

THE SITUATION OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN ASIA



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Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)



The Situation of Indigenous Languages in Asia

February 2022



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The main objective of this Briefing Paper on the Situation of Indigenous Languages in Asia is to build a comprehensive understanding of the situation of indigenous languages in Asia, including the data and statistics available on them, the challenges faced for their survival and the good practices for their revitalization, preservation and promotion.

Indigenous languages are crucial for the overall well-being and identity of indigenous peoples –not only as a means of communication but also as a repository of knowledge on their inter-relationships with their lands and resources, the environment as well as for their understanding of the worldview.

This publication has come at a time when the International Decade on Indigenous Languages has just been launched. The United Nations General Assembly (Resolution A/RES/74/135) proclaimed the period between 2022 and 2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL 2022-2032), to draw global attention on the critical situation of many indigenous languages and to mobilize stakeholders and resources for their preservation, revitalization and promotion.

This Decade aims at ensuring indigenous peoples' right to preserve, revitalize and promote their languages, and mainstreaming linguistic diversity and multilingualism aspects into the sustainable development efforts. It offers a unique opportunity to collaborate in the areas of policy development and stimulate a global dialogue in a true spirit of multi-stakeholder engagement, and to take necessary for the usage, preservation, revitalization and promotion of indigenous languages around the world.

In line with the objectives of the International Decade, this briefing paper will help as a tool in Asia that will contribute to building a global community for indigenous languages, facilitate information-sharing on activities and events organized at the different levels, promote relevant resources, report and monitor progress made, and create new opportunities for exchange and dialogue among a wide network of stakeholders.

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Gam Awungshi Shimray
Secretary General
Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact

ACRONYMS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CDE	Convention against Discrimination in Education
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSICH	Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage
CPPDCE	Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
ILO	International Labour Organization
MTB-MLE	Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PFII	Permanent Forum of Indigenous Issues
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNDRIP	UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization



Indigenous children from Simdega district of Jharkhand, India, Photo WGRC/AWN

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous languages are crucial for the overall well-being and distinct and cultural identity of Indigenous Peoples as a means of communication as well as an expression of their self-determination. Further, indigenous languages are important repositories of unique knowledge on the inter-relationships of the concerned Indigenous Peoples with their lands and resources, the environment and their understanding of the worldview. Such knowledge is accumulated over generations with elaborate vocabularies constructed around topics of ecological, economic and socio-cultural importance. 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 (PFII 2016).

Language is a core component of human rights and fundamental freedoms and is essential to realising sustainable development, good governance, peace and reconciliation. A person's freedom to use his or her chosen language is a prerequisite to freedom of thought, freedom of opinion and expression, access to education and information, employment, and other

values enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Indigenous languages are accordingly vital for the rights and fundamental freedoms of Indigenous Peoples. At the same time, the critical situation of indigenous languages also carries a special and wider significance for everyone because of their role and relevance in peace building, good governance, sustainable development and reconciliation within our societies (UNESCO 2019).

Languages around the world are disappearing at an alarming rate. Scientists have warned that up to half of all human languages will have disappeared by the end of the century as smaller societies are assimilated into national and global cultures (Knight 2004). According to a 2016 report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (PFII), no less than 40 per cent of the estimated 6,700 languages are in danger of disappearing – many of them are indigenous languages. Recently, the UN has stated that a mere 6% of the world population speaks 4,000 surviving indigenous languages while two indigenous languages are dying every month (UN News 2019).

Disappearance of an indigenous language implies loss of vital traditional knowledge, which could be otherwise harnessed for sustainable development and wider human advancement. It also implies the degradation of the culture and identity of the concerned indigenous group that in turn negatively impacts the global cultural diversity. This highlights an urgent need to promote, strengthen and mainstream indigenous languages across social, cultural, economic, environmental, political, scientific and technological domains acknowledging their importance for peace-building, sustainable development, biodiversity, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and reconciliation processes in the society. Further, Indigenous Peoples - in particular women and girls, children, persons with disabilities and older persons - face diverse challenges in preserving and developing their languages, which require a multifaceted and integrated approach to address them. This calls for attributing significant value to indigenous languages in political, economic, social, cultural, environmental, institutional, health-related, educational, communication and information contexts while taking full advantage of the latest scientific and technological developments (UNESCO 2019).

Objectives, Methodology and Limitations

In the above context and with consideration of the recently concluded 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages and the forthcoming International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032, it is necessary to generate an understanding on the situation of indigenous languages in Asia, including the data and statistics available on them, the challenges faced for their survival and development, and the good practices for their revitalisation, preservation and promotion. Accordingly, recommendations can be drawn for the states, Indigenous Peoples and other stakeholders to consider towards improving the situation of indigenous languages in the course of the International Decade.

Thus, this study aims to take stock of the state of indigenous languages in Asia, a region where comprehensive information on the issues of Indigenous Peoples, including their languages, is lacking. It is based on desk review and analysis of existing research and reports provided in the list of reference at the end of the paper. It is guided by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) of the International Labour Organization (ILO) to provide a human rights-based overview of the situation of those languages.

This study focuses on selected countries in Asia, namely: Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. All these UN Member States voted in favour of the adoption of UNDRIP in 2007, except Bangladesh. Along with other UN Member States, all these states reaffirmed their support for UNDRIP at the high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly known as the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in 2014. Among them, only Nepal has ratified the ILO Convention No. 169, whereas India and Bangladesh have ratified ILO Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention, 1957 (No. 107). In addition, these countries have ratified other UN human rights treaties relevant to the issues under review in this study and to the overall marginalisation the Indigenous Peoples are facing.

The study aims to provide an overview rather than an exhaustive review of the situation and experiences in the countries examined. It should also be noted that the study is primarily looking at the content of existing laws and

policies, while it is beyond its scope to establish comprehensive assessments of their implementation. Nevertheless, implementation challenges and gaps, as reported by other sources, have been included, as appropriate.

International Legal Framework

The rights of individuals to freely use, learn and transmit their languages in public and in private without discrimination are well established in international human rights law and are understood to have group or collective dimensions. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration without distinction of any kind such as language, among other grounds (Art. 2). Further, as mentioned above, right to language is required for individuals to enjoy freedom of thought (Art. 18), freedom of opinion and expression (Art. 19), right to work (Art. 23) and right to education (Art. 26) and to participate in the cultural life of the community (Art. 27) and other rights enshrined in the Declaration.



Indigenous Peoples are at a 'Land Right Now' campaign in Nan Province, Thailand, Photo: AIPP

The **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**, in Article 14, ensures the right of individuals to a fair trial, including the guarantee to be informed about the nature and cause of the charge against him in a language he understands, and to have the free assistance of an interpreter if he cannot understand or speak the language used in court. Article 19 guarantees freedom of opinion and expression and the right to impart or receive information and ideas of all kinds in the medium or language of one's choice. As per Article 27, in those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language.

The **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)** recognises the right of everyone to education (Art. 13) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) requires, under Article 29, that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of respect for the child's own cultural identity, language and values as well as the national values and for other civilisations. Further, in those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language (Art. 30).

Article 13 of the UNDRIP states that Indigenous Peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit their languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures to their future generations and that states shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected. Article 14 states that indigenous individuals, especially children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the state and that the state shall take measures to ensure that Indigenous Peoples have access to an education in their own culture and language.

According to the PFII, language rights must be implemented as a collective and an individual right. It is crucial to recognise that language rights of Indigenous Peoples include, but are not limited to:

- (a) The right to maintain and use their own languages;
- (b) The right to have indigenous languages recognised in constitutions and laws;

- (c) The right to maintain personal names, place names and the proper names of their languages;
- (d) The right to be educated in the mother tongue (either in state schools or in their own schools);
- (e) The right to use indigenous languages in court and administrative proceedings;
- (f) The right to non-discrimination on the grounds of language in such domains as work, social security, health, family life, education, cultural life and freedom of speech;
- (g) The right to take part in public affairs and public service without discrimination on the grounds of language;
- (h) The right to establish indigenous media in indigenous languages as well as to have access to mainstream media in indigenous languages (PFII 2008).

The **ILO Convention No. 169**, in its Article 28, affirms that indigenous and tribal 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. When this is not practicable, the competent authorities shall undertake consultations with these peoples with a view to adopt measures to achieve this objective. Measures shall be taken to preserve and promote the development and practice of the indigenous languages of the peoples concerned. The Convention also requires that governments adopt measures appropriate to the traditions and cultures of the peoples concerned, to inform them on their rights and duties, especially regarding labour, economic opportunities, education and health matters, social welfare, and their rights deriving from this Convention. That shall be done, if necessary, by means of written translations and using mass communications in the languages of these peoples (Art. 30).

There are many other internationally recognised standard-setting instruments adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and other UN bodies with specific provisions to promote and protect languages that relate directly or indirectly with the rights of Indigenous Peoples to their languages, including education, cyberspace and other aspects of public or private life. Major UNESCO conventions include the Convention against Discrimination in Education (CDE), 1960; the Convention for the Safeguarding of the

Intangible Cultural Heritage (CSICH), 2003 and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (CPPDCE), 2005.

Additionally, language rights relate to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aiming to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies” (SDG 16), “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education” (SDG 4), and “achieve gender equality” (SDG 5). A list of the relevant key instruments is provided in the Annex.

In the regional context of Asia, as noted by the UN Independent Expert on minority issues, measures to strengthen regional standards for language rights are needed despite progress such as the adoption by the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration in 2012. The Declaration entitles every person to the rights set out in the Declaration without distinction of any kind, including language, affirms economic, social and cultural rights, and includes provisions for the rights of vulnerable and marginalised groups. However, there is no specific provision relating to Indigenous Peoples or linguistic minorities and their rights to language despite the rich and diverse linguistic heritage of the region and the threatened status of many indigenous languages.

National Legal Framework

Language rights, as part of cultural rights, are inadequately recognised in many countries. They have been neglected in national legislation and policy and are often excluded from the realm of human rights and human rights implementation processes. Language rights are also integral elements to the right to self-determination and should be viewed within the context of the universal, interdependent and complementary nature of human rights (PFII 2008).

Only a few states of Asia explicitly recognise language rights in their constitutional framework. The Constitution of **India**, 1950 provides that any section of the citizens residing in India having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same, and no citizen shall be denied admission into any education institution maintained by the



Group activity- HR documentation & advocacy training, Photo: AWN

state or receiving aid from state funds on grounds of language, among others (Art. 29). Linguistic and religious minorities are also guaranteed the right to establish and administer education institutions of their choice, which shall not be discriminated in receiving aid from the state (Art. 30). Similarly, any member of the Federal Parliament or State Legislature who cannot adequately express himself in Hindi or English or the official language(s) of the state can be permitted to address the House in his mother tongue (Art. 120 and 210).

The Indian Constitution sets Hindi in Devanagari script as the official language of the Union while providing for the use of English for all official purposes until the period of 15 years since the commencement of the Constitution (Art. 343). It envisaged phasing out English in favour of Hindi over the 15 years but gave the parliament the power to, by law, provide for the continued use of English even thereafter. Plans to make Hindi the sole official language of the Union were met with resistance in many parts, and the use of English and Hindi, in combination with other official languages, continues till date as provided by the Official Languages Act, 1963.¹ Article 345 of the Constitution provides constitutional recognition as "official language or languages of a state" to any language adopted by a state

¹ See the Official Languages Act, 1963 (as amended in 1967) of India for more details.

legislature as the official language of that state. In addition to the official languages, the Constitution recognises 22 regional languages, including Hindi and a few indigenous languages, as scheduled languages (8th schedule) – most of which have official status in various states. The President of India may also direct that any language spoken by a substantial proportion of the population of a state be also officially recognised throughout the state or any part thereof for specified purposes (Art. 347).

