

**The Addis Ababa Declaration**

**on the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL2019)**,

**Meeting of the African Region**, **30-31 July 2019,**

**Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**

One of the major factors that have affected the status of African languages is colonialism and its legacy. After the inception of colonialism in Africa and the imposition of the languages of the colonial masters, namely English, French, Portuguese and Spanish in their respective territories as languages of administration and instruction, African languages have been relegated to a secondary position. This phenomenon has drastically affected the broad culture and identity of the African, consequently African languages, in a global point of view have no more been the development discourse of Africa, which has the effect of marginalizing Africans in the process of their own development.

Out of the more than 2000 African languages only a handful are used as languages of development. However, the Founding Fathers of the African Union, (previously the Organization of African Unity (OAU), were conscious of the indispensable role of African languages in Africa’s development, consequently, Article XXIX of the Charter of the Organization of African Unity, (OAU) stated that “the working languages of the Organization and all its institutions shall be, if possible African languages, English French, Arabic and Portuguese.” After the transformation of the Organization of African Unity to African Union, (AU) Article 25 of the Constitutive Act of the African Union expresses exactly the same thing.

The establishment of the OAU Inter-African Bureau of Languages – *Bureau interafricain des langues* de l'OUA (BIL) in the early 1970s, and the adoption of the revised *Language Plan of Action for Africa[[1]](#footnote-1)*, the Charter for the African Cultural Renaissance, and the statues of the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) by the Assembly of Heads of States and Governments, and the declaration by the AU of 2006 as the Year of African Languages, re-affirmed this vision of the Founding Fathers of the Pan-African organization.

