

Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
Tenth Session
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Item 8

Indigenous Languages Caucus, Richard A. Grounds, Ph.D. Chair

Proposed Suggestions For Structure Of
U.N. International Year Of Indigenous Languages 2019

[Greetings in Yuchi language]

We are very excited about the benefits for Indigenous Peoples as they continue to develop effective language work to revitalize their original languages with the additional support now provided by the upcoming U.N. International Year Of Indigenous Languages (IYIL) in 2019. That is the good news.

The challenge, of course, is *how to ensure that the UN International Year of Indigenous Languages actually provides a strong focus on Indigenous Peoples and their issues* (and not allow the process to be dominated by academic agenda and long-running colonial preferences). (The following suggestions were developed through gatherings at the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and through e-mail exchange with the active Indigenous Languages Caucus membership.)

Proposed Responses:

- Include an **Indigenous person as co-facilitator** for UN Year to work with the UNESCO facilitator (in order to ensure that an Indigenous voice is influencing the planning and organizing process and this person should be someone familiar with the U.N. operations)
- Develop an **Indigenous advisory committee** comprised of experts in Indigenous language revitalization for planning and implementing the IYIL
- Implement a feedback process that will provide **transparency about the action plan** and strategies that are being developed within UNESCO for the IYIL
- Arrange for an effective **process for input into the planning** activities – that is, a one-and-a-half hour side event does not present a realistic opportunity for concrete planning toward the fast-approaching IYIL (they could be a working committee to hammer out details)

As you know, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has recommended the establishing of a special Fund for IYIL that would be “dedicated to the preservation and revitalization of Indigenous languages” and, importantly, that this fund should be Indigenous-led. The Seventh Generation Fund is interested to serve as the custodian of this fund.

The potential value of this fund cannot be overstated. This fund could be a major outcome of the IYIL since it would have a long-term impact to get a funding structure in place that would then serve as resource for ongoing language work into the future.

The concept for this fund—as we discussed it at the Expert Meeting on Indigenous Languages in 2016—was to have a single fund that would be on the model of, say, the

World Wildlife Fund. Having a single major fund would help with visibility and credibility for the ongoing language work.

Further, a single large-scale fund would be able to help balance global economic differences by redistributing funds to support IYIL and Indigenous language revitalization work around the globe.

(If broken up into regional funds, the less-favorable outcome would be that the regions with the greatest economic resources would presumably end up the larger support base.)

Our recommendation on uses for the funds:

- Money should not go toward academic research ABOUT our languages (there are millions of dollars already being spent to research our languages) but should instead go to either:

- 1) Directly support Indigenous communities for immersion language work (since immersion methods—whether immersion schools, language nests, or Master-Apprentice—are the only demonstrated way of developing fluency)

And, at the end of the day, the only thing that will matter is the growing of new fluent speakers (that will allow us to keep our languages alive for future generations)

- 2) Or funds should go toward administrative costs related to events and activities necessary for executing IYIL (even running the fund itself will cost money)

Suggestions for structure of the IYIL:

Each Indigenous region (including at least the 7 within UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues official system) should conduct a major event celebrating Indigenous languages that would:

- Give a special recognition from the U.N. in the form of an Eminent Elder Award and an Indigenous Youth Award for exemplary individuals who embody the ideals of Indigenous language revitalization

(and that these Awards ideally would be written in the language of the recipient)

- Of course, these gatherings would also include information on best practices with workshops and training on effective methodologies in language revitalization

Also we would stipulate that the preceding regional events should be scattered across several months in order to take advantage of media reverberations around the world calling attention to the language crisis and pointing to active solutions and funding possibilities.

This presumably would mean a coordinating committee for each region who would at a minimum select an Elder and Youth for their region to be recognized for their language work. When we held Celebrations in Oklahoma during the first Decade of Indigenous Peoples we named Elders for recognitions that were written in the language of the Elders (Kiowa, Osage, Yuchi, Lenape) and were signed by Julian Berger from the UN High Commission on Human Rights.

The point of having the awards not written in the Indigenous languages was to elevate the language of our Elders as important to the world heritage and to put them on equal footing with Colonial languages.

<https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/oklahoma-gathering-celebrates-close-un-decade>

REGIONAL COMMITTEES:

We recommend that the regional committee would also plan activities for their main regional Indigenous event that would serve as:

- A celebration of Indigenous languages and culture through song, (appropriate) story telling, prayers, dance, etc.
- An occasion for consciousness raising within the Indigenous community about the nature of language loss, best practices for revitalization, the path of immersion for growing new speakers, sharing of language resources and strategies, etc
- An opportunity for educating the larger non-Indigenous community about the crisis in Indigenous languages, the value of Indigenous language as the key to irreplaceable Indigenous knowledge and its value to the larger global community
- A media event to raise awareness about both the crisis and possibilities for Indigenous language survival
- Provide opportunity for funding to be given toward supporting Indigenous languages at the community level with the goal to grow new young fluent speakers

We would also propose a year-ending global Indigenous language celebration event at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris as a kind of finale and launch into the future and ongoing work in revitalizing our Indigenous Languages

We will be more than willing to suggest names or contacts who can participate in the planning and development for the International Year of Indigenous Languages.

Ôk'ajU TahA Ôk'âfAnôTA (working together we can move things forward!)

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