
SPECIAL EDITION

CELEBRATING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES DURING THE
UN INTERNATIONAL DECADE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES 2022–2032

JULY 2022

GLOBAL NETWORK ON
INDIGENOUS-LED EDUCATION

Pass it on!

Stories of Indigenous-led Education from the Grassroots



Compilation

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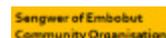
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Founding Members



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Executive Summary

Indigenous Peoples comprise less than 6% of the global population, yet they speak 4000 of the world's 6700 languages. Some estimates say that up to 95% of the world's languages will be gone by the end of the century—most of these being Indigenous languages. It is estimated that one Indigenous language falls into disuse every 2 weeks.

Mainstream education systems across the globe continue to marginalise Indigenous Peoples. All the while, Indigenous communities continue to face human-rights abuses, loss and destruction of their lands and territories, dispossession and discrimination. These everyday challenges have made it increasingly difficult for Indigenous communities to promote, preserve and pass on their knowledge, language and culture.

We want to change this.

About this Publication

Established in 2020, the Global Network on Indigenous-led Education (the ILED Network) is a growing, collaborative network of organisations in support of Indigenous-led education. We have a wide geographical reach, with members in India, Kenya, the Philippines, Thailand, Panama, Ecuador, Peru, Uganda, Costa Rica, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

The ILED Network was created **to centre those Indigenous grassroots initiatives that uphold, preserve and pass on these communities' ways of life, knowledge and language to Indigenous youth**. Our shared intention is to harness the power of Indigenous-led education to make Indigenous communities, especially Indigenous children and youth, more resilient.

In this publication we present how the ILED Network plans to make a change, building on the momentum created by the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032. The aim of this International Decade is to draw global attention to the critical situation of many Indigenous languages, while mobilising stakeholders and resources to protect, support, revitalise and promote Indigenous languages.

Grassroots Stories of Indigenous-led Education

At the heart of this publication, we share grassroots stories of Indigenous-led education from Thailand, Suriname, India, Kenya, Uganda and Costa Rica. The stories offer insights into the importance of Indigenous languages for Indigenous cultures, and reveal the challenges communities face—especially in relation to education—and the solutions they are working on to promote, preserve and pass on their languages. Our **key takeaways** from these stories are as follows:

- There is a **mismatch between mainstream education and Indigenous languages**. In fact, mainstream schooling often contributes to the gradual disappearance of Indigenous languages. This problem is compounded by harmful practices in schools, such as prohibiting Indigenous children from speaking their mother tongue.
- More pressing daily threats and challenges, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, are necessarily demanding the attention of Indigenous Peoples. It is in this context that **Indigenous communities are navigating the opportunities available to them** to pass on their language and knowledge to the youth.
- Oral Indigenous languages, with no written script, need **a space in which oral traditions, cultures and languages can thrive**. This requires a paradigm shift, both inside and outside the classroom.
- **More funding and support for Indigenous-led education** is crucial. Most Indigenous-led education initiatives receive no governmental support or lack an enabling environment.

The ILED Network's Perspective on the UNESCO Global Action Plan

The ILED Network is well-positioned and keen to contribute to the realisation of the Global Action Plan to implement the International Decade lead by UNESCO. Following our analysis of the action plan, we want to emphasise the following points:

- **The time to act is now**. The status of Indigenous languages is critical. Urgent collaborative action is needed from all stakeholders worldwide to protect, support, revitalise and promote Indigenous languages.
- **A holistic approach is essential**. Promoting and supporting Indigenous languages requires a holistic perspective and understanding of how language and linguistic vitality and diversity are connected to territory, health, livelihoods, knowledge, spirituality, nature, biodiversity, intergenerational relations, and the roles of women, youth and children.
- **Underlying human-rights issues need to be addressed, especially in education**. The promotion of Indigenous languages can succeed only if underlying issues—such as discrimination, gender-power imbalances and human-rights violations that undermine the continued existence of Indigenous languages—are acknowledged and addressed.

-
- **We need a transformation of education at all levels, from an Indigenous perspective.** The critical state of Indigenous languages should be addressed across all educational levels: informal, non-formal and formal education; academia; and at the political level where educational policies and plans are made. Indigenous Peoples, youth in particular, must be at the heart of this transformation process.
 - **Grassroots initiatives need more direct support and resources.** Grassroot initiatives have the biggest potential for impact, yet very little funding, support and resources reaches them, partly because larger funding mechanisms have extensive bureaucratic and technical requirements.

Our Recommendations

Our recommendations are for those who are inspired by our message and who would like to support Indigenous languages, capitalising on the momentum that the International Decade offers.

Donors, Allies and other Supporters

- Consider supporting smaller, grassroots initiatives. Providing seed funding for our Small Grants Fund is also a good place to start. Aiming to bridge the gap between donors and grassroots initiatives, this ILED fund was set up to make sure that more adequate, sustainable and flexible funding and other direct support reaches grassroots education initiatives.
- Support capacity building and knowledge sharing.
- Share about Indigenous grassroots initiatives with others in your network and on your social media channels.

Duty-Bearers

- Challenge discrimination and harmful practices in mainstream education policies and practices that undermine the wellbeing of Indigenous languages and cultures.
- Start transforming national schools and curricula to become more inclusive and respectful of Indigenous cultures, ways of learning and languages, especially endangered languages. Shape educational policies together with Indigenous Peoples, based on their needs and proposals.
- Support initiatives that are led by Indigenous Peoples.
- Create a supporting legal environment for Indigenous-led education initiatives, in line with Art.14 of UNDRIP on Indigenous Peoples' right to culturally and linguistically appropriate education.

Indigenous Peoples

- Reach out to the ILED Network. We are curious to hear your perspective and to discover what the network could do for you.
- Follow us on [social media](#) and get inspired by other Indigenous-led initiatives.
- Initiate or organise dialogues with policymakers and institutions in your region or country. Help them to understand holistic and human-rights-based perspectives on language and education; share with them your initiatives, needs and ideas for transforming education.
- Register on the [International Decade online community platform](#) and engage with others working to promote Indigenous languages.



The Tooro Botanical gardens manager shares information on a cross section of environmental components including water and terrestrial biodiversity importance and their Indigenous uses to the local community from the time immemorial, and why they should be protected today. Credits: FED.

Key Terms

We use the following definitions in the context of this publication.

Education: Any kind of activity in which knowledge or skills are transferred to the next generation, whether it be formal, informal or non-formal. For a better understanding of the different types of education, see the [official definitions](#) as formulated by the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe.

Indigenous-led: Activities that are initiated and/or run by Indigenous Peoples, including Indigenous individuals, organisations and/or communities.

Resilience: Applicable to both individuals and communities, resilience is the idea that the wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples and their cultures is upheld despite new challenges and changing circumstances. It means that Indigenous languages, cultures, livelihoods and identities are thriving in our ever-changing and globalised world.



Credits: IMPECT Association.

A Celebration of Indigenous Resilience, Creativity and Innovation

Welcome to the first publication of the Global Network on Indigenous-led Education (the ILED Network).

Indigenous Peoples face many challenges in promoting, preserving and passing on their languages. Their initiatives, especially in relation to education, are often overlooked. We want to change this.

Language and linguistic diversity are at the core of this publication. This topic has been chosen in light of the UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032. The aim of the International Decade is to draw global attention to the critical status of many Indigenous languages, while mobilising stakeholders and resources **to protect, support, revitalise and promote Indigenous languages.**

In the following pages, we share inspiring stories of Indigenous-led education from our ILED Network members. Through these grassroots stories, we witness how Indigenous languages form the backbone of Indigenous cultures.

Throughout the publication we link to online content including videos, images and audio recordings. We hope you enjoy these stories, which are first and foremost a celebration of Indigenous resilience, creativity and innovation.

Members of the Global Network on Indigenous-led Education

About this Publication

This publication is intended for Indigenous Peoples and communities, ILED Network members and their networks, duty-bearers and other supporters/allies of Indigenous issues. The purpose of the publication is to introduce the ILED Network and our goals for this International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032. Through stories of Indigenous-led education from 6 countries, we reveal the issues and challenges commonly faced by Indigenous Peoples and we celebrate some of the ways they are surmounting the hurdles.

We start by briefly introducing the ILED Network—our background, members, plans, and goals—with links for further reading.

In Part I, the core of this publication, we describe our initiatives and share grassroots stories from ILED projects in 6 countries—Thailand, Suriname, India, Kenya, Uganda and Costa Rica. In a brief analysis, we draw out common concerns and issues, notably those that Indigenous Peoples face with mainstream education.

