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- ORAL DELIVERY VERSION -

Statement by the Observer Delegation of Canada

**UNITED NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM
ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES'
HALF-DAY DISCUSSION ON INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES**

Agenda Item 7

New York

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Delivered by:

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Government of Canada

Good afternoon.

I am pleased to be here today to participate in this important meeting.

Canada acknowledges 2008 as the International Year of Languages, and applauds the work that the Permanent Forum is undertaking to support the protection and promotion of the world's Indigenous languages.

LES LANGUES AUTOCHTONES AU CANADA

Sur la population totale du Canada qui totalise un peu plus de 33 millions de personnes, Plus d'un million de Canadiens – soit quelque 4 % de notre population – se reconnaissent comme étant membres d'une Première nation, Inuits ou Métis.

Le Canada regroupe environ 50 langues autochtones différentes, ce qui est le reflet d'une grande diversité de cultures et d'identités autochtones. Ces langues appartiennent à 11 familles de langues autochtones : 10 familles de langues de Premières nations, dont le michif, une langue développée par les Métis, et l'inuktitut.

LA SITUATION DES LANGUES AUTOCHTONES

La viabilité ou la continuité d'une langue autochtone au Canada dépend de son utilisation sur une base quotidienne, idéalement en tant que principale langue parlée à la maison.

Plus de 50 langues autochtones sont parlées au Canada, mais certains indices donnent à penser que cette diversité est menacée. En 2006, seulement une personne sur cinq avait une langue autochtone pour langue maternelle ou langue première alors qu'un nombre encore plus faible déclarait parler une langue autochtone à la maison. Cependant, une proportion plus élevée (22%) des Autochtones ont indiqué qu'ils étaient capables de parler une langue autochtone puisque que certains l'avaient appris comme langue seconde.

ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE DATA RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Statistics Canada

The assessment of the state of Aboriginal languages in Canada relies extensively on language data collected by Statistics Canada.

Accurate and reliable data, measures, and indicators can inform strategies to support the survival and protection of endangered languages. Language data can provide valuable insight about endangered language continuity, trends and needs.

The State of Language Learning in Aboriginal Communities

From 1981 to 2001, many Aboriginal languages, especially endangered ones, experienced long-term declines in intergenerational transmission as

they were spoken less and less at home as a major language. This has resulted in declining proportions of children who speak an endangered language as a major home language.

A 2007 Statistics Canada publication noted the importance of second-language acquisition among speakers of endangered languages. This in some measure, is serving as a counterbalance to mother tongue decline. It is especially true among youth who are showing interest in learning the traditional but endangered languages of their parents or grandparents as second languages.

Statistics Canada cites that in 2001, second-language learners accounted for over half of the speaking population among some of the most endangered languages, including for example: Tlingit; Haida; and smaller Salish languages.

It is also important to note that while some languages are seeing increasing numbers of speakers due to a concerted effort to learn them as a second language, other endangered languages are not being picked up by younger generations.

Increased Understanding

While second-language acquisition cannot be considered a substitute for mother tongue learning, increasing the number of second-language

D'autres programmes précis viennent s'ajouter aux mesures de soutien à l'égard des langues autochtones. En effet, le Canada verse plus de 4 millions de dollars par année à ses trois territoires nordiques afin de favoriser la préservation et la promotion des langues autochtones dans le Nord du Canada. De plus, le Canada remet 8 millions de dollars par année à des sociétés de communication autochtones pour qu'elles diffusent des émissions de télévision et de radio dans des langues autochtones; une autre somme de 2,5 millions de dollars est attribuée par l'intermédiaire du Fonds canadien de télévision pour contribuer à la diffusion d'émissions de télévision dans des langues autochtones.

COMMUNITY BEST PRACTICES

Each year, the Aboriginal Languages Initiative (ALI) supports over 200 community-based language projects, including: the recording and transcribing of interviews with Elders; and the digitization and archiving of language materials. For example, the ALI has supported the development of orthographies and dictionaries for over 25 endangered Aboriginal languages in Canada.

This past year, the ALI also provided support for the Michif Language Tour. Efforts were made to promote this endangered language and encourage Michif speakers to use the language in the home and other social settings, in 21 Métis Communities.

Through support from the Department of Canadian Heritage, a number of Canadian First Nations communities are now documenting their languages using the Phraselator. The Phraselator allows communities to create timeless digital records of Aboriginal languages as they are spoken by Elders and other remaining speakers.

Of special distinction is the British Columbia Premier's Award received jointly by the First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council and Network BC for their innovative partnership to provide electronic language resources to First Nations throughout the province of British Columbia.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The Government of Canada is committed to supporting endangered languages through data collection and analysis, the development of indicators, and through sustainable investments in community-based language initiatives.

Given that language needs differ across communities, it is critical that communities take the lead in all stages of identifying priorities, developing language plans, and undertaking preservation activities. It is also important to share best practices, knowledge and expertise as we move forward to support the preservation and promotion of Indigenous languages globally.

Je vous remercie. Thank you.