

Statement by Renee Grounds

U.N. PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES, Fourth Session  
NORTH AMERICAN CAUCUS  
Agenda Item 3b  
Statement on second MDG concerning Universal Primary Education  
May 16-27, 2005

[Greeting in Yuchi language]

Honorable Chairperson:

*I am Renee Grounds, a youth speaking on behalf of the North American Caucus.  
I am greeting you in the unique language of the Yuchi Nation, a language now spoken fluently by only 5 elders.  
We are working diligently to pass the language down to younger community members such as myself.  
I plan to teach and speak the Yuchi language to my children when I have a family in some future day.*

*We want to call attention to the importance of Indigenous languages for the Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary education.*

Whereas, the institution of education—especially through government and church-run boarding schools—has been the primary instrument deployed in the destruction of Indigenous languages;

And whereas, Indigenous languages are key to the vast and ancient resources of Indigenous knowledge and to the wellbeing of the children in our communities;

Whereas, the current status of our languages is extremely endangered as indicated by any statistical measure:

For the region now covered by Canada and the USA over 70% of our languages are only spoken by the grandparent's generation (which means that there is an extremely small amount of time to educate the children and youth of our communities in the languages of their gifted elders.

In fact, one hundred percent of the 210 languages still spoken in North America are endangered.

Australia is the continent with the worst language situation with over 90% of its now-remaining 350 aboriginal languages near extinction

According to Ole Henrik Magga, the first Chair of the Permanent Forum, as much as half our original languages will be lost in the next 20 years.

Linguistic scholars now estimate that at present rates of decline 90% of the world's languages will be lost by the end of this century.

This is particularly relevant for Indigenous Peoples who comprise only 5% of the world's population, and yet carry 90% of the world's 6,700 diverse languages

Therefore, in light of the importance of our Indigenous languages for education in our communities and for the storehouse of human knowledge,  
And in consideration of the extremely endangered status of our Indigenous languages,

We request that the Permanent Forum make the **following recommendations:**

+ call for a UN “**International Year of Indigenous languages**” for 2007

*(to educate about the value of our languages and highlight the critical status of our languages and help to develop effective strategies for revitalization)*

+ that “Indigenous Languages” comprise a major **theme for the new Decade of Indigenous Peoples**

*(including appropriate educational activities and regional meetings such as the End of the First-Decade Celebration in Tulsa, Oklahoma in December 2004, where Willie Littlechild presented on the vital importance of Indigenous languages)*

+ call on member states to affirm linguistic rights by **repealing all discriminatory legislation and opposing linguacidal policies and practices, especially as carried out under state educational institutions.**

+ call for further **funding from states and UN agencies such as UNESCO and UNICEF for language revitalization programs** and request that an **Indigenous Language Fund** be established to receive monies for international language work

*(especially in light of the history of sustained and systematic assault on languages with enormous amounts of funding spent through boarding school programs and other government agencies)*

+ **work to implement bilingual education in areas where Indigenous populations live**

In promoting universal primary education we point to the danger of the wide-spread notion of a one-size-fits-all educational approach that does not take into consideration the needs of the individual child and the rights of Indigenous Peoples to determine their own educational systems and curriculum content.

We need an approach that would not support national languages at the expense of Indigenous languages, approach that would be **additive** rather than subtractive language learning and responsive to the early start and maximum exposure fallacies pointed out by Dr. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas during the Third Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. However, we insist that for many of our areas, the Indigenous language is no longer being learned in the home and therefore a strong program of immersion education is needed in the Indigenous languages for revitalization purposes.

In sum, we call for more aggressive actions for Indigenous languages due to the immeasurable **value of our languages**. Our Indigenous languages are essential to Indigenous Knowledge, ceremonial life, medicinal practices, and our own identities as Indigenous peoples. Our original languages safeguard the ability of our children to communicate with their elders, shapes our world view, defines our identity as Indigenous Peoples. Our languages are the basis for unwritten histories, specialized agronomies, and the understanding of local ecosystems and regional environments. In short, our languages carry our original instructions about our proper way of being in the world and keeping proper relations with other-than-human beings in the circle of life.

*s(@nlAKIvasOta (“thank you”)*