



2022-2032 | INTERNATIONAL DECADE OF
Indigenous Languages

Regional Consultation in Asia
for the preparation of
the Global Action Plan
for IDIL 2022-2032

Regional Consultation in Asia for the Preparation of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022 – 2032)

Bangkok, 10 and 11 May 2021

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I. Introduction

1.1. Background

The world is home to a wonderful diversity of languages, each of which reflects the unique cultural traditions, shared histories and collectively held beliefs of its speakers. A language is more than just a means of communication; it is also a rich depository of traditional ways of seeing and understanding the world, which makes each tongue a unique microcosm of beliefs, practices and customs that connect its speakers to their collective past.

This is especially true of small and close-knit indigenous communities and ethnic minority groups whose own languages are a primary form of self-identification and ancestral memory. However, in our globalising and increasingly interconnected world culturally and politically dominant languages are becoming the main pathways of communication, both offline and online, which is posing grave risks to the continued survival of many indigenous languages¹.

In all, the world boasts some 7,100 known languages, yet most of them are spoken only by indigenous peoples. More than two-thirds of the planet's indigenous peoples live in Asia and many of their 2,000 or so languages are at risk of disappearing forever because few people are left to speak them.

The Mok language of Myanmar and Thailand, for one, has long been on the verge of extinction with only a handful of elderly speakers reported to use it.

The Hokkaido Ainu language of Japan is likewise a nearly extinct tongue spoken only by a few elderly members of the community. A myriad of other indigenous languages, from Malaysia to the Philippines, from India to Vietnam, are at increasing risk of going extinct.

Needless to say, the extinction of each minority language would be an irreplaceable loss — and not only to the people whose ancestral tongue it is but also to all of us because we would lose a precious part of humanity's collective cultural heritage and knowledge systems. That is why the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution in 2016 proclaiming 2019 the Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL2019) with the aim of raising awareness of the vital and urgent need to preserve endangered indigenous languages not only for the benefit of their speakers but also for the sake of all of us considering the unique contributions each language makes to our world's rich cultural diversity, knowledge systems and collective wisdom.

Boosted by the successes of the IYIL2019 and impelled by the need for further concentrated actions, the United Nations General Assembly has designated the 10-year period running from

¹ UNESCO adopts a broad rather than a more restrictive approach towards indigenous languages, facilitating the inclusion of native languages, describing them as the languages currently or historically used by indigenous peoples and considered integral to their heritage, knowledge systems or identity.

2022 to 2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL2022-2032) with UNESCO serving as the lead agency for the initiative. Working with Member States and all stakeholders, including indigenous groups, educators, experts and government agencies, UNESCO has embarked on a Global Action Plan with the purpose of preserving all imperilled languages, or revitalising nearly extinct ones, for posterity by help of digital media and other documentation tools.

As part of those broad-based initiatives, UNESCO held a two-day consultation process on May 10-11, 2021, called “The Regional Consultation in Asia for the Preparation of the Global Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL) 2022-2032” with the participation of numerous stakeholders and experts, including representatives of indigenous groups and Governments in Asia, educators, linguists, university professors, civil society representatives, media professionals and UNESCO staff. The participants identified regional challenges, defined priorities, proffered solutions and delineated desirable outcomes of targeted actions.

1.2. Major challenges and lessons learnt – IYIL2019

The regional consultations in Asia for the development of the Global Action Plan will seek to tackle challenges by drawing on lessons learnt from the successes of IYIL2019. They will also build their work on the outcome document *Yuelu Proclamation* from the International Conference on “The role of linguistic diversity in building a global community with shared future: protection, access and promotion of language resources,” which was held on 19-21 September 2018 in Changsha, the Peoples’ Republic of China, and the *Bangkok Statement on Language and Inclusion*, output of the High-level Policy Forum on Multilingual Education held on 24-26 September 2019, Bangkok, Thailand.

Among the lessons learnt from the IYIL2019 is the recognition that the preservation, revitalisation and promotion of linguistic diversity and multilingualism are crucial for human development, social justice and good governance in the region’s multi-ethnic societies. As the Los Pinos Declaration puts it: “Ensuring the vitality and sustainability of indigenous languages is only possible if all human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected consistently for the empowerment of indigenous language users.”

However, great challenges remain, among them a lack of adequate resources and tools for indigenous language communities, including access to appropriate communications technologies, as well as often wanting legal/constitutional frameworks that disadvantage the speakers of indigenous vernaculars at the expense of dominant languages in societies around Asia. In some Member States, indigenous groups are also at risk of losing their ancestral living

spaces as a result of decisions to declare surrounding areas as national parks and other protected areas².