In Part II, we explore how we aim to contribute to the success of the International Decade, focusing on the vital role of Indigenous-led education. We review the UNESCO Global Action Plan for implementing the International Decade, and identify gaps and potential areas for improvement, based on the grassroots experiences of our members.

In Part III, we draw important conclusions and offer targeted recommendations for capitalising on the momentum that this decade offers. We also invite you to join or otherwise support our network, and suggest opportunities for engaging with us.

This publication is based on interviews with members of the 6 spotlighted organisations. Our analysis also includes a desk-based review of materials on the International Decade, including other relevant sources and articles. Our conclusions and recommendations have been collaboratively drafted and reviewed within the ILED Network.



Community reporters recording an interview at Sigur. Credits: Keystone Foundation.

Introducing the Global Network on Indigenous-led Education

Established in 2020, the Global Network on Indigenous-led Education (the ILED Network) is a growing, collaborative network of organisations in support of Indigenous-led education. We have a wide geographical reach, with members in India, Kenya, the Philippines, Thailand, Panama, Ecuador, Peru, Uganda, Costa Rica, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The shared intention of these impact-first organisations is:

To harness the power of Indigenous-led education to make Indigenous communities, especially Indigenous children and youth, more resilient.

The Story of the ILED Network

The seed for the ILED Network was planted when several grassroots and support organisations found each other through their shared challenges and aspirations: seeking more recognition, visibility, support and funds for **holistic approaches** to community resilience, and especially for their work on community-based Indigenous education.

These different organisations were witnessing the various ways in which formal education systems continue to marginalise Indigenous Peoples across the globe. Simultaneously, Indigenous communities continue to face many threats and problems such as human-rights abuses, loss and destruction of their lands and territories, dispossession and discrimination. These daily challenges have made it increasingly difficult for Indigenous communities to pass on their knowledge, language and culture.

Fortunately, many Indigenous communities are responding to these challenges by developing their own initiatives. The ILED Network was created **to centre those Indigenous grassroots initiatives that uphold, preserve and pass on these communities' ways of life, knowledge and language to Indigenous youth**. After all, engaging and gaining the commitment of future generations is crucial for cultural resilience.

By joining forces, our member organisations hope to make a bigger impact. After a series of exploratory discussions, the network became a reality in 2020. In January 2021, we launched the ILED Network to the world, through our first webinar.

“

...I am a proud member of the ILED Network. Mainly because we thought: we are dealing with a lot of issues. We are dealing with land issues and things that we think are huge, and we are leaving out that communities are losing their languages in the meantime. Communities are facing forceful assimilation, communities are being criminalised for being who they are, children being ashamed of speaking their Indigenous/traditional languages and we wanted to work against that in terms of education...”

— Milka Chepkorir, a young Sengwer leader, Kenya

What makes the ILED Network unique?

- We focus on sourcing funding and support for **education** and the transfer of knowledge, encompassing formal, non-formal and informal education activities open to all ages and genders. Most funding for Indigenous issues tends to go to initiatives that focus on areas such as environment, livelihoods and/or land rights. Education is often left out of the picture, despite being a crucial component for Indigenous resilience. Similarly, Indigenous Peoples are rarely given a serious place at the table when education policies are being created.
- We take a **global approach**. Although characterised by their diversity, Indigenous communities across the globe share very similar experiences and challenges. While this is an important starting point for our collaborative approach, we are prioritising tropical forest regions because it is in these regions that Indigenous-led education initiatives are most underfunded and under-exposed.
- We emphasise **complementarity, not duplication or competition** with other initiatives and networks.

The ILED Network's Plan of Action

Our first year was dedicated to establishing the founding group of the network, creating sustainable and cooperative partnerships. Together, we created the ILED Network's [theory of change](#), mission and vision. This process led us to identify the following 3 interrelated strands of work, which have shaped our action plan:

1. Promote networking, knowledge sharing and exchanges

Facilitate cross-cultural knowledge sharing to build mutual support and inspiration for ILED Network members. This includes:

- local, regional and international cross-visits and exchanges on selected topics (online and offline).
- peer-to-peer learning and reviewing of each other's initiatives and practices, and sharing news, opportunities, and contacts.
- regional coordinators acting as a driving force in the network: supporting our existing activities and expanding the scope of the network, such as introducing new partners, donors and opportunities for collaboration.

2. Gain traction and financial support through sharing funding opportunities, networks and contacts

Administer an accessible, low-bureaucratic **Small Grants Fund** for inspiring Indigenous-led education initiatives.

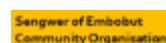
We receive some seed funding through our member organisations, and we want to grow our pool of small grants by engaging new donors and supporters. The small grants go directly to Indigenous-led, community-based and grassroots initiatives. This is in line with evidence showing that initiatives embedded in the communities make the biggest impact and have the greatest potential for scaling up and replication.



Credits: IMPECT Association.

3. Raise awareness and increase visibility of Indigenous-led education initiatives

- Engage external stakeholders through organising webinars/dialogues and other outreach activities.
- Publish information, including multimedia, and contribute to relevant consultations or processes related to Indigenous education.
- Celebrate successful grassroots initiatives with an annual award.



Part I:

Grassroots Stories of Indigenous-led Education



Other than the traditional Indigenous names of the trees, the youth also learn about the botanical names of the trees and plants.. Credit: FED

Here, we present the stories of 6 community-based organisations from Thailand, Suriname, India, Kenya, Uganda and Costa Rica.

Each story offers insights into the importance of Indigenous language for Indigenous culture, and reveals the challenges these communities face (especially in education) and the solutions they are working on to promote, preserve and pass on their languages.

Thailand

Stronger Together: Indigenous Communities Join Forces



Credits: IMPECT Association.



ILED Network Member: IMPECT Association

Location: Chiang Mai, Thailand (Highlands in the Northern Provinces)

Founded in 1991, the Inter-Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand (IMPECT) Association is an Indigenous-led organisation consisting of 10 different Indigenous groups: the Akha, Dara-ang, Hmong, Kachin, Lahu, Lisu, Lua, Karen, Mien and Shan peoples.

It is also one of the lead organisations which established the Network of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand.

Its focus areas include the right to self-determination; cultural revival and alternative education; public advocacy; and strengthening community-based organisations and networks.



If our language is lost, that means this knowledge about natural resource management is also lost.”

— Wilailuck Yerbaw, IMPECT Association

Background

Across the world, Indigenous Peoples have an intricate connection to the environment in which they live. The Indigenous Peoples that IMPECT works with are no exception. A telling example of this connection is the rotational farming system that plays an important role in the daily lives of the Thin and Lua peoples in Thailand. The practice embodies the interwoven nature of language, spirituality (and spiritual wellbeing) and natural resource management.

In the rotational farming system, the farmers use a piece of land for only one year; once the harvest is complete, this area is left uncultivated for several years. The practice is known for its positive effects on the soil, because it limits soil erosion and respects biodiversity.

This tradition is accompanied by many rituals, each taking place during a different phase of the process. For example, it starts with the farmers asking the spirits for permission and forgiveness for burning the land. To realise this, language is essential:



So we need a proper language to address the spirit, so if we cannot maintain this language, then we cannot connect to the spirit anymore.”

— Wilailuck Yerbaw

Other rituals accompany important steps such as planting the mother rice, cutting the head of the grass, and the moment when the harvested rice is carried back to the communities. The latter is accompanied by a ritual that sends back the spirit in the form of a bird:



The bird/spirit is sent back to heaven, because the rice cultivation is finished.”

— Chupinit Kesmanee, IMPECT Association

Communities that are forced to adopt commercial farming for their livelihood often stop doing these rituals. When this happens, the relationship between the natural resources, the spiritual world and the community changes, leading to overexploitation of the land as land use intensifies (including the use of fertilizers) to keep up with the demands of the market. This shows how important these rituals are for the sustainable management of resources, supported by the Indigenous languages.



So this way we can see the interlinked relationship between natural resources and spiritual meaning in this process.”

— Chupinit Kesmanee

Challenges

In the past, the Indigenous elders used to worry about their children not mastering the Thai language. Now this has shifted, as they see that their children have become fluent in Thai but have forgotten their Indigenous language. For example, when the Indigenous youth listen to the traditional songs, they no longer understand the meaning of the words:

“ **So this does not only happen in some Indigenous groups, but in so many Indigenous groups that among the younger generation they learn more about Thai language, and even English, but not their own mother-tongue language. This is a big problem at the moment.**”

— Chupinit Kesmanee



Credits: IMPECT Association.

