

## “Global Justice for Indigenous Languages: A Symposium”

Institute for Comparative Literature and Society  
Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Program at the Institute for the Study of Human Rights  
Columbia University

April 21, 2018

### SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE SYMPOSIUM (APRIL 30, 2018)

Languages are a critical part of identity, necessary not only for communication, but also for transmitting epistemic resources, ways of living and knowing, and cultural traditions of Indigenous Peoples and their communities. While the right is recognized by various international normative frameworks, especially the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), we must move from the macro level of codifying language as a right in policy and law to holding states accountable for compliance with and implementation of mechanisms to protect, preserve, develop, promote and revitalize Indigenous languages and their speakers. Indigenous Peoples of the world have contributed to humanity by bringing the importance of cultural and spiritual rights to the attention of the UN, legal frameworks, and humanity as a whole.

Symposium participants emphasized the following salient challenges and problems:

- We must not forget the dark colonial histories and engagement of many states in cultural and linguistic genocide, such as residential schools and the banning of children from speaking their mother tongues. When children, as well as adults, are forced to lose their communities’ language, they lose their pride, self-esteem, knowledge, and cultural traditions, which are part of their human dignity and their rights. States and non-state actors must recognize the way colonial legacies have worked and continue to affect Indigenous communities.
- Language loss affects personal, cultural, political, scientific, and economic aspects of our lives (UNESCO). There are 6,700 languages around the world,

40% of which are “in danger.” Most languages in danger are those that have fewer than 10,000 speakers. This is exacerbated in communities where there are very few speakers left.

- Racialization and discrimination continue to threaten the use and promotion of Indigenous languages; perhaps focus should shift from the duties of Indigenous Peoples to value and use their languages to the dominant society and changing the mindsets that perpetuate discrimination and judgement of Indigenous language speakers.
- There is a lack of human and material resources for mother-tongue education. This includes lack of teachers who are both trained in pedagogy and able to teach (in) Indigenous languages. Materials such as textbooks and guides must not only be created in Indigenous languages, but these and the education they provide must be culturally relevant, placed in contexts of the communities in which they are carried out.
- States need to move from the creation and codification of norms, laws, and policies to compliance and implementation on the macro and micro levels.
- More professional translation and interpretation services are needed in judicial and other legal processes as well as in the provision of health services.
- Access to healthcare is seriously impeded by language barriers and lack of dissemination of health information in Indigenous languages; outbreaks of Ebola and Zika have been linked to these barriers often made invisible by global English.
- Urban contexts and migrations to urban areas often accelerate language loss and increase monolingualism in dominant/colonial languages.
- Digital disadvantage and lack of access to the information society further threatens to marginalize Indigenous languages and their speakers.
- Transnational existence and organization of Indigenous language speakers create challenges for ensuring their language rights.

The Symposium heard many positive examples of Indigenous-led and other initiatives for Indigenous language revitalization and strengthening in Aotearoa/New Zealand, among the Cree Peoples, the Mohawk Peoples in Akwesasne, throughout Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and in the Arctic, among the Sami Peoples in particular. Some specific positive examples include:

- The use of digital technology and media to make Indigenous scripts and literature visible to more people across the world.
- The use of arts and music, such as the creation and dissemination of poetry, newsletters, and rap by Indigenous language speakers.
- Translation directly between Indigenous languages and non-dominant languages as a form of resistance.
- The establishment of immersion schools that have seen intergenerational success in revitalizing and passing on indigenous languages

Symposium speakers emphasized that the vital force for the revitalization of Indigenous languages resides with the will of the Indigenous Peoples themselves. The Symposium underlined the link between language revitalization, Indigenous lands and territories— including living heritage sites—and the recuperation of Indigenous knowledge, as well as the control of data collection. The language rights of Indigenous Peoples are also linked to various other human rights, including their right to express and manifest their religions and spirituality, as well as the preservation of Indigenous knowledge systems.

As a general recommendation, the Symposium highlighted the need for more multi-stakeholder, multi-sectoral, and multi-disciplinary approaches for revitalization with Indigenous Peoples, governments, academia, NGOs, the private sector, and others.

Some specific recommendations include:

- The language rights articulated in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) should be fully put to use by Indigenous Peoples in their advocacy and action and must be fully implemented by States. Drawing from the standards of the UNDRIP, the Symposium stresses the importance of Indigenous languages in a) legal and judicial proceedings; b) the education system; and c) media.
- The revitalization process must also include special measures by state authorities to protect Indigenous territories, including the environment, to prevent forced assimilation, including via industrialization of Indigenous lands, as well as the protection and fostering of Indigenous traditional knowledge and Indigenous ways of life.

- Fundamental importance of using human rights framework and approach for language justice, enabling action to be carried out on macro and micro levels.
- Need to flip the norm of monolingualism to a norm of multilingualism.
- Importance of focusing on the language rights of Indigenous Peoples in reconciliation efforts.
- Need to enact legislation and establish institutions for Indigenous languages with the effective participation and leadership of Indigenous Peoples themselves.
- Need to recuperate traditional names of places and persons.
- Reiterate the UNPFII's recommendation for the need to prepare more teachers trained both in pedagogy and to teach Indigenous languages. In the education sector, focus should be placed on making Indigenous language learning appealing and relevant to younger generations, especially in urban areas.
- Language revitalization goes to the heart of Indigenous societies and intergenerational transmission; a spirit of love and trust must undergird such efforts so that positive results can be achieved.
- In the education arena, efforts to build Indigenous education can use a framework that has come to be known as "The Epistemologies of the South": respect for indigenous cognitive styles; respect for Indigenous forms of language and cultural transmission or local literacies, all in a spirit of autonomy and sovereignty.
- Turning to the UN system, participants recommended that the UN's Special Representative on the Prevention of Genocide focus his attention on the topic of persecution or suppression of Indigenous languages. It was also recommended that UNESCO convene a ministerial level meeting for states to report on realities on the ground regarding Indigenous knowledges. The International Year of Indigenous Languages 2019 is viewed by all as a special opportunity to galvanize action and create synergies between all actors working on language awareness and revitalization with Indigenous Peoples.
- Symposium participants appealed to academia to reconsider the "archival approach" to research on Indigenous languages, urging them instead to bring their research to the communities, to work with the communities. Research must focus not only on transcribing languages, but above all on the people who speak them.
- There is a need to have more regional opportunities to meet, share, and engage in experiential learning regarding Indigenous languages.
- Indigenous scripts must also be part of Indigenous language revitalization efforts. This is where digital technologies can make effective interventions.

- Literary works written in Indigenous languages (and, by consequence, Indigenous languages themselves) should be appreciated at the same level as the rest of literary productions and not as a sub-category when they are evaluated and studied (e.g. In educational institutions or through literature prizes).
- Overall, academics have a role to play in decolonizing their universities, including through the promotion of Indigenous languages and knowledge systems, as well as through cooperation with Indigenous academics, communities and organizations.
- The commitment, endurance, and successes of Indigenous language speakers and parents transmitting their ancestral languages to their children should be celebrated, because it is hard to sustain language every day. We need to recognize the role that families, households, and local community members play in teaching Indigenous languages to children in the revitalization of endangered languages. This means that more support and resources need to go to homes and families bravely engaging in such efforts.