



Address by

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on the item "The 2019 Year of Indigenous Languages"

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Ms. Chairperson, Ladies and Gentlemen, (distinguished guests),

It is my great pleasure to address this important Forum.

First of all, may I express UNESCO's appreciation to all those Member States that initiated and supported the adoption of the UN General Assembly Resolution on the proclamation of the 2019 Year of Indigenous Languages. Without the hard work of the Permanent Forum, Special Rapporteur and experts, it would not have been possible to pass such a Resolution.

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples addresses the two-fold challenge that frames UNESCO's work: *first*, to support and promote safeguarding of indigenous cultures, languages, knowledge and identity; and *second*, to provide skills that enable indigenous peoples to participate fully and equally in the national and international community.

In today's world, information and knowledge are key determinants of social transformation and human development. However, information cannot be harnessed if not communicated and understood in relevant languages.

Importantly, knowledge is developed and passed from generation to generation through the richness of linguistic diversity, and indigenous languages are a storehouse of irreplaceable environmental knowledge contributing to the conservation of the world's ecosystems.

Linguistic diversity is also an integral part of cultural diversity. It reconciles different ideas, values and traditions, and encodes the accumulated heritage of humankind.

We should see language as an essential resource for development and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

However, many communities around the world are not able to receive quality education, be involved in the scientific community, access information or freely express themselves in their own languages.

Alarming, the world's languages are disappearing at an alarming rate. Indigenous languages in particular, including indigenous sign languages, are often highly endangered, making the need to defend them all the more pressing.

The 2019 Year of Indigenous Languages is an excellent opportunity to mobilize partners and resources to support communities who wish to safeguard their indigenous languages by providing an international platform for action.

It is important to stress that a language becomes endangered when its speakers cease to use it. The Year should therefore not only focus on language preservation and documentation, but also on *empowering speakers* of indigenous languages to maintain and strengthen their cultures and traditions, and pursue development in keeping with their own needs and aspirations.

It is essential to adopt a multi-stakeholder, multi-disciplinary and inclusive approach -- one size does not fit all.

UNESCO welcomes and supports the UN General Assembly Resolution and is proud to take full responsibility for leading the process.

In line with Article 14 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, UNESCO emphasizes the role of linguistic and cultural diversity in education.

UNESCO further aims to raise awareness of the impact on language for the implementation of the SDGs and is convinced that the Internet and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have a key role to play in fostering open and inclusive knowledge societies. Speakers of indigenous and lesser-used languages need to be able to express themselves in culturally meaningful ways, create content in local languages and share these in cyberspace.

Let me conclude by summarizing a key message – *language matters for development*.

In addition to preservation of language resources, we need to empower speakers of indigenous languages to make their own life choices. What's more, knowledge contained within indigenous languages is crucial for human wellbeing and the sustainable development of society.

I hope that the aforementioned ideas may act as a catalyst for future discussion and help to advance the organization of the 2019 Year of Indigenous Languages.

Thank you for your kind attention.