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of SOUTH AFRICA



COMMITTEE: UNESCO

Topic: 2022-2032 International Decade of Indigenous Languages

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1. Introduction

Overview

The International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) is an initiative launched by the United Nations to draw global attention to the critical status of many indigenous languages and to mobilize efforts for their preservation, revitalization, and promotion. The initiative underscores the urgent need to protect and promote these languages, many of which are at risk of extinction. The preservation of indigenous languages is essential not only for the cultural identity of indigenous peoples but also for the richness of human heritage.

Importance of Indigenous Languages

Indigenous languages are fundamental to the cultural identities of indigenous peoples, encapsulating their histories, traditions, and knowledge systems. They are crucial for maintaining cultural diversity and heritage. These languages hold unique worldviews and wisdom, often passed down orally through generations, which contribute to the global tapestry of human expression and knowledge.

Objectives of the Topic Pack

This topic pack aims to provide comprehensive information on the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, highlighting its background, significance, current challenges, and strategies for the protection and promotion of indigenous languages. It serves as an essential resource for members of the United Nations Association University of Free State chapter, supporting their initiatives and advocacy efforts for indigenous language preservation and revitalization.

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2. Background

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted in 2007, is a landmark document that articulates the individual and collective rights of indigenous peoples. Article 13 of the Declaration specifically recognizes the right of indigenous peoples to revitalize, use, develop, and transmit their languages, traditions, and oral histories to future generations. The Declaration serves as a comprehensive framework for addressing the rights and aspirations of indigenous peoples globally.

Historical Context and Challenges

Indigenous languages have faced suppression and neglect for centuries, primarily due to colonization, assimilation policies, and the dominance of major languages. Colonial governments and later national governments often implemented policies aimed at assimilating indigenous peoples into mainstream society, which included discouraging or outright banning the use of indigenous languages. This historical context has resulted in the marginalization of many indigenous languages, leading to their decline and, in some cases, extinction.

Previous UN Resolutions and Initiatives

The United Nations has consistently highlighted the importance of protecting indigenous languages through various resolutions and initiatives:

- **Resolution 65/198 (2010):** Addressed the rights of indigenous peoples, emphasizing the need to preserve their languages and cultures.
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- **Resolution 66/142 (2011):** Focused on the protection of indigenous languages, urging member states to take effective measures to preserve and promote these languages.
- **Resolution 69/2 (2014):** The outcome document of the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, which reiterated the importance of preserving indigenous languages.
- **Resolution 74/135 (2019):** Proclaimed the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032), calling for urgent action to safeguard indigenous languages.

3. The International Decade of Indigenous Languages

Objectives

The International Decade of Indigenous Languages aims to:

- Raise global awareness about the critical status of indigenous languages.
- Mobilize resources and efforts to preserve, revitalize, and promote indigenous languages.
- Ensure that the rights of indigenous peoples to their languages are recognized, respected, and implemented in national and international policies.

Key Areas of Focus

- **Education:** Integrating indigenous languages into educational systems at all levels, from early childhood education to higher education.
- **Technology:** Utilizing digital tools and platforms to document, teach, and promote indigenous languages.





- **Policy:** Developing and implementing supportive policies and legislation to protect indigenous languages and promote their use in public life.

Global and Regional Initiatives

Efforts are being coordinated at both global and regional levels, involving a wide range of stakeholders, including UN agencies, governments, indigenous communities, and non-governmental organizations. These initiatives aim to create a supportive environment for the preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages, leveraging local, national, and international resources and expertise.

4. Importance of Indigenous Languages

Cultural Identity and Heritage

Indigenous languages are a vital part of the cultural identity and heritage of indigenous peoples. They are the medium through which cultural traditions, histories, and worldviews are conveyed. The loss of an indigenous language often means the loss of cultural knowledge and practices that are intrinsic to the identity of indigenous communities.

Education and Knowledge Preservation

Incorporating indigenous languages into educational curricula is crucial for preserving traditional knowledge and ensuring that younger generations continue to speak and value their native languages. Educational initiatives that promote bilingualism or multilingualism can enhance cognitive abilities and academic performance while also fostering cultural pride and identity.





Socioeconomic Impact: The revitalization of indigenous languages can have positive socioeconomic impacts by enhancing cultural tourism, creating job opportunities, and fostering community pride and cohesion. Indigenous languages can also play a role in local governance and business, contributing to sustainable development and community resilience.

5. Current Status of Indigenous Languages

Endangerment and Extinction Rates

Many indigenous languages are critically endangered, with some having only a handful of fluent speakers remaining. UNESCO estimates that a language dies every two weeks, which means that up to 90% of the world's languages could disappear by the end of this century if current trends continue. This alarming rate of language loss highlights the urgent need for concerted efforts to preserve and revitalize indigenous languages.

Case Studies from Different Regions

- **North America:** Efforts to revive Native American languages, such as the Navajo language, through immersion schools and digital tools. The Navajo Nation has implemented language programs in schools and communities, resulting in an increase in the number of young Navajo speakers.
- **Australia:** Programs aimed at teaching and revitalizing Aboriginal languages, including the use of language nests and community-based language centers. The Australian government has also provided funding for language documentation and preservation projects.
- **Africa:** Initiatives to document and promote indigenous languages amidst diverse linguistic landscapes. In countries like Kenya and South Africa, efforts





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- have been made to include indigenous languages in school curricula and to promote their use in media and public life.

