



International Year of Indigenous Languages

Libraries and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

A Briefing

KEY POINTS

- 1) The International Year of Indigenous Languages sets out a joint collaborative Action Plan for governments, international organisations, institutions and other stakeholders in order to promote and support indigenous languages and strengthen the position of their speakers in society.*
- 2) The Action Plan focuses strongly on preservation of indigenous languages, access to education, information and knowledge, improvement of data collection and sharing of information in and about indigenous languages. Libraries are key to this.*
- 3) Libraries also have a major role providing library services as a part of a meaningful strategy to preserve and promote indigenous languages.*

Language is essential to culture, community and daily life. Through languages, people not only express their history, traditions and memory, but more importantly construct their future. Yet many languages are disappearing due to a variety of factors, with indigenous languages particularly vulnerable.

Libraries play an essential role in keeping a record of indigenous cultural heritage, knowledge and language. Their work in preserving aims to ensure their survival in order to inform and inspire future generations. Yet, preservation and conservation are not the only way in which libraries contribute. They also promote cooperation in the field of culture and information services to indigenous communities as well as encourage indigenous leadership within the sector.

The United Nations (UN) has proclaimed 2019 to be the International Year of Indigenous Languages (IY2019) as a proactive response to concerns about their disappearance. This briefing offers an idea of how to get involved and how to get libraries' work recognised.

Libraries preserving and promoting Indigenous Languages

Around the world libraries recognise the diversity of indigenous cultures and are promoting not only preservation of their cultural heritage but also giving them the possibility to participate fully in the information society.

They play an active role in strengthening indigenous communities, providing access to materials in indigenous languages and supporting indigenous language collections. This is a key element of their overall mission to safeguard cultural heritage, and for the communities concerned, is vital.

Moreover, libraries are frequently visited, and in many regions, they are often the sole access points for information and culture, particular in rural or remote regions. Studies have

UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

The Declaration was adopted in 2007, and sets out the individual and collective rights of Indigenous peoples, as well as their rights to culture, identity, language, employment, health, education and other issues. It also emphasizes the rights of Indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions, and to pursue their development in keeping with their own needs and aspirations.

shown that the services libraries provide indigenous communities and individuals, have had a great impact to personal as well as professional growth.

IFLA already underlines the importance of cultural heritage in its [Strategic Plan](#). A number of IFLA's [Preservation and Conservation Centres](#) focus on past and contemporary Indigenous culture and oral history and the [IFLA Indigenous Matters Section](#) supports the provision of culturally responsive and effective services to indigenous communities throughout the world. The Section has, in particular, published the online book [Library Services to Indigenous Populations](#) with several case studies on libraries and cultural institutions as a reference guide that can be used for library services for and with indigenous peoples.

By preserving and giving access to indigenous languages and services, libraries increase understanding of these cultures, and can support reconciliation efforts. Linguistic diversity in library collections contributes to the promotion

of indigenous cultural identity and intercultural dialogue.

Action Plan for the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages

By the end of IY2019, the UN aims to:

"Have contributed, including over the long term, to the support of, access to and promotion of indigenous languages and to a concrete improvement in the lives of indigenous peoples by strengthening the capacities of indigenous language speakers and relevant indigenous people' organisations."

To achieve this, the [Action Plan for the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages](#) sets out principles and actions to be taken at the local and national, as well as regional and global levels, to raise awareness of indigenous languages and contribute to realising indigenous people's rights worldwide. It was agreed by the United Nations in 2016.

International Year: Three Thematic Areas

Area 1. Support and maintain indigenous languages with ICT

Areas 2. Preserve indigenous languages and improve data collection

Area 3. Mainstream the knowledge areas and values of indigenous peoples

The IY2019 Action Plan calls for a coherent approach and for joint collaborative action by all stakeholders. The IY2019 is not only to benefit those who speak the languages, but also for others to appreciate the important contribution that indigenous languages make to our world's rich cultural diversity. The aim is to achieve maximum positive impact and social change with regard to the indigenous languages and those who speak them.

The loss of languages has a huge negative impact, for the world and on the indigenous cultures concerned. This is why the UN has dedicated a whole year to indigenous languages, to encourage urgent action to preserve and promote them.

Through a consultative process with stakeholders from government, civil society, indigenous groups and others, the Action Plan contains a set of thematic areas for the International Year. It is intended as a guide to the actions of national and international stakeholders, and a signpost for those looking to focus global attention on the critical risks confronting indigenous languages around the world.