At the same time, there are fewer and fewer knowledgeable elders left who have mastered the Indigenous languages and the COVID-19 pandemic put a hold on many opportunities for them to pass on their knowledge. Although IMPECT works hard to resolve this issue, it is observing that some Indigenous communities are not keen on creating Indigenous opportunities for learning language:

“

They prefer that their children can learn the Thai or English language [...] This is the big obstacle for us to overcome the attitude even with the Indigenous members in the communities [...] So the learning of Indigenous languages cannot compete with other languages.”

— Wilailuck Yerbaw

The reason behind this reluctance is the attitude within the mainstream education system. In the mainstream schools, there is no space for Indigenous languages. For example, there is no policy on the inclusion of Indigenous languages at school and the national curriculum supports only the Thai language (and foreign languages such as English, Chinese and Japanese). To add to this, Indigenous children are prohibited from speaking their language in the classroom.



Credits: IMPECT Association.

This lack of policy especially affects the youngest Indigenous children who have just started school. At this early stage, most of them do not yet know the Thai language, which is often the only language that the teachers speak. This makes it very difficult for them to communicate with the teachers and to get along in class. IMPECT has observed that this negatively affects the school performance of these young Indigenous children.

There is also the challenge that most of the Indigenous languages are oral languages. So, to read and write these languages a script would have to be invented. This is a common issue for Indigenous languages globally, as the dominant system attaches more value to written forms of communication and information, rather than creating a space in which oral traditions, cultures and languages can thrive.

IMPECT sees how this lack of attention to Indigenous languages at the national level trickles down to the local level. For example, when communities organise their own educational activities, they have to find the funds to make it happen. The government either provides no support, or the support is inaccessible to those working at the local level. This issue is also raised when talking about the UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032:

“

[...] there is no willingness by the government to do anything. If we do not do this ourselves, the government will not respond [...] Even [though] there is the recognition of the Decade of Indigenous Languages, it will be difficult to access the financial support [...]”

— Wilailuck Yerbaw

This reaction is understandable, considering Thailand has participated in other international decades before, yet it did not lead to any significant policy changes. It also ties into a recurring challenge as to how these local initiatives can become more financially sustainable in the long term.

Another pressing issue has a big impact on the daily lives of many Indigenous Peoples in Thailand, where almost **half a million people are stateless**. Most of these stateless people are highland Indigenous Peoples living in the Northern Thailand provinces. It is these communities that IMPECT works with.

Although people without citizenship can attend school, their freedom of movement is limited, as they are only allowed to stay in the province in which they are born. So, even when they manage to obtain a diploma, they cannot move to find a job (and the options are limited). This lack of freedom in combination with limited access to basic services and welfare benefits, being unable to vote, and ongoing stigmatisation poses many challenges to the highland Indigenous Peoples, which undoubtedly also affects the vitality of their language and culture.

IMPECT Grassroot Initiatives

Given the many issues due to the mainstream education system, a focus of IMPECT is on public advocacy, promoting Indigenous cultures and languages at the national level. Not only do they advocate for policy changes at the political level, but they also introduce solutions such as multilingual education. The latter is especially important, as it creates space for Indigenous language and it does not imply that Indigenous children have to give up their mother tongue when at school.

As an organisation run entirely by Indigenous Peoples, most of IMPECT's projects focus on the different communities and the activities and solutions that these communities come up with. IMPECT takes on a supportive role, letting the communities decide how they want to organise their own education:

“

[...] starting with each community and their own analysis of what is happening: with the education system, and to their children, and to their Indigenous knowledge.”

— Wilailuck Yerbaw

IMPECT also functions as a network of Indigenous education, having realised that the various organisations and communities are stronger together and more sustainable in the long run. The network has been so successful that it has sparked a domino effect. Many Indigenous elders have

asked IMPECT for help with transferring knowledge to the next generation and with raising awareness among the youth about the importance of Indigenous knowledge, language and practices:



They see what is happening to their youth, they lack their cultural roots and that there is no next generation of knowledgeable persons.”

— Wilailuck Yerbaw

Different types of Indigenous education initiatives are used throughout the network. The way they are organised depends on the specific context. For example, some Indigenous communities and organisations work with the local school to develop a curriculum that includes the local Indigenous languages, merging both national/governmental and Indigenous curricula.

Indigenous-led education is another form. This is when the community organises its own learning centre, in which the knowledgeable elders function as teachers and transfer their knowledge, way of life and language to the Indigenous children (and the wider community). The community teachers decide how this is done, leading to different activities and approaches. Here are some examples:

- New learning materials, such as textbooks and videos, are created, or new technologies and digital learning tools are implemented. This is combined with Indigenous ways of learning, such as using a traditional musical instrument.
- Elders set up a children's camp focused on a specific theme. For example, a language camp to transmit the Akha language, or a camp focusing on a specific ceremony or celebration, whether it be the songs that are sung during a funeral or the celebration for when a new baby is born.
- In some communities, educational activities are organised according to the cultural calendar.
- Some community learning centres provide the children with Indigenous education (such as the rotational farming system), but also teach the national curriculum (such as the Thai language, social studies).

One of IMPECT's ILED initiatives is also funded by the ILED Network's Small Grants Fund, entitled "*Empowering indigenous youth on the transferring of mother tongue and intangible cultural heritage of the Mawakhi community*". More information can be found on the [ILED Network's webpage](#). The full project proposal is available upon request.

This story is based on an interview with Wilailuck Yerbaw, an Indigenous Akha woman who works with IMPECT on Indigenous education programmes. This includes promoting Indigenous cultures and building the capacity of Indigenous people and youth. During the interview, Chupinit Kesmanee translated from Thai to English and vice versa. Some of his additions have also been used in this story.

Suriname

Reviving the Lokono Language in Hollandsche Kamp



Performance by Lokono cultural association Wabokwa. Credits: Sergio Jubithana



VIDS



Spotlighted Organisation: Association of Indigenous Village Leaders in Suriname

Location: The Lokono (Arawak)¹ village of Hollandsche Kamp, Suriname

Founded by Indigenous village leaders in 1992, after the end of the civil war in Suriname, the Association of Indigenous Village Leaders in Suriname (VIDS) aimed to strengthen traditional Indigenous leadership and restore the damage that had been done.

Today, the VIDS is a representative of the Indigenous Peoples of Suriname, both nationally and internationally. It works towards the realisation of:

- the legal recognition of Indigenous rights in Suriname (such as collective land rights)
- the improvement of the socioeconomic position of Indigenous Peoples in Suriname
- collaboration between the different Indigenous groups of Suriname
- the preservation and strengthening of Indigenous cultures and identities; for example, by raising awareness, intercultural education and building capacity.

Though the VIDS is not a founding member of the ILED Network, we are delighted to have their participation in this ILED publication. Their Language & the Future initiative (funded as part of the [Indigenous Navigator](#) project and discussed below) is of great relevance and an important addition to this publication.

¹ Lokono is the Arawak name for the Arawak language and peoples.

Language Revitalisation at the Grassroots

If anyone is motivated to fight for the wellbeing of his people, it is Sergio Jubithana. As *hoofdbasya* (a member of the village council) of the Indigenous Lokono (Arawak) village of Hollandsche Kamp, Sergio is always looking for opportunities to develop himself and to use his newly gained skills for the better:



I am a socially engaged person. I help wherever I can.”

— Sergio Jubithana



The Language & Future project team presenting themselves to the community at Hollandsche Kamp. Credit: Sergio Jubithana.

In 2021, it was no surprise that he was chosen as project manager of his first community project, allowing him to put his personal drive into practice. Together with a team, they created the project, Language & the Future (translated from Dutch: *Taal & Toekomst*).

This project arose from an urgent issue within the community—the gradual disappearance of the Indigenous Lokono (Arawak) language. This was especially an issue for the previous 2 generations; Sergio witnessed how most villagers between the ages of 4 and 45 years were unable to speak Lokono (Arawak).

To start off, the team organised a series of storytelling evenings to promote the project and get the community involved. At these events, the youth and elders shared stories and performed theatre plays, both in Lokono (Arawak) and Sranantongo (the lingua franca in Suriname) to make sure everyone could understand. More and more people joined these evenings, showing their enthusiasm for learning the Lokono (Arawak) language.