Efforts in Language Revitalization

Various successful initiatives include language nests (early childhood immersion programs), community workshops, and the use of media and technology to promote language learning and usage. For example, the Maori language revitalization in New Zealand has seen significant success through the establishment of Kōhanga Reo (language nests) and Kura Kaupapa Maori (Maori immersion schools).

6. Role of Various Stakeholders

Governmental Bodies

Governments play a crucial role in supporting the preservation and promotion of indigenous languages by enacting supportive policies, providing funding, and integrating indigenous languages into public education and services. National and regional governments can create language policies that recognize and promote the use of indigenous languages in various domains, including education, media, and public administration.

Indigenous Communities

Indigenous peoples are at the forefront of language preservation efforts, often leading initiatives and advocating for their language rights. Community-driven projects and grassroots movements are essential for the revitalization of indigenous languages. Indigenous communities possess the cultural knowledge and expertise necessary to design and implement effective language preservation programs.

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Non-Governmental Organizations

NGOs support language revitalization through funding, research, and on-the-ground projects. They often play a key role in raising awareness, mobilizing resources, and providing technical assistance to indigenous communities. Organizations such as the Endangered Languages Project and the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages work to document and promote endangered languages worldwide.

International Organizations

UNESCO, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and other international bodies provide frameworks and support for global efforts in language preservation. These organizations facilitate international cooperation, provide policy guidance, and support capacity-building initiatives aimed at preserving and revitalizing indigenous languages.

7. Challenges and Opportunities

Legal and Policy Barriers

Many countries lack comprehensive legal frameworks to protect indigenous languages. Policies often fail to recognize the importance of these languages or provide adequate support for their preservation and promotion. Legal barriers can include restrictive language policies, lack of official recognition, and insufficient funding for language programs.

Technological Advances

Technology offers new opportunities for documenting, teaching, and promoting indigenous languages. Digital tools, online courses, and social media platforms can enhance language learning and usage. For example, mobile apps like Duolingo now

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offer courses in indigenous languages, providing accessible and engaging language learning opportunities.

Funding and Resources

Sustainable funding and resource allocation are critical for long-term language revitalization efforts. Innovative funding mechanisms and partnerships can help bridge resource gaps. Governments, philanthropic organizations, and private sector partners can collaborate to provide the necessary financial and technical support for language preservation initiatives.

8. Key Strategies for Promotion and Protection

Educational Reforms

Incorporating indigenous languages into national curricula, supporting bilingual education, and training teachers are essential strategies for language preservation. Educational reforms can include the development of culturally relevant teaching materials, the inclusion of indigenous language instruction in teacher training programs, and the establishment of language immersion schools.

Media and Technology

Using radio, television, and digital platforms to broadcast programs in indigenous languages can increase their visibility and usage. Media initiatives can include the production of films, documentaries, and television shows in indigenous languages, as well as the creation of online platforms for language learning and cultural exchange.

Community Engagement

Empowering communities to lead language preservation efforts ensures that initiatives are culturally relevant and effective. Community engagement strategies can include

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organizing language festivals, cultural workshops, and intergenerational language transmission programs. Community-driven projects that involve elders, youth, and local leaders are often the most successful in revitalizing indigenous languages.

9. Case Studies and Best Practices

Successful Language Revitalization Programs

- **New Zealand's Maori Language Act:** Legal recognition and support for Maori language revitalization. The Act has led to the establishment of the Maori Language Commission, which promotes the use of Maori in public and private life and supports language education and media initiatives.
- **Hawaiian Language Immersion Schools:** Successful educational programs that have significantly increased the number of fluent Hawaiian speakers. The Pūnana Leo (language nest) preschools and Kula Kaiapuni (immersion schools) provide comprehensive education in the Hawaiian language, contributing to its revitalization.

Innovative Approaches in Language Education

- **Language Apps:** Mobile applications like Duolingo offering courses in indigenous languages. These apps provide accessible and engaging language learning tools for users worldwide.
- **Virtual Reality:** Using VR to create immersive language learning experiences. Virtual reality technology can simulate real-life language environments, providing learners with an interactive and engaging way to practice their language skills.

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Collaborative Projects

Partnerships between governments, universities, and indigenous organizations can amplify the impact of language preservation efforts. Collaborative projects can include language documentation initiatives, linguistic research, and the development of educational resources. For example, the Wikitongues project collaborates with communities around the world to document and share their languages through video recordings and online resources.

10. Conclusion

Summary of Key Points

The International Decade of Indigenous Languages is a crucial initiative to preserve and promote indigenous languages worldwide. It highlights the urgent need to protect these languages and mobilizes resources and efforts to support their preservation and revitalization. The initiative emphasizes the importance of cultural identity, education, and socioeconomic development in the context of indigenous languages.

Call to Action

Members of the United Nations Association University of Free State chapter are encouraged to advocate for indigenous language rights, support local initiatives, and raise awareness about the importance of linguistic diversity. By engaging in advocacy, education, and community outreach, members can contribute to the global efforts to preserve and revitalize indigenous languages.

Future Prospects

With sustained efforts and international cooperation, it is possible to reverse the decline of indigenous languages and ensure their survival for future generations. The

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International Decade of Indigenous Languages provides a unique opportunity to make significant progress in this area, fostering a more inclusive and culturally diverse world.

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This detailed topic pack provides a comprehensive overview of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, emphasizing its significance, current challenges, and strategies for promoting and protecting indigenous languages. It serves as an essential resource for advocacy and action within the United Nations Association University of Free State chapter.

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