Simultaneously, socioeconomic factors are forcing indigenous peoples to abandon their traditional ways of life in favour of relocating to urban areas in search of education, employment and other opportunities. Many indigenous peoples also lack official recognition of their distinct identities, which hampers their efforts to maintain their unique linguistic and cultural traditions in the face of increasing pressures to assimilate into dominant societies

1.3. Rationale — Why an international decade of indigenous languages?

The Global Action Plan for IDIL2022-2032 is a response to the pressing need to preserve indigenous languages before they go extinct in an increasingly homogenised world in order to aid in the preservation and revitalisation of unique cultural and linguistic traditions which underline indigenous peoples' distinct communal and personal identities as well as shared memory. In addition to the large-scale cultural and physical dislocations that have affected many indigenous communities and placed their traditions at risk worldwide, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has provided a further impetus for concerted actions insofar as it has highlighted the role that existing linguistic barriers can play in further marginalising indigenous groups when it comes to seeking and receiving medical aid and other forms of assistance.

1.4. Purpose of the Global Action Plan

The Global Action Plan lays the foundation for joint actions; outlines strategic approaches; defines major actions; provides guidance on implementation, monitoring and governing structures; and suggests measures to be taken together by UN-system entities, governments, indigenous peoples' organisations, academic experts, members of civil society and the private sector, as well as other interested actors, in order to achieve the major objectives of the IDIL2022-2032.

1.5 Objectives of the regional consultation in Asia

A two-day regional consultation in Asia was organised by UNESCO with the aim of contributing to the development of the Global Action Plan for the International Decade. The outcomes of the process include the following priorities:

² UNESCO is addressing this challenge through the implementation of the Policy on engaging with indigenous peoples, the 1972 World Heritage Convention and the 2003 Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage.

1. Identify regional priorities, including strategic objectives, outcomes, outputs, domains of change (thematic considerations) as well as activities for the International Decade in Asia,
2. Raise awareness on the importance of indigenous languages, linguistic diversity and multilingualism for sustainable development,
3. Forge partnerships among various stakeholders for the establishment of a regional network of partners, national committees and focal points for the Decade in Asia.

II. Strategic Approach

2.1. Vision statement

The centrality of actions should rest with indigenous peoples across Asia³ founded on a principle of sustained communal engagement summarised by the motto “Nothing about us without us”. The Decade should serve as an opportunity to build new models of coexistence, foster dialogues, improve educational outcomes, and boost interactions between indigenous communities and others as a factor of ongoing human development projects targeted at indigenous communities in line with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The aim should be to promote and nurture multilingualism so as to make more visible the rich diversity of languages spoken in Member States across this vast, dynamic and diverse region. The overall vision of the initiative can be encapsulated in the statement selected by the majority of participants during the regional consultation process held by UNESCO on 10-11 May, 2021, as the most appropriate one:

“We envision a world where indigenous peoples fully exercise their right to preserve, revitalise, promote and transmit their languages for future generations.”

2.2. Linkages with development agendas and frameworks

The Global Action Plan for IDIL2022-2032 is built on the International Year of Indigenous Languages, universal frameworks and outcomes presented in the strategic documents but not limited to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; the Action Plan for organizing the International Year of Indigenous Languages (E/C.19/2018/8); the Strategic Outcome Document (UNESCO General Conference 40/68); the summary report on the International Year of Indigenous Languages, 2019 (E/C.19/2020/9); the Los Pinos Declaration

³ Asia here refers to one of the seven socio-cultural regions defined by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

[Chapoltepek] – Making a Decade of Action for Indigenous Languages (high-level closing event of the International Year of Indigenous Languages, 27-28 February 2020, Mexico City, Mexico); and the document of the Third Committee, Rights of indigenous Peoples in a follow-up to the outcome document of the high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly known as the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, 75th session of the UNGA on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (A/C.3/75/L.20/Rev.1); as well as other relevant documents.

2.3. Strategic objectives

During the in-depth consultation process held by UNESCO on May 10-11, 2021, the participants emphasised a variety of strategic objectives that must be met in order for meaningful progress to be achieved in the completion of the Action Plan for Asia. They stressed the importance of **fostering inclusive and equitable educational opportunities and learning environments in order to promote, protect and revitalise indigenous languages.**

Equally important should be the **digital empowerment of indigenous communities by help of improved access to new technologies and language learning tools.** At the same time, an emphasis will need to be placed on an **increased need for freedom of expression among indigenous communities and the development of new media outlets for the speakers of indigenous languages so as to assist indigenous peoples in participating in culture in all its forms.**

2.4. Impacts of IDIL2022-2032

As a result of the Decade, national language and educational policies that support the revitalisation and use of targeted languages should be given a priority in Member States as a means for development of indigenous individuals and communities.

Similarly, relevant social and policymaking spheres should be broadened in order to encompass indigenous languages, which should also be incorporated into justice systems to facilitate greater access to legal avenues for the speakers of indigenous languages. Educational and cultural projects should be undertaken across wider societies so that societies in Member States recognise the importance of preserving indigenous languages and come to appreciate the rich veins of ancestral wisdom and knowledge transmitted by these languages through the generations.