Further, the Constitution provides English as the language to be used in the Supreme Court and the High Courts and for Acts, Bills, etc. until the Parliament provides otherwise by law (Art. 348). There has not been any law prescribing Hindi to be used as a language of the Supreme Court, and hence the sole language of the Supreme Court has been English. Nonetheless, in many high courts, there is, with consent from the President, allowance of the optional use of Hindi (Business Standard 2016). Likewise, the Parliament has so far merely required that all bills brought before it, also be translated into Hindi through the Official Languages Act, though the English text remains authoritative.

Furthermore, every person is entitled to submit a representation for the redress of any grievance to any officer or authority of the Union or a state in any of the languages used in the Union or in the state, as the case may be. The Constitution also states that every state and local authority therein shall endeavour to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups, for which the President may issue directions if needed. Furthermore, the Constitution provides for a “Special Officer” for linguistic minorities to be appointed by the President with the duty to investigate all matters relating to the safeguards provided for the minorities (Art. 350).

Finally, as per the Constitution, in the sixth schedule of the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram (predominantly populated by Indigenous Peoples), the Autonomous District Council may establish, construct, or manage primary schools in the district and may, with the previous approval of the governor, prescribe the language and the manner in which education shall be imparted in the primary schools in the district (6th Schedule, paragraph 6).

The 2015 Constitution of **Nepal** states that all languages spoken as the mother tongues in Nepal are the languages of the nation (Art. 6). While the Nepali language in the Devnagari script is recognised as the official

language of Nepal, a province may, by a provincial law, determine one or more languages of the nation spoken by a majority of people within the province as its official language(s) in addition to Nepali language (Art. 7). The Constitution also provides for setting up a Language Commission tasked to, within five years of its formation, determine the criteria for the recognition of the official language and to make recommendations to the government on the measures to be adopted for the protection, promotion and development of languages, among others (Art. 287).

Further, the Constitution ensures the fundamental right of every Nepalese community residing in Nepal to get education in its mother tongue and, for that purpose, to open and operate schools and educational institutes, in accordance with the law (Art. 31). At the same time, every person and community are guaranteed the right to use their languages, participate in the cultural life of their communities and to preserve and promote its language, script, culture, cultural civilisation and heritage (Art. 32). The Constitution also sets out the state policies to protect and develop languages, scripts, culture, literature, arts, motion pictures and heritages of various castes, tribes, and communities on the basis of equality and co-existence while maintaining the cultural diversity of the country (Art. 51(c)).

In **Vietnam**, the 2013 Constitution provides that the national language is Vietnamese while it also guarantees the right of every ethnic group to use its own language and system of writing, to preserve its national identity, to promote its fine customs, habits, traditions and culture (Art. 5.3). It also ensures the right of a citizen to determine his or her nationality, use his or her mother language and select his or her language of exchange (Art. 42). Further, it affirms that the State shall prioritise the educational development in mountainous and island areas (regions inhabited by ethnic minorities), and in regions that have extremely difficult socio-economic conditions (Art. 61).

Myanmar's 2008 Constitution states that the Union shall assist to develop language, literature, fine arts and culture of the national races (Art. 22(a)) and guarantees every citizen the rights to develop their language, literature, culture, religion, and customs without prejudice to the relations between and among national races and to other faiths if not contrary to the laws enacted for the security of the Union, prevalence of law and order, community peace and tranquility or public order and morality (Art. 354(d)). However, only Myanmar language is affirmed as the official language (Art. 450).

In the **Philippines**, the 1987 Constitution declares Filipino as the national language stating that it shall be further developed and enriched, as it evolves, on the basis of the existing Philippine and other languages. It also requires the government to take steps to initiate and sustain the use of Filipino as a medium of official communication and as language of instruction in the education system as per the law and as deemed appropriate by the congress (Section 6). Further, the official languages for communication and instruction are Filipino and, until otherwise provided by, English while the regional languages are the auxiliary official languages in the regions and shall serve as media of instruction therein, and Spanish and Arabic are to be promoted on a voluntary and optional basis (Section 7). The Constitution also provides for establishing a “National Language Commission” composed of representatives of various regions and disciplines to undertake, coordinate, and promote researches for the development, propagation, and preservation of Filipino and other languages.

In **Malaysia**, the Constitution recognises the Malay language as the national language but also allows using (other than for official purposes), or teaching or learning, of any other language and affirms the right of the federal or state governments to preserve and sustain the use and study of the language of any other community in the federation (Art. 152(1)). At the same time, in the State of Sabah or Sarawak, a native language in current use in the state may be used in native courts or for any code of native law and custom, and in the case of Sarawak, until otherwise provided by enactment of the Legislature, may be used by a member addressing the Legislative Assembly or any committee thereof (Art. 161 (5)).

The Constitution of **Bangladesh** provides that the state language is Bangla (Art. 3) and that the State shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities (Art. 23). Similarly, as per the Constitution of Indonesia, the national languages shall be Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia) (Art. 36) and the State shall respect and preserve local languages as national cultural treasures (Art. 32).

Other countries under the review - Cambodia, Japan, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Thailand, do not explicitly recognise language rights in their constitutions while some governments have adopted laws or policies to provide for mother tongue-based or multilingual education (MTB-MLE), such as in Cambodia and Thailand, which is further discussed in the section below.

DATA AND STATISTICS

Indigenous Peoples constitute over 6 per cent of the global population with an estimated 476.6 million spread across regions (ILO 2019). They represent around 5,000 distinct cultures and speak the major share of the world's almost 7,000 languages – around 4,000 of them. While official statistics state that Asia and the Pacific region is home to more than two-thirds of the indigenous population around the world, recent estimate of Indigenous Peoples' organisations suggests that about 411 million Indigenous People live in the Asia region alone (AIPP 2018).

At present, 96 per cent of the world's languages are spoken by only 3 per cent of the world's population. More than 3,000 languages are reportedly spoken by fewer than 10,000 people each. The UNESCO Endangered Languages Programme notes that half of the world's languages will likely die out by the end of the century as warned by the scientists (UN 2012). Other estimates predict that up to 95 per cent of the world's languages may become extinct or seriously endangered by the end of the 21st century. Most of the languages that are under threat are indigenous languages, and most of them would disappear according to these estimates (PFII 2016).

In 2009, the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger ranked about 2,500 endangered languages according to 5 different levels of vitality: vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered and extinct (Moseley 2010). Accordingly, more than 200 have become extinct during the last three generations, 538 are critically endangered, 502 severely endangered, 632 definitely endangered and 607 unsafe. The Atlas states that 199 languages have fewer than 10 speakers and 178 others have 10 to 50. It also establishes that countries such as India and Indonesia, which have great linguistic diversity, are also those which have the greatest number of endangered languages.

According to Ethnologue, some 2,300 languages are spoken in 30 countries in Asia and it also has the most indigenous languages in the world – almost one third of them (Ethnologue 2020). In Southeast Asia alone, at least 1,000 different indigenous languages are spoken, some more widely than others. For example, the Karen, language is primarily spoken throughout northern Thailand and has been widely documented and is spoken by several million people, on the other hand, languages such as Dupaninan Agta in the Philippines are endangered with only about 1,000 native speakers (Young 2019).

While Indigenous Peoples account for significant linguistic diversity in Asian countries, most of the indigenous languages are in danger. For example, in Malaysia, almost 80 per cent of 133 languages used are indigenous languages spoken by the Orang Asli. Eighty per cent of those indigenous languages are classified as being endangered because of a lack of transmission from one generation to the next. Around eight indigenous languages will soon disappear entirely as there is only a handful of elderly people who still use them. The indigenous languages in Peninsular Malaysia are spoken by the Jahai, Jahut, Jakun, Semai, Mah Meri, Temiar and Temuan; in Sabah by the Kadazan, Dusun, Bajau and Murut; and in Sarawak, by the Iban, Bidayuh and Melanau (New Strait Times 2019).

A survey in Bangladesh found 41 languages, including Bangla – 35 of them indigenous languages (spoken by people categorised as “ethnic” by the government), and at least 14 languages are on the verge of extinction (Hasan 2019). Of them, Lahra is the most endangered language that is spoken by only 215 people, and Koda is another language at risk spoken by only 1,300 speakers as of 2005 (Tripura 2019). Similarly, the UNESCO has warned that 19 Cambodian minority languages are at risk of extinction over the coming decades out of more than 20 languages spoken in the country (Voice of America 2010).

The matrix below includes a snapshot of indigenous groups, languages in danger and relevant legal and policy framework, particularly for MTB-MLE, in the countries under this study based on the information mainly from the UNESCO and Ethnologue:



International Mother Language Day celebration at AIPP, Chiang Mai, Photo: AIPP

Country	Indigenous groups	Number of languages in danger (listed in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Language in Danger 2010)	Languages spoken	Principal language/Language in education	Literacy (Ethnologue)	International conventions (Ethnologue)	Language counts (Ethnologue 2019)
Bangladesh	54 ethnic groups (AIPP 2018) & 41 languages (The International Mother Language Institute, 2018)	14 languages in danger ²	41 (Hasan 2019)	Bangla is the only national and official language. In 2010, following the adoption of the Education Policy, the government began policy reforms for mother tongue-based education in its National Education Policy (Tripura 2016). Since 2017, mother-tongue-based multilingual education is provided in pre-primary and primary levels in five major indigenous languages.	74% (2018)	CPPDCE (2007), CSICH (2009), ICCPR (2000)	The number of individual languages listed for Bangladesh is 41. All are living languages. Of these, 36 are indigenous and 5 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 4 are institutional, 12 are developing, 15 are vigorous, and 10 are in trouble.
Cambodia	24 indigenous groups officially recognized (CERD 2018)	19 languages in danger	27 languages (Kosonen 2017)	Khmer is the official language. It was the exclusive language of instruction in education until the late 1990s when bilingual education programs were first initiated in some minority areas. Five non-dominant languages are currently used as languages of instruction and literacy. The Education Law of 2007 gave	81% (2015 UNESCO)	CPPDCE (2007), CSICH (2006), ICCPR (1992), UNDRIP (2007)	The number of individual languages listed for Cambodia is 27. All are living languages. Of these, 20 are indigenous and 7 are non-indigenous.

² Recent reports suggest that as many as 14 endangered languages are dying. See, for example, “Dying in silence” (The Daily Star, 2021) at <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/14-endangered-languages-dying-silence-2048313>

Country	Indigenous groups	Number of languages in danger (listed in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Language in Danger 2010)	Languages spoken	Principal language/Language in education	Literacy (<i>Ethnologue</i>)	International conventions (<i>Ethnologue</i>)	Language counts (<i>Ethnologue</i> 2019)
India	705 ethnic groups recognized	197 languages in danger	At least 121 distinct languages	local authorities the right to choose the language(s) of instruction in certain minority areas. The "Guidelines on implementation of bilingual education programs for indigenous children in highland provinces" was released in 2010 and the Bilingual Education Decree 2013 further strengthened the position of non-dominant languages in education. After a series of consultations, the government adopted "Multilingual Education National Action Plan" in 2015, which is a detailed four-year plan increasing the role of the government in the delivery of multilingual education. However, the plan falls short of strengthening the multilingual education model and is unclear about the expansion to new languages. (Kosonen 2017).	74% (2018)	CPPDCE (2006), CSICH	Furthermore, 4 are institutional, 5 are developing, 5 are vigorous, 7 are in trouble, and 6 are dying.