Sergio noticed how meaningful the project was as more people came up to him to show their interest, asking if he could use any help. This happened several times during the project, and at times when he faced the many challenges. This was not only the case in his own village, but also in other Indigenous villages close by (such as Matta and Cassipora):



When people hear what you are working on, everybody is looking [for a way] to make a contribution.”

In Hollandsche Kamp, the Indigenous Navigator language project team also wanted to create a suitable and inviting space for language learning. So, part of the project was dedicated to renovating the community centre and building important facilities such as toilets.

At the same time, Sergio and his team looked for knowledgeable elders who still speak the Lokono (Arawak) language. Together with these elders, they created 6 videos, each with a different theme on Lokono (Arawak) knowledge and traditions:

1. The traditional ritual revolving around adulthood: the ant trial (translated from Dutch: *mierenproef*)
2. Traditional agriculture and agricultural plots
3. The waterways and creeks
4. Important traditional knowledge on hunting and the animals in the rainforest
5. The story of an elder and the history of Hollandsche Kamp
6. Indigenous youth and why the Lokono (Arawak) language is disappearing.

The idea was to use the videos as learning materials, providing a starting point and source of discussion for each language class. In the months that followed, 40 students (23 adults and 17 youth) watched the videos and completed the Lokono (Arawak) language course in their new community centre.

To further support the community in learning the language, the project had one goal above all others: to create the first Lokono (Arawak) app in Suriname. The idea was that the app would especially appeal to the youth, who are growing up in the digital age. The hope was that the app would become a habit for the youth to use the Lokono (Arawak) language in their everyday communication with one another. They could use it to text each other, for example.

In developing the app, they used an existing Lokono (Arawak) dictionary. Strangely enough, this dictionary had been published only in the Netherlands, and they had to ask the publisher and author for permission to use it. This raised many questions, including for Sergio who wondered why they had not heard about this dictionary before and why it was not used for the benefit of the Lokono (Arawak) peoples and language:



But in Suriname we do not know this dictionary, why did it only remain in the Netherlands? What did they do with it?”

The publisher acknowledged this and gave them permission to use the dictionary for the advancement of the Lokono (Arawak) language, making the first Lokono (Arawak) app in Suriname a reality.

Challenges and Successes

“

...I want to take on those challenges so that I can motivate the youth that we, as Indigenous Peoples, can also do that.”

Although Sergio's project was successfully completed, it was not an easy journey for him and his team. They faced many challenges and unexpected setbacks throughout the project, with the COVID-19 pandemic affecting them greatly.

For the videos and interviews, they wanted to talk to the elders, but the many travel restrictions and the risk of contamination made this group very difficult to reach. This led to many limitations and delays. The Lokono (Arawak) language course also had to be postponed. When they did manage to give the language classes, they had to organise additional sessions because the number of students per class was limited to allow for social distancing.



Still from the film, *'Behoud en overdracht van de Lokono taal en cultuur in Hollandse Kamp' / 'Preservation and Transfer of the Lokono Language and Culture in Hollandsche Kamp'*

They also faced financial struggles, as their budget could not foresee the shocking inflation of the Surinamese dollar due to the economic crisis. The price of construction materials increased, delaying the renovation of the community centre.

“

So the financial picture was a huge challenge, but nevertheless we did not lose sight of our goal.”

Sergio's optimism and perseverance never wavered, despite many personal hardships throughout the year. As the pandemic endured, the Indigenous communities lost loved ones to the coronavirus, including Sergio's father. And, still, Sergio continued with the project.

During the project's final event, a [video documenting the whole journey](#) was launched:

“

When I watched that video I got a little emotional, because only then did I realise what great work I have done man.”

Sergio has witnessed the big impact the project has had on the community. During this final event, some of the youth who took the language course gave a presentation, sharing how much they had learned in the previous months. Before the project, many of them did not understand the traditional Lokono (Arawak) songs that they were singing. Now, they write their own Lokono (Arawak) songs. And they accompanied the funeral of Sergio's father with traditional Lokono (Arawak) songs:

“

...it makes it interesting for them to know what they are singing and you notice that they have become more enthusiastic after that [...] Now we are just expressing ourselves in our culture, we are no longer those Indigenous Peoples that are ashamed to convey their culture. This is the foundation and we have that.”

Other victories are witnessed, such as when a 10-year-old student full of pride tells his mother what he has learned in the language classes. Some people have embraced the habit of greeting one another in the Lokono (Arawak) language as they walk through the village.

Though the project has officially ended, Sergio's ambitions are far from done. He has many plans to take the project to the next level. One idea is to expand the app by adding more Lokono (Arawak) words and, eventually, whole sentences. Later on, they want to add recordings and a translation function. Sergio is confident that they will realise this, as the support so far has been overwhelming.

“

[...] I have always told my people: you have to leave a legacy. And I know that in the future, I can say that I have laid a foundation for the youth who will come after [...], that they can take it over and be able to continue it afterwards.”

This story is based on an interview with Sergio Jubithana, who is *hoofdbasya* (a member of the village council) of the Indigenous Lokono (Arawak) village of Hollandsche Kamp. Since the death of his father, Sergio has also been acting Chief of Hollandsche Kamp. Furthermore, Sergio is an officer in the Surinamese army and manages his own Lokono (Arawak) music group, *Beradjie*. The original interview was conducted in Dutch.

India

A Richness of Oral Histories and Languages in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve



Radio Kotagiri interviews with Irula children. Credits: Keystone Foundation.



ILED Network Member: Keystone Foundation

Location: Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, Kotagiri, Tamil Nadu, South India

For the past 28 years, Keystone Foundation has worked together with 10 Indigenous communities living in 135 villages in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.

Initially, it focused on the livelihoods of the honey-hunter community, but its work now encompasses all aspects affecting the wellbeing of Indigenous communities.

Keystone Foundation works with the principle of interdependence (inspired by the nest-building behaviour of birds), aspiring to create a balance between conservation, livelihoods and enterprise development, benefitting both the natural world and its people at the same time.

“

Language is the basis of culture and identity.”

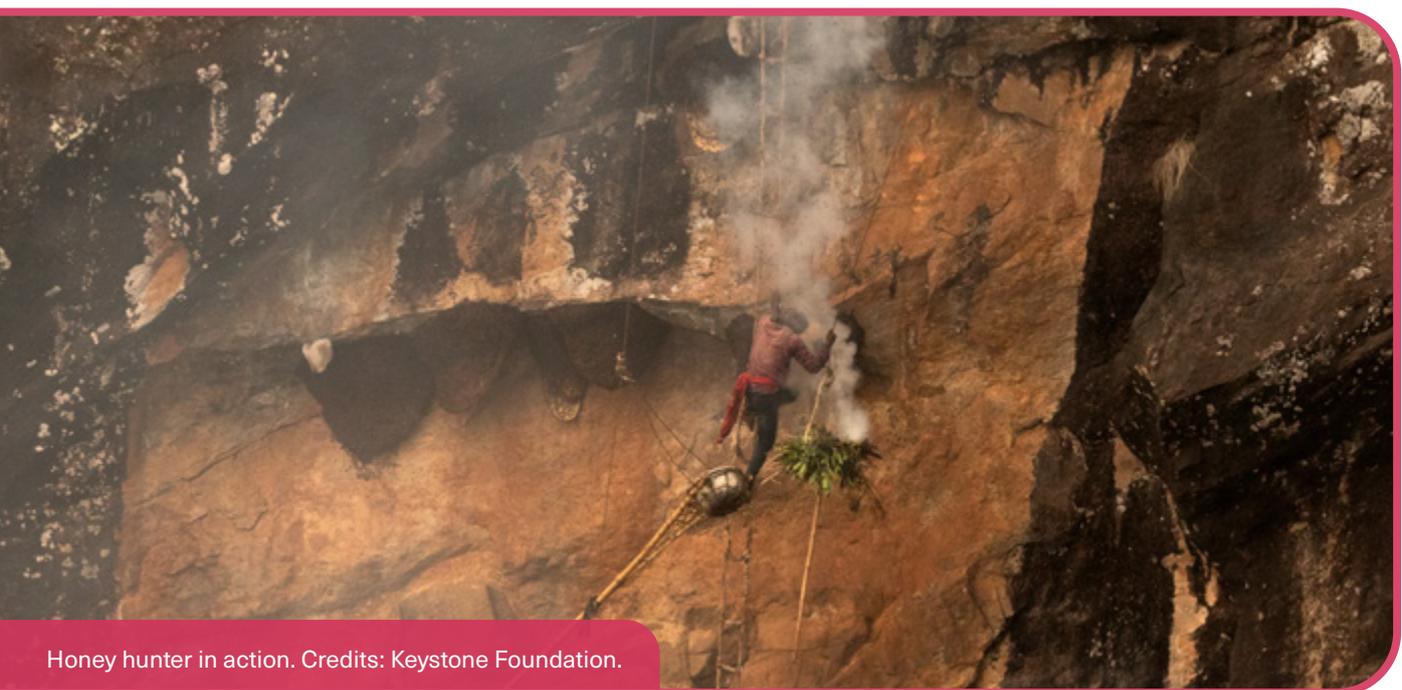
— Snehlata Nath, Keystone Foundation

Background

The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve is famous for its breath-taking nature and biodiversity. But there is more to the area than natural beauty—also well known for its rich heritage and cultural diversity, as it has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In an area of 5500 km², several different Indigenous languages are spoken by various Indigenous communities. Each Indigenous community has their own specialisation, based on the ecology of where they live.

