

Indigenous Languages: A Briefing Paper



Introduction

Indigenous peoples make up less than 6% of the global population, yet they speak more than 4,000 of the world's almost 7,000 languages. There are dire predictions that up to 95 per cent of the world's languages may become extinct. Seriously endangered, are indigenous languages which are majority of these languages. The persistence of indigenous languages is a clear proof of their right to assert their self-determination. When indigenous languages are threatened, so are indigenous peoples. Several factors such as policies of assimilation, land dispossession thus enforced relocation, discriminatory laws and actions, non-access to education, poverty, illiteracy, migration and other forms of discrimination and human rights violations are harsh realities, risks and threats. Increasingly, indigenous languages are no longer transmitted by parents to their children.

Article 13 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that "indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their languages, oral traditions, writing systems and literatures." Further, it provides that "States

shall take effective measures to protect this right, including through interpretation in political, legal and administrative proceedings.” Articles 14 and 16 state indigenous peoples’ rights “to establish their educational systems and media in their own languages and to have access to an education in their own language.”

Though lack of resources is frequently cited as a reason for inadequate actions, some indigenous peoples are successfully revitalizing and developing their languages through their own initiatives and support by organizations such as Pawanka Fund in the last two years. Now, in line with the United Nations’ proclamation of 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages and to draw attention to the critical loss of indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve, revitalize and promote them at the national and international levels, PAWANKA Fund in its sixth cycle, has supported more projects that are spread globally in Central, South and South East Asia to South, North and Central America, to Africa, and even the Scandinavian countries which are focused on indigenous languages which is a crucial concern of indigenous peoples.

Reclaiming and Revitalizing Indigenous Languages

For indigenous peoples, their language is not merely a tool to communicate. Their languages embody the very core of their collective identity, the distinctiveness of their culture and the complexity of their wisdom and knowledge.

The case of Nsyilxcn, one of Canada’s most endangered languages in the Okanagan region, has less than 250 fluent mother tongue speakers. The project “**Yilmixwm Knowledge of tmixw: Chiefs Knowledge of Lands Life Force**” was realized in 2017 with the help of fluent speakers, adult speakers who perpetuate the “use” by discussing complex terms to know the layers of meaning of the Nsyilxcn language. The En’owkin Centre or Okanagan Indian Educational Resources Society (OIERS) oversaw the project with the participation of the Chiefs of the seven Okanagan Syilx reservations who committed to recover and assert the governance laws of their people on their lands through the reinstatement of the customary laws expressed in the Nsyilxcn language and their stories. Fluent speakers of the Nsyilxcn Okanagan language deciphered the traditional values, governance processes, and leadership skills embedded in the traditional sacred Okanagan Chief’s story. Stories and legends on the history of traditional places were shared with the help of fluent and elder Nsyilxcn speakers. Intensive sessions and workshops were held to discuss the history of the place and the legal implications as well as the old legal words pertaining to land use and governance. They were directly involved in the implementation and provided oral and written detailed reports on the achievements and results to each of the seven Band Councils for their use and dissemination to tribal governance organizations in the seven reservations.

In the Pacific, the organization Hālau I Ka Leo Ola O NāMamo in 2018 accomplished both the cultivation of their artistic dance and local language through their project “**E Ola A Laupa’i**” or “Long live the Knowledge of the Ancestors through the Descendants.” The hula dance masters were extremely impressed that the thirty (30) students spoke the Hawaiian language and were determined to learn the hula. Each indigenous student who was chosen because of commitment to the Hawaiian language and hula was able to understand their responsibility to learn these dances and the meaning of chants and songs that go with these, which they performed to the wider community.

Three years ago, the Archipelago Indigenous Youth Front, a member organization of AMAN in Indonesia, launched the project “**Indigenous Youth Tracing Ancestors’ Path.**” Fifteen indigenous youth came from 15 provinces and arrived in Bogor, West Java to take part in a series of trainings aimed at reviving indigenous culture. They replicated the ancestors’ traditional ways which were documented through text (writing), photos, and videos. A ground breaking experience, the indigenous youths were sent to the five regions for community immersion which exposed them to cultural diversity of indigenous life. Particularly in North Sulawesi, the Koha indigenous youth established an indigenous school for learning the language Koha, which compensates for the dearth of government schools that cater to the particular needs of indigenous people there.

In Sudan where the Nuba people are in the midst of strife and political uncertainty, the Delibaya Nuba Women Development Organization (DNWDO) initiated a project “**Nguro Ebang (I am Heiban)**” that concluded at the end of 2018, to retain their language that would be passed on to future generations. With oral tradition as their main mode of learning, their language is gradually being forgotten due to urban migration and education. A book on the Nuba language which was written in the early 90s by a community elder was revised and updated by a language committee that included teachers who enhanced their curriculum and teaching methods. The book is a record of the language and a learning tool for grammar threatened with loss had it not been utilized. It is now used in language classes where community members learn the indigenous alphabet, in reading, writing, and vocabulary. Community elders who are also holders of a wealth of knowledge about their people’s past, requested a class for them to learn to read and write the language which they only spoke fluently. More creative ways were applied to ensure better attendance and practice of the language. Mixed classes with the elders encouraged the youth to learn and practice conversations or pronunciation with the elders when at home and in their neighborhood. The Nuba people take pride in reclaiming their identity because they are writing their names in their language and calling each other with their traditional names.

