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A Statement
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Indigenous languages

Madame Chair

I am addressing you on behalf of the Sami Parliamentarian Council.
Most of indigenous languages existing in the world are small languages and threatened to extinguish within the near future, according to one of many estimations even one language a week dies. A language is threatened when there are no children speaking that language, and a language is not transmitted to a succeeding generation.

Most United Nations conventions, such as the United Nations Charter, the Declaration of Human Rights, the ILO-convention 169 and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples include language. In addition, this year has been proclaimed as the International Year of Languages. In this forum language is also discussed today. However, in the international fora there has been too little focus on language, linguistic diversity and especially linguistic human rights.

Linguistic human rights are those linguistic rights of individuals and communities that are so crucial that they must be considered basic human rights.

There are individual linguistic human rights and collective human rights. Individual human rights should include the right to identify with one's language, the right to fully learn one's own language and the right to use one's own language. The most important collective rights are the right to have the language of the community accepted. The right with other members of the groups to learn, teach and use the language in private and public context, and the right for transmission of its language to succeeding generations and the right for survival as a group.

What does language mean? Language is a means of communication and a means of expressing one's own feelings and experiences. It is through language that cultural heritage is transmitted from a generation to another. Language is also a valuable library of traditional knowledge, for example in the Sámi language there are thousands of terms expressing snow and reindeer. This knowledge is today used in scientific research. The Sámi terminologies for snow and ice conditions are utilized in environmental research. In a similar way, names of medicinal plants in South American indigenous languages have been used by western scientists to detect new ways of producing medicines.

The understanding of what language actually represents is necessary to understand why language loss is such a crucial issue.

Madame Chair, Since the 1970s there has been the revitalization of indigenous and minority cultures and languages. That time ethnicity and indigenous movement started to grow as a reaction against globalization, and at the local level indigenous cultures and languages began to be reassessed. According to the Finnish Constitution the Sámi have self-determination with regard to their language and culture within the Sámi Home area. The Sámi language is also protected by a Language Act. However, the practical implementation of that Act still requires greater efforts from both the Sámi and especially authorities and decision-makers.

One of the most positive examples of revitalization is the arranging of language nests or immersions, which was an initiative of the Maori people in New Zealand, and which later was adopted by other indigenous peoples. A language nest has proved to be successful in Sámiland of Finland, where the two smallest languages, Inari and Skolt were in danger of extinction because of the lack of speakers. The language nests have been found to give the children a good language foundation for participating in Sámi-language instruction in the school.

Another example is the "Master-apprentice" model used by some indigenous peoples. The "master" is an elderly or otherwise culturally and linguistically competent person who teaches his or her knowledge to an "apprentice" who in turn becomes a master and finds another apprentice. There are many other examples of these kinds of innovations in indigenous language revitalization. In my opinion such positive experiences should also be more mutually shared by indigenous peoples.

Madame Chair, To conclude, assimilation of the Sámi language and other indigenous languages is still going on in spite of all revitalization efforts.

Thus, new international instruments and new mechanisms are still needed to protect and to promote the world's indigenous languages. In Europe, we have the Council of Europe Charter for regional and minority languages, and that is just a beginning. But languages should get much stronger protection globally if we really want them to survive. So far, we know many languages are seriously endangered which means that time is scarce.

That's why I have two recommendations as follows,

Recommendation 1:

In recognition of the linguistic diversity a new international instrument on linguistic human rights is needed to protect and promote indigenous languages. Implementing the indigenous peoples' linguistic rights should be subject for a strong monitoring mechanism.

Recommendation 2:

In recognition of the linguistic diversity of the indigenous world there should be proclaimed the International Day of Indigenous Languages.