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First Nations Language Loss in Canada: Language Extinction and Its Impacts on Future Generations

*Presentation by the AFN Chiefs Committee on Languages (CCOL)
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Introduction

We extend our greetings to the representatives of the Permanent Forum and to our Indigenous brothers and sisters who have come to gather here at this critical time.

This year the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2008 to be the International Year of Languages and it is our collective duty to promote and protect all languages, particularly endangered languages, in all individual and collective contexts.

The loss of language represents the loss of knowledge, particularly *Indigenous knowledge*. When a language disappears, so does the culture that goes with it. For communities that have been socially disrupted, *and language loss has been significant*, language embodies information about how we relate to one another and our surroundings. Language loss, therefore, impacts our capacity for healing and cultural connectedness.

Languages are a gift from the Creator which carries with them unique and irreplaceable values and spiritual beliefs that allow speakers to relate with their ancestors and to take part in sacred ceremonies. It is our vision that the present generation recover and strengthen the ability to speak these sacred, living languages and pass them on so that future generations will be fluent in them.

Our Purpose

We are here as representatives from the Chiefs Committee on Languages, a National Committee mandated by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN). The AFN is a political organization representing 633 First Nations in Canada, over 800,000 First Nations citizens and 53 First Nations languages across Canada.

The Chiefs Committee on Languages consists of 10 representatives from each of the Assembly of First Nations' ten regional affiliates who act in a national capacity to advocate and lobby for the needs of all First Nation communities across Canada on the essential and critical issues related to First Nations languages, revitalization, restoration, preservation and protection.

Currently there is no legislated protection for First Nations languages in Canada. The *Official Languages Act of Canada* (1969) recognizes English and French as

the *official languages* of Canada but there is no similar protection for First Nations languages. The *Constitution of Canada* (1982) in sections 16-23 of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* entrench minority language rights further, but First Nations languages are neither referred to in the *Canadian Constitution* or federal legislation.

Funding for First Nations languages, therefore, must come from secondary sources such as cooperative agreements with the federal government for First Nations languages. Historically the Government of Canada has made *very limited commitments* to funding First Nations languages despite the language crisis facing our nation.

Language Loss and its Impacts

Canada's First Nations languages are among the most endangered in the world. One of the most obvious signs of the health of a language is the number of its speakers. Symptoms of loss include loss of fluency as younger generations prefer to speak another tongue. Usage also declines in *domains* where language was once secure, such as, in cultural observances, schools *and most importantly*, at home.

Growing numbers of parents also fail to teach the language to their children, therefore, impacting the levels of fluency over time.

We know our languages are dying. The one sure way *to murder a language* is to ensure the genocide of its speakers. This was systematically done during the 1800's during the colonization era, and thereafter, during the residential school era.

More often *languages die* in a more complex and gradual way through the assimilation of speakers into other cultures. Repressive policies and other attempts at cultural genocide in the past have taken a toll over several generations of our speakers. Our Elders call upon us to:

- Not forget our languages.
- Speak and write our languages.
- Teach and learn our languages.
- Respect each other's dialects.
- Focus on young people.
- Start in the home to strengthen the will of the people to revitalize and bring back our languages.
- Work together to build a foundation for our peoples.

Language loss, especially for our youth, has set them adrift between our culture and that of mainstream society. Revitalizing our language and culture is a way to healing and reconnecting with the land.

We have developed a community driven revitalization plan for languages in Canada through a *National First Nations Languages Strategy* which was adopted by the AFN Chiefs in Assembly in July 2007.

The strategy is based on community commitment to identify priorities and develop and carry out plans that involve all age groups. The strategy targets the next 20 years to begin to overcome the legacy of neglect - with particular focus on the most critically endangered languages.

The core elements of our strategy are to ensure the revitalization, recognition and protection of our languages through sustainable investment, capacity building, promotion and preservation.

Despite our Efforts

The Canadian government has demonstrated very little understanding of, or empathy for, the impact of the loss of First Nations languages. The Crown has

We have also developed a DRAFT First Nations Language Private Members' Bill which has support from key representation on Parliament Hill. We are hoping to initiate the bill into first reading this year.

The Challenge

Canada continues to ignore First Nation languages even though our Elders, and our languages, are dying every day. Lack of government funding to support the revitalization, restoration, preservation, and protection of our languages has limited our capacity to address this very critical problem - which is even more pronounced at this time of international recognition of the plight of languages on a world stage.

The Chiefs Committee on Languages is in the process of finalizing and presenting a business plan to the Minister of Canadian Heritage and delivering a clear message to Canada that it must properly resource First Nations in order to protect their languages.

With the new *National Strategy, Implementation Plan and Private Members Bill*, our goal is to achieve recognition, protection and sustainable investment to ensure the survival, promotion and growth of First Nations languages throughout Canada.

historically ignored the linguistic rights of First Nations Peoples, yet the *Constitution Act 1982, Section 35.1*, entrenches our First Nations language rights in the Canadian Constitution. The Federal Government has a legal obligation through treaties, and legislation, to provide adequate resources that will enable First Nations to exercise this right.

Almost 70% of First Nations communities' languages are in decline, endangered or critically endangered. Preservation of First Nations languages **must be a higher priority of government** because of the link between cultural preservation and language. Without language, the main vehicle of transmission of cultural values and traditions no longer exists.

We are diligently working to integrate and roll out our new *National First Nations Language Strategy* and *National First Nations Language Implementation Plan*, as well as, to lobby Canada to uphold their fiduciary obligations. The latter will take many forms including the possibility of court cases to assert jurisdiction over our languages.

Request to the Permanent Forum

Given the policy and legal legacy of government involvement in eradicating and assimilating our languages and cultures it was Canada's intentional policies of assimilation, which have lead to the fact that First Nations languages are on the brink of extinction.

Since European settlement, First Nations have lost more than 100 languages in Canada and can anticipate that all but two of the 53 languages remaining may become extinct.

We call on the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to support First Nations linguistic rights and our right to exist as distinct and unique peoples.

We call on the Member States to support our efforts to preserve, revitalize, protect and promote our languages and cultures consistent with the vision of the International Year on Languages.

From Canada, we demand proper resources for the revitalization and protection of First Nations languages. The Chiefs Committee on Languages has already

indicated to the Minister of Canadian Heritage that we will be seeking proper resources for the protection and revitalization of First Nations languages. We know First Nations will require additional resources over and above the \$160 million that was cut last year from the Heritage fiscal framework. This is an outstanding commitment of the Government of Canada and refers back to Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples recommendations and previous acknowledgement by Canada of the critical state of First Nations languages.

Finally, we also demand from Canada a commitment to ending their political stand against the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

Without these protections and support of the Government of Canada, we stand to lose not only our languages but the vital knowledge and cultural systems they envelop. When just one of our languages dies the combined human knowledge of millennia dies with it – in the form of medical knowledge, science, historical information, survival and environmental sustainability.

Thank you for the honor and privilege to address this Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Seventh Session.