



Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, Canada Statement by National Chief Robert Bertrand Item 5: Indigenous Languages

Good morning, this statement is on behalf of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. We advocate for the rights, interests and needs of Indigenous peoples who live off-reserve in urban, rural and remote areas across Canada. Our peoples are status and non-status Indians, Métis peoples, and the Inuit of Southern Labrador.

Article 11 of UNDRIP states that Indigenous peoples have the “right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs” and that “states shall provide redress through effective mechanisms”.

Many of our peoples who were historically excluded from their communities and cultures in the colonial structure continue to be marginalized today. Successive decades of colonialism led to the incremental destruction and loss of our languages and culture. One of the core goals of the residential schools system was to eliminate Indigenous languages and culture. Today, the consequences of these discriminatory and assimilationist policies is the endangerment of our languages.

The 2016 Census data indicates a stark loss of language for off-reserve and non-status Indigenous populations in Canada:

Only 1.9% of persons identifying as non-status First Nations reported being able to converse in an Aboriginal language compared with 27.3% of status First Nations.

Only 1.4% of First Nations living off-reserve are able to speak an Aboriginal language compared with 44.9% of those living on-reserve.

The data on language loss stands in contrast to the motivation of off-reserve peoples to maintain the language. According to the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 60% of parents of Aboriginal children in non-reserve areas believed it was very important or somewhat important for their children to speak and understand an Aboriginal language. These statistics indicate the need for cultural programs, policies, and a targeted strategy for Aboriginal language revitalization among non-status peoples, as well as, status First Nations living off-reserve.

CAP advocates that the diversity of Indigenous populations within urban, rural, and remote areas must be considered when creating public policy on Indigenous languages and we urge the Canadian government to engage CAP and its constituents to provide “adequate, sustainable and long-term funding for the reclamation and revitalization of Indigenous languages”.