

Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Sixteenth session 17-21 July 2023

Monday 17 July

Item 7: International Decade of Indigenous Languages

Madam Chair, distinguished members of the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, esteemed delegates, and fellow Indigenous Peoples,

Our histories and cultures, our wisdom and aspirations, have all played an integral role in shaping the world we inhabit and our identity itself. And language is the enabler, and it is at the heart of all these processes. However, for far too long, our languages have been stifled, our perspectives and voices have been dismissed by the states and the United Nations.

It is applaudable that the UN Decade of Indigenous Languages have pointed to the need to promote, strengthen and mainstream indigenous languages across social, cultural, economic, environmental, political, scientific and technological domains acknowledging their importance for sustainable development, biodiversity, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and reconciliation processes in the society.

Most importantly, a person's freedom to use his or her chosen language is a prerequisite to freedom of thought and freedom of speech, which are fundamental to building a democratic polity that relies on meaningful dialogues and facts. Therefore, looking at how language governs and affects us in all aspects of our life, states need to do much more and double up their efforts guided by **Article 13 and 14 of the UNDRIP**.

There is urgency in this because scientists have warned that up to half of all human languages will have disappeared by the end of the century.

Nevertheless, some of the good practices and initiatives in Asia include the following:

1. In India:

- The Constitution of India has begun to recognize indigenous languages such as Santali, Bodo, and Mundari.
- Tribal Research Institutes (TRIs) and Tribal Language Teachers' Training Institutes are being established to work toward the preservation, development, and promotion of indigenous languages and assist in the publication of literature and dictionaries in indigenous languages.
- Scholarships and grants are being provided to students and researchers studying indigenous languages.
- Efforts are being made to introduce multilingual education in indigenous areas.

2. In Malaysia, the government, University and indigenous organizations are promoting:

- Ethnic language Ambassador.
- Ethnic Language Champion Award and Cultural Village Award.
- Online ethnic language classes, and language Boot Camps for children.
- Forums and Webinar on indigenous languages.
- Novel writing competition in the mother tongue.
- Publication of materials in multiple formats in indigenous languages.
- Orthography spelling system workshops and Ethnoarts workshops.

3. In Bangladesh the government is:

- Giving awards for indigenous language champions.
- Developing curriculum for schools in indigenous languages.

These examples of good practices are small but inspirational and should drive us to overcome the enormous challenges we face in achieving our vision and the Global Action Plan. To overcome these challenges, governments must develop a comprehensive National Action Plan (NAP) that has depth and clearly identifies and defines the systemic barriers, issues and challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples. Governments should adopt various measures and recognize the primary importance of establishing collaborations with indigenous communities, educational institutions, NGOs, and linguistic experts for designing and implementing effective strategies to impart education in indigenous languages.

Further, the NAP must consider investing in research and teacher's training programs, developing and disseminating educational resources in indigenous languages, indigenous-led curriculum development, promoting bilingual education, improving infrastructure, and implementing targeted initiatives to address socio-economic and cultural barriers to education. Education in indigenous languages must primarily aim at strengthening their human rights, legal recognition of their language, identity and self-governance. And in addition, the development of the NAPs must take into account the following:

1. **Lack of Resources:** The existing curriculum is inadequate. There is a need to develop curriculum that is comprehensive and inclusive of indigenous languages, cultures, history and knowledge systems to ensure that education in indigenous languages is relevant.
2. **Teacher's Training:** Governments needs to focus on training teachers to resolve the issue of shortage of trained teachers and equipping them with the necessary linguistic and pedagogical skills to teach in indigenous languages and in ways appropriate to indigenous cultures.
3. **Standardization and Accreditation:** Most indigenous languages lack standardized scripts, grammar rules, and linguistic guidelines. The absence of accreditation processes for indigenous language education hinders the establishment of quality educational institutions and the recognition of indigenous language certificates or degrees.

4. **Lack of Infrastructure:** Many indigenous areas lack or are without educational infrastructures and located in remote areas, such as shortage of schools, classrooms, and basic amenities. It is important that all responsible institutions and agencies are well resourced and adequately funded.
5. **Socio-economic Factors:** Socio-economic factors such as poverty, illiteracy, and lack of awareness among indigenous communities can affect their engagement and participation in education. Therefore, governments needs to address these factors and create an enabling environment that encourages indigenous communities to value and pursue education in their languages.
6. **Monitoring mechanism:** Establish monitoring framework and mechanism, and governance structure of the Decade at the local and national levels.

I thank you Chair, for this opportunity to place some of these pressing issues and concerns of Indigenous Peoples regarding indigenous language and education.

Gam A. Shimray
Secretary General, Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact.