



**Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
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Languages and cultures

Declaration by the
***Universal Esperanto Association (UEA) and the
Nitobe Association for linguistic democracy and linguistic justice***

The fifth session of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples will be considering the role of languages and cultures in protecting and furthering the rights and identities of indigenous peoples.

Each human being has at least one language, generally termed the native language. Normally the native language is not chosen but is acquired by birth, as it is transmitted by the parents and/or the environment. It is thus an attribute of every individual, like skin colour or gender. By means of language people organise and communicate their thoughts, exchange information, interact with one another and take action in society. The possibility of acting through the language of which one has a complete command, which is generally one's native language, is thus a precondition for taking an active part in society and being truly capable of acting as a citizen, e.g. pursuing studies, holding a job and defending one's rights before a court. That is everyone's fundamental human right.

Protecting native languages is therefore not just a question of culture. Its importance is above all practical, political and economic: it is a question of respect and of giving effect to the real interests of individuals. If a language loses functions in society, that impoverishes those who speak it as their native language not only in cultural terms but also at a practical level, as it reduces their real opportunities for playing a role in that language in the various contexts of social, political and economic life.

Where there is language discrimination, a native language that is not the predominant (official) language in society puts the person concerned in an unfavourable position with regard to education, justice and the labour market. In those areas the status of a person's native language inevitably affects his or her ability to play an active part in society and indeed any chance of prosperity. Defending language rights is thus an important part of the protection of human rights.

Ensuring the possibility of using one's native language in communicating with the authorities is an essential condition for ensuring that citizens can actually use their political rights to the full. Indeed, the organs of the State cannot abstain from communicating. A State can be neutral with regard to religion, but it cannot remain neutral with regard to languages, since it cannot avoid using at least one language for its legislation and for running its courts, schools and communications systems. There is no such thing as a State without written or spoken communication. But the institutions cannot be truly democratic if they are not based on inclusive communication, accessible for all citizens via their first, native, language. Linguistic democracy is thus a fundamental element in practical political democracy.

The *Universal Esperanto Association (UEA)* and the *Nitobe Association for linguistic democracy and linguistic justice* stress that protecting the language rights of indigenous peoples means enabling them to participate to the full in all areas of life and preventing their economic and political impoverishment.