



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES INDIGENOUS VOICES

The indigenous peoples native languages in the Russian education system

8-10 September 2009, Republic of Sakha
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**Indigenous peoples of the Far North of Russia and Members of RAIPON
Honorable Minister of Education, Republic of Sakha and other Officials of the Republic
President of RAIPON, Sergey Haruchi
Member of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Pavel Sulyandziga
Indigenous Peoples of the Far North of Russia
Distinguished Guests and Participants**

Warm greetings of solidarity from the Cordillera Region of the Philippines!

Let me apologize for not being able to come to be with you in this historic conference on “Indigenous peoples native languages in the Russian education system”. My last minute attempts to get a visa from the Russian Embassy did not work out so I just have to speak to you from afar.

The theme of your conference is very relevant to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues as we are alarmed by the fast disappearance of indigenous peoples' languages in many parts of the world, including Russia. Out of the remaining 6,000 languages in the world today, 4,000 of these are spoken by indigenous peoples. There is not much data to show how many of these 4,000 indigenous languages are under threat of extinction. Still, with the data at hand, it is indigenous peoples who are contributing most significantly to the linguistic and cultural diversity remaining in today's world. If States and society, in general, do not install measures to save indigenous languages then this precious diversity is in peril.

With this recognition, the Permanent Forum held an International Expert Workshop on Indigenous Languages from 8 to 10 January 2008. The report of this is contained in Document E/C.19/2008/3 and it has a Russian version. One of the conclusions of this



United Nations



meeting is that there is a lack of awareness on the part of some Governments, indigenous peoples and the intergovernmental system of the urgency for policy measures to reverse the trend of indigenous languages threatened for extinction.

I do not claim to know what the situation is in Russia in relation to the measures being taken to save indigenous peoples' languages so some of what I will say may not be relevant. However, the fact that you are holding a conference on this theme, tells me that this is a concern for both the Regional State and RAIPON. In my presentation I will reiterate some of the points raised in several Permanent Forum sessions about the importance of indigenous languages and the need to ensure that these are preserved and used.

It is a known story that in many countries indigenous peoples have been disallowed by the colonizers and by the States to speak their own languages. The punishment brought upon children who speak their native language range from soaping of the tongue, imposition of fines to various forms of corporal punishment. Schools and government offices use one official language as a medium of instruction, for written documents and communications and for the multi-media. Maybe in some countries such practices do not exist anymore, but the use of one national language and the lack of resources allotted for bilingual or multilingual education still remain as challenges.

The mind, spirit and soul of a people are embedded in their native language. Our identities as peoples and our cultures are expressed in our own languages. The extinction of these languages can lead to our own extinction as distinct peoples. It is an imperative, therefore, that we are able to protect, preserve, promote, speak and use our own native languages. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) recognizes language rights and there are several articles which pertain to this. Some of these are the following;

Article 13:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to the future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.
2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected and also to ensure that indigenous peoples can understand and be understood in political, legal and administrative proceedings, where necessary through the provision of interpretation and by other appropriate means.

The other article which is on language and education is Article 14. It states;

Article 14:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their
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- own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all loves and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
 3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

Article 16 talks is on language and media;

Article 16:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish their own media in their own languages and to have access to all forms of non-indigenous media without discrimination.
2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that State-owned media duly reflect indigenous cultural diversity. States, without prejudice to ensuring full freedom of expression, should encourage privately owned media to adequately reflect indigenous cultural diversity.

These are the 3 most important articles related to indigenous languages and it is my hope tha these will be protected and fulfilled by the Russian State. I am aware that Russia abstained when the vote for the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was taken in 13 September 2007 at the UN General Assembly's 61st Session. Notwithstanding this, the rights recognized in the UNDRIP “constitute the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world” (Article 43), which includes the indigenous peoples of Russia. It is my hope that you, governments and indigenous peoples of the Far North of Russia, will be able to convince the Russian State to reverse its abstention and endorse the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the same way that Australia reversed its no vote and endorsed the UNDRIP.

