Protecting endangered languages, key to save millennia-old cultures

This year's International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples is dedicated to Indigenous Peoples’ Languages. Around 5,000 of the 7,000 languages spoken in the world are indigenous, and one of them dies every two weeks. The EU invests €500 million every year on education programmes to revitalize these ancient communication tools in 60 countries across the world.

Are you aware that, while you're on your well-deserved two-week summer holiday, one of the nearly 5,000 indigenous languages existing in the world will vanish from Earth forever? Two if your holiday lasts a month! According to the UN, one of these languages dies every 15 days. That means a whole worldview, possibly a millennia-old culture and folklore passed on from father to son for generations,
gone... lost in time... "like tears in rain". In a declaration on behalf of the EU, on International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, High Representative Federica Mogherini remarked: "Of the 7,000 languages spoken in the world, 5,000 are indigenous, and most of the world’s 2,680 endangered languages are indigenous. This is one of the direct consequences of the continued violation of indigenous people's rights to their traditional lands, territories, resources and to self-determination."

Only 6% of the global population are indigenous people — 370 million living across 90 countries — but they do speak 71% of the living languages in the world. And they are threatened: estimates suggest that more than half of the existing languages will become extinct by 2100. This is why this year the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, in view of the International Year of Indigenous Languages, aims to "highlight the critical need to revitalize, preserve, and promote" these ancient and minority communication tools.

"Indigenous people are also disproportionately affected by poverty, climate change and violence, including gender-based violence. In front of this alarming reality, the EU reiterates its strong commitment to promote and fight for indigenous languages and cultures", Federica Mogherini stated.

In response to the growing threats to these minorities, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a Resolution (A/RES/71/178) on ‘Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ last year, and proclaimed 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages. The UN Headquarters observance celebration, which will bring together various indigenous peoples’ organizations, UN agencies, Member States, civil society and other relevant stakeholders, will take place on August 9th and will be webcasted live.
The indigenous languages, oral traditions and literatures are officially protected within the EU. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union prohibits discrimination based on language, and underlines the right of indigenous children to practice their own language and culture. Of course, multilingualism is natural in a continent founded on 'unity in diversity' where, besides the 24 official languages of the Union, there are over 60 regional or minority languages spoken by some 40 million people: Basque, Catalan, Frisian, Saami, Welsh and Yiddish, just to mention a few.

5 words you may not know that come from indigenous languages

For us, that 97% of the world population who speak only 4% of the world's languages –being Mandarin Chinese, English and Spanish in the top 3-, indigenous languages may seem a distant, alien reality. However, you may be surprised by the amount of words with indigenous origins we use every day. Here you are 5 of the most common examples:

**Chocolate:** Aztecs spoke Nahuatl, a language many indigenous peoples still speak in Mexico, and they loved to drink a beverage made from cocoa they called chikolatl. Then the Spanish conquerors landed in Mexico, and the rest is history.

**Barbecue:** We all love them, but just a few know that the term comes from a Taíno word –barbacoa- used by indigenous people in the Caribbean to refer to this popular cooking method: a "structure of sticks set upon posts".

**Kayak:** The word defining this small and narrow vessel can be traced back to the Greenlandic word qajaq, which the Inui people used to name their "hunter´s boats". The first kayaks are believed to be at least 4.000 years old.

**Hurricane:** We owe this powerful word to the Maya, who used to call their god of storm Hunrakan. It was picked up by the Spanish explorers and finally stepped into English by the 16th century.

**Avocado:** The most instagrammable fruit was already a favourite of the Aztecs by 500 BC. They called it ahuacatl, which was also slang for "testicle". The term was introduced into Spanish as aguacate in the 17th century and anglicized later on.

However, this is not always the case in other regions of the world. That is why, since the issue was included in the EU agenda in 1997, the Union has focused on the protection of the 370 million people that define themselves as indigenous worldwide. In 2007, the EU adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and it has been a priority to integrate the support to these minorities in the EU's implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

On top of that, the European external action is actively promoting a mother-tongue based multilingual education in places such as Namibia, where the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) contributes to the revitalisation of endangered indigenous languages; or Bangladesh, where kids from the Chittagong Hill Tracts region speaking seven different tribal languages can now learn in their mother tongue at school thanks to a EU-sponsored education programme. In total, the EU invests €500 million every year on this kind of education programmes in around 60 countries across the world.

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