Research Report

Leiden Model United Nations 2015

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Forum: *General Assembly Third Committee*
Issue: *Preserving Minority Languages*

Position: *President of the General Assembly*

Introduction

According to a United Nations (UN) independent expert, around half of the world's estimated 6,000 languages are likely to die out at the end of the century if there is no active protection of minority communities and their languages. The report further notes that governments, who are obliged to protect these languages, are often faced with a source of tension when addressing the issue. Rita Izsák, the author of the UN report said the following:

> "Language is a central element and expression of identity and of key importance in the preservation of group identity. Language is particularly important to linguistic minority communities seeking to maintain their distinct group and cultural identity, sometimes under conditions of marginalization, exclusion and discrimination."

Ms. Izsák further said that the protection of minority languages is a human rights obligation, and a key element to achieve good governance, prevent conflict, and ensure a stable society.

Minority languages are threatened by an increasingly globalised society, where information is increasingly web-based and provided by the Internet. The global interaction, communication and marketplace require understanding by multiple parties, promoting a universally spoken language such as English, and working against the less spoken languages.

Definition of Key Terms

Language
The Oxford definition: "the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way."

Minority Language
The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages states the following definition: "Traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State's population; and different from the official language(s) of that State."

Preservation
According to the Cambridge dictionary: "the act of keeping something the same or of preventing it from being damaged."

General Overview

Threats to Minority Languages

Language is a key element of translating thought and identity. Cultural minorities rely on their language to preserve their group identities in the face of discrimination, marginalisation, and exclusion.

There are two types of minority languages. The first is like Welsh in United Kingdom, or French in Canada; the language is spoken by a minority of the population within a country. The second type of language is the micro-languages that are spoken by only a hand full of communities. Languages spoken by Amazon tribes fall under the latter category.

There are a number of threats to minority languages. Colonisation has played an important role in the threat of these languages. Many former colonies in Africa and Asia have adopted the language of their colonisers as the official language. This means that in countries like Mozambique and Cote d'Ivoire, Portuguese and French are the official language, and that the local languages are less frequently being spoken by the population.

As briefly mentioned previously, the growth of the Internet as a source of information has put pressure on smaller languages. There is a greater incentive to speak a language that more people speak, as this makes the communication of information easier to understand. Furthermore the American culture is also threatening smaller languages as its influences lead to frequent use of American-English words in the national and regional languages, something that certain people feel threatens the authenticity of the language.

In some cases, it is the national government that is negatively affecting minority languages. For example, in Slovakia a law passed that put a preferential status on the Slovakian language. This is reflected in road signs, shopping signs, and documentation, where Slovakian cannot be written in a smaller font than a second language. The Hungarian community in Slovakia sees this as a threat to their language and right to express themselves freely

Importance of Preserving Minority Languages

Apart from the fact that it is important to preserve minority languages as it is in certain ways considered to be a human right, there are also a number of other benefits that are yielded.

In many communities around the world, the language of schooling differs from the language that is spoken by the children at home. Studies have shown that when

students receive education in their mother tongue, there is greater self-confidence, fewer dropouts, higher academic achievements, longer periods of schooling, and even greater fluency in both the mother tongue and the official language, opposed to when taught in the national language. Women of minority cultures tend to thrive when they are taught in their own language, as often these women do not have access to education in the national language, simply because they lack the necessary fluency.

Some people may argue that governments should not discriminate the minority languages in their public documentation. Communication requires two channels of information, and therefore it is not always the best option to force the entire population to speak a single language. Communication and the quality of public services such as justice, education, and social services improve if the people who do not speak the official language can be reached.

Limiting minority languages also plays a role in promoting conflicts. When the use of one language is treated as superior to another language, a likely source of tensions is created. Conversely, if the minority languages are respected, there is an increased level of political participation among the minority cultures, and a reduced incentive for conflict.

Finally, and possibly most importantly, minority languages promote human diversity. Language is a source of cultural diversity and it is important that such diversity is respected, as this is also a healthy sign of embracing minorities and their ideas, and reduces discrimination and intolerance.

Major Parties Involved

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)
The primary organisation within the UN with regard to preservation of cultures and human diversity also plays a significant role in the preservation of minority languages. It aims to raise awareness for the issue, and to conduct research into the benefits of preserving minority languages. It also works together with the Human Rights Council (HRC), as both UN bodies are concerned with the protection of these languages. UNESCO also funds educational programmes to be taught in the minority languages.

The European Union (EU)
The EU has drafted and implemented a treaty (see "Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue) in order to protect the minority languages in its borders. It has further been very active to stand up for the rights of minority cultures and languages, and has thereby been able to preserve the diversity within the EU.

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Timeline of Events

5 November 1992	European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages is ratified by the members of the Council of Europe.
18 December 1992	The UN passes the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities
31 December 2012	Rita Izsák presents the report by a UN independent expert to the General Assembly.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

The European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML) is the most notable document of international law regarding this issue. The Council of Europe adopted it in 1992, and it protects numerous minority languages within each country that has ratified the treaty. Examples include West Frisian in the Netherlands, Gaelic in the UK, and Romani in a number of EU countries. The ECRML lists a number of actions, of which signatories need to implement at least 35. The treaty applies to the EU languages, and not to any minority languages spoken by immigrants.

Bodies of the UN, including UNESCO, the General Assembly, and the HRC, have made progress in this issue. The latter has given a mandate to the UN independent expert on minority issues, Rita Izsák, to promote the individual rights of cultural and linguistic minorities, and to work with governments to implement measures for preservation.

Possible Solutions

Though individual organisations can make important progress, it is vital that solutions are sought at the state level, as only then there will be significant long-term progress. It is essential that member states recognise and respect minority languages, and consider it as a way of protecting human diversity, and not as a divisive instrument.

Furthermore, it is necessary that all minority cultures be given the opportunity to speak their language freely with no restrictions. Promoting cultural practises in the form of music, theatre and art is a valid method to protect the use of minority languages, and indirectly the culture.

Another method is to incentivise that not only minority communities need to learn the official languages, but that the minority languages are also taught to speakers of the official language. This way more people learn the language, thereby preserving it.
Finally, the more frequent use of the Internet has posed a new challenge to minority

languages, but it can also be utilised for the benefit of these languages. It is important that information online can be found in the minority language so that all groups can benefit equally. It can further play a role in increasing the number of speakers through online courses and applications.

Useful Documents

Language Rights Linguistic Minorities Handbook:
https://www.google.nl/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCUQFjAAahUKEwiE7I-npMrIAhXEVSwKHR_5DL0&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ohchr.org%2FDocuments%2FIssues%2FIEMinorities%2FLanguageRightsLinguisticMinoritiesHandbook.docx&usg=AFQjCNGi_JPHUPyNzqus6IMgNHTKeFz8OQ&sig2=6MVjTcyQk8zX_8MxBi16rA&bvm=bv.105454873,d.bGg

See further titles and links provided in the Bibliography.

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