

## **A REPORT FROM THE GRASSROOTS INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES EXCHANGE AND CONVENING**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Dispersed over seven continents, Indigenous Peoples make up less than six percent of the total world population while speaking nearly 70 percent of the world's 6,700 languages. More than 2,000 Indigenous languages are designated as "critically endangered," meaning there are less than 1,000 speakers remaining. In line with Cultural Survival's commitment to promoting dialogues and discussions around Indigenous language revitalization during the UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032), on May 8-12, 2023, Cultural Survival hosted the Grassroots Indigenous Languages Exchange and Convening in Oaxaca, Mexico. The purpose of the gathering was for Indigenous language programs around the globe to meet and exchange best practices, including various financial and educational tools and resources.

Participants from 10 language programs representing 10 Indigenous languages attended the event. The common denominator among all of these projects is that they are community-led initiatives fighting to maintain and revitalize their languages, which have been marginalized and threatened by colonialism and the forced assimilation into mainstream culture—something that began during the colonial era and continues to this day. Participating projects included:

- Kumandin Linguistic Group (Russia) - Kumandin Peoples
- Itelmen Linguistic Group (Russia) - Itelmen Peoples
- Spokane School of Languages (USA) - Spokane Peoples
- Salish School of Spokane (USA) - Spokane Peoples
- Yuchi Linguistic Project (USA) - Yuchi Peoples
- Resguardo Inga de San Miguel de la Castellana (Colombia) - Inga Peoples
- Instituto Superior Pedagógico Intercultural Quilloac (Ecuador) - Cañari Peoples
- Colmix-Colectivo Mixe (Mexico) - Mixe Peoples
- Colectivo Nemuk (Mexico) - Mixe Peoples
- Proyecto de Desarrollo Rural Integral Vicente Guerrero (Mexico) - Nahua Peoples

Cultural Survival was honored to host a space for these language leaders, who are working diligently to keep their native languages alive. Languages are much more than a form of verbal communication. They are a manifestation of culture and history and the primary tool for understanding and stewarding the relationships that Indigenous Peoples hold with Mother Earth. The event planted the seeds of what will hopefully become a community beyond borders, and serve as inspiration for the attendees to go back to their territories

with renewed strength to continue their important work defending and protecting their languages as a foundation of their Indigenous identities.

After a week of open conversations, certain common challenges and key points emerged. It is important to bring these points to the forefront because their existence can only be fully acknowledged when they are talked about. That is the fundamental premise of this work: Indigenous languages exist, and we must take urgent action to recognize and protect them as the vital sources of culture, identity, and history that they are. Topics that were highlighted during the event include:

### **LEARNING AS ADULTS**

Undoubtedly, one of the things that has caused many Indigenous languages to be endangered is people losing their connection to them during adulthood. This can happen for any number of reasons, but is particularly common as people are forced to migrate out of their communities in search of a better life or forced to adopt a dominant colonial language to avoid suffering racism and discrimination for speaking their native language. Today, many Indigenous languages are extremely vulnerable because the adult populations in the communities no longer have the tools to transfer their knowledge to younger generations. This increasingly common phenomenon has also contributed to a loss of Indigenous identity.

For Andres Quindi and Juan Carlos Solano (Cañari) from the Instituto Superior Pedagógico Intercultural Quilloac in Ecuador, their fight for the survival of the Kichwa language has been complicated. Both of them have faced discrimination for defending their language, and it is only now, as adults, and with a lot of effort, that they have been able to obtain the tools needed to learn their language and to transfer their knowledge of Kichwa among their community of Quilloac. The process has been long, but after several attempts, they have finally created manuals written in Kichwa that contain over 80 hours of language lessons. They are continuing to create more educational resources for children and adults, who, just like them, were forced to distance themselves from their language.

The Resguardo Inga de San Miguel de La Castellana in Colombia noticed the need to revitalize their language following centuries of subjugation to colonial violence, and more recently because of the ongoing armed conflict that has resulted in the eradication of at least two Indigenous languages in the area. Resguardo Inga is the cornerstone of a project that has the active participation of men, women, and children. Its focus is to create educational projects in preschool, elementary, and secondary schools. They are also preparing to launch the University of the Inga Peoples for adult language learners. For Resguardo Inga, it is critical that people do not wait until adulthood to reconnect with their language; they want younger generations to grow up feeling part of their community so

they will keep their culture alive. Resguardo Inga now have over 20 professionals within their community that are devoted to language revitalization.