**DECLARATION**

1. We the participants (national, regional and international participants representing their national governments, Indigenous leaders, Elders and Youths, Indigenous peoples’ organizations, representatives of the civil society and non-governmental organizations, academics and researchers and youth organizations from Africa) representing the African Union and the African peoples both at home and in the diaspora, at the Africa Regional Meeting on the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL2019) organized by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the African Academy of Languages of the African Union (ACALAN-AU) at the Headquarters of the African Union in Addis Ababa, express our gratitude to the United Nations for proclaiming 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages and hereby adopt the following declaration on this day, 31st of July 2019;
2. While congratulating the United Nations Organization for the proclamation of 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages, we acknowledge that the use of the word ‘**indigenous languages**’ as defined, is a **misnomer** in the African linguistic reality and hereby state that for the African Union, all “African languages” are **indigenous languages** to the continent and serving as the ‘mother tongue’ or first language of most Africans. We further state that in accordance with the African Union’s ‘***Language Plan of Action for Africa***’, all languages of Africa are expected to be developed and used for Africa’s development in partnership with the languages inherited from the colonial past (English, French. Portuguese and Spanish, etc). In light of the foregoing clarification that all African languages are indigenous languages in Africa, we consider the United Nations proclamation of 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous languages as another opportunity to join UNESCO as the lead UN agency to coordinate the activities of the year in the celebration and advocacy for the development of African languages as indigenous languages to Africa, in the same vein as our previous actions in favor of UNESCO’s advocacy for the Use of the mother tongue in education and the need to enhance the maintenance and sustenance of linguistic and cultural diversity for the preservation of knowledge and culture. We further acknowledge the diversity of African languages, and that all Africa languages are important to the sustainable development and peace in Africa. Therefore, while recognizing the right of the indigenous peoples and indigenous languages, and therefore the African peoples and African languages, we acknowledge the need to decolonize or review the meaning of indigenous languages in the African continent marked by colonization;
3. Recalling the UN General Assembly’s resolution A/RES/71/178 on the rights of Indigenous peoples, proclaiming 2019 the International Year of Indigenous Languages[[2]](#footnote-2) to draw attention to the serious loss of indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve, revitalize and promote Indigenous languages, and to take more urgent steps at the national and international levels, as well as mobilize stakeholders for coordinated actions around the world, and invites the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to serve as the lead agency for coordinating the activities of the Year, in collaboration with other relevant agencies, within existing resources, and endorsed Action plan for organizing the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages (E/C.19/2018/8);
4. We reaffirm our support for the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and the African Regional Meeting of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages which is in line with Resolution 71/178 of the United Nations General Assembly. The meeting is also in line with the vision of the Founding Fathers of the African Union which described the linguistic identity of we the African peoples as part and parcel of our cultural heritage and in indeed the core value of our integration and development process;
5. We stress the importance of scientific research, and the digitization and preservation of African languages. Local, national and regional authorities should promote African languages in the cyberspace and apply Human Language Technology to them and encourage the learning of other languages to promote multilingualism and linguistic diversity especially in the cyberspace;
6. Recognizing that the rights affirmed in the *UN Declaration* are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible, we acknowledge the provisions of the *UN Declaration* that specifically reference indigenous language rights in the context of usage, revitalization, and transmission (Article 13), education (Article 14), media (Article 16), and other articles that bear on indigenous language rights including the right to cultural diversity (Article 15) and rights and responsibilities to traditional knowledge (Article 31). We underscore the responsibility and even the obligation of Member States of the African Union to take measures, including legislative measures, to support the rights affirmed in the *UN Declaration* (Article 38), to provide technical and sustained financial assistance for the exercise of these rights (Article 39), and the fact that they constitute the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of Indigenous peoples (Article 43);
7. We recognize that the African peoples should be empowered through the development and promotion of their languages, and reiterate that all African languages are indigenous to Africa, that capacity building is relevant in capacity building, and that African languages should be attributed economic value in terms of economic valorizing functions so that positive attitude could replace the current negative attitude of Africans themselves towards African languages. We recommend that African languages should be central in education system in Africa and that Member States of the African Union should start teaching school subjects in African languages; that measures should be taken to ensure that all languages, without exception, are revalorized and instrumentalized in terms of standardization and harmonization of orthographies, terminology development and other language development activities to enable indigenous language assume new economic development functions;
8. We recommend the necessity of mobilizing adequate resources both human and material to develop and promote African languages. This is necessary to attribute economic value to African languages, and to not undermine or marginalize any language in Africa; All African languages should be respected;
9. We acknowledge that the mandate of the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) is to empower all African languages in partnership with the languages inherited from colonization; and encourage the African Union Member States and the United Nations, UNESCO, and other United Nations agencies, other intergovernmental organizations, and United Nations indigenous rights’ mechanisms,[[3]](#footnote-3) to undertake concrete actions, including the mobilization of financial resources and cooperation and technical assistance, institutional capacities building of language speakers to more effectively contribute to the development and promotion of the use of African languages and the development of African language learning tools and resources;
10. We strongly recommend the use of African languages as official languages and languages of instruction in all the spheres of life on the continent, as a factor of African integration and development, and to develop human resources and promote the participation of the majority of Africans in their own development, in accordance with the African Union’s **Language Plan of Action for Africa**. African languages should be constantly used on the TV, Radio, in the movies, etc.; cartoons and folktales should be digitalized for children and administrators and politicians to be equipped with the knowledge of African languages and use them;
11. We commit ourselves to create conditions for the preservation of African languages, develop regulatory and legal frameworks to protect African languages and culture, and encourage ACALAN to carry out advocacy in the African Union Member States that have not yet developed language policies to do so within the context of the African Union’s **Language Plan of Action for Africa** to determine status for African languages. We further recommend that African languages be used in administrative and political activities in order to give value to them to promote the participation of the people in their own development;
12. We encourage the deploying of necessary resources and robust data through national statistics institutions, in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Agenda 2063 of the African Union, the African Union’s Language Plan of Action for Africa and other international and national laws and policy documents relating to indigenous peoples and multilingualism, and other relevant normative instruments and strategies;
13. We are convincedthat the use of technology to support young people to learn to read and write in African languages is necessary for the implementation of the existing language policy within the context of the African Union’s **Language Plan of Action for Africa**. It is equally important that National development plansare based on equity in the distribution of and access to cultural resources for Standard Setting for the development of African languages. We encourage the development of international frameworks to support the emergence of dynamic linguistic sectors in Africa and technical and funding assistance shouldbuild human and institutional capacities and support creativity in education for a more effective sustainable development. We support regional youth meetings to sensitize African youths on the importance of reading and writing in African languages and to closely work with ACALAN National Language Structures (focal points) to promote the Addis Ababa Declaration especially with the youths;
