



SAINT PETERSBURG DECLARATION ON MOTHER TONGUES PRESERVATION

Final document of the
II High-Level International Conference
“World Treasury of Mother Tongues:
Nourish and Cherish. Context, Policies and
Practices to Preserve Indigenous Languages”

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Preamble

The II High-Level International Conference “World Treasury of Mother Tongues: Nourish and Cherish. Context, Policies and Practices to Preserve Indigenous Languages” was held with great success in Saint Petersburg (Russian Federation) from 30 June to 2 July 2024 within the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

The event brought together over 200 specialists in social sciences and humanities, representatives of intergovernmental, international, regional and national non-governmental organisations, authorities, memory institutions, institutions of culture, science, education, communication and information, as well as civil society and the private sector.

Experts discussed the prospects of preserving multilingualism for sustainable development in the modern world, key trends and challenges faced by multilingualism support institutions, the possibilities of using IT to promote linguistic diversity in the digital environment, as well as the issues of ensuring linguistic rights and the work of language activists.

The main objective of this biennial conference is to facilitate the preservation of mother tongues of various peoples of the world as unique repositories of knowledge, invaluable historical and cultural experience. Since language deprivation entails not just the loss of a means of communication, but also a gradual loss of national identity and of a particular worldview, the issues of supporting linguistic and cultural diversity as one of the fundamental factors of sustainable development have long been in the focus of attention of influential international organisations. However, despite the efforts made, many languages are still threatened with extinction.

Conference participants highlighted the following key points:

1. The spread of dominant international languages with strong political and economic status, fuelled by trade, technological innovation, and global media, has a significant impact on the fate of smaller languages. More and more indigenous people around the world have been switching from their mother tongues to majority languages for education, social integration and economic prospects. Migration and urbanisation reinforce the phenomenon of language shift, forcing linguistic minorities to adapt to new language environments.
2. A paramount problem for indigenous languages worldwide is the significant decline in language transmission from older to younger generations. The use of mother tongue by young members of indigenous communities is often hindered not only by poor language

skills, but also by the fact that ancestral languages are associated primarily with traditional culture and folklore and are not perceived as tools of contemporary real life. The break in the intergenerational transmission of mother tongues intensifies language erosion, leads to a decrease in the number of speakers of these languages and the spheres of their use, and reduces linguistic diversity.

3. While a number of countries are already focusing on primary education in mother tongues, in many countries and regions the introduction of mother tongues into curricula is still often difficult. The situation is exacerbated by the low resource capacity of these languages, lack of educational materials and national teaching staff, especially in the areas of compact settlement of indigenous peoples, as well as a poorly organised system of mentoring and support for young teachers.

4. In today's world, the preservation and development of languages is directly linked to the rapid progress of digital technologies, which have a tremendous impact on communication and information exchange in different languages between individuals and communities. Technologies can offer unprecedented opportunities and open a gate into the world of digital communication for under-resourced languages (including oral, sign languages, etc.), thus tackling such issues as the lack of language environment, dispersion of an ethnic group amid speakers of another dominant language, strict age limits imposed by the school system, and also ensuring the presence of a language in the digital sphere, which is prestigious from the point of view of the younger generation. However, it is important to remember that AI technologies are currently concentrated in the hands of a very limited number of multinational companies, and the implications of this situation need to be carefully analysed. Moreover, the dependence on IT corporations poses the risk for speakers of certain languages, for certain regions or countries of being denied access to language technologies in case of political, economic and other conflicts.

In view of the above, Conference participants,

Being confident that linguistic diversity as a prerequisite for equal access to quality education, public services, health care, employment and participation in society is crucial for the well-being of citizens,

Expressing their strong belief that, at the level of national governments and intergovernmental organisations, the maintenance of linguistic diversity should be recognised as an essential condition for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda,

Recalling that protecting the right to the free use of one's mother tongue is an important factor in maintaining national and cultural identity, preserving the authentic culture of ethnic communities and strengthening ethnic ties,

Stressing that mother tongue education is a fundamental right for every child and that failure to respect this right dangerously impedes learning and socialisation,

Warning that while technology can help preserve, document and learn different languages and cultures, the predominant focus of generative language models on English and the lack of diversity in the digital space can provoke cultural and linguistic homogenisation and threaten the very existence of minority languages,

are strongly convinced that tackling the issues of language preservation and development requires consolidation of efforts of all stakeholders, including national governments, institutions of science, education, culture, art, national book publishers, mass media, film industry, IT community, and businesses.

The key lines of actions in this field include the introduction of policy support measures, standardisation and documentation of mother tongues, empowerment of language communities, preservation and development of indigenous cultures, provision of education and content creation in mother tongues, as well as equipping languages with appropriate digital technologies.

In this context, the following points should be taken into account:

- The issue of the development and use of national languages in various spheres of the economy and public life should constantly be the focus of attention of the authorities. Linguistic and cultural diversity in a multicultural space and the legal status of indigenous languages should be enshrined in the relevant federal and regional normative legal acts.
- Language policy should be based on a dialogue with representatives of language communities. They should be not mere witnesses, but active participants in decision-making processes and the development of strategies in this area.
- It is extremely important to create a unified mother tongue-based educational space, including all levels of education, by combining the efforts of the state, society and the family.
- Since the linguistic situation varies greatly from region to region and from nation to nation, tailored strategies and approaches are required to fit their specific characteristics. It is important to create information resources allowing to outline digital profiles of linguistic communities with the most up-to-date information on the resources they possess. This will enhance the possibility of finding ways to integrate indigenous peoples into the digital world and to develop the necessary linguistic tools, applications and interfaces.
- In order to preserve linguistic sovereignty (as the right and ability of a community or ethnic group to develop and control technological tools and platforms that support and promote their language and culture), decentralisation of strategies to ensure the presence and support of languages in the digital space, as well as the creation of ethically and linguistically neutral systems of responsible AI, based on different languages, including small indigenous ones, are required.