The Toda community lives in the upper grasslands due to their way of life as a pastoral community. The Kota peoples are known for their artisanal skills. The Sholanaikans, Paniyas, Irulas, Kurumbas, Kuruchiyans, Mullukurumbas, Adiyans and Uralis are mostly forest-based communities, whose culture and livelihoods revolve around forests. The Kota peoples are known for their artisanal skills, working with iron, silver, wood and pottery, among others.



Honey hunter in action. Credits: Keystone Foundation.

In the whole of India, there are only 2 communities where women, rather than men, do pottery. One of these unique communities lives in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.

The Nilgiri Hills are also home to a unique Indigenous community of honey-hunters, who continue the spectacular tradition of collecting honey from the face of steep cliffs.



[...] it is a very daring act: you have to make a ladder with a rope [made out of forest creeper], and then you have to scale down a huge height of 300–400 feet to collect this honey.”



Kurumba Honey Song

There was a time when this tradition was gradually disappearing because, despite the dangerous work, the honey hunters were getting very low prices for the honey.

To tackle this issue, Keystone Foundation organised discussions with the community, including the youth, asking if and how they wanted to keep the tradition alive. These discussions led to the creation of a honey-based enterprise that provides the honey-hunters with a livelihood.

This has also encouraged the youth to stay involved in this tradition—they see that their skill is recognised and it provides them with an income. The tradition is passed to the next generation by the senior honey-hunters. Young people interested in learning about honey hunting can become an apprentice to a senior honey-hunter.

Language is inseparable from this process, being the main tool for transferring the honey-gathering knowledge to the next generation. This includes the traditions and knowledge on how to manage the resources sustainably, ensuring that a balance is maintained. For example, some cliffs are declared sacred and honey-hunters do not take any honey from there.

And several bee colonies are always left untouched—for example, hunters might take only 4 of 10 colonies.

The timing of honey-hunting is also crucial. Hunters gather the honey just before the rainy season, when the bees are about to migrate. At this time the bee colony is big and strong, and the bees will migrate anyway to avoid the oncoming monsoon.

The language of the honey-hunters includes many bee songs and prayers for when the community goes down to the cliff to collect honey.



Hi, here we have come again, the season has come for us to come again and take your honey.”

— A line from one of the many beautiful honey-hunting songs



Katunaicken Honey Song

The social organisation of the community revolves entirely around honey-hunting. For example, if a man goes down a cliff to collect honey, it is his brother-in-law who guards the rope. This is because he will really care for this person, as he does not want his sister to become a widow.

These different examples show how honey-gathering weaves through all aspects of the community's way of life.

“

[There is] so much culture and tradition behind it, they would never leave it.”

To learn more about honey-gathering traditions in the Nilgiri Hills, check out the short documentary [Honey Hunting in the Nilgiris](#) [19' 22"] made by Keystone Foundation.

Challenges

Indigenous languages are crucial for the resilience of Indigenous cultures. Yet, daily, the Indigenous communities of the Nilgiri Hills face many challenges that impact the vitality of their languages.

The national education system is an important reason why their culture and language are in danger. One issue is that the mainstream language has dominated the formal education system:

“

The main language dominates and Indigenous languages are not taught at all. And what we do see [is that] the youth [are] not knowing some of the words and not knowing the ways in which they have to express [themselves] to their elders [...] So to keep the language alive is a very big challenge today. It is a huge challenge.”

When the children go to school, they often also lose touch with their home environment. They come home from school and start their homework. So even lack of time has become an issue for the transfer of Indigenous knowledge and languages, as there is often no time left for the youth to learn from the elders. This also presents the Indigenous youth with a dilemma, as they struggle to find a balance between these 2 worlds in which they are growing up.

Most of the languages from the Nilgiri Hills are oral languages, which poses a shared challenge for keeping them alive. Apart from not being taught in the mainstream schools, these languages are not documented and no written script is available.

Adding to this, the number of speakers is small, ranging from as few as 200 to a maximum of 10,000 speakers per language.

Finally, the communities often face more urgent threats that demand their attention—for example, a mining project threatening Indigenous territory, or climate change affecting their livelihoods in agriculture or non-timber forest products.

“

So with so many things happening, it is very hard to keep the concentration on these aspects such as language, culture, identity and those things.”

These daily challenges are the reason why Keystone focuses on Indigenous rights, livelihoods and conservation. But they are also developing projects with an emphasis on language and culture, ensuring that these issues also get the attention they deserve.

“

[...] and it has to be the agency of the community, it has to be them, it has to be the youth, it needs to be knowledge that is transferred to the children [...] This is the only way that is sustainable in the long run. It is not the role of the NGOs, it is the role of the community [...] I really feel that this ILED work is really crucial, and it needs a lot of focus and attention right now.”



Toda honey collecting in a shola forest. Credits: Keystone Foundation.

Keystone Grassroot Initiatives

Barefoot Journalists and Community Fellowships

The Barefoot Journalists are a group of local Indigenous youth that are part of Keystone's Community Media project. For the past 15 years, the project has been supporting these young reporters to gather stories from their communities for the local radio and newspaper. In doing so, they play an important role in documenting their language and culture:

“

Many of them record a lot of the dialogues, the songs, the riddles, the different kinds of storytelling from the elders and all of those cultural anecdotes. This is becoming some sort of repository of the language, and culture in a way – both the meaning and the language is getting recorded like this.”

Involving the youth in this process of cultural revival and documentation is crucial. Keystone also does this through community fellowships whereby young Indigenous Peoples are invited to get involved in an area of their own interest. Currently, there are 18 fellows working on themes such as:

- reviving the lost jewellery traditions of the Paniya peoples (such as bead-making)
- documenting traditions and rituals related to buffalo, originating from the Toda peoples (traditionally pastoral communities).

Cultural Mapping

Some of the community fellows are involved in Keystone's Cultural Mapping project, which aims to recover oral histories through the use of cultural mapping. The idea of using place names as a point of departure was inspired by a local historian (name unknown) who said that "where history is silent, place names speak". Cultural mapping is not only important for Indigenous land rights, but it is also a form of cultural revival. Indigenous place names are not the ones you usually find on Google Maps, yet they are rich with meaning:



[...] why a certain place was called a certain way, what was behind it, which community/clan lived there. Slowly then all the stories are coming out [...]

This project is especially relevant to the youth, as their histories are not told in mainstream schools and narratives. By playing an active part in the project, the youth are using their own language to take back their histories, and gaining a greater understanding of how this relates to their ancestral domains.

Village Elder Program

Indigenous elders possess a wealth of knowledge and wisdom that they have learned from their ancestors. Keystone noticed that transferring this knowledge was becoming more and more difficult (due to the mainstream schools, among other reasons). To tackle this, Keystone initiated the **Village Elder Program**. The program encourages the knowledgeable elders of the community to teach the young children about their expertise, whether it be growing/using medicinal plants, conserving seeds, gathering honey, or agricultural practices. The elders decide how they would like to do this; for example, they might take 10–15 children for a walk in the forest.



So it is like a designed class, but it is based on traditional knowledge and the transfer of that through this process."

Keystone has observed evidence that the project is really successful, with the youth taking it upon themselves to go to their elders to sit and learn with them. The youth are also feeling the pressure of losing their culture, and the Village Elder Program offers them a way to counter this.

Annual Festivals

Another example of a community-based initiative are the **annual festivals**. For these days of celebration, the community decides together on an overlapping theme. Examples are food, jewellery, dress, and land rights. Everybody wears their traditional clothing, and there is music and dance. Annual festivals are not only an opportunity to showcase their culture, but a dedicated time to discuss topics of importance to the community.