14. We recommend that the United Nations and its relevant agencies, in collaboration with the African Union and its specialized language agency, which is the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) develop a comprehensive policy to promote the use of African languages for knowledge production. We further recommend that African researchers carry out research in African languages to make African research outcomes competitive and more relevant. Universities should be committed to using African languages as well encourage the writing of theses in African Languages. Standard libraries should also be established to promote books and book production in African languages;
15. We decry the role of States and their practices in relegating African languages and cultures to the periphery of national development programs, and the persistent policies leading to the endangerment of African languages, and attempts to exclude African languages from the education system and to continue imposing former colonial languages to African children rather we recognize that languages of the colonial legacy are important as partners to African languages which should be fundamental in Africa’s development process;
16. We acknowledge the importance of other international human rights instruments, including the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No**.** 169**)**[[4]](#footnote-4), **Agenda 2063** of the African Union, General Comment 23 of the Convention to Eliminate All forms of Racial Discrimination to ensure the survival, dignity and well-being of the African peoples key element of their cultural identity, well-being and cultural integrity. We further acknowledge the diverse interrelated, interdependent and indivisible rights of the African peoples in relation to African languages, ranging from rights recognized in constructive arrangements to inherent rights of the African peoples which derive from their political, economic, social structures, spiritual and cultural rights as distinct peoples;
17. We are convincedthat control over developments affecting Africans by Africans and their lands, territories and resources will enable them to maintain and strengthen their institutions, cultures and traditions, and to promote their development in accordance with their needs and aspirations, including the promotion of African languages by effective use and intergenerational transmission of all African languages;
18. We encourage Member States of the African Union to support and play an active role in eliminating barriers to the revitalization, maintenance, access and promotion of African languages, and to promote them at the national, sub-national, and regional levels, through the enactment of effective legislation, language policies and programs, sustainable funding, that would genuinely empower African languages. This includes the elimination of prejudice faced by African languages as a result of the lack of political will of some African countries which negatively affects the rights of the majority of the African peoples to effectively participate in their own development because of the language barrier;
19. Consistent with articles 41 and 42 of the UN Declaration, we further encourage UN member States, UNESCO, and UN agencies, UN indigenous rights’ mechanisms,[[5]](#footnote-5) and other intergovernmental organizations to undertake concrete actions, including through the mobilization of financial support including funding schemes, and technical assistance, to build institutional capacities of civil society, academia and public organizations to support African peoples and States in the development of African language learning tools and resources. We also encourage all UN agencies to join and support UNESCO and the African Union in mainstreaming African peoples’ rights to African languages in all contexts. At the national level, such funding must be in context of legislation to ensure support for the development of national language strategies;
20. Acknowledging the importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), as stated in the Plan of Action of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) (Article 15), UNESCO’s Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace (2003) and Indigenous media, and the AU’s specialized language agency ACALAN’s African Languages and the Cyberspace project, the lack of access to own digital content, resources, services and tools in African languages and limited digital skills continues to be a major form of digital exclusion in social, political, cultural and economic domains for the majority of Africans. ICTs and African media organizations can develop and promote African languages while opening new opportunities for digital social, economic and political inclusion, life-long and distance learning, employment, knowledge sharing, cooperation, collaborative efforts and the effective transmission of African languages;
21. Furthermore, we recommend that Member States of the African Union recognize the need to develop African languages to ensure the cultural advancement, and acceleration of the economic and social development of Africa, endeavor to formulate and implement appropriate national language policies, and prepare and implement reforms for the introduction of African languages into the education curriculum, according to the provisions of the **Language Plan of Acton for Africa**, and articles 18 and 19 of the **Charter for the African Cultural Renaissance**;
22. We urge Member States to equally adhere to January 24 to 30 **African Languages Week** adopted by the Specialized Technical Committee Youth, Culture and Sport of the African Union – (**STC/YCS-3/EXP/XXIV),** and effectively participate in the commemoration of the week with the support of ACALAN-AU and UNESCO. The rationale for adherence to these policy documents and especially the adoption of the African Languages Week includes the following:
* To truly contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,[[6]](#footnote-6) and the Agenda 2063, which emphasize a correlation between African languages and the contribution to peace building, the attainment of sustainable development goals and ensure reconciliation process in Africa, especially in the context of the African population that are vulnerable and marginalized in the process of their own development;
* Adherence to these policy documents will support the African peoples and the world at large to revitalize, reclaim, promote and sustain the importance and vitality of African languages;
* The acknowledgement, respect and valuing the African knowledge systems and their contributions to the quality of knowledge production, and existing and emerging technology will be developed to revitalize, reclaim, promote and sustain African languages;
* It will help to gradually reverse the effects of colonialism on African languages, and increase the visibility of African languages that colonialism and former policies had obscured, and turn the state of African languages, cultures and peoples to be more appropriate, humane and just within the International community; and
* These policies, efforts and resources to educate and support the African peoples will contribute to inclusive development as a result of the greater participation of Africans in their own development, and thus to the urgent reconciliation processes and to the greater success in African integration;
1. Convinced of the value of strengthening international and domestic standards on linguistic rights of the African peoples, we also call upon the African Union to endorse the Dar es Salam Framework for Action[[7]](#footnote-7), developed by the African Union’s African Academy of Languages (ACALAN).
1. The Language Plan of Acton was adopted in 1985 and then revised n 2006 during the Khartoum summit in 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. United Nations A/RES/71/178, Seventy-first session Agenda item 65 (a) adopted by the General Assembly on 19 December 2016 [on the report of the Third Committee (A/71/481)] 71/178. Rights of indigenous peoples, paragraph 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (PFII), Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) and the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), International Labour Organization, adopted Geneva, 76th ILC session 27 June 1989 (entered into force 5 September 1991) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (PFII), Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) and the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. General Assembly, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, UN Doc. A/RES/70/1 (25 September 2015) (adopted without a vote), at 3 (Declaration), paras 3 and 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “The Dar-es-Salaam Framework for Action” is calling for a collective commitment to action for African Governments to ensure that Article 25 of the Constitutive Act of the AU (Previously Article 29 of the OAU Charter) is implemented. The Framework invites the African Union Member States to promote Kiswahili as a language of wider communication in Africa. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)