Sulustu Moses (Spokane), Executive Director of the Language School of Spokane, has been an activist for the Spokane community for more than 20 years. He started his path as teacher at a very young age, and his years of hard work and advocacy for Indigenous languages is reflected in the Language School of Spokane. This school was inspired by the Salish School of Spokane and similarly advocates for adult immersion language learning. Although there are only currently around 20 people speaking the language, they hope that with time, the number of speakers will grow and that the project will be sustainable.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR ELDERS IN THE REVITALIZATION OF LANGUAGES**

Participants shared both the hardships and successes that they have experienced in their efforts to keep their languages alive and for reconnecting with them in adulthood. Richard Grounds (Yuchi/ Seminole), Executive Director of the Yuchi Language Project, believes it is important for children and adults to stay connected with their languages. He talked about the significance of confronting colonialism from our original way of seeing the world, our Indigenous cosmovisions. For Grounds, the key is to re-Indigenize our communities; that means reclaiming our existence as Indigenous Peoples that are backed by a history of traditions, cultures, and cosmovisions. The flagship of this process are our Indigenous languages because they are the way of keeping our communities healthy. Languages are where the interconnectivity brings us together as Indigenous Peoples.

Grounds also spoke about the importance of staying connected with our Elders and spending time with them, since they are the roots that tie us to the cultural richness of our communities. The best way to reconnect with our languages is by speaking with our Elders, who have witnessed the transformations of our communities over time. Our Elders are the ones keeping languages alive. Therefore, it is the responsibility of adults to be the channel that transfers the knowledge from Elders to younger generations so the languages can survive and persist.

Kuttybai Kuttibal (Kumandin), who is part of the Kumandin Language Project in Russia, believes it is important to popularize Indigenous languages, because when Elders die, their knowledge of the language dies with them. The aim of the Kumandin Language Project is to decentralize the teaching of Indigenous languages. To achieve this, they teach their language through songs that are shared within the community. Currently, they are working on a language textbook. Kuttibal highlighted that we cannot rely only on traditional teaching methods, as there are many opportunities in oral traditions to be vehicles to connect with our communities.

## **CHILDREN AS THE FOUNDATION OF NEW GENERATIONS OF SPEAKERS**

The process of learning and teaching a language to children does not depend on the conventional methodologies that are frequently used to teach foreign languages. As language projects have tapped into their creativity to find alternatives to traditional teaching and learning methods, the participants shared some of the projects that they have developed to stimulate the interest of children, youth, and adults in learning or relearning their languages.

LaRae Wiley (Sinixt) and her husband Christopher Parkin are leaders at the Salish School of Spokane, a certified school in Washington State that has developed a system of intergenerational transmission of the Salish language to create more speakers. This teaching approach aims to create an experience where the language learner “lives their life through the language” and promotes full immersion in the language so that learners can become familiar with it through daily life activities. The method involves learning by repetition and direct contact with the language.

In Tlaxcala, Mexico, Proyecto de Desarrollo Rural Integral Vicente Guerrero works for the recovery and revitalization of Nahuatl culture and language. Their project aims to bring back the use of native seeds in their communities as a way of reclaiming their Nahuatl culture and identity. Eusebia Taxis Salazar (Nahuatl) is part of the project and focuses on children learning the language through play. She has created toys that are related to corn and other ancestral elements to facilitate their learning process as an exercise of immersion in their own language and culture.

In Russia, the Itelmen Linguistic Group have also focused some of their efforts on children in their community. They want kids to connect with the Itelmen language at a very young age, which they accomplish through educational materials like toys and puppets that are used to tell their traditional stories. They have also written a book addressed at youth, and have started knitting and embroidery projects as a way of keeping their art and traditional clothing alive. Additionally, they have started a daycare where children share time with their Elders with the intention of fostering intergenerational transmission of their language.

For Indigenous languages, the learning process goes beyond achieving basic fluency and communication. It involves going back to one’s roots, understanding that the stories of our ancestors live within us and that they remain alive when there are people to tell them. For those stories to survive, we need more than pen and paper. We need the hands that sign and the voices that laugh and speak our languages. Finding such ways to reconnect with our

roots is also a way of demonstrating that as Indigenous Peoples, we have a vast richness that is expressed in multiple ways.

## RECLAIMING OUR LANGUAGES

There is no doubt that the history of Indigenous Peoples is a history of resilience and resistance. During this event, all of the groups represented selfless investment in their most valuable resource—time—and some had even executed language projects using their own financial resources. Such commitments represent a hardship for COLMIX, based in Oaxaca, Mexico, whose leaders have to split their time between their paid work and this unpaid volunteer project. It is thanks to their commitment and dedication that their project to revitalize the Mixe language has achieved sustainability. Their priority is to develop educational resources to revitalize the Mixe language, which is classified as highly endangered. They have created different research projects to understand the Mixe language throughout history, as well as Mixe language teaching projects for adults and a project to educate people who want to teach Mixe. These activities are ways to reclaim their existence as Mixe Peoples, and the research, academic, and educational work that they do allows them to raise awareness of the importance of revitalizing their language and the richness of their roots.

This table explains the level of language endangerment represented at the event.