The three thematic areas (listed in above box) include support for revitalisation and maintenance of indigenous languages, notably through more materials, expanded content and a wider range of services. They also cover the preservation of indigenous languages, access to education, information and knowledge and mainstreaming the knowledge areas and values of indigenous peoples and cultures into broader sociocultural, economic and political domains.

The International Year will take form of action-oriented activities in preservation of indigenous languages, access to education, information and knowledge in and about indigenous languages for indigenous children, young people and adults, improvement of data collection and sharing of information in and about indigenous languages, using language technology and other communication and information mechanisms (access).

Action Plan, Paragraph 28

The International Year of Indigenous Languages will be a year-long series of activities. It will not focus on raising global awareness but also on targeting steps which will lead to improved quality of life, enhanced international cooperation and strengthened intercultural dialogue, and reaffirm cultural and linguistic continuity.

It aims in particular to build capacity among all stakeholders to take concrete and sustainable measures at every level to support, give access to and promote indigenous languages around the world in accordance with the legitimate rights of indigenous peoples. The Action Plan acts as the core document for the implementation of the [UN Declaration](#). It encompasses both the UN 2030 Agenda and the [Sustainable Development Goals](#).

The Key Objectives

The International Year of Indigenous Languages creates many opportunities for libraries as part of the IY219 Action Plan. This sets out five key areas, or 'interventions', which are, in turn, associated with outcomes, outputs and activities. Interventions 2 and 3 are strongly connected to the work of libraries.

The outputs linked to Intervention 2 are: to promote the principles and frameworks which support ethical dissemination of indigenous knowledge through existing international mechanisms for the protection of intellectual property and other means of information; to create awareness of indigenous language issues through impact generated events and activities; and to stimulate the development of knowledge-sharing platforms and promote and make this more accessible.

Intervention 3's outputs include ensuring that indigenous languages are documented with the active participation of the language holders and, where possible, indigenous peoples are empowered to make informed decisions about the self-recording and documentation of their languages and the further utilization of records in the public domain.

Libraries around the world are taking an active role in indigenous matters and have very similar goals as those set out in the Action Plan. Libraries that are supporting indigenous groups and languages already act as key providers of information, education, research, culture and social participation. They build a framework that promotes equitable access to information and knowledge in any format in any place, as well as facilitate the creation and re-use of content by their communities according to ethical principles.

Engaging in the International Year

As highlighted above, libraries are already taking an active role on preserving and promoting indigenous languages. Libraries have proved themselves as welcoming and trusted community centres, and are often key actors in overcoming barriers to accessing and participating in indigenous culture.

The Action Plan for IY2019 underlines the need for multi-stakeholder partnerships including Member States, Indigenous people's representatives, Academia, NGOs, Civil Society and public institutions and the private sector. This provides a key opening for libraries.

Five key interventions in the Action Plan

- 1. Increasing understanding, reconciliation and international cooperation.**
- 2. Creation of favourable conditions for knowledge-sharing and dissemination of good practices with regards to indigenous languages.**
- 3. Integration of indigenous languages into standard-setting.**
- 4. Empowerment through capacity building.**
- 5. Growth and development through elaboration of new knowledge.**

What can you do?

- Take a look at the '[Get Involved](#)' page on the IY2019 site
- Exhibit (or inform about, as appropriate) contributions from indigenous cultural and linguistic heritage at your library.
- Promote exchange of knowledge between cultures.
- Encourage initiatives fostering the teaching of indigenous languages and practices.
- Ensure that indigenous languages are documented with active participation of the language holder.
- Draw on the guidance already produced by IFLA to inform your activities.

Events taking place during IY2019 should take into account the three main thematic areas and should **support** the preservation of indigenous languages through a range of different measures, bring **access** to information and knowledge and **promote** the values of indigenous languages and cultures within broader sociocultural, economic and political domains.

Libraries such as the [National Library of Australia](#) is already supporting the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage by collecting oral histories, manuscripts and photographs. At [CERDOTOLA](#) in Cameroun a digital library of the African indigenous cultural memory has been created, and at the [Native Hawaiian Library](#) they offer a variety of Hawaiian culture-based resources such as books, newspapers and Molokai maps.

You can read more about how to get involved and be inspired [here](#).