In 2018, the Advocates for Indigenous Language Survival’s (AICLS) project “**Breath of Life Institute 2018/Developing Native Leadership**” strengthened the native languages of California Indians. The project was able to connect with 25 new Individuals from diverse tribes and 26

different Native California languages spread throughout the state. These participants share the work they accomplished reconnecting with their Native languages, and were able to bring in new participants interested in the program. The organization grew which has so far admitted more than fifty (50) individuals from various tribes and reached more Native people committed to reclaim, revive and better speak their heritage languages and keep these alive, as well as to promote Native leadership. The program is focused on assisting those who are primarily reviving their sleeping languages and is inspired to see how California Indian communities refuse to let their languages become dormant and continue to rise to protect their Native languages.

In the Altai Republic in Russia, indigenous culture is reflected in oral narratives such as stories, legends, and epic poetry which are traditionally accompanied by throat vibration singing known as Kai. Today, they are almost forgotten and no longer performed in its traditional entirety. All these cultural forms have been written down and published in small print runs but are not taught in schools. The project **“Bashparak” (Big Finger)** implemented by the Altai Film Creative Group in 2018 revived the tradition of epic poetry education by creating cartoons and distributing them among the indigenous population. The young Altaians are taught the value of spoken language, thus expanding their worldview and knowledge. It involved select pedagogues and other school teachers who agreed on the program and exposed the Altaian and Russian-speaking children who were a mix of Altaians and ethnic Russians, and teachers alike to the world of the epic, through an excursion to the Karakol valley. The children expressed their interest and desire to draw their visions while listening to the epic. These drawings were created into an animation series by a group skilled in technical illustration. The team acquired a computer to assemble the animations as well as instruct the children in the fundamentals of cartooning. The project that involved a total of forty-five (45) participants has created ripples beyond the Karakol Valley.

Radio remains to be a powerful communication tool that is most accessible relative to other media. It has an expansive reach and can be sustained by a community for their own purposes. Thus the organization Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (AMAN) in Indonesia built radio stations in line with their project **“Indigenous Media as a Means for Inter-generational Communications”** in three communities where the people have an awareness of their well-being, self-determined development, and indigenous rights in the face of threats to their survival. In each community, their indigenous language is used in the radio program in addition to Bahasa where discussions are on traditional practices such as farming, weaving, and spiritual values related to these. Additionally, the mobile application

which is accompanied by a book about the Sakai people highlights their cultural identity while amplifying their voice to the mainstream media and the public.

To save a language from total extinction is what the Gurapau Group in Marsabit County, Kenya pursued with the project **“On the Trails of Vanishing El molo Language”** which involved a total

of 800 indigenous people, not including those that benefited from its impact. They identified men and women in El-molo villages who still have knowledge, understanding, and skills of the language and imparted these to language teachers and other elders . The project also necessitated the expertise of an external expert who trained teachers to develop a curriculum and teacher's guide book, and another expert to undertake research on the El-molo language, collect data from skilled elders on El-molo vocabulary and grammar, to improve the dictionary. A competition was held at the village level to identify competent and adept individuals to teach the El-molo language. A research tool was employed to gather more information from skilled elders and other community members who have basic knowledge of the language in an informal context. The publication of the teaching curriculum, teaching aid and El-molo dictionary ensured that the language will survive, especially that language classrooms in villages were constructed for El-molo language classes for children that were complemented by community sensitization meetings.

There are 123 indigenous languages in Nepal but only a few of these have developed a writing system. The preservation and survival of the other languages are crucial to uphold cultural diversity and integrity. The National Indigenous Women's Federation (NIWF) initiated the project **“Developing the Writing System in Endangered Languages of Nepal”** for four endangered languages namely Pahari, Chepang, Bhujel and Thami; and to develop a curriculum for teaching conversation in Majhi. Stakeholders' meetings with related language communities and indigenous peoples' organizations were conducted to design the workshops. Speakers, experts, and experienced senior linguists from different districts were invited for each language workshop which was co-hosted by indigenous peoples' organizations. Spelling guides were developed for each language, and test copies were printed for field testing in the communities, and after final revision, final copies with new orthography were printed and distributed through the indigenous peoples' organizations.

In Hawaii, the Palikū Documentary Films' **“The Investigations for Multi-media Interactive Indigenous Portal”** was a production to showcase what it looks and sounds like for indigenous languages to truly live and thrive in their own homelands, despite not being the dominant language or political power in their region. The project which included trans-global communication also allows for the simultaneous research and initial development phase of a multi-media inter-active indigenous information portal that films like the one mentioned above would be a part of.