Language	Level of endangerment	Number of speakers globally	Additional comments	Country	Certainty based on available evidence
Mixe-Zoques	Threatened	5,200	Totontepec Mixe is an "emergent language" belonging to Oaxaca Mixe.	Mexico	20%
Kumandin	In danger of disappearance	1,044	The Kumandin live densely in Solton and Krasnogorsk regions and the city of Biysk of the Altai district, Turachak region and Gorno-Altai city of the Republic of Altai. Furthermore, they live scattered in Altai district and the Republic of Altai as well as outside their borders.	Russia, Altai region	60%

Dolgan	Threatened	5,500	The Dolgans speak a dialect of the Yakut language. This dialect has at times been considered a separate language due to the strong Evenk influence, which causes it to differ considerably from the Yakut language spoken in the northwestern and middle parts of Yakutia.	Russia, Southern Taymyr Peninsula	60%
Itelmen	Severely threatened	<20	The ethnonym 'Kamchadal' is also used to refer to the old Russian-speaking immigrant population of Kamchatka, which may or may not have absorbed Itelmen-speaking elements in the past.	Kamchatka Russia	20%
Nsyilxcən	In danger of disappearance	149		Canada, USA	20%
Kalispel-Spokane-Pend d'Oreille-Salish	Severely threatened	70	Spokane-Kalispel is spoken in three major dialects: (1) Spokane dialect (which has only two remaining fluent first-language speakers, a married couple in their 70s); (2) Flathead dialect (also known as Montana Salish). There are about 60 fluent first-language speakers of Flathead, one in his 40s, another about age 55, all others 65 or older. A sub-dialect is said to characterize Flathead speakers of Pend d'Oreille descent. (3) Kalispel dialect (a few	Montana, USA	20%

			speakers as of 2008).		
Yuchi	Critically threatened	5-7	Yuchis have been politically associated with the Muscogee Creeks since the early 19th century. Most live among the creeks in northeastern Oklahoma near Sapulpa, Hectorsville, and Bristow.	Oklahoma, USA	80%
Inga	Vulnerable	33,200	Population of Lowland Inga as of 2007: 11,200	Colombia	20%
Quichua del altiplano ecuatoriano	Vulnerable	1,153,800		Ecuador, Colombia, Peru	80%
Eastern Nahua	At risk	125,000		Mexico	20%
Lowland Mixe	Vulnerable	50,900	Northeast Oaxaca throughout San Juan Guichicovi Municipality near Veracruz border, Isthmus of Tehuantepec. East central Oaxaca including Coatlán, Camotlán, San José, Santa Isabel, Ixcuintepec. East Oaxaca.	Mexico	20%

Source: Endangered Languages Project, <https://www.endangeredlanguages.com>

In the community of Totontepec, Oaxaca, Colectivo Nemuk advocates for the recovery of the oral tradition that lies in the hands of Elders, who are key to revitalizing the Ayöök language in their territory. Part of their approach includes the people that are in the diaspora—those who, for some reason, had to leave their community and, consequently, their Mixe culture and traditions. Colectivo Nemuk started a project teaching Ayöök as a second language to adults through an approach that has allowed them to see the language in a less formal and more familiar way. They prioritize the connection to the language in daily life, highlighting oral communication so people can get used to hearing the Ayöök language.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- The amount of work that the event attendees are doing to keep our Indigenous languages alive is remarkable, not only because of the lifelong dedication that they have put into it, but also because it is having a direct impact on their communities and the strengthening of their languages.
- In order to have clear objectives in regards to revitalizing our languages, we need to be clear about their vitality. The level of vulnerability that Indigenous languages are facing varies from community to community. Some languages still have a fair number of speakers, while others only have adult speakers. There are others that have just a few speakers left. The strategies to maintain or revitalize a language will vary depending on each language's situation.
- The immersion methodology for children and adults or the methodologies focused on daily oral practices have proven to be the most effective ways to promote new speakers and help them speak the language more fluidly.
- In order to gain more speakers and reinforce an Indigenous language that is already spoken in a community, it is crucial to also develop educational materials that support the teaching-learning processes of new speakers.
- The participation of Elders as the holders of ancestral knowledge is essential to strengthen and revitalize our languages. They are the ones who can help us understand the relationship between our languages and our cosmovisions, livelihoods, and Mother Earth.
- The teaching of Indigenous languages is linked to daily life traditions and relationships with nature. Therefore, we must keep using our cultural knowledge to support the revitalization of our languages.
- Although States have the responsibility of executing policies and assigning budgets to protect Indigenous languages, the responsibility starts with each one of us. We must promote our own initiatives and teach our languages in our own households.
- Schools are spaces to strengthen Indigenous languages, cultures, and identities beyond our households.
- Compared to government and academic initiatives, community-based initiatives have lower costs to carry out their activities.
- Recognition of Indigenous Peoples is the first step towards more just societies, and towards societies that acknowledge and nourish the cultural, spiritual, and natural richness of each country in the world. Therefore, the revitalization of Indigenous languages is another branch in the Indigenous movement that, despite the obstacles, persists. After this gathering, it was evident that the fight for Indigenous languages will continue with all the language advocates in their communities.