Country	Indigenous groups	Number of languages in danger (listed in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Language in Danger 2010)	Languages spoken	Principal language/Language in education	Literacy (<i>Ethnologue</i>)	International conventions (<i>Ethnologue</i>)	Language counts (<i>Ethnologue</i> 2019)
	as "Scheduled Tribes"		2011 census while the common estimate is at least 450 living languages (The Asian Age 2019)	Hindi is the national language, English is the language for official businesses along with Hindi, and the third language is a state-wise recognized language. Article 30 (1) of the Indian Constitution specifically states about education in indigenous and minority languages, and guarantees indigenous, religious and linguistic minorities the right to sustain their languages and cultures through education. India also made its commitment to ensure mother-tongue education to children, including indigenous and minorities. The 3-language formula says a child has to learn the mother tongue/regional language, Hindi and English with Hindi and English gradually introduced in later years of schooling (Singh et. al 2012).		(2005), ICCPR (1979), UNDRIP (2007)	for India is 460. Of these, 447 are living and 13 are extinct. Of the living languages, 419 are indigenous and 28 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 64 are institutional, 119 are developing, 138 are vigorous, 112 are in trouble, and 14 are dying.
Indonesia	> 700 groups (ILO 2017)	143 languages in danger	707 languages (Kosonen 2017)	Bahasa Indonesia is the official language and is also the language of instruction and language of literacy at all levels of education	96% (2018 UNSD)	CDE (1967), CPPDCE (2012), CSICH	The number of individual languages listed for Indonesia is

Country	Indigenous groups	Number of languages in danger (listed in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Language in Danger 2010)	Languages spoken	Principal language/Language in education	Literacy (Ethnologue)	International conventions (Ethnologue)	Language counts (Ethnologue 2019)
Japan	The Ainu officially recognized as indigenous group, Ryukyuan (Okinawan) not recognized as indigenous (AIPP 2018)	8 languages in danger	13 languages (World Atlas 2020)	The standard Japanese is the country's national language, which is taught in schools. Ethnic education for Ainu children is guaranteed by the 1997 Law for the Promotion of the Ainu Culture and for the Dissemination of and Advocacy for the Traditions of the Ainu and the Ainu Culture, also known as the New Ainu Law. Ainu children may attend community-based Ainu language classes. However, Ryukyuan language plays no official role in	spoken by only an estimated 10-20 per cent of the population as their first language. Although the Indonesian Constitution guarantees the use and development of non-dominant languages, they are generally not used as languages of instruction. Further, Law No. 20 of 2003 states that other mother tongues than Indonesian can be used in the early stages of education (Kosonen 2017).	CSICH (2004), ICCPR (1979), UNDRIP (2007)	719. Of these, 707 are living and 12 are extinct. Of the living languages, 701 are indigenous and 6 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 18 are institutional, 73 are developing, 188 are vigorous, 347 are in trouble, and 81 are dying.
					99% (2018)	CSICH (2004), ICCPR (1979), UNDRIP (2007)	The number of individual languages listed for Japan is 15. All are living languages. Of these, 14 are indigenous and 1 is non-indigenous. Furthermore, 1 is institutional, 2 are developing, 10 are in trouble, and 2 are dying.

Country	Indigenous groups	Number of languages in danger (listed in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Language in Danger 2010)	Languages spoken	Principal language/Language in education	Literacy (Ethnologue)	International conventions (Ethnologue)	Language counts (Ethnologue 2019)
Lao PDR	Around 200 ethnic groups (49 officially recognized as “ethnic minorities”) (ILO 2017)	32 languages in danger	84 languages (Kosonen 2017)	public education in the Okinawan education system, and its use has traditionally been discouraged in schools (Ishikida 2005). Lao is the official language. The Education Law of 2007 stipulates Lao as the language in education; the government has been reluctant to allow non-dominant languages in education (Kosonen 2017).	85% (2015)	CPPDCE (2007), CSICH (2009), ICCPR (2009), UNDRIP (2007)	The number of individual languages listed for Laos is 85. All are living languages. Of these, 73 are indigenous and 12 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 1 is institutional, 10 are developing, 43 are vigorous, 26 are in trouble, and 5 are dying.
Malaysia	86 ethnic groups (AIPP 2018)	26 languages in danger	134 languages (Kosonen 2017)	Bahasa Malay is the official and national language. The use, teaching and learning of any language is also guaranteed but the “national primary schools” use Standard Malay as the main language of instruction, whereas	95% (2018)	CSICH (2013), UNDRIP (2007)	The number of individual languages listed for Malaysia is 134. Of these, 133 are living and 1 is extinct. Of the living

Country	Indigenous groups	Number of languages in danger (listed in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Language in Danger 2010)	Languages spoken	Principal language/Language in education	Literacy (Ethnologue)	International conventions (Ethnologue)	Language counts (Ethnologue 2019)
				the “national-type primary schools” use another language, such as Mandarin Chinese, Tamil, or an alternative Indian language, as the main LOI. Some non-dominant languages are offered as subjects in certain schools. Interest in using non-dominant languages in education is increasing, but no major efforts have yet started (Kosonen 2017).			languages, 112 are indigenous and 21 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 11 are institutional, 5 are developing, 9 are vigorous, 95 are in trouble, and 13 are dying.
Myanmar	135 ethnic nationalities (ILO 2017)	28 languages in danger	117 languages (Kosonen 2017)	Myanmar (Burmese) is the official language and the main language of instruction in government schools. The National Education Law of 2014 acknowledges linguistic diversity yet stipulates only English as a Language of Instruction along with Myanmar. The Law supports the teaching of non-dominant languages as subjects and allows local languages to be used orally as auxiliary languages to help non-Myanmar speakers understand the curriculum. The	76% (2016)	CSICH (2014), UNDRIP (2007)	The number of individual languages listed for Myanmar is 121. Of these, 120 are living and 1 is extinct. Of the living languages, 114 are indigenous and 6 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 11 are institutional, 48 are developing, 41 are vigorous, 16 are in trouble, and 4 are dying.

Country	Indigenous groups	Number of languages in danger (listed in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Language in Danger 2010)	Languages spoken	Principal language/Language in education	Literacy (Ethnologue)	International conventions (Ethnologue)	Language counts (Ethnologue 2019)
Nepal	> 80 ethnic groups (59 officially recognized indigenous nationalities) (ILO 2017)	71 languages in danger	123 languages listed in 2011 census	<p>Law was criticized and prompted student protests. State-level language policies are being developed in some regions, and there will likely be more latitude at least for the larger regional languages in education (Kosonen 2017).</p> <p>Nepali is the official language while all languages spoken as the mother tongues in Nepal are recognized in the 2015 constitution as languages of the nation. Further, a province may, by a provincial law, determine one or more than one languages of the nation spoken by a majority of people within the province as its official language(s) in addition to Nepali language. The constitution also ensures fundamental right of every Nepalese community residing in Nepal to get education in its mother tongue and, for that purpose, to open and operate schools and educational institutes, in accordance with the law.</p>	68% (2018)	CSICH (2010), ICCPR (1991), ILO Convention 169 (2007), UNDRIP (2007)	The number of individual languages listed for Nepal is 122. All are living languages. Of these, 109 are indigenous and 13 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 8 are institutional, 18 are developing, 28 are vigorous, 58 are in trouble, and 10 are dying.

Country	Indigenous groups	Number of languages in danger (listed in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Language in Danger 2010)	Languages spoken	Principal language/Language in education	Literacy (Ethnologue)	International conventions (Ethnologue)	Language counts (Ethnologue 2019)
Philippines	110 officially recognized indigenous groups (ILO 2017)	15 languages in danger	183 languages (Kosonen 2017) 72 languages (Kosonen 2017) 108 languages (Kosonen 2017)	The Education Act (1971), revised in 2007, states that primary education should be provided in the mother tongue. Accordingly, guidelines and curriculum have been developed to use mother tongue as medium of instruction as well as to be taught as a subject. Further, the government has developed curriculum for teaching 15 languages and mother tongue-based multilingual education is also being implemented in various languages (Kadel 2016).	98% (2015)	CDE (1964), CSICH (2006), ICCPR (1986), UNDRIP (2007)	The number of individual languages listed for Philippines is 185. Of these, 183 are living and 2 are extinct. Of the living languages, 175 are indigenous and 8 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 39 are institutional, 67 are developing, 38 are vigorous, 28 are in trouble, and 11 are dying.
Thailand	> 50 ethnic groups (10 officially recognized "hill tribes") (ILO 2017)	25 languages in danger	72 languages (Kosonen 2017)	Filipino (based on Tagalog) is the national language and English is also an official language. The official languages were used as the languages of instruction for decades until the Philippines adopted a policy of Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education in 2009. The Department of Education's Order 74 set the framework for Multilingual Education as the basis	94% (2018)	CSICH (2016), ICCPR (1996), UNDRIP (2007)	The number of individual languages listed for Thailand is 73. All are living languages. Of these, 51 are indigenous and 22 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 3 are institutional, 25 are developing, 18 are

Country	Indigenous groups	Number of languages in danger (listed in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Language in Danger 2010)	Languages spoken	Principal language/Language in education	Literacy (Ethnologue)	International conventions (Ethnologue)	Language counts (Ethnologue 2019)
				<p>of educational language policy. Republic Act no. 10533 in 2013 strengthened the pluralistic language policy in education. It made the principles of multilingual education the foundation of the formal education curricula. Currently, 19 languages are used as the initial Languages of Instruction in government schools, and dozens of other languages are used in programs supported by non-governmental and civil society actors (Kosonen 2017). Thai (based on Central Thai) is the de facto official and national language although the Thai Constitution has no reference to the official language and only an estimated 50% of Thai citizens speak Standard or Central Thai as their first language. Thailand's first National Language Policy was approved by two different governments in 2010 and 2012 respectively. The Policy also deals with non-dominant languages and their use in education and calls for the use of learners' first languages as the basis for cognitive development.</p>			vigorous, 21 are in trouble, and 6 are dying.

Country	Indigenous groups	Number of languages in danger (listed in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Language in Danger 2010)	Languages spoken	Principal language/Language in education	Literacy (Ethnologue)	International conventions (Ethnologue)	Language counts (Ethnologue 2019)
Vietnam	> 90 (53 officially recognized "ethnic minorities") (AIPP 2018)	27 languages in danger	108 languages (Kosonen 2017)	<p>Political instability has hindered the operationalization of the language policy. Several non-dominant languages are currently used in mother tongue-based education pilot projects run by academic institutions and non-governmental actors in partnership with the Ministry of Education (Kosonen 2017).</p> <p>Vietnamese is the national and official language (spoken by 87% of the population – Kinh). Many written policies support the use of non-dominant languages in education but in practice Vietnamese remains to be the main Language of Instruction at all levels of education, whereas some non-dominant languages are taught as subjects. A few pilot programs are applying the principles of multilingual education. They use minority students' first language along with Vietnamese, from preschool to the end of the primary level, and positive results have been observed in these programs (Kosonen 2017).</p>	95% (2018)	CPPDCE (2007), CSICH (2005), ICCPR (1982), UNDRIP (2007)	The number of individual languages listed for Viet Nam is 110. Of these, 109 are living and 1 is extinct. Of the living languages, 93 are indigenous and 16 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 1 is institutional, 15 are developing, 46 are vigorous, 41 are in trouble, and 6 are dying.



