



MINISTRY FOR FOREIGN
AFFAIRS OF FINLAND

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Half-day Panel on the role of languages and culture in the promotion and protection of the well-being and identity of indigenous peoples

**Statement by the delegation of Finland
20th September 2011**

Mr / Madam Chairperson,

Distinguished panellists, delegates and participants,

Languages and cultures of the indigenous peoples offer the world invaluable cultural richness and diversity, which is something to be celebrated and protected. Until the 1970's indigenous languages and cultures were largely discriminated against, and many languages and manifestations of indigenous cultures disappeared.

Indigenous peoples have strong ties to their environment and their cultural identity is directly dependent on intact ecosystems. Sustainable development is based on the rich cultural heritage and language is an inherent part of it. Language provides the most efficient mean of transmitting traditional knowledge and culture to future generations. This is crucial for the survival of indigenous peoples. Languages are a marker of the vitality of culture and cultural diversity, and individuals and communities apprehend and give meaning to their relationships and environment through language. Therefore, the disappearance of indigenous or minority languages, also represents an irrecoverable loss of cultural wealth and common cultural heritage.

Lately, targeted measures have been taken to revitalize indigenous languages. In Finland the Sámi Language Act affirms that Sami people have the right to use the Sami language before authorities and in certain administrative and legal procedures within the Sami homeland. We have strengthened education in Sámi. For instance, the language nests activities for younger children have provided encouraging results. However, in Finland both Skolt Sámi and Inari Sámi are spoken only by few hundred people and these languages are on the verge of extinction.

The growing urbanization of indigenous peoples is a particularly challenging trend for indigenous languages. In Finland over 60 % of the Sámi people live outside their Sámi homeland. A governmental working group in collaboration with the Finnish Sámi Parliament is currently preparing the program for revitalisation of the Sámi languages. The program will focus on education, day care, teaching, social welfare and health care services, culture and the media. The ongoing negotiations on a Nordic Sami Convention also aim to strengthen the rights of the Sámi in such a way they can preserve and develop their language and culture.

We would like to invite the panelists to share their views on good practices in revitalizing the indigenous languages in different social contexts. In particular, how to meet the challenges brought by the urbanization of indigenous peoples and the mixture of traditional and mainstream cultures, including livelihoods?

I thank you.