Keystone takes on a facilitating and supportive role, encouraging communities to engage in dialogue together. The communities take it from there and make it their own. By sitting together and talking with one another, the communities try to come up with their own solutions for pressing issues, such as the loss of language.

Language Labs

Language revitalisation is the most recent Keystone initiative, the idea coming forth from talks with the communities. The project is focused on those languages that are endangered, with fewer than 2000 speakers left—the Alu Kurumba, Irula, Toda and Kota languages. The idea is to create **Language Labs**: a digital system that allows the community to store and retrieve recordings, audio-visuals and other linguistic materials. At a later stage, these materials would be used to make podcasts, learning materials and other tools to stimulate the children's desire to learn language.

One of Keystone's ILED initiatives is also funded by the ILED Network's Small Grants Fund, entitled "*Community Knowledge Exchange Hub & Museum by Indigenous Communities of the Nilambur Region*". More information can be found on the [ILED webpage](#). The full project proposal is available upon request.

This story is based on an interview with Snehlata Nath, a founding member of the Keystone Foundation. She has a background in economics with a special focus on Indigenous livelihoods. In 2013, she received the Jamnalal Bajaj Award for the Application of Science and Technology for Rural Development.

Kenya

Planting a Tree for my own Breath



Pictures taken during educational sessions conducted by the Berur Sengwer women group. They went to different villages to talk to community members about issues such as environmental conservation and to share about their project and its main objectives. Credits: Pamela Kuto, young Sengwer woman.

Sengwer of Embobut
Community Organisation

ILED Network Member: Sengwer community of the Cherang'any Hills

Location: Sengwer communities in the counties of Elgeyo-Marakwet, Trans Nzoia and West Pokot, Kenya

In 2015, the Sengwer peoples of Embobut came into action by setting up a community-based organisation (CBO) called the Sengwer of Embobut CBO. Together with community leaders, elders and activists, they fight for the recognition of their rights, also encouraging women to get involved in negotiations for land rights. The CBO also works on managing community resources and protecting the environment. With Sengwer communities in other places, they are working together to register the Sengwer Indigenous Community Trust. This is to ensure inclusion and to amplify their voices by coming together as community members from 3 administrative locations.

Challenges

“

How much we lose when our elders die? It is so much. It is like having our libraries on fire and the fire is spreading so fast.”

— Milka Chepkorir, a young Sengwer leader

Milka Chepkorir's powerful words are an urgent call to action by this forest-dwelling community. As the years go by, the Sengwer peoples are losing their elders and, with them, also, their culture, language and intricate knowledge of the natural environment. Sengwer elders, especially, are experiencing feelings of hopelessness, as they see the many daily challenges that disconnect the Sengwer youth from their roots:

“

...she [Sengwer village elder] was feeling so incapacitated that she is not even able to pass on the language, the knowledge and the skills to the younger generation.”

Cultural and linguistic shaming in mainstream schools is one such pressing issue. It is common that when children speak a language other than English or Swahili, they are shamed by the teachers and other students. The Sengwer peoples are a minority in Kenya, but they are not recognised by the Kenyan government as a distinct community/ethnic group. This means that their language is not taught at school and most of the children from majority groups are unaware of Sengwer culture. So, when Sengwer children speak their native tongue at school, they often face stigmatisation:

“

...I was laughed at. I am one of those that could not really feel proud to be Sengwer. [...] When you introduce yourself with your ethnicity, people are like, 'Who is Sengwer? Can you say a word in Sengwer?' And then you say it, and people just laugh, you know.”

These practices impose a sense of shame on Sengwer children about their language, and consequently their identity and culture. And they often also have to leave their communities to access education, further preventing the elders from fulfilling their role as knowledge-keepers.

The Sengwer peoples (mostly the communities in Embobut forest) endured decades of harassment and more than 25 forced land evictions by the Kenyan Forest Service. Although evictions stopped as of 2020, past evictions have caused high levels of poverty among the Sengwer peoples, and other related problems, such as mental health problems and changes in lifestyle and food consumption. The elders are feeling a lack of assurance as well, fearing that they might never see their land rights recognised in their lifetime.

Sengwer Grassroots Initiatives

Countering the daily challenges, the Sengwer communities look for opportunities for the elders to sit with the youth and pass on their language and culture.

Cultural Festivals and Spaces for Learning

One example is the celebration of annual cultural festivals. These festivals create meaningful moments for the community to gather, allowing the children to witness a day dedicated to traditional dances, songs and enjoyment:



Sengwer women dancing and singing traditional songs.
Credits: Pamela Kuto.



Credits: Pamela Kuto, young Sengwer woman.



[...] to remind ourselves of our Indigenous ways of life. [...] Grounding ourselves back to who we are.”

More is needed, however, to keep the Sengwer language and culture alive. This is why Sengwer community members from different regions are setting up their own cultural centres, creating a space for Sengwer children to learn about their roots. As it is not possible to do so in mainstream schools, the activities are organised on weekends and during school holidays. This is a telling example of the creativity and resilience of Indigenous Peoples, as they look for ways to pass on their culture when faced with many limitations and challenges.

Creating Audio-visual Learning Materials

Creating learning materials and videos is also part of their initiative. They started with a pilot in Embobut, where knowledgeable elders were recorded while sharing their knowledge of Sengwer culture and history. The filming is especially important, because it documents traditional knowledge and the Sengwer language before it is lost.

The videos (both short and long films) are also the basis of important teachings for Sengwer children. For example, the videos show Sengwer children the different species of plants, their names, their use. Afterwards, they are taken to the forest to identify the plants. In this way, the knowledge of the Sengwer as a forest-dwelling peoples is being passed on to the next generation.

This project is just a start, but the ambitions reach beyond the Sengwer community in Embobut:

“

We are hoping that we can expand this filming project to other regions, so that we have more and more materials that can be shared.”

Planting a Tree for my Own Breath

The Berur women of the Sengwer community run their own tree nursery at the cultural centre in Kabolet. Using knowledge and skills that have been passed down for generations, the women care for the smallest seedlings, making sure they grow into strong, mature trees. This initiative is based on a pressing issue in the area—soil erosion due to agricultural practices.

“

[...] there is a lot of environmental degradation. To me, correcting this is a priority, because we are losing some parts of the land to landslides.”

By planting trees, the Berur women attempt to restore the eroded ecosystem and promote a more sustainable management of natural resources. For example, they plant only native trees, with the aim of restoring the honey production and the water catchment. This is important for the Sengwer peoples as they have a lot of traditional knowledge on beekeeping. This initiative also distinguishes itself from other tree-planting programmes in Kenya, which are often solely focused on cutting down the trees for profit rather than long-term sustainable change.

Another important idea behind the project is to restore the role of the Indigenous Peoples as protectors of the land. Due to the high levels of poverty, the Sengwer peoples are often forced to lease their lands to majority groups. These pieces of land then suffer from the use of too many chemicals and overexploitation of the resources. The project hopes to break this vicious circle and restore a sense of hope.

“

So that community members will not always have to be viewed as the destructors of the environment, but also this time around taking an active role in restoring what is destroyed and especially putting limits to those who lease the land. To use the land appropriately and sustainably.”



Credits: Pamela Kuto, young Sengwer woman.

For this reason, Sengwer children are actively involved in the tree nursery. By organising monthly gatherings and working closely with schoolteachers, the Berur women inspire Sengwer children to act for their community and the natural environment. The children take care of their own trees, while learning important Indigenous knowledge from the community elders. The name of the project—Planting a Tree for my Own Breath—is also based on this idea of empowering the youngest ones to do something that will improve their own lives:

“

[...] to take the responsibility, knowing that if you do not plant the trees, it is your own breath that you are interfering with.”

The Sengwer community's "*Planting a Tree for my own Breath*" initiative is also funded by the ILED Network's Small Grants Fund. More information can be found on the [ILED webpage](#). The full project proposal is available upon request.

Although language is not the main focus of this project, it cannot be separated from it. Similar to other traditional cultures, the Indigenous knowledge about the natural world is embedded in the Sengwer language. This includes the naming of species of trees and plants. There are Sengwer words that contain information about the use of a tree's resources, whether it be for medicinal purposes or quenching thirst.

