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Visions for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032

By **Kristen Carpenter***, **Andrew Cowell****,
Alexis Palmer***

The United Nations General Assembly recently proclaimed the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (“IDIL”) from 2022-2032 to “to draw attention to the critical loss of indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve, revitalize and promote indigenous languages and to take urgent steps at the national and international levels.” The Decade is an opportunity to expose and address the severe loss of Indigenous Peoples’ languages locally, regionally, and globally. It is a chance for the entire world community to gather together and commit to bringing Indigenous languages back from the brink of dormancy or extinction.¹

The situation is severe. A policy report of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs recently stated:

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¹ UN DESA, UN DESA Policy Brief No. 151: Why Indigenous Languages Matter: The International Decade On Indigenous Languages 2022–2032, (Feb. 10, 2023), <https://fr.idil2022-2032.org/resources/un-desa-policy-brief-no-151-why-indigenous-languages-matter-the-international-decade-on-indigenous-languages-2022-2032/?fbclid=IwAR3smoKdEuHT6mp-HASVHo7MtzUHioGGT5OrAe2lwAvypFXw3Y8pxiCMhWE>.

Out of the 6,700 languages spoken worldwide, forty percent are in danger of disappearing. Indigenous Peoples make up less than six percent of the global population, yet they speak more than 4,000 of the world's languages. Most of the languages that are under threat are Indigenous languages.²

The United Nations (“UN”) attributes language loss to “ongoing assimilationist policies, social pressure, demographic change and the emphasis on a homogeneous nation state model that shares one culture and one language.”³

In North America, assimilationist policies have created a very complicated and painful legacy of language loss.⁴ Throughout the U.S. and Canada, so-called boarding schools or residential schools were funded by government and religious institutions to eradicate Indigenous cultures, from approximately 1820 through the 1960's (though some remained open much later). Children were instructed in English or French, as well as manual labor skills, and often punished or abused if they spoke their own languages. In many Indigenous communities, intergenerational transmission of the language, whether informally at home or formally in Indigenous-run schools, stopped or nearly stopped during this era. Today, when many Indigenous individuals would like to learn their languages, it remains difficult to overcome the intergenerational trauma and disruption caused by the boarding schools.

From a global perspective, Indigenous Peoples' languages may be key to diversity, cultural understanding, and even addressing climate change.⁵ Researchers study Indigenous languages as subjects of academic inquiry, whether in linguistics or anthropology, with increasing attention to the needs of Indigenous communities.⁶ For Indigenous Peoples,

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ In Canada, there has been an extensive process to document and redress the harms caused by the residential schools. See GOV'T OF CAN., *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, <https://www.rcaanc-cirmac.gc.ca/eng/1450124405592/1529106060525> (last modified Sept. 29, 2022).

⁵ UNESCO, *Cutting Edge: Indigenous languages: Gateways to world's cultural diversity*, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/cutting-edge-indigenous-languages-gateways-worlds-cultural-diversity> (last updated Nov. 7, 2022).

⁶ See UNIV. OF COLO. BOULDER: THE ARAPAHO LANGUAGE PROJECT, Henéyeihno'úseen!, <https://verbs.colorado.edu/ArapahoLanguageProject/index.html> (last visited Mar. 3, 2023) (“This website was created to support the revitalization of the Arapaho language and be a helpful resource for Arapaho language learners.”).

languages often have immediate, pragmatic, or personal significance. Indigenous individuals have explained that without speakers, they are unable to conduct religious ceremonies;⁷ use their own laws, customs, and traditions;⁸ access traditional plant knowledge;⁹ or maintain aspects of their identity.¹⁰ The revitalization of Indigenous Peoples' languages is critical to ensuring that Indigenous Peoples can enjoy basic equality and self-determination, as well as fundamental rights to speech, culture, religion, health, and political participation.¹¹ Accordingly, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (the "Declaration") and other human rights instruments contain extensive protections not only for culture but specifically for languages.¹²