The Conference emphasised that establishing common standards and practices for language support through interregional and international dialogue and sharing advanced expertise can contribute to the preservation and revitalisation of indigenous and minority languages, stimulate cultural exchange and strengthen cooperation between language communities.

Conference participants encourage all stakeholders to maximise efforts to maintain and develop mother tongues, and offer the following recommendations.

To national governments and authorities:

- To facilitate the expansion of the spheres of use of mother tongues, strengthening the principles of cultural pluralism, bilingualism and multilingualism, and freedom of expression in one's mother tongue.

- To consistently monitor and control the implementation of legislative acts adopted to enshrine the legal status of indigenous languages and to support linguistic and cultural diversity.
- To enshrine in law access to quality mother tongue-based education (in particular, through introducing state standards for education in mother tongues considering the socio-cultural specificities of the indigenous population of a particular region; creating favourable conditions for teaching indigenous languages, literature and culture in educational institutions of all levels; and developing a system of scientific and methodological support for education and upbringing in mother tongues).
- To enhance the development of indigenous media in various formats as an important means of transmitting information to indigenous peoples in their languages.
- To promote wider representation of mother tongues in the digital space, including by placing information in indigenous languages on the official web resources of authorities and key government agencies.
- To encourage the work of public organisations promoting the preservation and development of national languages, cultures, crafts and trades, and provide individual targeted support to language activists.

To scientific, educational and cultural institutions:

- To contribute to the development, approbation and improvement of methods and criteria for expert evaluation of the status of mother tongues and of state language policies.
- To ensure overall coordination of the academic efforts to document and preserve mother tongues both at national and regional levels.
- To develop scientific research in indigenous languages and literature, ensuring the creation of grammars, dictionaries, text corpora and other digital information resources to equip languages with modern language technologies.
- To analyse the factors determining the choice of the language of intra-family communication and enabling the intergenerational language transmission in a multilingual environment.
- To organise systematic consolidated work of all parties involved in the educational process at different levels of education, guaranteeing pedagogical continuity.
- To pay special attention to learning and teaching support materials for the educational process, including digital aids (based on fundamental and applied scientific research on various aspects of the study, development and preservation of mother tongues, that should involve institutions of teacher education).
- To introduce courses on language technologies (machine translation, text corpora building, etc.) into higher education curricula.
- To foster the implementation of innovative technologies in order to create a modern training environment for future teachers, and involve indigenous teachers and students in the creation of digital information and educational resources promoting the languages, culture and history of their peoples.

- To create (regional, national and international) repositories of best practices in teaching mother tongues, including through digital technologies.
- To develop and implement systems of academic mobility for teachers to exchange experience at the regional, national and international levels.
- To contribute to the preservation and promotion of the cultural and linguistic heritage of indigenous peoples in traditional memory institutions using advanced technologies and digital formats.

To the media and book publishing organisations:

- To cover sociolinguistic issues (interrelation between the language situation in a country and demographic, economic, political, educational and cultural realities; the consequences of language shift; the language needs of indigenous peoples; the problems of teaching mother tongues, etc.) in order to raise awareness of the importance of multilingualism and the need to support the languages and cultures of the peoples of the world.
- To provide reliable information about indigenous peoples in indigenous languages, including in digital format.
- To implement projects to publish modern learning and teaching aids for studying languages and traditional culture of indigenous peoples.
- To intensify the production of literature in mother tongues (with digital versions) and provide support for indigenous authors writing in their mother tongues.
- To promote books in mother tongues through mobile apps.

To IT companies:

- To analyse socio-cultural implications of the introduction of AI technologies and systems, striving to adapt general algorithms to the specificities of particular languages and develop scalable algorithms.
- To enable the digitalisation of languages by providing basic technologies (standard character sets, keyboard layouts, fonts, mobile apps, automatic translation systems, spell checkers, etc.).
- To promote the inclusion of mother tongue alphabets in the international Unicode standard with a view to enhance digital capabilities of indigenous peoples.
- To contribute to organising and holding training sessions for localisation specialists.
- To raise awareness of the potential of mass networking to create large amounts of relevant texts in different languages (including in the format of online encyclopedias, which can be used not only as a source of information in mother tongues, but also as a means of training AI systems and developing large language models).
- To promote the introduction of IT development issues in national language policies.

This document is the outcome of the II High-Level International Conference “World Treasury of Mother Tongues: Nourish and Cherish. Context, Policies and Practices to Preserve Indigenous Languages”, which brought together representatives of 41 countries: Albania, Argentina, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belgium, Benin, Brazil, Brunei Darussalam, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, China, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, Equatorial Guinea, France, Ghana, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Italy, Jamaica, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mali, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, Nigeria, Russian Federation, South Africa, Sweden, Togo, USA, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Zambia.

The event was organised by the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs of the Russian Federation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, the Russian Committee of the UNESCO Information for All Programme and the Interregional Library Cooperation Centre with the support of the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media of the Russian Federation, the Commission of the Russian Federation for UNESCO and the Permanent Delegation of the Russian Federation to UNESCO.

Conference participants unanimously noted the highest level of organization and content of this event and expressed their gratitude to the organisers for their efforts to create such a unique platform for promoting international experience in supporting indigenous languages, strengthening and expanding cooperation between experts, political and public figures.

