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Indigenous Languages: A View from UNICEF
by Anna Lucia D'Emilio



Why indigenous languages in education?

More than 18 years ago, before both the 169th agreement of the International Labour Organization (ILO) concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, and before the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), passed in September 2007, another instrument recognised the right of indigenous children to receive an education in their maternal language: the Convention on the Rights of the Child, (CRC). It was ratified by nearly every country in the world, making it the most widely ratified in history.

Article 30 of the CRC, states that no indigenous child should be denied the right to use his or her language and practise his or her culture, and this is a commitment that states have already taken on. This is not just about one particular right for one particular group of children. On the contrary, it is about being able to offer the indigenous child exactly the same rights that other children have to express themselves and communicate in their maternal language. It would never occur to anybody to impede or prohibit the use of English in a United States public school, or Italian in Italy. Article 30 of the convention is essentially a matter of fairness that guarantees equality.

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For UNICEF and governments, taking a rights-based approach has various implications, such as:

- a) The exercise of a right can not be decided by the number of speakers of any given language. A Kandoazi child, from Amazonian Peru, has the same right to education in his or her language as a Quechua child, independent of the fact that in the first case there is a population of around one thousand people in total and in the second case nearly 12 million.

- b) The exercise of a right cannot be decided in terms of the economic costs. Too many times we hear talk about the difficulties and the high costs of providing basic services to indigenous communities. However if we reflect on the cost of repeating years or dropping out of school completely and consider that in Latin America nearly 6.5 per cent of students repeat a grade in primary school, we can suppose that the cost of not providing a maternal or bilingual education may be higher than the cost of guaranteeing this right. In fact, various projects in bilingual education have managed to significantly reduce grade repetition.

- c) In line with the rights-based approach, UNICEF works as much with states, (the guarantors of rights,) as with the indigenous peoples and their organisations themselves, (the rights holders.) The former must strengthen their capacity to provide services in indigenous languages that are respectful of indigenous cultures, in accordance with the principle of free, prior and informed consent recognised in the UNDRIP; the latter, including children, must strengthen their

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capacity to demand and defend their rights according to the existing mechanisms.

Why mother tongue and bilingual education for indigenous children?

Tests have shown that children learn better in their own language. However it is important to emphasize one more time that – more than a strategy to improve the quality of education – the use of indigenous languages is an essential right recognised by the CRC, the 169th agreement of the ILO and the UNDRIP.

Those who oppose mother tongue and bilingual education usually say that it is expensive, complex and politically sensitive. Those opposed are not only found in the ranks of governments. Opposition often occurs in the institutions of the United Nations or other donors.

Over the past few decades bilingual education in Latin America has been hugely modified: in the 1950s and 60s it was strongly associated with evangelist activity through which the mother tongue served only as a bridge towards Spanish language assimilation. However, from the 70s onwards it has steadily been developing, gaining a cultural dimension as Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) and the dimension of maintaining and developing the indigenous languages concerned. Furthermore, for many indigenous peoples in Latin American countries in the 80s and 90s IBE has been devised as a space for the exercise of power, from which one can question existing power dynamics.

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There are many tests that have demonstrated that children learn better in their own languages and that strengthening the use of their language through the process of reading and writing makes it easier for them to learn a second language more extensively. Many tests also show that bilingual education has permitted large advances in the psychosocial sphere. In bilingual schools children are happier to learn, are more expressive and have higher self-esteem when compared with those not in bilingual schools. This is truly quality education.

But despite the Convention and despite the fact that many countries have highly advanced legal frameworks and highly qualified indigenous professionals, the use of indigenous languages and of bilingual modalities in education is still limited and does not reach all the communities and populations that need it. In Latin America, there is still no country that has succeeded in universalizing IBE for all indigenous children.

These services are often implemented with the support of international aid funds and only limited national resources. Yet some countries that once designated considerable resources have lessened them in the last few years. The projects' large financial dependency can have very negative consequences, running the risk that they become perceived as imposed by 'outsiders'.

Currently, UNICEF is supporting IBE projects and programmes in around 20 countries in the region, with different lines of action, according to the situation in each country. It is also increasing interventions for those indigenous populations divided by national borders with support from the Government of Spain in 17 Latin

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American countries, and also the government of Finland in 3 Amazonian countries. In some cases UNICEF has also supported the process of reviving languages in danger of extinction, such as the Añu language of Venezuela, which had only a few elderly speakers and now is taught as a subject at school so that children can become familiar with a basic vocabulary.

Education is not enough

To think that education alone can change the situation of diglossia in which the majority of indigenous people find themselves is ambitious to say the least. The school alone can not do much if the actual families do not speak these languages, if the parents do not teach them to their children and use them habitually as a means of regular communication. It is also necessary to implement the use of indigenous languages in the public sphere, in health services and above all in mass media such as radio, television and newspapers.

In aspects of health and prevention of HIV/AIDS, the use of indigenous languages has been vital, as much in the training of personnel as in the dispersion of printed and audiovisual material. UNICEF has been engaged and has backed various pilots of support to indigenous communicators. It has also promoted the development of material that are in indigenous languages and respectful of the indigenous world view. In Latin America and the Caribbean UNICEF has supported the production of materials in approximately 50 different indigenous languages.

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With a view toward promoting the spread of the UNDRIP, alongside other organisations, for example *Fondo Indigena* and the ILO, UNICEF has supported the translation of the Declaration into some 15 Latin American indigenous languages.

While it is in Latin America where UNICEF has had the most sustained work with indigenous languages, they have now also initiated activities in some countries in Africa and Asia. Together with UNESCO, several regional events on bilingual education have been planned in south east Asia.

Some lessons learned

UNICEF is convinced that promoting the use of indigenous languages is not only a strategy to improve social services: it is the right of children and of indigenous peoples. The programs that have yielded the largest and best results in terms of the use of indigenous languages are those that have relied on the active participation of indigenous peoples themselves.

Indigenous participation should not be limited to decisions related to the status of indigenous languages in society, but should be ensured in decisions related to the linguistic corpus. In accordance with the approach of the indigenous movement, UNICEF has transcended the simple use and maintenance of the languages, having also promoted and supported processes to develop native tongues such as the elaboration of alphabets, spelling norms and the development of technical language for the use of these languages in all subjects of school curricula, for various educational levels and for various environments. We firmly believe that it is

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crucial to overcome the situation of diglossia in which the majority of indigenous languages find themselves as a consequence of both colonisation and discrimination.

We have learned that working with indigenous languages is an extremely important strategy for the empowerment of indigenous peoples, especially women. We have also learned that in many cases bilingual education has successfully reduced the educational gap between boys and girls, girls being those who benefit most from these programs. The same is true for programs teaching literacy to the adult population. Our experience also shows the importance of including linguistic policies in the public policy framework of each country, developed with indigenous participation. There are few countries that offer a clear linguistic policy.

In conclusion, it is necessary to work for the maintenance and development of indigenous languages and for their use throughout society. But it is also necessary to work with the rest of the population, to promote a culture which respects cultural diversity and enrichment between cultures, in order to establish a framework for inclusive democracy.