2.5. Outcomes of IDIL2022-2032

Hence, actions must serve to **empower indigenous peoples and communities in a myriad of ways as well as to sustain their participation and inclusion in decision-making** through their representatives and institutions. The broad-scale empowerment of indigenous communities should also encompass **digital empowerment and access to new media** whereby technological tools can be harnessed to aid in the promotion, preservation, protection and rejuvenation of indigenous languages and all other cultural expressions.

Similarly, an emphasis must be placed on the **legal recognition of indigenous languages** in Members States where such recognition is lacking or even non-existent, as well as **education and language policy favouring multilingualism and the use of indigenous languages**.

At the same time, efforts must be undertaken to promote **academic research on indigenous languages** and foster a literary climate in these vernaculars by their speakers as a way to **safeguard and transmit those languages to future generations, and keep them in their livelihood practices**.

2.6. Outputs

To ensure **inclusive and equitable education** for indigenous peoples, policy briefs and guidelines will need to be produced and disseminated for widespread use across the region. Also, a considerable number of students at secondary school or above level need to be fluent in their native languages in order to enable them to become teachers of their languages to their communities to secure more **sustainable learning environments**. These could be achieved through the integration of indigenous languages into school curricula; localization of teaching materials, capacity enhancement of teachers and local educators; and assistance to local government agencies and communities in the recognition, institutionalisation and operationalisation of indigenous languages. The capacity development for indigenous languages should be through community-focused, place-based, mother-tongue based multilingual education.

Equal stress must be placed on the **development of affordable language technologies** and digital resources for indigenous languages to empower indigenous communities with digital skills. **Digital literacies of indigenous peoples** could be improved gradually through both low-tech and high-tech tools, from the digitization and digitalization of indigenous languages in all formats to the increasing availability of machine-based translation for indigenous languages. The creation and support of **indigenous media** to present issues of concern to indigenous peoples in their own languages and through their own voices are also indispensable. Indigenous peoples should be encouraged to embrace digital media in all its forms through sustainable operational models to foster community cohesion and play a vital role in maintaining their unique languages, cultures and identities, which could also serve as important channels for them to express their views and communicate with the general public.

Indigenous languages should be the drivers of **indigenous peoples’ cultural participation**. The cultural heritage system needs to be inclusive and upgraded to ensure the documentation of all forms of languages and the integration of indigenous languages into national culture roadmaps, while emphasizing the importance of indigenous language rights. As part of these initiatives, language descriptions, including the compilation of dictionaries and the building of corpuses, should go hand in hand with large-scale documentation such as linguistically annotated audio materials and digitalised databases for the use of speakers and experts. In addition, researches on traditional indigenous culture and the promotion of indigenous languages and stories to societies at large through cultural initiatives such as festivals, museums and workshops, as well as online channels should be facilitated.

Importantly, all targeted outputs should be human-rights based, as well as gender sensitive, responsive or transformative.

2.7. Target groups

In order for the Decade to be truly successful in preserving, revitalising and protecting indigenous languages, a wide range of stakeholders must be involved in conceiving and executing actions. Based on the outcomes of the consultation process held by UNESCO in May 2021, these should include in order of priority children and youth; teachers, parents and other educators; language learners; and knowledge keepers.

III. Guiding Framework

3.1. Key principles

The *Los Pinos Declaration [Chapoltepek] – Making a Decade of Action for Indigenous Languages* sets out several key principles to inspire, inform and guide the Global Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages according to basic human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the rights and values of indigenous peoples as indicated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Of primary concern is the placing of indigenous peoples at the centre of all initiatives of the Decade based on the motto “Nothing about us without us,” which encapsulates the principle of self-determination, as well as the right to use, develop, revitalise, and transmit languages both in speaking and writing to future generations, reflecting the insights and values of indigenous peoples, their identities and traditional knowledge systems and cultures.

Ensuring the equal treatment of indigenous languages with respect to other languages is likewise of vital importance in order to assist indigenous peoples in effective and inclusive

participation in consultation, planning and implementation of processes based on their free, prior and informed consent throughout any development initiative.

3.2. Involvement of stakeholders

During the consultation process in Bangkok on May 10-11, 2021, it was agreed that a broad range of stakeholders must be engaged in order to maximise the impacts and positive outcomes of actions undertaken during the Decade to preserve, promote, revitalise and centralise indigenous languages and other sociocultural expressions, both verbal and nonverbal.

First, the Action Plan in Asia must entail the mobilisation of indigenous communities with a view to encouraging them to actively participate in the Decade as key stakeholders. By taking ownership of targeted actions, indigenous communities can occupy a central place in the Decade and its ambitious forward-looking objectives.