In Article 8, the Declaration recognizes that "Indigenous Peoples have the right not to be subject to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture" and that "States shall provide effective mechanisms for prevention of, and redress for "Any action which has the aim or effect of depriving them of their integrity as distinct peoples, or of their cultural values or ethnic identities..." With respect to language, Article 13 of the Declaration asserts:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures,

⁷ See Levi Rickert, Shawnee Chief Ben Barnes: "We are Risk of Losing the Voices of Our Grandparents Forever", NATIVE NEWS ONLINE (Jan 6., 2020), <https://nativenewsonline.net/currents/shawnee-chief-ben-barnes-we-are-risk-of-losing-the-voices-of-our-grandparents-forever>. For other examples, see the essay by Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin, Jr., in this volume.

⁸ Christine Zuni Cruz, *Indigenous Pueblo Culture and Tradition in the Justice System: Maintaining Indigenous Language, Thought and Law in Judicial Review*, UNIV. N.M. SCH. L., June 1, 2003, at 2-4.

⁹ See generally CLINT CARROLL, ROOTS OF OUR RENEWAL: ETHNOBOTANY AND CHEROKEE ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE (2015) (describing project among Cherokee scholar, elders, and students to promote traditional knowledge and land conservation).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Daryl Wade Baldwin, *Effort to Recover Indigenous Language Also Revitalizes Culture, History, and Identity*, THE CONVERSATION (Oct. 7, 2022), <https://theconversation.com/effort-to-recover-indigenous-language-also-revitalizes-culture-history-and-identity-190733>.

¹¹ See generally Kristen A. Carpenter & Alexey Tsykarev, *(Indigenous) Language as a Human Right*, 24 UCLA J. INT'L L. & FOREIGN AFFS. 49 (2020) (describing protections for Indigenous languages in international human rights instruments).

¹² G.A. Res. 65/295, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Oct. 2, 2007) [hereinafter "the Declaration"]

and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected and also to ensure that indigenous peoples can understand and be understood in political, legal and administrative proceedings, where necessary through the provision of interpretation or by other appropriate means.

Article 14 recognizes: “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.”

While some states, including the United States, have begun to acknowledge the harm they did to Indigenous Peoples’ languages,¹³ they still need to allocate significant resources¹⁴ and changes to policy to remedy past harms and protect language rights today.¹⁵ Accordingly, a key component of the IDIL is the General Assembly’s call for all “Member States to consider establishing national mechanisms with adequate funding for the successful implementation of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages in partnership with indigenous peoples” and for “Indigenous Peoples, as custodians of their own languages, to initiate and

¹³ See ASSISTANT SECRETARY – INDIAN AFFAIRS BRYAN NEWLAND, FEDERAL INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOL INITIATIVE INVESTIGATIVE REPORT 7, 40, 51, 54 (May 2022), https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi_investigative_report_may_2022_508.pdf (detailing intentional measures to prohibit Indigenous children from speaking their languages and to force them to speak English).

¹⁴ Rebecca Nagle, *The US. has Spent more money erasing Native languages than saving them*, HIGH COUNTRY NEWS (Nov. 5, 2019), <https://www.hcn.org/issues/51.21-22/indigenous-affairs-the-u-s-has-spent-more-money-erasing-native-languages-than-saving-them> (“At the height of the Indian boarding school era, between 1877 and 1918, the United States allocated \$2.81 billion (adjusted for inflation) to support the nation’s boarding school infrastructure - an educational system designed to assimilate Indigenous people into white culture and destroy Native languages. Since 2005, however, the federal government has only appropriated approximately \$180 million for Indigenous language revitalization.”).

