

## **Opening remarks**

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### **On the occasion of the Regional Consultation in Asia for the Preparation of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL) 2022 – 2032**

**10 May 2021**

Representatives of Member States,  
Representatives of indigenous peoples and organizations,  
Distinguished guests and experts,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to deliver the opening remarks for the Regional Consultation in Asia for the Preparation of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

We are living in a world of seven thousand languages, and more than two thousand of them are spoken in Asia. Language carries the knowledge, ideas, beliefs and traditions transmitted from generation to generation, and also is the fundamental precondition to human's development, dialogue, reconciliation, tolerance, cultural diversity and peaceful existence.

Despite their immense value, languages around the world continue to disappear at alarming rates. Current data indicates that at least 40 per cent of the languages used worldwide are at some level of endangerment<sup>1</sup>. There will be two indigenous languages at risk of extinction every month, together with the cultures and knowledge systems to which they belong<sup>2</sup>.

In line with the commitment of facilitating the development of knowledge societies and promoting cultural and linguistic diversity, and universal access to information, UNESCO was honored to serve as the lead agency for the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages. The Year has exceeded the initial expectations of many stakeholders, where over 882 activities worldwide were registered to

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://en.unesco.org/news/upcoming-decade-indigenous-languages-2022-2032-focus-indigenous-language-users-human-rights>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/12/1053711>

help promote and protect indigenous languages and improve the lives of those who speak them<sup>3</sup>. This great success has accelerated the proclamation of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages starting from 2022 to 2032 with a two-year preparatory period.

This International Decade provides an opportunity to continue the important work we started since 2019, while it is by no means a given follow up to the Year and requires considerable efforts to achieve. Being entrusted by the Member States, UNESCO in collaboration with other UN agencies will develop a Global Action Plan for the Decade through open, inclusive and multi-stakeholder engagement and participation.

The Global Action Plan, in particular, aims at raising awareness of not only the critical situation of indigenous languages, but also the positive value and meanings that these languages provide to indigenous peoples and humanity at large. We strive to promote the use of indigenous languages in education, justice systems, the media, health programmes and public life, increase networking and knowledge sharing with local communities, and create opportunities for people who don't speak these languages to nurture those languages and celebrate cultural diversity.

These initiatives are even more important during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Indigenous peoples are often isolated both politically and socially in the countries they live in, which puts them under threat when public health emergencies and natural disasters happen. In this respect, information in indigenous languages must be accessible and followed, so that preventive measures and medical needs can be exchanged in a timely and accurate manner.

Of special concern are the indigenous children and youth whose schooling has been suspended. The pandemic might be temporary, but the disruption it has caused to the global education system and the challenges to be addressed are unprecedented. Improving mobile device connectivity in remote areas and involving indigenous languages into technology and school's curriculum will enable a higher proportion of young generation to receive inclusive and quality education. In the longer term, policies and measures should be implemented to ensure that all indigenous peoples have access to continuous education in their mother tongue.

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<sup>3</sup> See p.2, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000376719/PDF/376719eng.pdf.multi>

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The upcoming decade will become a milestone in drawing further and more sustained global attention to indigenous languages. All our actions will adhere to the key principle of ‘Centrality of indigenous peoples’. Indigenous peoples’ participation will be reflected in more attendance, active participation, and full involvement at every stage of the implementation.

Today, UNESCO in close cooperation with UNDESA, OHCHR and other UN agencies, invites representatives from the national governments, indigenous people’s organizations, native speakers of indigenous languages, experts, academia and the Global Task Force for the International Decade, to conduct a constructive dialogue on the Global Action Plan for this Decade. We look forward to setting priorities among thematic areas and operational objectives, proposing concrete approaches, and developing an effective connection among various stakeholders in Asia.

With these remarks, I wish you all a productive and fruitful consultation. Thank you very much for your participation.