

Giving People a Voice –

Multilingualism & Education

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On October 21, 2016 the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2019 the International Year of Indigenous Languages, beginning on January 1, 2019, *dedicated to preserve, revitalize, and promote indigenous languages; as languages matter for social, economic and political development, peace building and reconciliation.*

Indigenous languages are essential to sustainable development; they constitute the vast majority of the world's linguistic diversity, and are an expression of cultural identity, diversity and a unique understanding of the world.

In 2010 UNESCO with the support of the Government of Norway published the 3rd Edition of the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* that has also been made available interactive online

The UN's 2016 proclamation followed upon the decision by UNESCO to build on their *Atlas of Languages in Danger* to create a new online collaborative platform "World Atlas of Languages" aiming "to share own data on linguistic diversity, information about good practices, existing language teaching and learning solutions, and host user-generated content."

It seems evident that this program of sharing will in the first round benefit programs to counteract the trends toward language decline among tribal peoples. This is why the protection of the languages of our tribal populations took center stage at the conference *Multilingualism and Education* both through research presentations and poster sessions with representatives from the Sami communities on hand to tell their stories.

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Indigenous Communities in Danger

It is a well known fact that governments as part of their assimilation policies toward minorities have implemented extensive legislation directly aimed at restricting the use of indigenous languages. The Norwegian discrimination of the culture of our indigenous Sami population represents no exception.

As early as 1880 the Norwegian Parliament enacted a law prohibiting the use of Sami languages in schools in the provinces of Nordland and Troms as well as the coastal area of Finnmark. Later, in 1898 this was expanded to include the whole of Sami territories, and with a prohibition of using Sami languages even during recesses. This regulation was not repealed until 1958.

The total of the Sami population today inhabiting Northern Scandinavia (Norway and Sweden), Northern Finland and the Russian Kola Peninsula is estimated at little more than 100 000, including an estimated 30 % speakers of a Sami language and only 15 % using one of three languages- North Sami, South Sami and Lule Sami in writing. Of these only North Sami peoples has not been considered in need of support and cultural revitalization.

The Government Action Plan for Sami Languages

In 2009 the Norwegian Ministry of Labor and Social Inclusion after comprehensive talks with the Sami parliament and other ministries published its first ACTION PLAN FOR SAMI LANGUAGES (Publication A-0025 E, 69 pp).

The Foreword (p. 8) lays out the proposed program:

Through this plan of action the Government will lay the foundation for a broad and long-term commitment to the Sami languages across all sectors and levels of administration.... The aim is that the Sami languages will emerge as a stronghold in society and they will be given room to develop in all areas of society.

The Objectives, Challenges, Long-term Strategies and Measures are then laid out in three the major divisions. LEARN, USE, and SEE.

In the LEARN section special emphasis is placed on providing instruction in Sami languages throughout school life to prepare Sami children for participation in the Sami community as valuable language users. The Action Plan sees it as important that pupils be offered adequate programs to learn Sami throughout school life, with providing parents and peoples in the child's environment a chance to be co-learners (p.27) The plan also points to the Education Act that gives Sami youth in secondary education the right to Sami as a subject (p.30).

In the USE section the Action advocates a program for increased use of Sami languages in the public services for users in all areas of society.

The right to use the Sami language in their meetings with the public sector is one of the most fundamental rights for Sami people. When the language provisions in the Sami act were first introduced it was pointed out that the right to use Sami, first and foremost, must be in places where one needs to express oneself clearly and precisely as well as understand

what is being said. Here the health services and legal system are central because a breakdown in language communication can have particularly serious consequences for the people involved (p.41).

Lastly a SEE section deals with the necessity of making the Sami language visible to the public. This includes strengthening the place of Sami literature films and theater in the public domain, not least in the libraries and the communication media of Radio and TV, including the web based information services. Special provisions for making purchasing arrangements for Sami literature are likewise recommended.

A last chapter then deals with the need for research and the development of knowledge.

All in all the document forms the basis for the preservation through cultivation of indigenous languages that could serve as a model for collaborative efforts across the world.

The UN proclamation of 2019 as the Year for Indigenous languages, dedicated to preserve, revitalize and promote indigenous languages declares aims of promoting social, economic and political development, peace building and reconciliation that are also central to the UN charter. It commits our governments to listen to the voice of our minorities when their very existence is threatened by endangering actions affecting their territories and lives.

And these are threats not mentioned in any of the official action plans already discussed. Ever since the cold war Sami territories have been used and colonized for military purposes as testing fields for new weapons and war exercises on reasons of "extreme" conditions of darkness, snow and freezing temperatures. These are thinly populated areas considered their own rightful schooling fields for military training or weapon development in violation of UN declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples that prohibits military activities in territories populated by indigenous peoples.

Language and Voice

The government action plans for the preservation of Sami languages must be seen on the background of the courageous fight for survival by a people oppressed through the centuries. It is a history of humiliation, degradation and discrimination only paralleled by the suffering inflicted on the other minorities consider as threats to our culture – the Roma, travellers and outsider disadvantaged groups that experienced decades of exclusion.

Their stories need to be told and their voices heard. At the conference our leading language researcher Nancy H. Hornberger quoted Richar Ruiz on the necessity of distinguishing language and voice.

“As much as language and voice are related, it is also important to distinguish between them. I have become convinced of the need for this distinction through a consideration of instances of language planning in which the “inclusion” of the language of a group has coincided with the exclusion of their voice... language is general, abstract, subject to a somewhat arbitrary normalization; voice is particular and concrete... To deny people their language... is, to be sure to deny them voice, but, to allow them “their” language is not necessarily to allow them voice.”

Postscript

From July 11-17, 2019 the UNESCO affiliated International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) will hold its biannual world conference at the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts at Chulalongkorn University. One of the themes announced directly involves language preservation. *How can researchers engage communities to sustain their own cultural traditions, and what role shall UNESCO and other international take.* It is a common experience that vocal music is a primary source for preserving and revitalizing endangered languages.

The main background for this proposal is no doubt the major cooperative research project *Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures* led by Huib Schippers, now the Director and Curator of the Smithsonian Folklife. Its aim was to offer guidance to empower communities to develop strategies that help sustain their own music cultures.

In their interconnectedness as mutually supportive cultures they form the base for the preservation and survival of the collective memory and the continuity of the means for expressing the spiritual base for the existence of a people. Or as the role that Smithsonian delegates to both language and music: *“The expression of a unique vision of what it means to be human.”*

In an article *Cities as Cultural Ecosystems* (Journal of Urban Culture Research, vol 12, 2016:12-19) Schippers makes a plea for a much needed bottom up instead of the prevalent top down approach.

A key element in these efforts is defining the nature of what needs to be preserved in consultation with communities, and devising strategies on how best to approach the particular challenges that entails.