Hajong Children in Bangladesh, Photo: Bangladesh Jatiya Hajong Sangathon (BJHS)

Index for Ethnologue Language counts:

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| Developing | The language is in vigorous use, with literature in a standardised form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable. |
| Vigorous | The language is used for face-to-face communication by all generations and the situation is sustainable. |
| Threatened | The language is used for face-to-face communication within all generations, but it is losing users. |
| Shifting | The child-bearing generation can use the language among themselves, but it is not being transmitted to children. |
| Moribund | The only remaining active users of the language are members of the grandparent generation and older. |
| Nearly Extinct | The only remaining users of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language. |
| Dormant | The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community but no one has more than symbolic proficiency. |
| Extinct | The language is no longer used and no one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language. |

Significance of Indigenous Languages

As noted above, **indigenous languages are vital for the rights and fundamental freedoms of Indigenous Peoples not only as a means of communication but also for their overall well-being with preservation of their distinct cultural identity as well as expression of their self-determination.** Indigenous languages reflect the world views of indigenous communities. Loss of language also erodes the identity and spirituality of the community and the individuals. Customary laws of indigenous communities are formulated in their languages or often best understood in those languages. If the language is lost, the community may not fully understand its laws and system of governance.

For example, in the Philippines, the indigenous Kankanaey Igorot have the concept of *inayan*, which prescribes the proper endeavor in various circumstances. It encompasses the relationship of the individual to the community and to the ancestors. Beyond simply saying “be good”, it carries the admonition that “the spirits/ancestors will not approve”. However, such notion or value is being lost as many of the young people now no longer speak the local languages but use English or the national language instead. In lack of dialogue between elders and the youth, not just language but also ancestral ethical principles are being lost (Degawan 2019).

Further, **language rights should be considered from a holistic perspective. They are required for the enjoyment of other basic rights or they cannot be fully enjoyed in the absence of other rights, such as right to decent work, health or education. A recent ILO report indicates barriers associated with language³ as one of the factors causing significant disparities in participation in employment for persons belonging**

³ While Indigenous Peoples in Asia and the Pacific have higher participation in employment than non-indigenous groups, 56.5 per cent of Indigenous Peoples in North America are employed compared to 59.6 per cent of non-indigenous people. Research undertaken in Canada indicates that these differences can be attributed to such factors as lack of adequate education, skills and training, discrimination, shortage of jobs in communities, as well as barriers associated with language and geographies (ILO 2020).



Learning, Photo: Kritchayathorn Rodpu, Thailand/Indigenous Media Network (IMN)

to indigenous groups compared to their non-indigenous counterparts (ILO 2019). Similarly, a community-led participatory research in Thailand found that Indigenous Peoples, particularly women, face language barriers and are subjected to negative attitudes and ethnicity-based discriminatory practices while trying to obtain citizenship or accessing healthcare services (IWNT, Manushya 2019).

The PFII has consistently emphasised the importance of indigenous languages for providing indigenous children with quality education in their mother tongue, which not only strengthens their ability to communicate in their own language but also benefits their overall academic achievements and lowers dropout rates. A strong foundation in indigenous language has also proved to benefit the ability of those children to learn the dominant non-indigenous language used where they live (PFII 2016). Accordingly, to eliminate drop-out rate, achieve “Education for All” and avoid discrimination against indigenous groups, the Cambodian government and NGOs have introduced and developed multilingual education in the remote mountainous region of northeastern Cambodia. The initiative began with piloting of 20 MTB-MLE preschools in indigenous languages in 5 provinces. After teaching indigenous languages in primary school,

indigenous students are gradually transitioned into Khmer and other foreign languages (Kaing et al 2017). According to CARE, the NGO that supported multilingual education in the country, enrolments in multilingual education schools doubled between 2009 and 2015 (Nowaczyk 2015).

Likewise, a study in Nepal found that with the introduction of multilingual education, the dropout rate decreased significantly and children enjoyed going to school. Teachers were also enthusiastic about the program and favoured continuing it despite many problems, parents were happy with the program as well, however, they also expected teaching of English from the onset of schooling (UNESCO 2011). Another study indicates further benefits of multilingual education such as higher learning achievements of students, including effective lifelong learning skills, preservation of identity of minority language communities, etc. At the same time, it identifies many challenges for multilingual education in Nepal, such as gaps in government plans, policies and implementation, lack of faith in quality of community schools providing such education, and increasing attraction towards English medium education, among others (Kadel 2016).

On the other hand, in the absence of multilingual education, indigenous children have lower enrolment rates and poorer learning results compared to their non-indigenous counterparts that leads to lesser literacy rates among indigenous communities. A 2008 research shows that in Lao PDR, students speaking languages belonging to the Tai-Kadai language family, which include the national language Lao, have higher enrolment rates (77.2 per cent for male and 75.4 per cent for female) than those speaking indigenous languages that are not used as language of instruction. Thereby, children belonging to indigenous groups such as those speaking Hmong-Yao languages have the lowest primary enrolment rates with only 46.3 per cent for male and 44.2 per cent for female – well below the national average which is 65.6 per cent for male and 64.1 per cent for female. Such disparities are even greater for upper secondary enrolments while the issue of language of education also exacerbates the gender disparity. Accordingly, the functional literacy rates of Sino-Tibetan language speaking groups (22.1 per cent for male and 14.6 per cent for female) were less than half of Tai-Kadai groups (47.6 per cent for male and 33.5 per cent for female). A government report noted the language of instruction as a possible reason of exclusion of indigenous minorities. Similarly, in Thailand, surveys have shown that minority children with poor Thai language skills had 50% lower learning

results than Thai-speaking students in all main subjects while over 25% of students, mostly in border areas inhabited by ethnolinguistic groups, had problems in reading and writing Thai (Kosonen 2009).

Another **significance of indigenous languages is their role and relevance in peace building, good governance, sustainable development and reconciliation within wider societies.** A case in point is in Bangladesh, where fulfillment of the right to education in mother tongues of Indigenous Peoples has been one of the political demands of Indigenous Peoples, which was recognised in the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord 1997 and the Hill District Council (amendment) Acts and other government policy and strategy documents of the government formulated after the accord. However, implementation of the laws and policies has been extremely slow (Tripura 2016). Since 2017, the government has implemented MTB-MLE in five major indigenous languages (Chakma, Marma, Kokborok, Sadri and Garo) in pre-primary and primary classes. Nonetheless, the program is still not properly rolled-out in the field because of absence of teachers' training curriculum and calendars and lack of specific budget allocation for teachers' development.

Furthermore, **indigenous languages are treasures of vast traditional knowledge depicting their inter-relationships with their lands and**



Language learning, Photo: Sri Petch Changcharoensuk, Thailand/IMN

resources as well as concerning their ecological systems and processes and ways to protect and use some of the most vulnerable and biologically diverse ecosystems in the world. It is thus no coincidence that the areas where Indigenous Peoples live are those that contain the greatest biological diversity, which is shown in the fact that 80 per cent of the remaining biological diversity of the earth is found in some 22 per cent of the global land area owned, occupied or used by Indigenous Peoples. Hence, when an indigenous language is lost, so too is important traditional knowledge about how to maintain some aspects of the world's biological diversity.

Biological, linguistic and cultural diversity in relation to Indigenous Peoples are inseparable and mutually reinforcing. A case in point is the traditional symbiotic relationship of Thailand's indigenous Karen people with nature. The Karen people manage the forests around their villages and fields through a set of customs, prohibitions and rituals. For example, cutting trees in *pga dae pau*, the umbilical-cord forest (i.e. a sacred forest where the umbilical cord of newborn babies is tied to trees for establishing a long-term relationship of protection with chosen trees) is strictly prohibited. Further, the link of the Karen people with their environment is indicated by the term they use for their elders, who possess wisdom and provide guidance for the younger generations, as '*pga mi pga pga*' – literally translated as 'the wild and the forest'. At the same time, the rotational farming or *rai mun wian* that they practice encourages a remarkable level of biological diversity mimicking the biodiversity around them. More than 200 species and varieties of plants are found and used in the rotational system, which also creates shelter and habitat for a wide range of animals, birds and insects during different stages of rotation in an ecologically sustainable manner, unlike in industrial monoculture (Trakansuphakon 2018). A more common example of such significant knowledge transmitted in indigenous languages, which has been cited in the fight against climate change, is how the Inuit have more than fifty terms for snow – each appropriately describing types of snow in different situations. The same holds true with the Igorot of the Cordillera region in the Philippines when describing rice throughout its plantation cycle as well as its uses as food or others (Degawan 2019).

Similarly, indigenous traditional knowledge engraved in their language, which are usually transmitted through legends or stories recited by the

elders to the younger ones around campfires, can also help the world combat with disasters that are growing more common in recent times, including due to climate change. For example, it is reported that the indigenous Moken (sea gypsies) of the Andaman Sea living off the coast of Thailand and Myanmar for hundreds of years suffered no casualties at all in the 2004 tsunami in the Indian ocean while it killed around 300,000 people. Experts suggest that the Moken could tell the tsunami was coming when they saw the sea receding very fast in one wave, which they call “Laboon” – “the wave that eats people,” which they believe is brought by the angry spirit of the ancestors to clean the earth (CBS 2005). There are many such examples that demonstrate how indigenous traditional knowledge could help cope with various challenges faced by the world – but are often undocumented and unheeded. **The protection of indigenous languages is therefore not only a cultural and moral imperative, but an important aspect of global efforts to address biodiversity loss, climate change and other environmental challenges and achieve sustainable development (PFII 2016).**

CHALLENGES AND THREATS

The threats faced by indigenous languages are the direct result of colonialism and colonial practices that led to decimation of Indigenous Peoples, their cultures and languages. For example, in India, the British colonisation spelt doom for a large number of tribal communities, who feared reprisals from colonialists and thus turned wary of speaking their own language and began using the dominant regional language (The Asian Age 2019). Thereby, **colonial and post-colonial laws and measures are continued in the form of assimilationist policies that emphasise a model of a homogenous nation-state that shares one culture and one language** and thus result in further subjugation of indigenous cultures and languages. Such laws and policies that result in the destruction of indigenous languages are also referred to as linguicide.

In Japan, for example, the government, following its conquest over the Ainu through many battles between 1457 and 1789 and consequent annexation of their territories in 1869, sought to assimilate the indigenous Ainu by introducing the Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act in 1899 in



Photo: Thanawut Ritthuay, Thailand/IMN

course of its modernisation amidst growing sense of nationalism (CNN 2019). The Act implemented Japan's compulsory national education system (in Japanese language) in Hokkaido and eliminated traditional systems of land rights and claims of the Ainu. They were forced to adopt Japanese customs through a series of government initiatives over time. As a result, while the 2006 survey by Hokkaido government shows that 304 out of 23,782 Ainu speak their language with 4.6% of them able to teach it, other sources⁴ estimate that only between 2 to 15 native Ainu speakers remain (Tahara 2009).