The Sengwer language and culture also has taboos and beliefs that show how they relate to their environment:

“ **We have beliefs that a tree is just as alive as you, and if you misuse it, it will curse you. So whenever we extract anything, we just extract what is enough. And we make sure to cover up the roots if it is the roots you extracted. Or we make sure to smear cow dung or soil on the bark if it is from the bark that you extracted for medicine, so that it heals back and we can use it again in the future.**”

These plant names and practices show how the Sengwer language is also a language of nature conservation. This is not always clear to outsiders, however, with the Kenyan authorities failing to see how the Sengwer way of life protects the forests:

“ **[...] they are not looking at the very evident sign that these forests have continued to exist because we have been in them, otherwise the forest would not be there.**”

This is a recurring issue for Indigenous Peoples globally, coming from the dominant idea that nature conservation can only happen when there are no people in the forest. This idea often favours land dispossession and displacement, yet it ignores the important role that Indigenous Peoples play as protectors of the environment. An important message for policymakers—especially those working on the International Decade of Indigenous Languages—is to acknowledge the importance of the Sengwer language and culture for everyone.

“ **[...] and now we want to protect our language. I hope that they do not see this as a threat, but as a plus to everything: a plus to our social wellbeing, as countries, as communities and support [us as] such [...] The least they can do is to at least not fight us, but to let us be who we are, and let us be who we are in languages, in cultures, in everything.**”

This story is based on an interview with Milka Chepkorir, a member of the Sengwer Indigenous Peoples of Cherang'any Hills, Kenya. Milka is an Indigenous activist and coordinator of the Community Land Action Now (CLAN) – a network that helps communities in Kenya to register and defend their collective and communal land titles. Milka also works at the ICCA Consortium as coordinator of Defending Territories of Life.

Uganda

Indigenous Languages and Traditional Knowledge: the Missing Link in Conservation



Learning about the useful Indigenous trees and plants, why they have been degraded, the need to protect them and how they can be propagated. This is in Tooro Botanica garden tree nursery bed. Credits: FED.



ILED Network Member: Friends with Environment in Development (FED)

Location: The Batooro, Banyabindi, Batwa and Bunyoro communities, Uganda

Founded in 2011, Friends with Environment in Development (FED) works towards ecological sustainability, social justice and healthy living through amplifying community voices and rights, influencing policy- and decision-making, improving people's livelihoods, and building capacity of community participants to live in a healthy and just environment. FED's focus areas are environment, sustainability and livelihoods; community health; and good governance.

Though FED is not a founding member of the ILED Network, having joined at a later stage, we are delighted to have their participation in this ILED publication. We consider their work of great relevance and an important addition both to the network and to this publication.



The future, as far as I'm concerned, is great, because like I said, this [Indigenous knowledge] is the missing link that conservation has been missing."

— Robert Kugonza, Director of FED



Robert Kugonza (FED) - On the Missing Link in Conservation

Background

Despite continuous efforts of the government and NGOs to stop deforestation and the degradation of wetlands and the environment in general in Uganda, environmental reports paint an ever-bleaker image each year.

As an experienced professional in the field of conservation, FED founding director Robert Kugonza wondered: What is going wrong? What is the missing link?

This led him to reflect on his childhood and his grandmother who taught him many things about the environment. Whenever he or his cousins fell sick, their grandmother would go into the bush and pick the right leaves and twigs to make a bitter concoction which they had to drink, no matter how bitter it tasted. It always worked, and the next day they would feel much better. When they got older, his grandmother taught them how to choose the right leaves and how to make the drink.



This experience inspired Robert to start FED—the understanding that Indigenous knowledge is crucial for environmentalism, conservation and biodiversity.

And so, I realised that our health solutions were not from the commercialised pharmacy and the drug shops that characterise today's society, but that our pharmacies and drug shops then were the bushes around us. For me, that was a very big inspiration."

Robert believes the biodiversity in his community's forests and the environment around them has helped his people to become more resilient. Their traditional knowledge has also helped his community fight the effects of COVID-19, he says; to date, they have been largely unaffected by the virus.

Throughout Uganda, more than 60% of the population still use medicine from plants found in nature around them. For example, they drink teas made from various herbs that boost the natural immune system, in addition to breathing fresh air by default.

Robert also stated that sometimes traditional medicines provide solutions that the pharmaceutical industry cannot. For example, he says that people in his community who were found to be allergic to animal proteins such as milk and meat, including his own wife and brother, were advised by doctors in the mainstream health system to avoid eating these products. But after drinking a concoction of medicinal plants, administered by local Indigenous women, their allergies disappeared.

Interestingly, the power of traditional knowledge is not acknowledged by the government and most of the NGOs that work on conservation. In Uganda, the dominant idea seems to be that only environmental professionals know how to conserve the environment. Robert believes that this is why the environmental degradation has been going on for so long. The source of Indigenous knowledge, upon which everything is built, is ignored, he says, and yet most of our knowledge comes from trial and error, and the wisdom of our ancestors:



Local community youth of Kibasi parish, Hakibaale, Kabrole district, pose for a photo after their community learning platform on the need for traditional indigenous knowledge transfer from the elders to the young generations. Credit: FED

“

We need to [...] recognise the importance of indigenous knowledge, [...] the important role of the old stone age man who used his body as a lab to test most of the foods and fruits from nature that we all enjoy today. [...] testing everything on themselves without the modern labs to determine the toxicity of some of the plants and foods, some of which must have killed them. That sacrifice was for you and me, what we eat and enjoy today. [...] We must recognise their sacrifice.”

Challenges

Mainstream education in Uganda puts a lot of pressure on the vitality of Indigenous languages and the knowledge that is embedded within them. When children go to school, they are actively discouraged from speaking their Indigenous language. Sometimes they are punished for speaking their language. For instance, there is the risk of being beaten, or they are punished by having a coin tied around their neck for a given period. This is for other children to see that they are a ‘failure’ because they have spoken in their own language.

“

[...] or they report you to the teacher, so they beat you because you are speaking your local language [...] it is a decision that the use of our languages must be discouraged and [they are] therefore being destroyed in the process [...]”

Indigenous languages are treated as second class and primitive, and are considered unnecessary in Ugandan society, says Robert. But they are crucial and irreplaceable in preserving and conveying traditional knowledge. They contain riddles, expressions and stories that are shared around the fireplace, and that encourage young people, especially, to observe valuable traditional and cultural norms. This also teaches them to protect important species of trees and animals, and nature and culture in general.

The mainstream schooling also poses a challenge to many of the elderly and their role as knowledge-keepers. Since the introduction of privately-owned, commercialised schools in Uganda (alongside the government-run public schools), there has been a lot of competition and pressure on students to perform well at school. This is because the better grades a school gets, the better its reputation and it will thus attract more students (and profit). Children are, therefore, given a lot of homework, which means they lack the time, space and energy to learn anything from their (grand)parents anymore:

“

[...] modern education has rendered and labelled the richly Indigenous knowledgeable [(grand)parents] useless in society, and even within their own homes [...]”

The high value that society attributes to mainstream education deeply affects the place of Indigenous knowledge, practices and elders.

The shrinking number of elders is another challenge. In Uganda, 75% of the population consists of young people, while the elders (who possess the Indigenous knowledge) make up less than 10% of the total population:

“

And the situation is of course that if they grow old, they become ill and sometimes they pass on. So we are losing them. It is very, very sad that they die without passing on that knowledge to the young generation [...] But it is so urgent now that we should utilise those who are still alive and available, before we even lose them and their rich knowledge. This is the heritage of the youth and the next generation that will help them preserve the environment.”

Obtaining funding (and other support) for the important work of FED is a recurring issue; as a grassroots initiative, FED is easily overlooked by larger funding mechanisms. Robert also tries to influence policy changes, and he hopes that the formal education system will create more space for Indigenous knowledge and languages, and that they will come to realise and see its value and role in society as a whole:

“ **[...] this knowledge of Indigenous people that we have thought and labelled as useless [...] and even sometimes it is unfortunate that people are even trying to coerce them into changing their way of living, it is bad. They should let Indigenous people live and Indigenous knowledge be used and they should [...] learn more about it other than destroy [it].”**



Momentary pictures of youth – of Kibasi – Hakibaale, Kabarole District, mount Rwenzori region - Uganda environmental field tour and learning supported by Friends with Environment in Development (FED). In a community platform meeting for the youth to learn Indigenous knowledge and usefulness of plants to humanity, an elder, Margret Zahura, the old woman (standing in picture) shares her experience with the youth. The youth listen attentively and with interest. Credits: FED.

FED Grassroot Initiatives

FED works to restore people's original perspectives, encouraging them to value the importance of traditional knowledge and restore the position of Indigenous knowledge-keepers in Ugandan society.

