

Opening Speech for the Asia Regional Consultation on IDIL

Johar

First of all, I would like to Congratulate UNESCO offices and Dr. Irmgarda for taking the effort to conduct this Regional Consultation meeting, Asia, to frame plans and strategies for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL) 2022-2032.

Indigenous Peoples and organizations in Asia, welcome the efforts of the United Nations General Assembly for the declaration of the IDIL from 2022 to 2032. We are glad that UNESCO has been chosen as the lead agency to implement such a gigantic task.

Indigenous Languages give meaning to the well-being of indigenous peoples. According to the report of the World Language Mapping System (WLMS) Version 19, the majority of the 7100 known languages of the world are spoken by Indigenous Peoples. More than two-thirds of the world's indigenous population is in Asia, who speaks different languages. Some of the indigenous languages in Asia are on the verge of extinction or critically endangered due to various threats. According to the *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, the Ruga language of the Garo Hills in India has disappeared with its last speaker's death in the 2000s. The Mok language of Thailand is spoken by only 7 speakers, the Kasong language of Cambodia is spoken by 50, the Sa'och language is spoken by 20 in Cambodia and 10 in Thailand, the Hokkaido Ainu language of Japan is spoken by 10, the Punan Batu language of Malaysia is spoken by 30, the Inagta Alabat language is spoken by 30 and the Isarog Agta is spoken by 5 speakers in the Philippines, the Kavalan language is spoken by 24, the Kananavu by 4, the Thao by 5 in Taiwan, the Kili languages is spoken by 40 and the Manchu language by 20 in China, while only 6 native Rengmitcha speakers remain alive in Bangladesh.

We believe that the celebration of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages promotes the protection, restoration, revitalization, preservation, maintenance, and development of indigenous languages. We further believe that the decade will bring a commitment by member states to preserve and promote indigenous languages and recognize the right to indigenous languages as a human right for all indigenous peoples.

To address the challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples, some of the Member States in Asia have undertaken remarkable efforts such as officially recognizing indigenous languages and scripts, introducing indigenous languages in the education system, allowing indigenous languages in various competitive exams, and use them in various creative media. We are thankful to those countries who have come forward to promote, preserve, and started revitalizing indigenous languages in their respective countries. We call on the UNESCO country offices to facilitate the Member States at national and local levels to intervene in more actions to meet the objectives of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

However, in most Asian countries indigenous peoples are still the victim of eviction by State-led development projects, which affect dislocation from ancestral land, out-migration of indigenous peoples & youths, damage of the socio-economic system, and loss of rich indigenous cultural diversity as a whole. The settlement of various non-indigenous communities has also led to acculturation, assimilation, and erosion of indigenous languages.

Covid-19 has affected us severely and we have lost our near dear ones also. In these difficult times, it has become even more challenging to achieve the target of IDIL. Indigenous Peoples

in rural areas are highly impacted by Covid-19 and they do not have the means to cope up with it. The demise of indigenous peoples due to Covid-19 is also one of the major threats to indigenous languages. To conclude I would like to say that we humans have limited capacity to strategically think, plan, and do things, and therefore we need divine interventions and the grace of the almighty to accomplish our tasks. I pray and wish that may these two and a half days of regional consultation be fruitful and may we come out with concrete strategies and a plan of action.

Thank you

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