In Asia, despite an overwhelming majority of countries having more than one language spoken within their borders with significant number of speakers, **discriminatory language policies from the colonial era continued after independence in many countries favouring dominant or foreign languages that Indigenous Peoples do not speak as their first language.** Policies, legislation and their implementation often discriminate against indigenous languages in several ways, including by giving special advantages in terms of participation in governance or administration,

⁴ See, for example, Ainu language information on the Endangered Languages Project at <http://www.endangeredlanguages.com/lang/1212>.

territorial privileges, medium of instruction for education or representation in the media to speakers of certain non-indigenous languages.

In the prevailing situation, **most Asian states**, as demonstrated in the matrix above, **give official status and recognition to certain languages while most languages, particularly indigenous languages, are denied legal recognition**. Although more than 2000 languages are spoken in Asia, there are only 50 national and official languages in 30 Asian countries – of which 22 are in India alone (Kosonen 2009). Among the countries in this study, India is the only country that has given official status to several languages, including some indigenous languages. Most countries have defined a single language as official/national language, such as in Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam, despite significant linguistic diversity in these countries. This deplorable imbalance weakens indigenous languages and contributes to views that portray those languages as inferior and give room for discriminatory and corrupt practices that are difficult to combat through legal or political means (PFII 2008). It also diminishes the linguistic diversity in these countries and increases divisions among populations weakening the countries in the overall.

Globalisation and the rise of a small number of culturally dominant languages has also exacerbated the threat against indigenous languages. That has led to a situation in which indigenous language is no longer transmitted by parents to their children, nor is it used on a daily basis in many indigenous communities. Thus, although language loss has happened in the past, the world today is facing an unprecedented major linguistic and cultural extinction on a scale at par with major extinction events of the past, in which most of the world's species became extinct. Such challenge is most acutely faced by Indigenous Peoples in the absence of immediate and concerted actions of the concerned state and non-state actors (PFII 2016).

Further, **dispossession of indigenous communities of their lands and resources or their forced relocation or removal from their ancestral territories poses a major threat to the indigenous cultures and languages**. Lands and territories hold central position for these peoples because their cultures and languages, including traditional knowledge, are developed and transmitted – often orally – across generations and are all centered around their land and territories. Thus, when Indigenous Peoples are often dispossessed and displaced from their lands, territories and

resources in the name of development projects or business investments, it also results in the loss of their cultures and languages. Such dispossession and displacement are mostly accompanied by criminalisation of any dissent of Indigenous Peoples or reprisals against their leaders and human rights defenders. In such situations, when they have to engage in national criminal justice systems, language barriers constitute a major obstacle to access to justice for Indigenous Peoples and can also lead to violations of their other rights.

Displacement from their traditional habitat is also often caused due to natural disasters that can result in endangerment or loss of indigenous languages, particularly for smaller language communities when they migrate to urban or other areas. More recently, **climate change induced disasters and other impacts have also increased the vulnerability of many indigenous communities to loss their traditional lands and resources and consequently their cultures and languages.** Nonetheless, although language loss is attributed to globalisation and migration, it is also the result of systemic and deliberate state laws and policies, which are discriminatory and racist (PFII 2008).

A key challenge for preservation and promotion of indigenous languages is the lack of available data on the status of those languages. There is no accurate estimate of how many indigenous languages are there at national levels and in the world at present. This situation results in part from the fact that there is no internationally agreed definition of “Indigenous Peoples” or “language” and that the distinction between a language and a dialect is not always straightforward and can often be politicised (PFII 2016). Thus, while most Asian countries do not legally recognise Indigenous Peoples or their rights, including language rights, it would be imperative to use the criteria of self-identification to recognise indigenous languages in the same manner as for the identification of Indigenous Peoples.

Many countries, including those that officially recognise Indigenous Peoples, do not collect any data about indigenous languages and even when they do so, the methods are usually faulty. Census questions often fail to accurately reflect the degree to which an indigenous language is spoken and used. For example, in Nepal, Indigenous Peoples’ organisations have repeatedly raised concerns about flaws in national census, which the census bureau has acknowledged (IWGIA 2011). It has been reported that

there was lack of inclusion of enumerators from indigenous nationalities. Non-indigenous enumerators filled the census forms in indigenous communities' areas without adequate information provided to the respondents. As a result, there was manipulation of data, especially regarding religion, caste and language, which negatively affected the quality of the census. Thus, census offices must endeavor to work in cooperation with Indigenous Peoples when conducting censuses and other data collection, not only in their implementation but also at all stages, including the design phase of the censuses (PFII 2016).

As noted by the UN Special Rapporteur on minority rights, **legal recognition and protection of minority languages are important as they create legal safeguards and a requirement for policy and program measures to address the issues of those languages, and often result in institutional attention.** Lack of such recognition and protections results in an environment where there is little or no formal legal commitment to promote and protect the languages or the rights of the linguistic minorities other than those required by international law (UN 2012). In such situations, indigenous languages may remain largely in the private domain in terms of language use, transmission and education. However, even where indigenous languages are officially recognised, and legal provisions exist, it does not often result in implementation of rights in practice.

In Asia and the world around, **governments frequently cite lack of resources as a major obstacle in protecting indigenous languages.** Although this is sometimes a valid concern, it is important to view indigenous languages not as a financial drain but as a valuable resource and that language diversity is a major contribution to the wealth of the country's cultural heritage. Therefore, **there is a need for more political will to provide the funding (especially predictable funding) required to preserve and develop this heritage** (PFII 2008). Nonetheless, even when states seek revitalisation, preservation and promotion of indigenous languages, language programs are frequently underfunded and where some funding becomes available, the sustainability of such programs becomes a challenge. For instance, in the Philippines, the government has launched the use of mother tongues in schools, but no resources are available in terms of teachers and learning materials to teach the indigenous children in their mother tongues (Degawan 2019).

Indigenous Peoples living in urban areas or persons belonging to rural indigenous communities who migrated to cities voluntarily or involuntarily face even greater challenges to maintain and revitalise their languages. To a large extent, Indigenous Peoples migrate on a seasonal or short-term basis, allowing them to maintain economic, social and cultural ties with their communities of origin, and thus resist assimilation. However, migrants (indigenous and non-indigenous alike) often tend to stay longer than they originally anticipated, sometimes losing touch with their peoples, leading to increased social fragmentation, a loss of identities and the deterioration of language skills (SPFII 2008). In urban settings, Indigenous Peoples or communities are usually confronted with more severe financial hardships than those in rural areas, which pushes language preservation and development to the backburner in their priority issues. There are also only few language speakers in close proximities in cities that can hinder language programs.

Another challenge is that many states and international organisations treat languages only as part of cultural heritage and thus do not provide the holistic perspective for the preservation of those languages. For example, much of states' grants for language programs goes into academic study of languages that are mostly esoteric and offer little assistance to



An Indigenous young boy in Malaysia playing the traditional flute, 'Sompoton', Photo: JOAS

communities but take up significant part of the grant as overhead cost (Grounds 2007). Likewise, international conventions refer to the need to preserve the importance of traditional knowledge, such as in Principle 22 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, 1992, Article 8 (j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 1993, and Article 7.5 of the 2016 Paris Agreement. However, neither these instruments nor any others explicitly consider the importance of promoting and protecting indigenous languages that hold such knowledge. Therefore, it is worth considering the integration of the challenges the Indigenous Peoples face in preserving their language and environment in addition to the adoption of an international instrument that covers all aspects (not only the environmental one) related to the protection of these languages and the overall rights of their speakers.

Further, some states, particularly in relation to transnational or cross-border indigenous languages consider Indigenous Peoples and their cultures as a threat to national security and set legislative restriction on the indigenous/linguistic communities. Thus, it should be stressed that the promotion of indigenous languages does not undermine national unity, rather it is a positive contribution to national heritage. Indigenous languages often do not coincide with national borders and they should therefore be dealt with at the national level and in the context of cross-border cooperation (PFII 2008).

At the same time, **indigenous language and education face specifically serious threats in the context of conflicts and militarisation**, whereby those cultures and languages or their institutions often become tools or means for oppression. A case in point is the great extent of attacks on Lumad schools or their forced closures by the Philippine security forces in their anti-insurgency operations against communist guerillas. In the context of the government's failure to provide culturally appropriate education to younger Lumad generations, indigenous Lumad communities set up those schools as a way to maintain their cultures and languages and defend their ancestral territories (Wattimena 2019). Similarly, in the Kachin state of Myanmar, the Kachin ethnic armed organisation, engaged in conflict with the government for the past six decades seeking autonomy for the state, established its own institution for higher education with courses taught in Kachin language (besides English and Chinese) after their 17-year-old truce with the government broke in 2011. However, the graduate students face difficulties as their academic degrees are not recognised by the government (Radio Free Asia 2020).

Although different indigenous languages have a great deal in common and share similar challenges, there are also some differences, especially based on the number of speakers and the different national contexts in which Indigenous Peoples live. For example, smaller language communities often struggle to receive any funding at all for the preservation and promotion of their languages. Many indigenous languages with smaller number of speakers are historically underestimated of their importance despite their possession of vast traditional knowledge, and their speakers are stigmatised or they lack written scripts or teaching systems. The challenges that indigenous language speakers face in the developed world tend to be related to the revitalisation and attempts to repair the damage that has been done to indigenous languages over generations of culturally detrimental policies, while in the developing world, there is a greater focus on maintenance and strengthening of indigenous languages.

There are also many practical challenges when efforts are made to preserve and promote indigenous languages, which specifically demonstrate the importance of indigenous ownership in any indigenous language efforts. For example, the objectives of solving some programs for endangered languages may not coincide with those of Indigenous Peoples when they are not developed in conjunction with the concerned peoples. Recording a language as an archival artefact is a preservation attempt that, although worthy, often does not adequately meet the community objectives of language revitalisation and increasing the number of fluent speakers. It is another challenge to produce a curriculum for indigenous children that is relevant to them and their communities, while also following national curriculums prescribed by the government. Funding and teachers' training and other support are needed to develop these programs that respect and promote indigenous cultures and languages as well as provide indigenous children with the capacities to become productive members of national societies (PFII 2008).

Finally, information and communication technologies (ICT), though they provide significant opportunities for language programs, can also pose challenges for indigenous languages and their communities when used in ways that are disrespectful of their customs and worldviews. There are past instances in which indigenous languages had not been recorded in a manner appropriate to their beliefs. Through ICT, expose indigenous cultures can also be exposed to media, such as TV, radio, games

etc. from dominant cultures and in dominant languages, which can be difficult to compete for indigenous mother tongue. Similarly, focusing on technology may also divert limited financial resources from tried and tested language immersion efforts towards the development of websites or applications that may have limited or no value in generating new speakers as desired by Indigenous Peoples. An increased reliance on technology can also have a negative effect on the interaction between younger and older generations (PFII 2016).

GOOD PRACTICES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Although threats and challenges to preserve and promote indigenous languages abound, there are also several good practices that exist at national and international levels for improving the situation of indigenous languages in Asia and beyond, some of which are discussed below.