¹⁵ See NEWLAND, *supra* note 13, at Letter to Secretary Deb Haaland, April 1, 2022 (“This report also presents an opportunity for us to reorient our Federal policies to support the revitalization of Tribal languages and cultural practices. This reorientation of Federal policy is necessary to counteract nearly two centuries of Federal policies aimed at the destruction of Tribal languages and cultures.”).

develop appropriate measures for the implementation of the International Decade.”¹⁶

As we write in 2023, several states, including Brazil, Colombia, and the Russian Federation have published national action plans to advance the goals of the Decade.¹⁷ At least one Indigenous nation, the Shawnee Tribe, has declared a Decade of the Shawnee Language and initiated a ten-year planning process for it.¹⁸ For the International Decade of Indigenous Languages to inspire truly transformative change, however, *all* States, Indigenous Peoples, and other stakeholders will need to follow suit, commit their hearts, minds and resources to the cause of Indigenous Peoples’ language use, revitalization, development, and transmission.

This volume of essays entitled, “Visions for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages,” gathers Indigenous leaders, linguists, lawyers, language teachers and others to articulate goals for the IDIL, as well as means to achieving them. Accordingly, these essays draw from cultural experience, political and diplomatic insights, and academic research to begin to lay the groundwork for policy reform that will help to ensure Indigenous Peoples can realize language rights, while fostering healing and relationships going forward.

The essays are drawn from speeches and panels that occurred in 2022 at several venues, including the Cherokee Nation (January 2022), United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (April 2022), and University of Colorado (October 2022).

The volume’s first essay is by Aleksei Tsykarev who recently served terms on both the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and United Nations Expert Mechanism on Indigenous Issues. Mr. Tsykarev highlights the human right to language as a matter of international language, as well as the need to localize the IDIL in regional, national, and Indigenous plans and programs. Drawing from his lifetime of activism to restore the Karelian language, Tsykarev speaks poignantly

¹⁶ G.A. Res. A/74/396, ¶ 25 (Dec. 2, 2019).

¹⁷ See 2022–2032: INT’L DECADE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES, *National Action Plans of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages*, <https://idil2022-2032.org/all-resources/national-action-plan/#1655725654578-44d0ab83-e0ee> (last visited Mar. 3, 2023).

¹⁸ Resolution Declaring the Decade of the Shawnee Language (2021–2030), Shawnee Tribe, Res. R-01-06-20-K (2020) (enacted).

of the need to restore Indigenous Peoples' sense of pride and purpose regarding their languages.

The volume's second essay comes from Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin, Jr., who has made revitalization of the Cherokee language a cornerstone of his political platform, including the recent opening of the Durbin Feeling Language Center, which will allow Cherokees to be immersed in the language from their infancy through elder care. Criticizing the United States for its failure to date to support the IDIL, Hoskin states emphatically, "We know that destroying Indigenous languages has been the work of nations, and we've got to insist that rebuilding Indigenous languages also has to be the work of nations."

The third essay is from Chief Ben Barnes of the Shawnee Tribe focusing on the importance of protecting and promoting Indigenous languages within his own tribe, nationally and internationally to ensure traditions can be passed to younger generations. In 2020, he declared a State of Emergency for the Shawnee Language, and the tribal council passed a resolution adopting the IDIL as the Shawnee Decade. The essay discusses how Chief Barnes and his brother, Joel Barnes, are working to incorporate language into the Shawnee government and to educate children to ensure successful dissemination of the Shawnee language through generations.

The fourth essay in the volume is by Ofelia Zepeda, an O'odham speaker, Regents Professor of linguistics, and director of the American Indian Language Development Institute at the University of Arizona. This essay notes federal laws and policies in the United States, such as the Native American Languages Act, that form a backdrop for the IDIL and the issues that arise from federal and private grants that fund research and education surrounding endangered Indigenous languages. Zepeda also emphasizes areas of concern for the IDIL that need to be addressed, including children, access to technology and information, and basic language rights. With collaboration among communities, she hopes that more policies will be produced to revitalize Indigenous Languages in the United States and internationally.

