

Remarks by RC at the Indigenous Languages and Media Seminar on
***“The Role of the UN and its Impact on Campaigns and Efforts of Saving
Indigenous Languages Around the World and the Lessons Learned”***
Johannesburg, 7 August 2024

Thank you, Programme Director

The Chairperson of the South African National Editors’ Forum, Ms. Nwabisa Makunga

The CEO of Pan South African Language Board, Mr. Lance Schultz

The Media Coordinator of the South African Agency for Technology

Advancement, Mr. Zamuxolo Matiwana

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning

Sawubona

Dumela

Molo

Avuxeni

Today, I am privileged to address you at this year’s **Indigenous Languages and Media Seminar 2024**. This is a significant gathering that serves as a platform to discuss the media industry’s rich tapestry of linguistic diversity that could be channelled to promote indigenous languages in South Africa. It is also an occasion to reflect on South Africa’s 30 years of democracy in promoting multilingualism.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the South African National Editors’ Forum, the Pan South African Language Board, and the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement for their collaboration with the UN in organizing this seminar.

The timing, on the eve of **“The International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples”** on 9 August, could not have been more appropriate. This day serves as a reminder of the resilience, strength, and contributions of the world’s indigenous peoples. **It is a call to action for all** of us to intensify our efforts to safeguard, preserve, and advance indigenous languages as a critical component of our cultural heritage and identity.

I have been requested to talk about **“The Role of the United Nations and its Impact on Campaigns and Efforts of Saving Indigenous Languages Around the World and the Lessons Learned”**.

Before I proceed, I would like to pay tribute to South Africa’s 30 years of inclusive democracy, which prioritizes cultural diversity, human rights and equality. Culture and identity are inextricably linked through languages. They played an important role in the transition of this nation. As a result, the 1996 Constitution acknowledges 11 official languages in order to foster cultural inclusion and linguistic diversity. Sign language was recognized as an official language last year. Last year we saw the addition of **sign language** as an official language.

As we come together to celebrate South Africa's democratic journey and the critical role that indigenous languages play in shaping its media landscape, today's event is of exceptional significance.

Over the past three decades, there have been significant strides in integrating indigenous languages into the media, including community radio, television, newspapers, and digital platforms. These outlets strive to empower marginalized communities, promote pride in linguistic heritage, and thereby assist in preserving and revitalizing endangered languages.

Nevertheless, despite these accomplishments, there is still more work to be done. Numerous indigenous languages continue to encounter obstacles, including inadequate funding, low representation in the mainstream media, and scarce resources. It is undeniable that the continuous dominance of a few languages in the global media poses an additional threat to the survival of indigenous languages. It is essential that we confront these obstacles head-on and collaborate to establish an environment that promotes the growth of all languages.

However, Ladies and Gentlemen, we are currently confronted with a daunting challenge on a global scale. The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) estimates that **43% of the world's approximately 6,000 languages are in danger of extinction**. We need to take immediate action to preserve and promote indigenous languages. I am delighted to note that the United Nations remains a **leading voice in this fight**.

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which the UN adopted in 2007, acknowledges the rights of indigenous peoples to their languages, traditions, and education. The declaration addresses the right to preserve, utilise, develop, and transmit languages to future generations.

Additionally, the UN has designated specific years and decades as priority areas for indigenous languages. The International Year of Indigenous Languages of 2019 was the most significant. It addressed the dire state of indigenous languages and aimed to motivate immediate action to preserve, revitalise, and promote them. The UN has reaffirmed its dedication to this cause by establishing the International Decade of Indigenous Languages from 2022 to 2032.

When it comes to preserving languages from extinction, UNESCO is in the vanguard. I'm pleased we have a colleague from UNESCO present today to provide further insight into their work on indigenous languages.

Our initiatives have greatly influenced and inspired numerous countries and global movements to preserve indigenous languages and for governments to enact laws and policies that safeguard indigenous languages. Among others, these include the US, Canada, and New Zealand. Here in South Africa, the Protection, Promotion, Development and Management of Indigenous Knowledge Act of 2019 acknowledges indigenous laws and knowledge.

One crucial area where our efforts are most clearly seen is education. Several countries have instituted culturally relevant curricula, bilingual education programmes,

and schools that immerse students in indigenous languages. These programmes positively impact the cultural pride, academic achievement, and language preservation of indigenous children.

Our work has also led to growth of community-driven initiatives as these typically achieve **the most significant and long-lasting outcomes**. To guarantee the survival of their languages, indigenous communities are developing digital resources, including language applications and online dictionaries.

We consistently advocate for the collaboration and sharing of successful strategies among indigenous groups and countries worldwide. We convene numerous conferences, seminars, and cultural exchanges to facilitate the exchange of ideas, information, and innovative solutions.

Through the years, we have acquired a plethora of critical lessons that can serve as a foundation for future endeavours in the preservation of indigenous languages. One of the most significant lessons is to recognize the primary custodians of indigenous languages. Any initiative to safeguard and revitalise indigenous languages must be spearheaded by indigenous communities. **Their guidance, wisdom, and customs are invaluable.**

It is impossible to preserve indigenous languages in isolation from other aspects of indigenous peoples' lives. A comprehensive strategy must encompass education, community development, cultural customs, and language. Through this approach, we can be sure that restoring indigenous languages is merely one component of a more comprehensive strategy to enhance the quality of life and strengthen the sense of identity of indigenous peoples.

To foster an environment conducive to language preservation, government policies and laws are crucial. Additionally, political commitment and dedication are essential to establish and maintain these policies.

The contemporary digital era presents unparalleled opportunities to preserve languages. Through mobile applications, social media, and digital platforms, language acquisition can be accessible to a broad audience. However, indigenous groups should be involved in the design and governance of these technologies in order to maintain cultural integrity.

Revitalising a language necessitates a continuous commitment and focus. Achieving long-term change requires more than just finance or programmes with a short timeline. Although the UN's programmes have been inspiring for the past decade, their success is contingent upon the continued investment of time and resources by all parties involved.

While the UN has played a crucial role in bringing attention to the issue of indigenous languages, we still have a long way to go. The lessons learnt underscore the significance of respect, comprehensive approaches, policy support, technical advancement, and dedication in the long term. Moving ahead, we must stay committed to preserving indigenous languages and the cultural richness they embody by leveraging these lessons and working together.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the preservation of indigenous languages is a matter of human dignity, identity, and justice, rather than solely language or culture. We owe it to the past to preserve these languages and the knowledge they impart.

Finally, I would like to reiterate our unwavering commitment to the preservation of indigenous languages in South Africa through public awareness campaigns and training. If we work together, it is possible to build a future in which the uniqueness of everyone's language, culture, and identity is honoured and preserved.

I thank you.