



## The Issue of Preserving Indigenous Languages and Cultures

At present, 96 per cent of the world's approximately 6,700 languages are spoken by only 3 per cent of the world's population. Although Indigenous peoples make up less than 6% of the global population, they speak more than 4,000 of the world's languages. Conservative estimates suggest that more than half of the world's 6,700 languages will become extinct by 2100. The majority of the languages under threat are indigenous languages.

Language and art form a large part of culture and are essential to the wellbeing and identity of Indigenous people. There are many pressures to halt some Indigenous practices, for example forgoing facial tattoos for job prospects, and often the official language of a country is prioritised over the Indigenous language, for ease of communication or assimilation. With the rise of globalisation and Americanisation, many non-colonial countries are also feeling the pressure to deprioritise their Indigenous cultural practices, art, and language, causing them to die out. Knowledge accumulated over thousands of years on medicine, meteorology, agriculture and other areas is at risk of forever disappearing.

The main method of preserving Indigenous languages is digital, through apps such as Duolingo, which teach endangered languages, however, this keeps the language alive as a second language, learned by people from many countries, instead of preserving the language within the Indigenous cultures. Just over 50 countries have more than one official language, which is an effective way to keep multiple languages alive in a country, however, multilingual infrastructure is expensive and difficult to implement. The traditional method of preserving knowledge between generations is through stories, songs, dances, carvings, paintings and performances, however, this is dwindling due to exploitation and dispossession.

Indigenous cultures have many aspects that range from art to food, music, and sport. In some countries, such as America, Indigenous communities are modernising their art, in order to increase sales of it to support the community. Many Indigenous cultures and practices are becoming extinct, as people have to move out of traditional communities to earn a living. Valentin Rybakov, Vice-President of the Economic and Social Council, said, in a recent UN conference, "misconceptions often categorise traditional activities as uninformed and damaging to the environment when in fact Indigenous peoples' knowledge of their lands includes a vast array of successful practices."

### Points to consider

- What are your country's Indigenous languages and cultures?
- Is your country's focus on preservation, or global expansion and assimilation?
- How can we include Indigenous people in this process?
- Should we try and modernise aspects of Indigenous culture as a method of preservation, or focus on preserving exact cultures and traditions?



### Useful Links

- [Browse the Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Register of good safeguarding practices - intangible heritage - Culture Sector - UNESCO](#)
- [Protecting languages, preserving cultures | UN DESA | United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs](#)
- [Indigenous languages - preserving culture and national heritage \(1stopasia.com\)](#)