First and foremost, it should be noted that **any efforts to revitalise, preserve and promote indigenous languages must be owned by Indigenous Peoples themselves.** Although states have obligations to save indigenous languages, Indigenous Peoples across Asia and the world have been leading various efforts to preserve and promote their languages because they could not wait for the states or the UN to provide them with the required resources. They have undertaken such efforts to overcome decades or centuries of destructive policies and legislation often with limited resources, with little or no external support and in an environment, where a few major languages dominate the cultural and linguistic landscape.

In **Bangladesh**, for example, Indigenous Peoples' organisations have taken the lead in addressing the urgent need for access to education in the mother tongue through various initiatives, such as the establishment of multilingual pre-primary centres, which provide education only in mother tongues in the first year and introduce Bengali to children in the second year. A central aspect of the success of the multilingual pre-primary centres has been the strong focus on consultations with and ownership of communities in terms of managing the pre-primary centres, choosing the teachers and reviewing the development of teaching materials. The government has taken up the multilingual pre-primary centres as a successful model for inclusive education in the mother tongue, with the purpose of replicating the initiative more broadly (PFII 2016).



Photo: IPF

Likewise, Indigenous Peoples and their organisations in **Malaysia** have been running early childhood centres to prepare children to enter government primary schools and strengthen their foundation to understand their own languages and practice their own cultures. Such centres in Sabah also show the need to include indigenous languages and cultures into early childhood care and education curriculum and promote multilingualism (PFII 2008).

Mother tongue-based/multilingual education has been implemented as a part of formal education in various countries under this study, except Lao PDR, as indicated in the matrix above. Such programs have often been initiated by or in collaboration with national and international NGOs, local private/public educational institutions and the government. For example, as noted above, a Highland Children’s Education Project in **Cambodia** was formulated by CARE in 2000/2001 in close consultation with the Cambodian government. It included creating community schools, developing curriculum and recruiting and training local teachers for multilingual education in remote communities that began with two languages (Tampuen and Kreung) in six schools in Ratanakiri province and later expanded to state schools across Ratanakiri and other provinces (Middelborg 2005). Eventually, the community schools were also handed

over to the government with a commitment to expand multilingual education across Cambodia under a Multilingual Education National Action Plan (CARE 2015). As of 2019, multilingual education curriculum is available in five indigenous languages – Bunong, Kavet, Kreung, Tampuan and Brao – which is offered in preschools and primary schools with high numbers of indigenous children in Mondulkiri, Ratanakiri, Kratie and Stung Treng provinces (Ball, Smith 2019).

Also, in **Thailand**, pilot MTB-MLE projects conducted jointly by an NGO, Mahidol university in cooperation with the concerned government agency, and indigenous and minority communities are being run in 35 schools for 10 indigenous and minority languages across the country. The pilot projects have shown significant increase in learning achievements of indigenous and minority students across all subjects, including Thai language. However, the government is yet to officially adopt a national policy or action on multilingual education (NIPT, IEN 2015).

India illustrates the proportionality principle in public education with more than 30 minority languages used as a medium of instruction in public schools with (usually) Hindi and English gradually introduced in later years of schooling (UN 2013). There are also Indigenous Peoples’ organisations and NGOs that have undertaken independent efforts for multilingual education. For example, an NGO in northeast India has been involved in revitalisation of indigenous Tiwa language by teaching children basic Tiwa language and their traditional cultures, which runs parallel with the formal education system. Tiwa language has been listed as UNESCO’s definitely endangered language with only 23,000 speakers left of 200,000 population.⁵

In **Nepal**, different multilingual education programs have been implemented by the government and local or international NGOs in different parts of the country since 2007, including mother tongue-based education in at least eight indigenous languages. However, the most ambitious program so far is the one established by the Ministry of Education in 2014 involving 732,962 children in 6,598 schools in 70 districts with more than 11,000 teachers trained. In this program, the mother tongue is employed as an additional language in primary grades, but the assessment of students takes place in Nepali, the national language. Similarly, the government has developed curriculum for teaching 15 languages and also

5 See video “Endangered Voices: Stories of Tiwa language training” (2018) at <https://en.iyil2019.org/resources/tiwa-language-revitalization-program-of-north-east-india/>

prepared teaching materials, among other activities (Kadel 2016). There are also indigenous mother tongue-based schools established as early as 1991 following a long history of language rights movement in Nepal, which continue to exist and teach up to the secondary education while indigenous languages are also taught at university levels (Hoek, Shrestha 1999).

Although MTB-MLE is recognised as one of the principal ways to preserve indigenous languages and promote education/literacy for Indigenous Peoples, it is estimated that only 62 per cent of the population have access to education in their first language in East Asia and the Pacific (including Southeast Asia) and 66 per cent in South Asia. Lack of multilingual education in indigenous or minority languages is further understood when national estimates are analysed. For example, it is estimated that only 54% of the total population in Nepal had access to education in their first language, whereby 45% of the population speak the majority language, Nepali, as their first language. Accordingly, in Japan 99 per cent of the population is estimated to have access to education in their first language followed by Vietnam (91%), Cambodia (90%), Bangladesh (83%), India (75%), Myanmar (61%), Laos (50%), Thailand (50%), Malaysia (45%), Philippines (26%), Indonesia (10%) and Timor-Leste (8%) (Kosonen 2009). Those figures show that there is much room left to expand MTB-MLE across Asia, which can provide opportunities for efforts led by the concerned Indigenous Peoples or their organisations in collaboration with relevant local or international NGOs and the government.

At the same time, **many Indigenous Peoples' organisations have instituted their own education systems for revitalising and promoting their languages and cultures.** For example, in Indonesia, the Indigenous Peoples' alliance, Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara has an educational branch with 31 independent indigenous school networks registered as of 2018. The self-funded volunteer-run indigenous schools (*sekolah adat*) started in 2015. While each school is different, most curricula focus on teaching languages, culture and environmental consciousness through farming, crafts, storytelling, music, dance, martial arts and forest excursions. Although called “school”, they function as afternoon learning clubs catering to indigenous children who attend state-run primary schools in the morning. Teachers are indigenous volunteers and include local elders (Susteyo 2018).

In the **Philippines**, the “Schools of Living Traditions” in different indigenous communities similarly keep their cultural forms, including



*Indigenous students from Aathpahariya Community, Dhankuta in Nepal,
Photo: Manoj Aathpahariya, LAHURNIP*

languages, alive (Degawan 2019). Thereby, a “culture bearer” or “master” or “specialist” teaches young people from the same ethno-linguistic community skills and techniques of doing a traditional art or craft. The mode of teaching is usually non-formal, oral and with practical demonstrations. Unlike “*sekolah adat*” in Indonesia, the Schools of Living Traditions are established by the government or according to its guidelines – often with the financial support of business enterprises –and then handed over to the tribal leaders (PIA 2019). As of today, 13 such schools are listed across the Philippines.⁶

The Ainu of **Japan** have also set up a learning system where the elders teach the language to their youths (Degawan 2019). As of 2005, 12 Ainu language schools have been opened, and additionally, some universities offer Ainu language courses (Ishikida 2005). At the same time, the Ainu Association of Hokkaido gives free language courses in 14 regions in Hokkaido to both Ainu and Japanese students. The Ainu language textbooks, magazines, dictionaries as well as bilingual Ainu-Japanese collections of the Ainu oral literature have also been published, which are increasing year by year.

⁶ See “School of Living Traditions Guidelines” and maps of the SLTs across the Philippines on the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) website at <https://ncca.gov.ph/school-of-living-traditions/slt-guidelines/>

Further, a private radio station has been broadcasting a weekly Ainu language class program over Hokkaido territory since the 1980s. However, the Ainu, who are generally marginalised, have little time to devote to learning their language. Thus, if the Ainu is not a part of the curriculum in Hokkaido schools, its future is uncertain even though it is also entitled to government protection as part of Japanese intangible heritage, notably through its official recognition as a second national language (Tahara 2009).

Indigenous Peoples' organisations and linguists in **Nepal** have also produced various language materials in indigenous languages such as newspapers, magazines/journals, learning and literacy materials, literature, folk song cassettes, films, etc. Indigenous community-owned or private radio and TV channels run solely in indigenous languages as well as radio and TV programs in indigenous languages in commercial radio and TV stations are also broadcast across the country and worldwide on the internet (UNDP 2009; Dahal, Aram 2013). Those include Nepal's first community television channel – Indigenous TV as well as TV channels targeted for one indigenous group/language such as Nepalmandal TV. More recently, indigenous activists in the country have also been undertaking innovative initiatives such as Newar youths who have been organising calligraphy workshops in various communities and institutions to revive the traditional Ranjana script of their language (Nepali Times 2018).

In **Malaysia**, universities have been significantly involved in creating awareness of and elevating indigenous languages and their related cultural knowledge and practices such as by including indigenous language programs in their courses, producing literary and learning materials such as digital stories by indigenous youths, and organising exhibitions, seminars and culture festivals (Malay Mail 2019, New Straits Times 2019, and The Star 2019). At the same time, publishing indigenous language children's books, including e-books, and other learning materials, such as animation videos, have stemmed in Asia and across the world and have shown to be effective in preservation and promotion of indigenous languages.⁷

There are limited good practices related to data collection on Indigenous Peoples and their languages in Asia. So far, only few

7 See, for examples, "Let's Read: Asia's free digital library for children" of the Asia Foundation at <https://reader.letsreadasia.org/?uiLang=4846240843956224&IId=4652254699192320>

countries, such as **India** and **Nepal**, collect disaggregated data by indigenous/ethnic group or on indigenous languages in their national censuses or surveys. However, those censuses or surveys do not provide a full and comprehensive picture of the indigenous groups and their languages while many languages are still unaccounted for. For example, a recent research in Malaysia has found a previously undiscovered indigenous language, Jedek, which is spoken by only 280 people and reflects a way of life and culture where the sexes enjoy great equality and there is little violence (The Nation 2018).

More intensive and systematic data collection efforts are thus needed. In the **Philippines**, the government has implemented a multi-year Philippine Indigenous Ethnographies Project deed on the production of ethnographies of Indigenous Peoples created by empowering the Indigenous Peoples themselves and to utilise them in the formulation of their own plans for the preservation and development of their culture, heritage and languages (Philippine Mission to the UN 2019). In Thailand, Indigenous Peoples' organisations, supported by international NGOs and donor agencies, have similarly developed a database of certain indigenous groups in the country, including their geo-cultural information and other resources.⁸ Indigenous Peoples' organisations in Bangladesh, Nepal and the Philippines, among other countries, together with UN agencies and NGOs have also been implementing their own data gathering initiative such as the Indigenous Navigator to produce country and community-level data, including on indigenous languages.⁹

Furthermore, **there are very few exceptions among Asian states with regards to legal recognition and protection of language rights of Indigenous Peoples.** Most of them, as explained above, do not have any or adequate legal protections for indigenous language rights in their constitutions and laws. Even in states, such as India, Nepal, Vietnam and Myanmar, that have some legal protections for language rights for indigenous and minority communities, the preservation and promotion of indigenous languages are significantly lagging while there is also lack of effective implementation of existing laws and policies.