Being a fluent speaker of my own native language, Kankana-ey Igorot, and knowing that this language still remains the first language of the majority of my own people I cannot imagine that my language can disappear. However, having seen what States and the dominant society are doing in terms of discriminating against indigenous languages, I think we should not relax and be complacent and become more vigilant in protecting our own language.

So let me move on to some recommendations on how to protect and ensure the continued use and existence of indigenous languages.

- 1. Raise and promote the level of awareness of indigenous peoples on the right to language and empower them to assert this right.**
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Indigenous peoples must be made aware that many of our languages are under threat of extinction in the face of assimilation and discriminatory policies and we must do all we can to save these. We all should learn about the history of our oppression and the discrimination against the use of our languages. We should become more aware of the ways in which we have been oppressed and discriminated because this will help us to discern how to address the social and political realities which perpetuate this situation. It is crucial that we understand that we have the right to speak and use our own language. The Articles on language (13, 14, 16), which I quoted earlier, should be made known to everybody and the States should be pushed to implement these articles.

It is very common to hear governments cite the lack of resources as an obstacle to the recognition of the right to language. The Expert Meeting of the Forum concluded that “although this is a valid concern, it is important to view indigenous languages not as a financial drain but as a valuable resource, that language diversity is a major contribution to the wealth of the country's cultural heritage and therefore there is a need for more political will to provide the resources needed to preserve and develop this heritage..”

2. Every indigenous person should know the intricate link of language with her or his identity, culture and protection of diverse ecosystems.

As I mentioned earlier our identity, culture and worldview is embedded in our language. We share and transmit our culture, our values and worldview through our language. Thus, losing one's language means losing who we are and our ways of living and thinking. We lose our indigenous songs, our stories, our wisdom, our ways of teaching and learning, our ways of transmitting our knowledge and cultures, and many more. Without our language we are lost as a people. The Permanent Forum, in its expert meeting referred to earlier, also recognizes that indigenous languages are treasures of vast traditional knowledge concerning ecological systems and processes and how to protect and use some of the most vulnerable and diverse ecosystems of the world. It concluded that the protection of indigenous languages is not only a cultural and moral imperative but an important aspect of global efforts to address biodiversity erosion, climate change and other environmental challenges.

3. Increasing the number of fluent speakers as the main objective of language revitalization efforts and mobilizing all resources needed for revitalization.

The most basic resource we have to save our language is our own human resource, our own fluent language speakers. The Forum expert meeting recommended that the key objective of all language revitalization efforts should be increasing the number of fluent speakers. “Efforts to salvage and promote indigenous languages will not be effective unless the concerned community desires such efforts and takes action in that direction. Indigenous peoples, themselves, must claim ownership of their languages and direct revitalization efforts of their languages.”





The Maori have taken efforts to set up a language bank which contains audio and video tapes of their fluent speakers and others who are not as fluent but have a good command of the language. We can learn from this experience and allot resources to do this. Only by passing the language from parent to child will there be a chance for our languages to survive.

It goes without saying that money is needed to do all these. We should get the governments and other institutions, like the churches, to provide the needed resources required to enable indigenous peoples languages to be revitalized and used. These institutions contributed in the disappearance and continuing threats to the extinction of languages, so they should bear the main responsibility in providing the resources.

4. Need to integrate language revitalization efforts in the educational system

There must be appropriate, certified training programmes which will enable indigenous peoples to become language teachers, linguists, interpreters, translators, curriculum developers and researchers. Aside from this bilingual and multilingual education has to be put in place in education institutions. Full scale training programmes which result in a certificate, degree or diploma in indigenous languages or specific language family can be developed and integrated in colleges and universities.

Comprehensive and appropriate curriculum have to be developed. The community which speaks the language have to be involved in developing the curriculum. Schools have their own ways of doing curriculum which might not be appropriate for indigenous languages. Thus community participation is crucial. Researches should be done on how to create successful and effective models of language revitalization. There are good practices in some countries from which we can learn from. Exchange visits between Russian indigenous educators and other educators from other parts of the world can be facilitated also.

These are just few suggestions which can be considered in your conference. I strongly recommend that you use the report of the Expert Working Group as a basic reference in your work as this contains important recommendations. I wish you good luck and all the best in this conference and I look forward to hearing about the results.

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