

**State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2009**  
**EXCLUSIVE ONLINE MATERIAL**

**The Sociolinguistic Atlas of Indigenous Peoples in Latin America: a tool for planning regarding education and indigenous peoples by Inge Sichra**



In conjunction with UNICEF, the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) and the Foundation for Education in Multicultural and Multilingual Contexts (FUNPROEIB Andes) have developed a *Sociolinguistic Atlas of Indigenous Peoples in Latin America*. This tool is aimed at helping to illuminate the ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity of the region; diversity which should be taken into account when tackling the situation of inequality and inequity which prevails in Latin America.

Though the atlas does not show a conclusive reality it maps dominant trends and features and has been developed as a book along with a DVD. The printed book uses both secondary sources and first-hand information to describe who indigenous people are, and the situation regarding their languages. A network of 34 scholars collaborated to collect the information. They wanted to produce something different from an academic treatise: a straightforward and clear publication that focuses on the current situation of native peoples and their languages.

Readers of the atlas will be able to understand the current state of affairs of indigenous peoples across the region, the various nuances and the advances already taking place in this under-explored field. In Guyana and Surinam for example, the peoples called 'Amerindian' are usually categorized alongside other minority groups such as the Maroons. That is why these groups have been included, despite the atlas being about indigenous peoples. Those of African descent have been included in certain Central American countries for this same reason, although not across all the geocultural areas covered by the atlas.

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The atlas takes into account 10 geocultural areas, which correspond to large geographical spaces in which cultures and languages have developed under shared physical and historical conditions to which they have had to comply or adapt. Geocultural delimitation is ambiguous, because it is superimposed with the legal definitions of the states involved according to their own geopolitical issues and administrative demarcations.

Organizing the atlas according to geocultural areas seeks to restore the context in which the native peoples of Latin America originated and which has shaped their history. In this way, the atlas attempts to widen the boundaries imposed by nation states, under which the understanding of indigenous peoples has been sometimes been compromised in the name of national interests. This effort to challenge the ideas and discourse on indigenous peoples also explains the order of the chapters: northwards, from Patagonia and Isla de Pascua to Oasisamerica in the north of Mexico, through Chaco, Amazonia, Orinoquia, the Andes, the northern Pacific coastline, the continental Caribbean, Central America and Mesoamerica. Perhaps changing the chapter order does not seem like much, but it already marks the beginning of different thinking.

By incorporating those sectors of the population that, until a few years ago, were invisible, denied or assimilated, but that have gained notoriety by becoming the subjects of rights and demanding self-determination, and social and political participation across the length of the American subcontinent, the atlas aims to present a truly dynamic reality, which resists being evaluated by numbers and figures that themselves become out of date the moment one attempts to chart or describe them.

Indigenous peoples, whose rights are in accordance with international legislation, are the subject of the atlas. It is neither an atlas of populations nor of languages. The atlas recognizes the national differences in ideas about indigenous

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peoples at the same time as advocating, in the political sense, the designation of indigenous peoples by their geographic dispersion and linguistic variation, instead of by national frontiers. From this perspective, we rediscover the historical arguments which reveal the magnitude and importance of inter-ethnic and linguistic contact for the survival of indigenous cultures as living cultures that are dynamic and changing.

Chronicling indigenous peoples in this way, the atlas, through the charts included in the DVD (which generally speaking complements the text) maps the name, number and place of settlement of 522 ethnic groups in Latin America. However, if the reader passes through the sections country by country – this being the most common way to process the information (although it implies a sense of national ownership) he or she would count 653 entries. In the first case of 522, we recognize that many of the peoples are trans-national peoples, often found in two or more countries in the region.

A Bolivian Aymaran leader, who, after having seen a presentation summarizing the content of the atlas said: 'I never knew there were so many of us [Indigenous Peoples] across the entire continent. We should spread this news everywhere so everyone knows, because we ourselves did not.'

The issue of educational planning is also addressed in the atlas. Considered one of the most effective educational systems in multicultural and multilingual settings, Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) has been promoted in many Latin American countries in the last decades. Every geocultural chapter ends with a discussion of relevant experiences in IBE, lessons learned and recommendations for language planning through the school system, mass media and community work.

Through the DVD which accompanies the printed work, the atlas also includes a large amount of quantitative information, displaying the diversity of indigenous peoples with an emphasis on graphics, statistics and georeferential maps. This tool was developed by a team based in Cochabamba, Bolivia, that gained access to virtual

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sources, census information, and figures gathered by NGOs or academic and religious institutions (where census information was lacking). Information drawn from records of indigenous peoples has been used as a starting point for elaborating the maps, statistical and graphical charts. The information contained in 522 'presentation cards', provides a rich factual base and is accessible at a number of different levels: by geocultural area, by country and by the indigenous people. It uses records of ethnically distinct indigenous peoples in 20 of the 21 countries in the region.

The atlas and DVD are intended for use by government functionaries and planners, and by international bodies, indigenous people and scholars themselves, also as educational materials, spreading across the student population and audiences in the mass media. The atlas can contribute greatly in conveying to all the students in the region the wealth of indigenous cultures in this their land, and as such help to promote a truly intercultural understanding.