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EU Intervention

Mr President,

The EU wishes to thank the panellists for their important observations in relation to indigenous languages. The International Year of Indigenous Languages has been important in raising the awareness of not only indigenous peoples and States, but also the general public on the urgency to halt the disappearances of indigenous languages. Languages, as we all know, are not only means for communication. Languages are also the repository of unique worldviews, philosophies, knowledge and understanding of the world.

The EU itself is a language diverse region. Besides the 24 official languages of the Union, there are over 60 regional, minority and indigenous languages, spoken by some 40 million people. It is this diversity that makes the European Union what it is: not a 'melting pot' in which differences are rendered down, but a common home in which diversity is celebrated, and where our many mother tongues are a source of wealth and a bridge to greater solidarity and mutual understanding.

This is why the EU fully supports indigenous peoples' rights to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

Furthermore, in ensuring the intergenerational transmission of languages, the EU firmly believes it is essential to promote, respect and fulfil the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which pronounces that a child belonging to a minority or who is

indigenous shall not be denied the rights, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.

Indigenous languages are threatened not only due to the lack of recognition resulting in discrimination and repression. But it also seems that the lack of access to education, let alone education respectful of the child's culture and mother tongue, contributes to the vicious circle of language loss. This may explain the unfortunate trend in many countries where indigenous parents, eager to see their children succeed in education, do not transmit their own language to their children and instead focusses on the national language of the countries they live in.

The EU believes that bi- and multilingualism is the best strategy for preserving the mother tongue of all children, and the minority and indigenous child in particular. Within the EU and since 2008, we have invested heavily in our Strategy for Multilingualism to help our Member States to develop new educational tools to ensure that school leavers have better language skills.

In our External actions we support many projects around the world to promote mother tongue based multilingual education and the revitalisation of indigenous languages. Examples to mention are our support for mother-tongue education in grades 1-3 in Sierra Leone. In Bangladesh we helped to develop a multilingual mother tongue education programme allowing the curricula development in 7 different tribal languages. In Namibia we are contributing to the revitalisation of endangered indigenous languages and in Turkey we are helping to strengthen the use of the Laz mother tongue from preschool and all the way into adult literacy. Some of these projects are included in the half billion euro the EU invests annually in education programmes in around 60 countries across the world.

We would like to thank all the indigenous mechanisms for their contributions to the International Year as well as the entire UN system, and UNESCO in particular as the coordinator for the year, in their efforts and contributions to make the International Year a success.

The EU will continue to work with all partners, Indigenous peoples and States in strengthening the recognition of indigenous languages and in efforts to halt their loss.

Distinguished panellists,

what can international community from Geneva perspective do to protect better the indigenous languages?

Thank you.