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MOSCOW DECLARATION ON MOTHER TONGUES PRESERVATION

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

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“World Treasury of Mother Tongues: Nourish and Cherish. National and International Context, Policies and Practices to Preserve Indigenous Languages”

(5–7 July 2022, Moscow, Russian Federation)

Preamble

On July 5–7, Moscow successfully hosted the High-Level International Conference “World Treasury of Mother Tongues: Nourish and Cherish. National and International Context, Policies and Practices to Preserve Indigenous Languages”. This event has become Russia’s significant contribution to the International Decade of Indigenous Languages and the implementation of the UNESCO Information for All Programme (IFAP).

The Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs of the Russian Federation, Russian UNESCO IFAP Committee, as well as its working body – Interregional Library Cooperation Centre and UNESCO IFAP Intergovernmental Council were the key conveners of this event supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Commission of the Russian Federation for UNESCO and Russian Civic Chamber.

This major forum gathered about 150 prominent Russian and international experts in the fields of education, culture, social sciences and humanities (especially sociolinguistics and language policies), communication and information, advanced language technologies and other information technologies, representatives of governments and public authorities, civil society institutions and the private sector from 44 countries. Conference discussions focused not only on preservation and revitalisation of indigenous languages, but also on broader contexts (linguistic, sociocultural, historic, economic, geopolitical, geographical, etc.) in which indigenous people and their languages exist and survive.

Background

The current document should be read in conjunction with the set of final documents of major international meetings on preservation of languages and development of linguistic diversity in cyberspace held within the framework of the UNESCO Information for All Programme from 2008 to 2019.

The fact that the conference took place in the context of geopolitical turbulence with shifts in almost all spheres of life determined its specific character. Conference participants emphasised that in times of such serious and dangerous crises as the current one, the commitment of most countries, organisations and their leaders to the fundamental principles proclaimed in the UN Charter becomes more vital than ever. UNESCO can and should continue to uphold these principles and serve as a platform for respectful dialogue, which is especially important

when contradictions, mutual claims and accusations are growing. Experts also stressed that in modern conditions, languages, being one of the most important factors of ethnic identification, are often used as instruments of domination and separation not only of individuals, but of entire nations, as a means of changing their identity by way of controlling public discourse through terms and narratives used in education, in the humanities and social sciences, in the media and propaganda. For this reason, preservation of the world's languages remains one of the most important tasks currently facing UNESCO Member States, scientific and educational communities, public associations and the private sector.

The conference proved that activities aimed at supporting indigenous languages are implemented to a varying degree in most countries, but they are clearly not enough. All social institutions should be engaged in support for indigenous and local languages. New opportunities for studying, preserving and developing endangered languages have emerged with digital technologies that allow for transferring the linguistic heritage of the past to modern media, and organising interpersonal communication of minority speakers in a new information environment.

Conference participants

- *highlighting* the urgent need to develop and strengthen cooperation in the field of language preservation and development between all UNESCO Member States, particularly multilingual environments, especially within the framework of the Information for All Programme – the only intergovernmental programme in the world to place multilingualism among its priorities and to consider these in relation to other important issues of our time, such as information availability, information preservation, information for development, media and information literacy, information ethics, including the ethics of artificial intelligence.
- *supporting* the goals of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, in particular ensuring the rights of indigenous peoples to preserve, revive and promote their native languages,
- *emphasising* that joint efforts of all stakeholders to preserve linguistic diversity in real life and develop it in cyberspace can and should become an integral part of activities aimed at ensuring sustainable development and peace and at implementing the Sustainable Development Goals,
- *recognising* that preservation of linguistic diversity gains particular importance in the current historical period, when even the largest languages rapidly get marginalised in such areas as education, science, politics, business, advertising, tourism, etc.,

believe that within the International Decade of Indigenous Languages all possible measures should be taken to deeply analyse the language problems of the modern world and elaborate new approaches to solving these problems; to build policies to support minority and indigenous languages based on a dialogue with representatives of language communities. Speakers of these languages themselves should be actively involved in solving the problems of preserving endangered languages. It is necessary to constantly, systematically and consistently motivate participation of native speakers through various support measures at all levels. Language policies and language planning should be integrated into most international, national and regional programmes in the field of education, culture, science, information, and support for civil initiatives.

Recognising that the status and the future of indigenous languages depend on a variety of sociocultural and natural factors, but primarily on:

- the presence of a clear collective will for preserving and developing these languages among the peoples that gave birth to them,
- the prospects for the preservation of indigenous language speakers themselves as separate unique independent communities, as well as the preservation of their traditional way of life and practices in the context of industrialisation, globalisation, migration and active interaction with larger ethnic groups,
- the economic, political and geographical conditions in which indigenous peoples currently exist, including interaction with their sociocultural environment,
- the scope and nature of support given to indigenous peoples by larger dominant ethnic groups and national governments,

the conference emphasised that indigenous languages are currently functioning amid larger and more dominant languages, and therefore closer attention should be paid to the dynamically changing linguistic picture of the world in its entirety and complexity, to the fate of all languages, including the largest European, Asian and African languages, which also get weakened and withdraw into the shadows of English.

