

**Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Seventh Session
New York, 21 April – 2 May 2008**

Agenda Item 7: Report of the “International Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous Languages”

JOINT STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF

Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action (FAIRA)
National Native Title Council
Murray Lower Darling River Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN)
Indigenous Peoples Organisation Network Youth Delegation
Marninwarntikura Women’s Resource Centre
Kimberley Language Resource Centre
North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA)
Menzies School of Health Research
National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (NACCHO)
New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council (NSWALC)
University of New South Wales, Indigenous Law Centre
Office of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner
National Indigenous Higher Education Network
National Indigenous Youth Movement of Australia

Thank you Madam Chair.

This intervention is made on behalf of a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations from Australia, present at this Forum.

We support the experts report acknowledging the importance of valuing Indigenous languages, as they reflect the world views of Indigenous communities. For example, customary laws of Indigenous communities are often in their languages, if the language is lost then the community may not fully understand its laws and system of governance. Loss of language also undermines the identity and spirituality of the community and the individual.

We urge States to adopt and implement the recommendations of this report as a matter of priority and urgency.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages are in a State of Crisis.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages of Australia are magnificent and are used by many Indigenous Australians as a first language throughout the continent.

Why is Language Important

The Aboriginal world view is inextricably linked to languages. It is hard for English speakers to understand the interrelationship between language thought and cultural knowledge. English does not have the extended history of traditional Aboriginal languages. It is a hybrid language which was influenced by several different European languages over many centuries. It is no longer possible to link English to one specific people and one specific culture.

Aboriginal languages can, however, be linked to specific groups of people and importantly, to specific areas of country. The complexity of meanings encapsulated in each language did not go through a process of being identified, recorded and diluted. In the same way knowledge of land, flora and fauna possessed by speakers of these languages was never categorised in the scientific manner of western knowledge. Western knowledge is literacy based and operates from the ethos of identification and classification. Aboriginal scientific knowledge operates from the ethos that there is a relationship between things within the environment and a human responsibility for it. Many academics have linked loss of Indigenous languages to the loss of biological diversity. In other words as the languages die out so does the knowledge of how to care for the environment, resulting in the loss of species of flora and fauna. Language cannot be divorced from the People, our Spirituality and our environments.

To date, linguists have been non-Indigenous and have imposed western methodologies, requiring written recordings from the scientific aspects of language – sounds, syntax, prefixing, etc. There was a focus on some recorded stories and traditional knowledge's, however this again was required to be in written form with much time spent on transcription and translation.

The outcomes from those times and those particular approaches have resulted in more linguists being able to speak the languages but a decline in Aboriginal speakers. While there has been much data recorded eg, grammars, wordlists, dictionaries, storybooks, they are only useful as language revival or maintenance tools to someone who has had Western linguistic training – or at the very least approaches language from a Western perspective. Therefore these tools have not been effective in many Australian Indigenous communities.

Meanwhile elders pass away and children do not hear their heritage languages.

Today, language has to take account of People, Place and Context

The devastating affect of colonisation on the traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages of Australia has endangered the cultural knowledge of thousands of

years. With the loss of language, the way this knowledge is transmitted to younger generations has been disrupted and changed. We believe, however, it is not too late to try and capture some of the cultural depth of this knowledge while speakers of the languages are still alive.

The Elders, who are the teachers in our tradition, strengthen our organisations by ensuring the cultural relevance of our policies and practices. We have put our stamp on setting priorities through the broader consideration of our Oral Tradition Heritage.

Because it is not just about language, it is the survival of our culture, traditions, laws and customs. It is about the transmission of knowledge and knowledge systems that have sustained us as a group of Peoples from the time of creation. The place for this teaching and learning is on country. Formal education and linguistic training needs to support the return of traditional Aboriginal ways of teaching and learning not compete with it. Our Elders are our teachers and our Country is the curriculum. We do not need Western Trained Aboriginal Linguists. We need Aboriginal Linguists Trained by their Elders in culturally relevant methodologies but who know what it is that they need from Western linguistics.

Australia's linguistic diversity is unique in the world and fundamentally important to the rights and identity of Indigenous people. At a time when Indigenous communities are in particular focus, with new awareness of inequalities of healthcare and other support systems, uncertainty as to government response to trauma in communities, and international events such as the new UN Declaration on the Rights for Indigenous Peoples, this richness in heritage now more than ever needs consistent, strategic and long term coordination on all levels to grow.

State and Territory representatives from Aboriginal Language Centres and Tertiary Institutions recently gathered at a National Indigenous Languages Conference during September 2007 to talk about current state and territory language initiatives as well as discuss strategies to revitalise, maintain and promote Indigenous Languages.

Madam Chair, We submit the following recommendations:

1. We urge the Government to adopt the recommendations of the National Indigenous Languages Conference in September 2007 and the International Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous Languages and to engage with Indigenous Peoples to develop implementation strategies as a matter of urgency.
2. We urge the Permanent Forum to recommend to UNESCO to promote teaching and learning frameworks & methodologies acknowledging and adopting at their core Indigenous Peoples' Oral Tradition Heritage.
3. We urge the Permanent Forum to recommend to UNESCO and States and their representatives to be open to and educated about the significance of the Oral Tradition Heritage learning methodologies and to incorporate this methodology

into Education curricular. Currently there is no understanding or acknowledgement of this learning framework.

4. Consistent with the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples' we urge the Permanent Forum to recommend to States to develop with the full participation of Indigenous peoples, mechanisms to allow Indigenous Peoples to take control and drive the vehicles for language continuation, maintenance and revival.

In closing I would like to leave you with a quote by Joe Brown, Walmajarri Elder–Chairperson Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre 1992-1994.

“All the old people know the meaning of the story for their own country...Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] people have stories about land, [sea], animals and people from the beginning when the world was soft. These stories teach you everything. How to live in the country and how to respect each other...They tell you about important places we have to look after”.