In Mizoram State in Northeast India, the Zo Indigenous Forum with their project **“Promotion and Protection of Endangered Pang and Ralte Languages”** shall come up with video and audio documentation of conversations, dialogues, and narratives or traditional oral literature to educate and mobilize the indigenous youth on the importance of language. The outputs and

outcomes of the project shall contribute to broader advocacy for inter-generational transfer of traditional knowledge.

Tebtebba-Indigenous Peoples International Centre for Policy Research and Development's project that covers eight (8) countries namely the Philippines, Peru, Nicaragua; Brazil; Kenya, Tanzania; Cameroon is **"Research and Advocacy on Indigenous Language, Concepts and Values on Sustainability."** It is currently being undertaken to strengthen the vitality and use of indigenous languages, concepts, and values in the implementation of indigenous peoples' sustainable and self-determined development. The research documents important indigenous concepts and values in the local indigenous languages, and the process and manner of transmission by indigenous elders to the younger generations. The compiled research report to be published shall be used for further enhancement, transmission and advocacy of these indigenous concepts and values for the continued practice and promotion for sustainability, as part of the implementation of the indigenous peoples' self-determined development.

Lessons Learned

A common thread that binds all the initiatives and action is the determination of indigenous peoples to keep their languages vibrant and reflective of their worldview and life ways. There may have been constraints and limiting factors to the practice of speech and perpetuation of the native language, but the agency and commitment to revive the mother tongue is strong and just needed assistance and support.

Knowledge transfer through their language both by oral tradition and a written system is key to indigenous peoples' affirmation of their cultural identity and diversity. Language since time immemorial defined their governance, self-determined resource management, and community relations.

In the case of the Okanagan Syilx Nation, the various layers of meanings and how these are significant to land rights illustrate the influence and strength of oral language while focused on the indigenous ways of knowing, to guide and inform the public and their own tribes of collective tribal governance and protection of tribal lands. The Hawaiian elders hold on to their language to continue further on their path as "enlightened" indigenous people who take pride in traditional practices as they live their leadership roles in developing others in the communities to nurture the language used to transmit their practices. The Koha youth in Indonesia realize that putting up a cultural school and learning their local language is a milestone in asserting their identity. Local wisdom is too precious to be ignored and the crying need for the youth to know their history, identity, culture, and the ancestors' legacy through their language cannot be understated.

All the indigenous communities where projects were implemented appreciated the importance of reviving and revitalizing the written language that will last for a long time. If at the start, some community members were skeptical about the endeavor, more were interested in learning, even the educated realized the importance of becoming part of the language classes so they can read and write their language better. The younger generation who are deemed by the elders as “lost” (though not solely their fault), did not know their roots until they learned their language, and were able to find themselves and learn about their ways and culture.

It takes a community to nurture a language. The Nuba and the El-molo community members, both young and old, developed great interest in learning and reviving their language threatened with forgetting and extinction. The support of tribal elders in the implementation of the project and the reciprocal enthusiasm of community members fully captured the need for language revival and preparedness to learn the language.

The role of language experts and linguists must not be overlooked as they play a vital role in sharing their expertise, academic or practical in language revival and development of learning tools. The Gurapau Group and NIWF people tapped into the great expertise among traditional and academic experts for language revival.

The AICLS realized that healthy, robust cultures, including languages, contribute to a stronger sense of identity and well-being and enable people to be more confident and stronger leaders in their respective communities as proven by the California Indians. Native languages, culture and traditional knowledge are intricately and undeniably tied together thus should be revived alongside each other to foster solidarity across nations or tribes.

The establishment and management of their own indigenous media enable the communities to enhance inter-generational communication, and contribute to assertion of their rights. Indigenous media that refer to community radios as in the case of AMAN’s projects, film and video documentaries as well as smartphone applications to interpret the history and values of an indigenous territory, computer animations to reflect local literature, enable an effective link between elders and youths as a way to conserve and protect indigenous knowledge, leadership, and governance, in the midst of marginalization and minoritization, as proven by the Altai film group, Zo Indigenous Forum and the Paliku documentary group.

Recommendations

Indigenous peoples’ organizations have to be further strengthened and their partnership with the communities maintained and broadened so they can seek other partners to support and sustain similar programs. Various efforts such as the publication of dictionaries, production and reproduction of documentaries, review of language curricula, popularization of and access to technological ware such as apps, which are all important in the community’s preservation of their

language and cultural heritage must be fully supported by states and organizations like PAWANKA Fund.

Much more is still to be done to ensure that indigenous languages survive and thrive. More research and dissemination of findings; support for available expertise to impart language skills to other members of indigenous communities; trained teachers for sustainability of language revival – these all need to be supported to stem the demise of the indigenous peoples' mother tongue.