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Item 7 "Indigenous Languages"**

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**STATEMENT BY
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OF
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Madame Chair, honorable members of the Permanent Forum and participants of the session,

I'm a Saami politician. For me, the situation of indigenous languages is one of the most important issues in the international cooperation related to indigenous issues. I have, however, noted that languages have not always been at the heart of the cooperation in this context. Land rights, climate change and political issues are perhaps areas where we can find solidarity and common objectives relatively easily. The situation of languages may have appeared to be an issue that separates Indigenous Peoples rather than unites us. I believe that our concern for languages unites us, and that we all share the common objective to preserve, develop and pass on our languages from generation to generation. Indigenous languages have developed during centuries together with indigenous cultures.

Languages are not only a means for communication but also a medium and important part of a culture. Language tells us through terminology about the environment, livelihoods and cultural habits of a local culture. All indigenous languages are unique and adapted to the local environment. This is what unites all Indigenous Peoples – our languages as a specialized part of our cultures and windows to our relationship with nature.

Scientific assessments made regarding the future of indigenous and minority languages are not optimistic. Many languages will die in the near future. Some say that even 25 % of the 6000 indigenous languages are endangered. At the international level, there is no time to waste. We cannot just watch a part of our identity die, leaving only a hollow shade of the original culture to the future generations. Without indigenous languages, the future of entire indigenous cultures is seriously endangered. The death of a language means that the unique knowledge stored in that language disappears and the capacity of the culture to function and adapt to global social and environmental changes is substantially weakened. It is of critical importance to preserve indigenous languages – it is the best way to assure the future of indigenous cultures.

Language has a cultural context. It is influenced by the environment, cultural habits, livelihoods, contacts and beliefs. Scientists and politicians have developed the concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), which refers to the ecological knowledge that has been accumulated by the local community over centuries. The main purpose of this concept is to describe the environmental knowledge stored in languages through taxonomies. These word lists and grammars are informative but they tell only a little about the way terminology is used and taught, or about the environmental relationship between words.

As I suggested above, language cannot be treated merely as a means of communication. It should also be considered as an inseparable part of a culture and its development. In linguistic research, it is commonly held that language influences culture and vice versa. Researchers speak about the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or about linguistic relativity. Language influences the ways in which we think and it is a tool for thinking. Consequently, when considering cultures, we should always bear in mind that languages are the most important issue when preserving indigenous cultures.

I am a member of a Saami reindeer herding family and I have done research on the reindeer herding Saami culture and language. Saamis are experts in reading nature and have very special and distinct terminology for environmental conditions and phenomena. The Saami language has a vast storage of terminology and appellatives for snow, which creates certainty when navigating and moving in the landscape. Although linguistic knowledge is typically largely of a practical nature, it also holds more theoretical aspects in

perception models, cultural ways of seeing and in exact classification systems of natural phenomena, land forms, terminology and identification models.

In our work, we need to focus on the relationship between culture and language. Indigenous languages cannot be treated simply as minority languages, because they are key elements of entire cultures. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples states, *inter alia*, that Indigenous Peoples have the right to develop their languages. Also other international instruments acknowledge the importance of preserving and developing indigenous and minority languages. We need resources and specific policies to preserve indigenous languages. Perhaps there would be a need for United Nations Declaration on indigenous languages. This year has been proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly as the International Year of Languages. We need to devote more attention, work, resources and political commitment to preserving indigenous languages.

There are nine Saami languages, all endangered. Just a few years ago, we lost the 10th Saami language when the last speaker of Akkala Saami died in Russia. During the last years of her life, she only spoke her mother tongue to her cow. Three of the Saami languages are spoken in Finland. Out of these, North Saami is spoken in Norway, Sweden and Finland and is the largest Saami language; Anárssaami is spoken only in Finland; and Skoltsaami is spoken mainly in Finland but also in Russia.

In Finland, the right to use the Saami language is guaranteed by the Constitution and the Saami Language Act. The Saami Language Act states that Saamis have the right to use Saami languages before public authorities in the Saami home area.

In terms of legislation, the situation of Saami languages is good in Finland. The implementation of the legislation has been hampered by the lack of resources, however. Among the Saami languages spoken in Finland, the situation of Skoltsaami is particularly serious. Only about half of the 600 Skoltsaami living in Finland speak Skoltsaami as their mother tongue - and none of them are children. This is a serious threat to the future of the Skoltsaami language and culture. Special measures, adequate resources and political commitment are needed to preserve the Skoltsaami language.

In Finland, we also have positive examples, e.g. the revitalization of the Anárssaami language. The immersion courses (so called language showers) have worked very well in the revitalization of Anárssaami and helped to secure the future of this language at least for the time being. Indigenous organizations have worked actively on preserving the Saami languages spoken in Finland. We also have a fairly good situation when it comes to the availability of official documents and other material provided for the general public in Saami languages. However, fully realizing the right to use Saami before public authorities, which is guaranteed in the Saami Language Act, requires further work.

My mother tongue is North Saami. I'm a child of the times when it was not normal anymore to pass on the Saami language to the children. In my childhood village, many Saamis started to speak Finnish even to their own children as a result of assimilation policies of the church and society at large. Local Finns often held negative attitudes towards the Saami language. Parents thought that it would be better for the children if they spoke Finnish rather than Saami - the knowledge of Finnish would give their children better opportunities in life and they would not be bullied by Finns at school or later in life. The parents did not speak good Finnish, which limited their ability to communicate with their children. I am proud of the fact that my own parents spoke only Saami to their children.

This kind of a process of assimilation and loss of language is familiar to the majority of indigenous cultures. Sadly, it has happened all over the world. The international community must show that we no

longer tolerate such developments, and we must encourage all nations to ensure the future of indigenous languages with adequate resources and political commitment. The international community must do what it can to help developing nations preserve their indigenous languages.

The Finnish Saami Parliament has decided that, in all of its meetings, all the Saamis can use their mother tongue and interpretation will be available. This is the first time when all the Saamis can use their mother tongue in the Saami Parliament. The reaction to this decision was a surprise to me - some Saamis saw that the resources could be directed to responding to other needs more immediate than preserving all the Saami languages. It is sad that this kind of an attitude, which many majority culture representatives and officials have held, can still exist in the minds of Indigenous Peoples themselves. The right to use one's mother tongue cannot be a only a question of resources. How can we explain to future generations that we have let vivid languages and cultures die because we did not have enough money? Who among us would want to explain this to his or her own grandchildren? If we let languages die, in what state do we leave this world for future generations? Do we want our generation and its leaders to be remembered as the ones who let the indigenous languages die?

Madam Chair, dear participants,

The best advice I can give you to preserve and save your languages is that you need to use them. Speak in your mother tongue to your children, to your friends and at public events. We cannot save a language only by statements and legislation, the language needs to be used and taught. Political commitment, policies and resources are needed for support. We need all the speakers of indigenous languages to work as pathfinders, provide an example, and encourage people to use their mother tongue.

Thank you for your interest.