Realising the impossibility of eliminating the objective causes of minority language extinction (industrialisation, urbanisation, scientific and technological progress, introduction of new technologies into traditional subsistence economy, assimilation, including through mixed marriages, and migration), ***the conference considers it necessary and possible*** to overcome such subjective causes as: passivity and weak motivation of indigenous and minority speakers to study and preserve their native languages; lack of necessary self-organisation within language communities; underdevelopment of the existing institutional infrastructure, in particular difficulties in organising the teaching and learning of minority languages, especially small indigenous languages.

In this regard, conference participants appeal to all interested parties to intensify efforts in order to improve the current situation.

At the level of UNESCO and other international organizations:

1. To develop and encourage international and especially interdisciplinary cooperation in the field of indigenous languages preservation and promotion.
2. To contribute in every possible way to raising awareness and building the capacity of language communities and their leaders to improve activities aimed at the preservation and maintenance of indigenous languages.
3. To facilitate inventories, resource mapping and the creation of separate portals (a kind of digital community profiles – DPCs) containing ethnographic and environmental information about endangered indigenous and minority peoples and linguistic communities, about their native languages and available language resources, thereby increasing the opportunities of finding ways to integrate them into the digital world and contributing to the design of a policy for development of the necessary linguistic tools, applications

and interfaces, in particular to prevent the reduction in the use of indigenous languages underrepresented in cyberspace, lacking or not using relevant ICTs.

4. To develop consultative frameworks for the elaboration and implementation of national policies in the field of supporting indigenous languages, to develop tools for analysing language policies, to define their key parameters and the criteria for the evaluation of each direction of these policies taking into account the status, vulnerability and needs of a particular indigenous language.
5. To initiate the design of a universal generic model for introducing an academic course and curriculum on preservation of endangered languages, cultures, history and heritage of indigenous peoples, including through digitisation and documentation, as well as training a new generation of scholars in this field.

At the level of national governments and other authorities:

6. To constantly move towards a qualitatively new level of the awareness of specialists and language activists about the status, problems and best practices of maintaining and preserving minority languages in different countries of the world, especially multilingual ones, as well as about innovative measures already taken in these and other countries at various levels – political, organisational, scientific, educational and technological, including through advanced language computer technologies, in particular artificial intelligence technologies.
7. To boost the potential of all social institutions that are responsible for supporting indigenous languages, primarily administrative structures that can provide the most effective support and are authorised to do it by law.
8. To design mid- and long-term educational activities for endangered and minority languages (development of educational and reference materials, use of languages as a medium of instruction at primary and secondary school levels, shaping curriculum, etc.)
9. To support the activities of publishing houses and the media, social media, writers and journalists, issuing of books, magazines, newspapers, TV and radio programmes in minority and indigenous languages, providing their speakers with an opportunity to read, write and communicate in these languages in the public space.
10. To develop programmes to support and develop indigenous literatures, translate the works of national authors into major languages in order to make them available to as many people as possible.
11. To inform members of language communities, especially endangered ones, about their linguistic rights and duties, involve them in the processes of documenting languages and tackling the issues of reviving them, empowering such communities and creating not only a new generation of professionals, but also many jobs for economic growth.

At the level of organisations of science, education, culture and the art:

12. To support and develop scientific activities aimed at the documentation and comprehensive study of indigenous languages and the creation of resources including electronic and online ones to ensure and enhance the representation of languages in cyberspace, equipping them with modern language technologies (language recognition,

automatic machine translation, speech recognition, speech synthesis, spell checking, question answering, etc.).

13. To encourage and pursue joint comparative research both on major complex topics and on certain aspects, differentiated by the number of speakers of ethnic languages, the size of their ethnic groups, their level of economic and social development, as well as the level of economic development of their countries of residence.
14. To arrange conferences, seminars, round tables and workshops on a regular basis with the participation of members of language communities, as well as specialists involved in language revival activities, in order to identify the existing problems, and to develop solutions for specific cases, monitor achievements, emerging trends and obstacles.
15. To identify and study the factors provoking the transition of minority speakers to dominant languages, and search for ways and strategies to control this transition.
16. To preserve the tangible cultural heritage of indigenous peoples in traditional libraries, archives and museums, as well as through digitising the existing materials, developing and advancing such resources as multimedia digital libraries, which will also collect and store the memory of indigenous peoples, making it available to the general public.
17. To support indigenous arts, indigenous theatres, cinema, concert and touring activities, song and choral art, folk art, ethnic games, including sports.
18. To encourage the creation and development of public associations of experts and laypersons dealing with language issues – unions of writers, journalists, translators, theatre workers, as well as their interaction with similar structures, including in other countries.

This document was elaborated by the joint efforts of conference participants from the following countries: Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, China, Colombia, Egypt, France, Gambia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Mexico, Moldova, Morocco, Mozambique, Nigeria, Norway, Paraguay, Philippines, Russian Federation, South African Republic, Sri Lanka, Syria, United Kingdom, USA, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Zambia, Zimbabwe as well as leadership of the UNESCO Information for All Programme and representatives of UNESCO Secretariat.

At the conference closing its participants unanimously expressed their gratitude to the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs of the Russian Federation and other organisers of the event for launching the idea to hold the International High-Level Conference “World Treasury of Mother Tongues: Nourish and Cherish. National and International Context, Policies and Practices to Preserve Indigenous Languages” in Moscow highlighting its rich content and excellent organisational level.