



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[21 August 2019]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



## **Alarming threat to indigenous languages: UN International year of Indigenous Languages fails to implement effective measures**

Society of Threatened Peoples is deeply concerned about the alarming situation of the world's indigenous languages. Of the 4,000 indigenous languages worldwide, many are under serious threat. As the majority of the indigenous languages are only passed on in spoken form, they are especially likely to disappear. Linguists assume that every two weeks a language disappears.

The protection of indigenous languages is an integral part of international law. Thus, all states are obliged to implement appropriate measures for the protection and continued use of indigenous languages and education. However, the gap between international law and everyday reality is huge: indigenous languages are scarcely present in public life, as they are socially marginalized and, thus, spoken only in private.

With great concern we observe a deep-rooted everyday racism, based on colonial structures. Indigenous people are marginalized, and the disappearance of indigenous languages is only one indicator among many. No UN member state is able to comprehensively reflect on its colonial heritage in order to recognize indigenous peoples' rights as fully equal. The number of speakers of indigenous languages is on the decline, since an indigenous language is considered of lesser worth compared to the respective majority language. It is especially the young members of indigenous communities who have to consider how to balance efforts to preserve their indigenous identity with their individual opportunities.

Compared to non-indigenous school pupils, indigenous children are often disadvantaged when starting their school career. An education system that fails to teach indigenous languages reproduces and consolidates social inequalities. Language barriers lead to inadequate access to administrative or judicial procedures, making political participation more difficult. Sound knowledge of the majority language is always needed to enter the labor market as well as higher education. Thus, parents often teach their children the majority language in order to give them better education and career opportunities.

Languages disappear due to human rights violations. China with its current assimilation policy towards Uyghurs and other minorities is one example of the persecution of indigenous peoples who dare to live according to their cultural identity. In Russia, indigenous movements are criminalized. Apart from that, a non-recognition of indigenous communities – as the case of India illustrates – is to be seen as a de facto repression of indigenous rights.

Today, many indigenous people have already lost their language due to social pressure and discrimination, but also due to boarding school systems and assimilation policies. Currently, all promising initiatives to keep an indigenous language alive are based on the commitment of indigenous communities. They try to pass on their language to the next generation, however, there is a lack of sufficient financial support from national and international institutions to keep these languages from becoming extinct.

### **Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the UN Human Rights Council to call on the UNESCO to:**

- counteract and point out everyday racism in post-colonial societies – and urge the member states to comply with the UN declarations and treaties, and to implement them. It will be necessary to initiate a UN Decade of Indigenous Languages, in line with the UN Year of Indigenous Languages, to ensure that indigenous representatives are involved and given leadership positions, as demanded e.g. by Grand Chief Willie Little Child;
- develop measures that give priority to revitalizing and strengthening languages, in contrast to documentation and research;

- support local and local indigenous initiatives and education programs to protect their languages – and promote community-based immersion projects, such as the indigenous-led Global Indigenous Language Fund; implement an active language protection system that prioritizes the most vulnerable languages, aiming to preserve as many as possible, including the establishment of an indigenous language department within UNESCO;
- to report, condemn and, if possible, prevent the most serious human rights violations and assimilation policies against indigenous communities, especially in the People's Republic of China.

**Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the UN Human Rights Council to call on States in which indigenous peoples live, to:**

- implement and effectuate the self-commitments regarding the protection of indigenous languages - including equal participation for indigenous peoples; introduce comprehensive bilingual education in at least one indigenous language for all school pupils, and integrate traditional knowledge into systems of higher education;
  - provide financial support for indigenous programs to preserve their language – and to introduce appropriate measures to revitalize languages;
  - provide indigenous people with equal access to public office, politics, and administration in their own language; come to terms with and counteract racism that is deeply rooted in societal structures.
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