The volume's fifth essay comes from the Indigenous Language Leaders Roundtable, moderated by Kristen Carpenter, focusing on the opportunities and challenges that the IDIL presents in communities, nationally, and internationally. Indigenous leaders Rosalyn LaPier, Billie Sutton, Richard Kistabish, and Justin Neely each emphasize the importance of prioritizing teaching the language within communities and

ensuring that all members of the community have access to necessary educational materials. Additionally, there is a common call for the United States to change their policies for federal funding for tribal language programs to ensure they are non-competitive and equally accessible to all Indigenous communities.

The sixth essay is by Wesley Leonard, associate professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Riverside, on the ethics of the IDIL and how to decolonize academia and the way institutions conduct research on Indigenous languages. He stresses that Indigenous Peoples' needs and values must guide academic work in all research involving their communities. He discusses the Natives4Linguistics Project—which he co-founded—that aims to realize a model of Linguistics that prioritizes Indigenous needs, protocols, and intellectual tools. The essay continues by focusing on the opportunity for the IDIL to address intellectual colonialism in academia and emphasizing Indigenous definitions of language. It concludes by recommending legislation to protect and rematriate Indigenous languages.

The volume's seventh essay comes from a panel moderated by Andrew Cowell. This panel examined the potential roles for linguists in the IDIL, as well as the ways that linguists, tribal leaders, tribal language programs, and community language learners can work together more effectively. The first three contributors to the panel (Bischoff, Whalen, Macaulay) summarized previous successful efforts around the International Year of the Indigenous Language ("IYIL"), showing the way that university-community partnerships have been established, and how this is also leading to increased contact and interaction within the indigenous communities themselves. The panelists described desiderata for the IDIL that come out of the IYIL experience. The final contributor (Cowell) surveyed the state of language programs, and linguist involvement, in three different Algonquian communities where he works, highlighting the many differences even between these linguistically culturally related communities. He then concluded by offering ways of finding some common themes to work on in the context of the IDIL, despite the many differences: better vertical integration of the different groups and audiences (including at conferences), so that political leaders and language workers can reach actual realistic, implementable decisions about language work, and an increased degree of support for the key bottleneck: younger language learners in these communities.

The final essay in this volume records the conversation which developed at a panel on academic and community interactions related to computational linguistics, language technologies, and the IDIL, moderated by Alexis Palmer. Language technologies have become an important part of how people interact with the world, and yet they are mostly available in only a tiny fraction of the world's languages. This panel convened experts (Arppe, Hermes, Junker, Livesay, and Running Wolf) in the development and use of language technologies for indigenous languages, all of whom shared their experiences from both academic and community perspectives. Following a series of introductions in which the panelists share their specific interests, experiences, and positionalities, the panel reflects on two high-level questions: a) how can language technologists support the aims of the IDIL?, and b) how can the provisions of the IDIL be brought to bear on language technology development? The panelists agree that, when it comes to deciding what types of language technology to develop, it is crucial that the community takes the lead. Language technology must serve the interests of the language communities, and not the other way around. The panelists also agree that questions of sustainability, interoperability, and ongoing support must be central, as well as a need to develop simple, non-proprietary tools for working with language data. Indigenous communities must retain sovereignty with respect to their language data and control over how it is used and by whom. In an exciting development, Running Wolf proposes a data clearinghouse model, in which a central authority might provide protection for contributed language data, as well as collecting fees from those who wish to use the data for various purposes, to be approved by the relevant community. Finally, the panelists recommend a number of technology-related skills, tools, and platforms that are easy to learn and very useful for anyone wanted to get started in language documentation, description, and revitalization, or in language technology development. The panelists close by reinforcing the need for policy changes related to funding, reparations from land grant institutions, support from large for-profit tech companies, and the need for caution and awareness around artificial intelligence. Quoting from Michael Running Wolf: "There is no silver bullet. There's no technology that's going to save ... language. Humans are going to ... reclaim language, rebuild language, and reinvigorate communities."

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