8 See the Portal of Indigenous Peoples Information in Thailand at <https://www.thaiportal.info/home>

9 See Indigenous Navigator website at <https://indigenousnavigator.org/indigenous-data/countries>

For example, in **India**, the first-ever linguistic survey conducted between 2010 and 2013 found that the country had already lost over 200 indigenous languages in the last 50 years and claimed that another 150 languages could vanish in the coming decades despite the significant legal protections for language rights. The survey discovered 780 languages across the country – over six times the number of languages recorded in the census and far greater than the common estimate of nearly 450 living languages (The Asian Age 2019, The Economic Times 2019).¹⁰ Linguists and tribal activists have thus called for more efforts from the government to preserve and revitalise indigenous languages, including documentation of indigenous languages and awareness raising on their importance, which they have been undertaking with or without governmental support (India Today 2019).

In **Nepal**, the government has formed a Language Commission as per the constitution for determining the criteria for the recognition of official languages as well as deciding on the use of mother tongues as the medium of teaching in schools, among other measures for the protection and



Sharing information to young women in Nepal, Photo: NIDWAN

¹⁰ The 2011 census of India had recorded at least 121 distinct languages and 270 identifiable mother tongues (which can be affiliated with certain language) with 10,000 or more speakers nationwide. For more details, see Census of India 2011: Paper 1 of 2018 – Language at https://censusindia.gov.in/2011Census/Language_MTs.html

development of languages. However, the Commission is yet to get full shape and faces lack of resources and authority even as its five-year term is almost coming to an end. It also is yet to suggest criteria for recognition of official languages, and as a result, Nepalis yet to adopt multilingual policy. Nonetheless, some local governments have begun adopting indigenous/local languages as their official languages (such as Nepal Bhasha/ Newar language in Kirtipur municipality). At the same time, many indigenous languages are on the verge of extinction such as Kusunda language – one of its last two surviving speakers died last year (Republica 2019, Indigenous Voice 2020).

Also, four languages (Taman, Hpun, Malin and Pyu) have become extinct in **Myanmar** between 1950 and 2010 – the most recent in 2008, according to the UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger. Many more are considered under threat or imminent danger of extinction. The indigenous Moken language is one of those languages considered “definitely endangered” with around 6,000 speakers left as of 2007. As a sea-based nomadic group spending most of their life living in boats on the water and travelling between about 800 islands in the Mergui archipelago located in an area claimed by both the Thai and Burmese governments, the Moken people have been regarded suspiciously by the governments and faced challenges to their culture due to efforts to forcibly settle them. In recent years, their numbers have also diminished due to political and post-tsunami regulations, offshore drilling, tourism development and industrial fishing.

Furthermore, **although there are a number of transnational or cross-border indigenous groups in Asia, regional or intra-national indigenous languages efforts are non-existent** unlike in Latin America where the Inter-American Development Bank has formed a databank on indigenous legislation in the region and one of the indicators is the extent to which language rights are recognised.

Thus, while there are some good practices for the preservation and promotion of indigenous languages in Asia, there are also various areas with further opportunities for improving the situation of those languages, particularly in terms of data gathering, legal protections and regional efforts. At the same time, **there are opportunities created for protecting and developing indigenous languages with new technological and scientific developments and through international processes, which are summarised below:**

Technological and scientific developments

There is a great potential created by developments in science and particularly ICT for the revitalisation, preservation and promotion of indigenous languages. Those developments have already significantly contributed to safeguarding intergenerational transmission of languages, including indigenous languages. Mobile devices and the increased access to the internet has not only helped in the improvement in communication and exchange of information but also in the promotion of literacy and economic opportunities. Although mobile and internet access have been continuously increasing, the share of internet users in the Asia-Pacific region at 48.4 per cent is still lower than global average (53.6 per cent) or other regions (except Africa). Internet penetration rate is even lower for women at 41.3 per cent in the region, while only 19 per cent of the population are online in the least developed countries and lack of ICT skills pose additional barrier to effective internet use (ITU 2019).

While the remoteness of most indigenous communities poses a daunting challenge for their access to and use of technologies, Indigenous Peoples' organisations outside Asia have created their own community-funded telecommunication network to provide mobile phone and internet services in remote communities (Intercontinental Cry 2018). Nonetheless, despite the digital divide across gender and countries, it is now technologically feasible and relatively cheaper to produce recordings, videos and other media, and run online radio stations in indigenous languages. Now it is also possible to develop the required software, including fonts and virtual keyboards, to enable Indigenous Peoples to write in indigenous languages using their own script to create content, such as web pages, online dictionaries, language learning apps and publications.

In India, for example, a project has created eight talking dictionaries to document indigenous languages with 32,000 entries of words in eight endangered languages and more than 24,000 audio recordings of native speakers. Likewise, Adivasi Lives Matter, a social media-based platform has been bringing out untold Adivasi stories among urban people, including by publishing a “Word of the Week”

in Adivasi languages on its channels for the readers to understand Adivasis better. In addition, this serves to build the capacity of Adivasis on the use of mobile phones for photography, video creation and article writing for its channels (The Asian Age 2019).

Further, on the occasion of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages, a guide has also been created to enable mobile and desktop software to support online written usage of indigenous languages while a few indigenous languages have already been standardised or codified for digital world as well as more advanced technologies such as speech to text, etc. (Translation Commons 2019). Similarly, various online startups and applications are taking action with digital tools to keep endangered languages stay alive and reverse the Internet trend that has left many languages behind, such as Tribalingual that offers courses in indigenous languages such as Ainu and Gangte (Changing America 2019).

Thus, ICT can allow indigenous practitioners to push for new and innovative technologies that can help their communities to actively engage in efforts to preserve and develop their languages, such as by exploiting the ubiquitous nature of audio and video recorders for speaking or singing as well as voice recognition and videoconferencing, rather than focusing on standardisation efforts and working in text. Those are particularly important since it will most likely be difficult for most Indigenous Peoples to have the human or financial resources for the establishment of schools that provide a holistic education in their languages. Furthermore, ICT can assist in resource mobilisation for language efforts such as through crowdsourcing and provide different opportunities for indigenous languages despite the differences in the numbers of their speakers. Indigenous Peoples can come up with inventive solutions to use ICT that suits their contexts and doing so may involve partnerships with the private sector (PFII 2016).

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Adopted by all UN Member States in 2015, the 2030 Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries in a global partnership. They recognise that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.

In the 2030 Agenda, states pledge to leave no one behind and to endeavour reaching the furthest behind first in meeting the SDGs. The 2030 Agenda is explicitly based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights treaties and its overarching framework contains numerous elements relevant to Indigenous Peoples. More specifically, states recognise Indigenous Peoples as one of the vulnerable groups that must be empowered and commit to provide them access to life-long learning opportunities that help to acquire knowledge and skills needed to exploit opportunities and to fully participate in society. They state that the 2030 Agenda will involve Indigenous Peoples together with governments, businesses and other stakeholders to ensure its success. States are also encouraged to draw on contributions from Indigenous Peoples, among others, to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress of the 2030 Agenda.

Indigenous Peoples are also explicitly referred to in two of the SDG targets. SDG 2 (no hunger) aims to double agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular Indigenous Peoples, through secure and equal access to land. SDG 4 (quality education) aims to eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerables, including Indigenous Peoples, by 2030.

Preservation and promotion of indigenous languages is critical to achieve SDGs for Indigenous Peoples, particularly to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (SDG 4)”. Besides, language rights are

also imperative to fulfill SDGs for Indigenous Peoples aiming to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (SDG 5)” and “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (SDG 16)”. Further, indigenous languages are vital to understand the knowledge based on Indigenous Peoples’ connection with their lands, territories and resources, such as forests and waters, as well as to transfer and make use of their knowledge for safeguarding their natural and cultural heritage and for protection of biodiversity and the environment, along with actions to combat climate change (in relation to SDGs 13, 14 and 15), for all. Thus, adequate attention to indigenous languages and their users will be a key factor in implementing the 2030 Agenda (UNESCO 2019). The 2030 Agenda, therefore, provides an opportunity for states and non-state actors to collaborate with Indigenous Peoples and their organisations to document, revitalise, preserve and promote indigenous languages in their actions to implement the SDGs, including data gathering and reporting on their importance in relation to various SDGs.

2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages

As a result of continued advocacy of Indigenous Peoples, the PFII, since its creation, has shown and shared its concern for indigenous languages with the UN system and member states. In response to a recommendation of the Permanent Forum, the UN General Assembly in 2016 proclaimed the year 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages with the UNESCO as the lead agency for the Year. The aim was to draw attention to the critical loss of indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve, revitalise and promote them and to take further steps at national and international levels.

Accordingly, the UNESCO developed an action plan for organising the International Year of Indigenous Language following multi-stakeholder consultations with states, Indigenous Peoples, UN entities, CSOs and other stakeholders. A Steering Committee

composed of representatives of the states and Indigenous Peoples (who co-chaired the Committee) as well as the concerned UN entities guided and monitored the overall implementation of the International Year. More than 800 activities officially associated with the International Year were organised around the world in relation to indigenous languages that were registered on the online platform dedicated to it. Those included awareness raising campaigns, capacity-building workshops, academic conferences, intergovernmental meetings, theatrical, musical and artistic performances, hackathons and online events, as well as celebrations of international days, international award ceremonies, among others (UNESCO 2019). Many of them were organised by universities, educational and academic institutions, NGOs and private entities as well as government agencies. The International Year contributed to facilitating dialogues, sharing of information and forging or strengthening cooperation and partnerships among a range of diverse or new stakeholders, such as libraries and museums and online language platform communities, through various initiatives around the world for advancing indigenous languages. The International Year also particularly helped to increase the visibility of indigenous languages through wide coverage on national and international media.

While the UN General Assembly organised high-level meetings to mark the International Year, the UN mechanisms focused on Indigenous Peoples – the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – also put specific attention to indigenous languages in their works during the International Year and called for actions by states, UN bodies and different stakeholders for language rights of Indigenous Peoples (PFII 2019, UNESCO 2019). Besides, UNESCO and other UN agencies also organised various events and engaged with Indigenous Peoples to mark the International Year at international, regional and national levels.

Further, states and regional bodies, in cooperation with the UN bodies and other stakeholders, organised regional and international

conferences to mark the International Year, which also helped the preparation of a Strategic Outcome document that concluded the International Year. The document comprises information on progress achieved over the year, including outcomes of the consultative process undertaken in the form of conclusions and recommendations to serve as minimum standards for future actions at the global, regional and national levels for preservation and promotion of indigenous languages through partnerships between Indigenous Peoples, governments, academia and other stakeholders. The proclamation of an “International Decade on Indigenous Languages (2022-2032)” with the UNESCO continued as the lead agency is one of the immediate actions suggested in the document in line with the recommendation of the Permanent Forum (PFII 2019). The International Year has thus provided a critical entry point for creating greater awareness on and calling further action-oriented response to the situation of indigenous languages across the world.

International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032

In December 2019, the UN General Assembly, following up on the International Year of Indigenous Languages, has proclaimed the decade from 2022 to 2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. The aim is to draw attention to the critical loss of indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve, revitalise and promote them and to take further steps at national and international levels, with the UNESCO as the lead agency for the International Decade. The General Assembly has also invited states to consider establishing national mechanisms with adequate funding for the successful implementation of the International Decade in partnership with Indigenous Peoples, and invited Indigenous Peoples, as custodians of their own languages, to initiate and develop appropriate measures for the implementation of the International Decade (UN 2019).