The stakeholders should also include in order of priority Governments (local, regional, national level); media; UN system and intergovernmental organisations; experts and academia; civil society organisations; as well as private sector and industries. It is through broad-based engagement and consensus that initiatives have the highest possibility of success, particularly over the long term.

3.3. Creating synergies

A primary focus for policymakers and other stakeholders will need to be on a strategic drive to integrate indigenous languages into regional sustainable development frameworks and mechanisms along the principles of the UN's SDGs, as well as into national and local educational and language policies and programmes.

In order to provide greater and easier access for indigenous people to justice systems and public services in their native languages, existing institutions that facilitate such access must be supported and inclusive new ones must be created. Similarly, effective synergies among key stakeholders must be created and supported, not least among policymakers, linguists and computer scientists to address the inclusion of indigenous languages in the digital space.

At the heart of collaborative efforts must lie an understanding of the importance of broadening legal, public administration, media and education systems to encompass indigenous perspectives and languages for more inclusive and equitable societies. Because language encompasses all spheres of life, all actors are important, which means that synergies must be

developed among Member States, indigenous peoples, UN-system entities, academia, civil society, and other public and private stakeholders.

3.4. Timeframe

Targeted actions should be undertaken with short-, medium- and long-term effects on a sustained basis in order to preserve, promote, mainstream and revitalise indigenous languages for the sake of linguistic diversity and multilingualism. In order for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages to effect meaningful changes in key domains of concerted efforts, actions during the timeframe should prioritize policy-making, capacity-building and awareness-raising so as to ensure both the sustainability and longevity of actions.

IV Implementation Guidelines

4.1. Monitoring progress made towards strategic objectives

During the consultation hosted by UNESCO on May 10-11, 2021, participants stressed the importance of monitoring imperilled indigenous languages in the same way we monitor the status of endangered species in order to maintain biodiversity so that we can ensure their continued survival for generations to come. The participation of indigenous peoples should be monitored and encouraged to ensure no group or language is left behind.

A variety of actions will be undertaken during the Decade and a close monitoring of their progress will be essential for their success. The parties responsible for monitoring should include the key stakeholders: indigenous groups, experts and educators, researchers and linguists, as well as government agencies such as education departments and official representatives of government in Member States.

4.2. Creation of multi-trust financial donor mechanisms

Multi-trust financial donor mechanisms will be key to ensuring the success of targeted actions. Areas of funding must encompass policy support for indigenous languages; teacher training; academic research on languages and other oral manifestations; cultural and social initiatives; creation of language resources and technologies; and the digital empowerment of indigenous peoples.

4.3. Communication strategy

A global and regional communication strategy must be put in place in order to advance the promotion of indigenous languages to societies at large as rich repositories of ancestral memory and knowledge that are invaluable parts of our common human heritage. The enlisting of both traditional and new media for that purpose can serve to raise awareness far and wide of the need to preserve, promote and protect indigenous languages and cultures.

At the same time, indigenous communities must be encouraged and supported to create and operate their own professional media outlets to present issues of interest and concern to members of their communities in their own languages. Young people and children should be the drivers of communication strategies. By creating and maintaining spheres of their own in both the digital and analogue landscapes, indigenous peoples can have an important means of communication that will assist them in the use and preservation of their languages.

V Annexes

5.1. List of acronyms

IDIL2022-2032: International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032

IYIL2019: Year of Indigenous Languages 2019

SDG: Sustainable Development Goals

5.2. Key documents

- The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (September 2007) https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf
- The Yuelu Proclamation on the Protection and Promotion of Linguistic Diversity of the World (September 2018) <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000368264?posInSet=1&queryId=7c8bc670-b43b-4cd0-a0c5-4077cb738fef>
- The Bangkok Statement on Language and Inclusion (February 2020) <https://bangkok.unesco.org/content/bangkok-statement-language-and-inclusion>
- [UNESCO policy on engaging with indigenous peoples](#) (2018) [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000262748_engSummary report on the International Year of Indigenous Languages 2019](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000262748_engSummary%20report%20on%20the%20International%20Year%20of%20Indigenous%20Languages%202019) (February 2020) <https://undocs.org/E/C.19/2020/9>

- The Los Pinos Declaration [Chapoltepek] – Making a Decade of Action for Indigenous Languages (February 2020) https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/los_pinos_declaration_170720_en.pdf
- Evaluation of UNESCO’s action to revitalize and promote indigenous languages within the framework of the International Year of Indigenous Languages 2019 (March 2021) <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000376719/PDF/376719eng.pdf.multi>
- Evaluation brief: Focus on Indigenous Peoples on the (April 2021) <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000376830?posInSet=1&queryId=76c330ff-2858-49fa-856c-e5b65a529320>

5.3. List of participants

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