



2022-2032 | INTERNATIONAL DECADE OF  
**Indigenous Languages**

**High Level Launch Event of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages  
December 13, 2022**

**Statement by Binota Dhamai  
Chair-Rapporteur**

**United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**

- Excellencies, government representatives, Indigenous Peoples' representatives, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, good morning to you all thank you for this opportunity.
- On behalf of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, a subsidiary body of the UN Human Rights Council, I thank the Director General of UNESCO and UNESCO members States for the opportunity to address you on the occasion of the high level launch event of the International Year of Indigenous Languages. Together with UNESCO, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples, the Expert Mechanism has been waiting for this important event.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- The Expert Mechanism's mandate is to assist states and Indigenous Peoples in the realization of the aims of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Declaration provides that Indigenous Peoples have a right to preserve, use, and transmit their languages, and States have an obligation to ensure that this right is protected. This Decade is an important opportunity for the realization of the human rights associated with language.

- In its 2019 report on Recognition, Reparation and Reconciliation, the Expert Mechanism highlighted that the recognition of indigenous languages is another key aspect of the recognition of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous cultures and languages are a central and principal feature of Indigenous Peoples' identities as collectivities and as individuals. There are examples in several countries of both constitutional and legal recognition of Indigenous Peoples' languages.<sup>1</sup>
- The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has made a direct connection between the cultural rights and land rights of Indigenous Peoples, and between their language and cultural heritage. It has recommended that States parties respect indigenous culture, history, language and way of life as an enrichment of the State's cultural identity.<sup>2</sup>
- Cultural self-determination, as one of the four main pillars of article 3 of the UNDRIP, also includes language. The Expert Mechanism in its 2021 Report on Indigenous Peoples and the right to self-determination stated that language rights are integral elements of the right to self-determination. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has stressed that indigenous languages are a paramount part of cultural rights and are also a key factor for the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights.
- Historically, laws and policies of many States prohibited the use of indigenous languages and sought to suppress customs and traditions, as a means of undermining indigenous political institutions and individual and collective identities and of assimilating Indigenous Peoples into the dominant culture. Indigenous languages represent an inherent part of identity and promote the maintenance and transmission of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and traditions. Languages contain within them the tools to express indigenous collective juridical and political methodology and organization. In many cases, Indigenous Peoples have maintained their traditions orally, embedded in their languages.
- The Expert Mechanism recommended in its 2021 report on self-determination that States, in conjunction with Indigenous Peoples, should promote and support the ongoing development, use and maintenance of indigenous languages, including through formal education systems. In particular, it is essential to safeguard Indigenous Peoples' identities and cultures. At the international level, the Expert Mechanism recommended that States should actively support the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, 2022–2032, through financial contributions and other means.

---

<sup>1</sup> EMRIP report: A/HRC/39/62

<sup>2</sup> EMRIP study: A/HRC/30/53

➤ In the meantime, I would like to underline several critical areas of work for the International Decade:

- First, Indigenous Peoples themselves should benefit from this Decade. Many initiatives now rest on the shoulders of small cultural organizations and local activists. They need recognition, capacity building, and funding – especially from state governments who now have an opportunity to meet their human rights obligations by supporting these entities at the front lines of language revitalization.
- Second, indigenous language rights must be understood and addressed in a holistic fashion that recognizes past injustices, including the suppression of indigenous languages as well as cultures, religions, and land rights by states. The realization of language rights should be an aspect of reconciliation more broadly.
- Third, indigenous languages rights are not just about preservation but also production. Modern technologies must be used as tools for education. We should pay attention to the youth and the potential of indigenous language as an aspect of youth subculture. We need not only language documentation, education, and training, but also the production and publication of film, literature, and music, opportunities to read, sing, and yes text, in indigenous languages.
- Fourth, one of the most serious oversights which we have noticed, is the lack of participation and free prior and informed consent, in language rights advocacy. Sometimes experts, academics, and state actors believe they know better how to teach indigenous languages, but this attitude often leads to failed efforts in communities. Indigenous Peoples' self-determination must be recognized in language revitalization efforts.

In closing, the Expert Mechanism strongly supports the 2022-2032 International Decade of Indigenous Languages. Over the course of a decade, it would be possible to truly transform the situation of Indigenous Peoples' languages, such that these languages could fully recover and flourish in the lives of Indigenous Peoples. The Expert Mechanism believes in this future and we are committed to working with you to make it a reality.

*Thank you.*