeing the right to mother-tongue education for indigenous children.
- Allocating the funding and resources needed to preserve and develop indigenous languages, and particularly for education.
- Translating laws and key political texts into indigenous languages so that indigenous peoples may better participate in the political and legal fields.
- Establishing language-immersion programmes for both indigenous children and adults.
- Raising the prestige of indigenous languages by promoting the use of indigenous languages in public administration and academic institutions.
- Using indigenous languages so that they are kept alive and passed down through the generations by indigenous peoples themselves.

### ❖ Additional information

**Report of the International Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous Languages.** January 2008. UN Document Symbol: E/C.19/2008/3 [NOTE: available in the Official Document System Database: <http://documents.un.org>].

**For more information on the Seventh Session**, please visit:  
[http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/session\\_seventh.html](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/session_seventh.html)

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