As noted in the Strategic Outcome document of the International Year, the International Decade offers a great potential as “a launch-pad for a new longer-term sustainable response” for indigenous languages as “many indigenous peoples still face complex existential challenges in terms of strengthening, protecting and revitalising their languages, many of which continue to disappear with all the inevitable negative consequences for humanity and society” and “the impacts of hundreds of years of language suppression or neglect cannot be reversed in one single year”. Thus, with 2020-2021 as a preparatory period to effectively implement the International Decade and with the conclusions and recommendations laid out in the Strategic Outcome document, the world is provided a prime opportunity to right the wrongs done to indigenous languages and their users that must include “substantially and measurably enhanced involvement of indigenous peoples themselves, particularly indigenous women and youth” (UNESCO 2019).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Indigenous languages are critical markers of the cultural health of Indigenous Peoples - when their languages are under threat, so too are Indigenous Peoples themselves. Protection of indigenous languages is also linked to indigenous well-being in various other areas of life, including peacebuilding, human rights and economic development. Further, those languages carry within them complex systems of knowledge that can benefit the entire world, including the knowledge to deal with the current global challenges of climate change. Language rights of Indigenous Peoples are guaranteed in many international human rights instruments, but only a few Asian states have legal protections for language rights in their national framework and most of them do not officially recognise Indigenous Peoples or their rights.

Despite very rich linguistic diversity in Asia, indigenous languages are threatened due to colonialism and colonial practices as well as post-colonial assimilation policies and actions that stress a homogenous nation-state model based on a single culture and language. In addition, globalisation and dispossession of lands and resources of Indigenous Peoples and climate change impacts have exacerbated the threat. However, language loss is mainly the result of discriminatory laws and policies in the absence of immediate and concerted efforts of states to preserve and promote indigenous languages. Lack of data on indigenous languages, legal recognition and protection of language rights as well as inadequate resources and political will are some of the challenges to save those languages. Some states wrongly perceive indigenous languages and cultures as threat to national security. At the same time, there are also practical challenges with programs for endangered languages, particularly in relation to those with few speakers.

While there are multitude of serious threats and challenges facing indigenous languages, many good practices and opportunities also exist for improving the situation of indigenous languages in the countries reviewed under this study. Indigenous Peoples' organisations in many of those countries have been implementing multilingual early childhood education programs while governments have also implemented MTB-MLE as part of formal education in most of the countries. However, a large proportion of the population in these countries still do not have access to education in their

first language, which is an area that requires a significant need for improvement. Many Indigenous Peoples' organisations have also instituted their own education systems for revitalising and promoting their languages and cultures, often with the support of the government. Indigenous Peoples' organisations, academia, linguists and others have increasingly been producing various language and media materials as well as running media channels in indigenous languages.

On the other hand, there are still only a few countries in Asia that collect data disaggregated by indigenous group or on indigenous languages in their national censuses or surveys. And, although there are a number of transnational or cross-border indigenous groups in Asia, regional or intra-national indigenous languages efforts are non-existent unlike in other regions.

Nonetheless, there are further opportunities created with new technological and scientific developments as well as international processes. Despite significant challenges of digital divide facing Indigenous Peoples, various online tools and ideas are already being tried out to preserve indigenous languages. Further, international processes, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages and the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032, have increased visibility about indigenous languages and strengthened dialogues and forged new partnerships to protect them. These developments and processes provide great potential to right the wrongs done to indigenous languages and their users, while it should be kept in mind that any efforts to preserve and develop indigenous languages must be owned by Indigenous Peoples and should meaningfully involve them, particularly indigenous women and youth.

With regards to the situation described above as well as given the immense diversity in the national contexts and within Indigenous Peoples and their languages in the region, it would be difficult to draw specific recommendations to individual countries with this study. While the calls for some specific actions at the national levels by Indigenous Peoples' organisations or language experts in the country have been included in various previous sections of this study, some general recommendations for future actions in the region are provided below, which are in line with the Strategic Outcome document of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen and build upon the existing actions for multilingual education and cultural preservation

Many Asian countries already have policies, plans or programs being implemented for multilingual education and cultural preservation in relation to indigenous languages and cultures. The first step could be to strengthen and build upon those existing efforts. For example, those countries still piloting MTB-MLE should immediately adopt national action plans, policies or laws towards ensuring mother tongue-based education for all – not just language education. Adequate and long-term funding should be progressively guaranteed to implement mother tongue-based education and indigenous language courses at all levels. Further, the concerned government agencies, educational institutions (schools, universities, etc.) and other stakeholders should collaborate with Indigenous Peoples and their organisations for the development of curriculum and teaching materials while also taking into consideration and replicating or supporting the Indigenous Peoples' own education systems that have been implemented in a few countries so far.

Recommendation 2: Recognise and enhance the role of Indigenous Peoples and their languages in the implementation of the SDGs

As repeatedly pointed out in the study, indigenous languages are important for Indigenous Peoples to achieve the SDGs related to quality education, peace, justice and good governance, among others. At the same time, indigenous languages are also vital for fulfilling the SDGs for the wider world given the great potential of indigenous

traditional knowledge contained in them for tackling challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss. Thus, governments in Asia should immediately recognise the significance of indigenous languages and their knowledge holders as well as create such awareness among wider societies. Further, actions should be taken to ensure that indigenous knowledge is respected in the SDGs implementation programs, including through full and effective participation of the concerned peoples. Indigenous Peoples and their languages should be comprehensively documented and monitored in the SDGs review processes.

Recommendation 3: Adopt a holistic human rights-based approach towards protection of indigenous languages

Legal recognition and protection of language rights of Indigenous Peoples are indispensable because they create legal safeguards and requirements for the policy and programs to address the issues of those languages and often also result in institutional attention. Thus, the Asian states should improve their legal frameworks for the protection of indigenous languages in line with the full range of their international human rights obligations. Positive legal provisions in certain countries in the region can be adapted by others in a manner corresponding to their contexts. Further, language rights should be considered from a holistic perspective as the vitality and sustainability of indigenous languages are only possible if all rights and freedoms are guaranteed to their users. Thus, a comprehensive human rights-based approach towards protection of indigenous languages would also require guaranteeing other rights of Indigenous Peoples, particularly those in relation to their lands and resources.

Recommendation 4: Ensure advancements in technologies benefit indigenous languages and their users to the fullest range

The Asian governments should make targeted efforts to ensure that technological and scientific developments reach indigenous communities for them to use in their language efforts while progressively closing the digital divide across the region and within countries. Further, the lack of ICT skills should not be an obstacle for Indigenous Peoples to benefit from those technologies. For this, the governments should forge effective partnerships with Indigenous Peoples and their organisations or facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships, including with relevant NGOs or private services to assist in implementing Indigenous Peoples' own solutions towards digitising or revitalising their languages, including through use of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. Further, the governments should use those technologies to ensure that its own information and services are available in indigenous languages and also encourage private and non-governmental actors to make available multilingual knowledge and educational materials – both online and offline.

Recommendation 5: Support and implement additional urgent actions, particularly for the indigenous languages at most risk

The actions required from the states in the context of the SDGs and other international frameworks will not be adequate to redress the centuries of suppression or neglect of indigenous languages and their communities. For example, reporting for most of the SDGs does not

even require data disaggregation by language or ethnic group. Thus, government in Asia should lead the process of supporting or implementing additional urgent actions for protecting indigenous languages. Based on good practices in the region, including undertaking linguistic or ethnographic surveys for a comprehensive data collection on indigenous languages, recognising and promoting the use of indigenous languages as local official languages, and promoting indigenous language media and cultural events, among others. Dedicated support or actions are particularly needed for the languages at most risk such as those with few speakers or that are on the verge of becoming extinct. Those actions should be defined in consultation with the concerned Indigenous Peoples and implemented with their full and meaningful participation.

Recommendation 6: Establish national dedicated mechanisms for the preservation and development of indigenous languages

One of the first specific actions for the states in Asia to take towards implementation of the above recommendations should be to establish national mechanisms with adequate funding for the protection and promotion of indigenous languages, including funds for the successful implementation of the forthcoming International Decade of Indigenous Languages. Such mechanisms should involve equal participation among the state representatives, such as in the Steering Committee of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages, as well as representation of other relevant actors, such as UNESCO country offices, linguists, etc. Further, they should be led by indigenous representatives/officials and relevant academics or linguists. One of the initial tasks of such mechanism should be to immediately develop comprehensive national action plans for the International Decade through consultations with different Indigenous

Peoples and their organisations as well as other concerned stakeholders.

Furthermore, the national mechanisms should make continued and sustained efforts for the preservation and development of indigenous languages even beyond the International Decade. They should, among other actions, support in research, training, curriculum development, publications, and other academic works in indigenous languages as a part of a long-term plan of action. Such plan, including the action plan of the International Decade, should be monitored and reviewed in conjunction with Indigenous Peoples and their organisations as well as relevant experts.

Recommendation 7: Institute a specific unit to support the protection and promotion of indigenous languages at the UNESCO

Finally, in view of the forthcoming International Decade of Indigenous Languages, the UNESCO should also set up a specific unit within the organisation tasked to support the protection and promotion of indigenous languages in Asia and across the world. The unit should be led by indigenous experts or others with expertise in indigenous languages. In collaboration with the states, Indigenous Peoples and other concerned stakeholders, it should provide support for UNESCO processes related to indigenous languages as well as technical and financial assistance to implement relevant language programs across the world.

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ANNEX

Key internationally recognised instruments (adapted from the Strategic Outcome Document of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages)

UNESCO

- Convention and Recommendation against Discrimination in Education (1960), Article 5 of the normative instrument specifically recognises “the right of the members of national minorities to carry out their own educational activities, including ... the use or the teaching of their own language”.
- Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education (1976), Article 22 states that “with regard to ethnic minorities, adult education activities should enable them to express themselves freely, educate themselves and their children in their mother tongues, develop their own cultures and learn languages other than their mother tongues”.
- Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice (1978) Article 9 specifically recognises that “steps should be taken to make it possible for their children to be taught their mother tongue”.
- Declaration and Integrated Framework of Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy (1995). Article 29 calls on stakeholders to respect the educational rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities.
- Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001). The Declaration provides the framework for a range of actions that promote cultural diversity and the preservation of endangered languages.
- Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) aims at safeguarding intangible heritage such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events.
- Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace (2003).
- Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005).

Other

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly Resolution 217A of 10 December 1948)
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- Convention on the Rights of the Child
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992). The Declaration aims to ensure the rights of people belonging to minorities without distinction of race, sex, language or religion (Article 4).
- Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights – Barcelona Declaration (1996).
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Articles 21 and 30 recognise and support specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf culture.
- Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity (2011).
- Outcome Document of the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples adopted by the UNGA in resolution 69/2 and the UN System-wide Plan of Action
- United Nations General Assembly Resolution 70/1 of 25 September 2015, entitled “Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”.
- United Nations General Assembly Resolution 71/178 of 19 December 2016, on the rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Document E/C.19/2018/8 of 21 February 2018 on the Action Plan for organising the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages.
- General Assembly, International Labour Organization Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, UN Doc. A/RES/73/342 (16 September 2019).



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