“ **The solution would be to look at the people the current education system has labelled useless, just because they have not been to class, before a blackboard and before a college teacher, so they think that they do not have any knowledge and nothing to contribute to the modern society.”**

An important part of FED's work is the intergenerational transfer of traditional knowledge—bringing youth and elders together, learning about the importance of biodiversity, the different uses of various plants, and the need to conserve all of this. Through this, FED hopes to make people appreciate and reinstate the importance of Indigenous knowledge and languages, and the position of knowledgeable elders in society (challenging the label of the supposedly 'uneducated').

One way in which this is being done is to encourage the community to find the time for this process, in spite of the pressures of mainstream education. This has led to initiatives taking place on the weekends and holidays, where the youth come to listen to the elders.

For example, the youth are taken on field trips to a botanical garden where they learn about the plants. Another project involves planting trees native to the region. Most of the trees that are planted are not native species, and FED wants to show the youth how important it is to preserve native tree and plant species. Other efforts include documenting traditional knowledge through film or other media, ensuring that this knowledge is recorded before the elders pass away.

Ambitions for the future include the creation of local, Indigenous knowledge pharmacies, where the use of local and herbal medicines is promoted and protected. Another ambition is the creation and establishment of community museums where important cultural elements —such as artefacts, legendary stories, histories and traditions—are preserved and documented.

“

Times are changing so rapidly, and our history is so important to keep reminding us who we are, where we have come from and where we are now. So as to guide us to determine where we want to be now, in the foreseen and the unforeseen future.”

The overall aim of these activities is to change the attitudes of young people and the communities that FED works with. In Uganda, the National Environmental Management Authority is responsible for protecting the environment; it is supported by the environmental police who work to ensure that people conserve rather than degrade nature. Robert sees the need to police conservation as an admission of failure:

“

[...] we should help young people understand what is [the] environment and the plants that are in there, the biodiversity, how the ecosystem works and how it is important to them. And then from that knowledge, without any force, without being policed, from their own conviction, they will [...] have the inbuilt incentive to conserve the environment willingly. Because they will know that the environment is about themselves, and destroying it is destroying themselves and the future of their children. That is what we are trying [...] to do to the best of our ability, to make the world a better place to live in.”

FED is already noticing the impact of its various projects and endeavours. One example is the enthusiasm of the children and youth when learning about the trees and their uses, and their eagerness to start planting trees themselves:

“

[...] and they [the children] said: ‘ah, we did not know that these trees were so important for us’. And they are very happy to be there and appreciating this knowledge, and they now want to assist in planting the trees as opposed to cutting them.”

In this process, the children also rediscover their Indigenous language. In school they learn that only English matters, but then they find out that their language is so rich that it can explain many things that cannot be expressed in English.

FED's projects are also having an impact on the broader community, as this anecdote shows:

“

One middle-aged man came out and said: ‘I’m grateful that you are bringing this approach to this community. [...] Because I have some knowledge about plants, [...] and whenever they [people] see me picking plants in the bush, they think I am a witch. Now, with this work [of FED], I am happy that I am going to share and use it without fear, because now people know and will continue to know [it] is important’.”

A shift in attitude at the political level can also be attributed to the work of FED, as they engage with government representatives, local leaders and members of the parliament to promote the protection of traditional knowledge and Indigenous languages:

“

This is important. We need policies that protect our Indigenous knowledge, we need policies that protect our languages, and we need policies to make sure that our Indigenous knowledgeable elders and communities are not overlooked as if they have nothing to contribute to our wellbeing.”

This story is based on an interview with Robert Kugonza, who is the founder and Director of FED. Based in Uganda, Robert is an environmental professional who promotes the importance of Indigenous knowledge in conservation. Also a human-rights defender for most of his career, he has worked in several countries to defend the rights of local communities affected by dam construction projects.

Costa Rica

Making Space for the Bribri Language and Identity



Do': a pig's head. Credit: Alí García Segura

ILED Network Member: Alí García Segura of the Bribri peoples

Location: Bribri communities near the Costa Rica – Panama border

For over 30 years, Alí García Segura has worked with 'millenary' peoples—his preferred term to describe those who have lived in a place for many thousands of years. Born, raised and educated in the Bribri community, Alí advocates for making the education system more inclusive to local language and culture on every possible level. Together with the communities, he records and documents the traditional oral language and wisdom, and creates educational materials for children and the general population.



Traditional Bribri Song

[Transcript](#)

Background

Alí García Segura is an ethnologist and co-professor of linguistics at the School of Philology, Linguistics and Literature of the University of Costa Rica in San José. Born and raised in the Bribri community, he has worked with millenary peoples for over 30 years.

The Bribri peoples are the second largest millenary community in Costa Rica, extending on the Atlantic slope (cross-border town bordering Panama) and the Pacific in the canton of Buenos Aires de Puntarenas. They are a matrilineal society with a holistic worldview, which is reflected in their unique language.



Activity in the Bribri community. Credit : Alí García Segura

Alí's grandfather was the first *Awá*, a traditional Bribri physician. He told Alí that it was important to write down and record the knowledge of their people. The Bribri language had always been strictly oral, but Alí started to record and write down his people's wisdom in their own language to ensure its survival.

The national education system focuses only on Spanish, so the number of proficient speakers of the Bribri language is shrinking and their ancestral knowledge is at risk of being lost.

Electricity and internet connections have brought many benefits to the community, but they also increase the risk of the Bribri people losing their Indigenous identity.

As the youth become more and more intertwined with the mainstream culture through online platforms, and the knowledgeable elders grow older, to Alí it feels like a race against the clock.

“

We cannot just keep hiding. [...] We will always be surrounded by neighbours. Since I was a kid, they told me, you have to go and learn what your neighbour's life is like. So they want me to know the foreign knowledge, reading and writing so that I can do what I'm doing now: spreading the words and voice of my community.”

— Alí García Segura

Being both traditionally and academically schooled, Alí plays a unique role in initiating projects that record and strengthen Bribri identity, language and community. Though other linguists and anthropologists work with millenary peoples in Costa Rica, none of them are Bribri. The culture is too different to truly capture the communities' worldview and wisdom by simply using translation. The language itself harbours an immense number of cultural values and practices through its structure alone, without even counting the vocabulary that holds specific wisdom about, for example, the local nature.

“

In our language, we don't have the word 'nature', 'peace' or 'love'. Or 'freedom' or 'health'. Or 'fidelity' or 'loyalty'. Because that is 'me'. I am peace, I am a plant, I am freedom. That's who I am. I am all those forms. All of these constructions of the world are completely different. That's why it's so important to build the world starting from the millenary peoples. Because when you talk about nature, it's ecologist language, they're teaching you that nature is something else, that it's somewhere else. Something you can use.”

Challenges

For many years, children were allowed to speak only Spanish in school and Alí remembers as a child being punished for speaking his own language. Now, Costa Rica has been declared a multicultural country and it promotes bilingual education. But bilingual means they want all children to also learn English in school, along with Spanish, instead of local languages like Bribri.

The English materials come from abroad and teach children about Western lifestyle. This raises the question: why are children not getting the opportunity to learn about the way of life of the Bribri peoples, their neighbours?

By imprinting only a Spanish and Western worldview on young Bribri children, these children lose the chance to be connected to their millenary identity. Education needs to be a two-way street between cultures, not one repressing the other.

“

When education comes in a single direction, it eliminates all those concepts and values. That means you're eliminating millenary peoples. This is not education; you are extinguishing us.”

Alí refers to this harmful practice as linguistic colonisation. Actively reducing the use of local languages through mandatory school curricula suppresses people's millenary identity. Oral languages, especially, are dependent on active speakers, which puts ancestral knowledge more at risk of being lost.

“

In Costa Rica, they don't put a bullet in our head, but they are killing us slowly. Why? Because they are grabbing our knowledge, our wisdom, and they are removing it. Mainstream education is eliminating that [...] That is a way of extinguishing our people. It's fundamental."

There is a lot at stake. Bribri children are already using their traditional language with a foreign structure, blending it with Spanish. If the language disappears, it also poses a risk to the Bribri identity. Education should be about increasing opportunities for the next generation, not decreasing them. When there is no room for Bribri education in the curriculum, it becomes impossible for children to choose traditional roles when they grow up, as they lose their connection to their community's worldview.



Children in school. Credit: Alí García Segura

“

If I impose my way of thinking on you when you're a child, tomorrow you're going to start thinking the way I do, not the way you do. So when we're talking about education, equal education for everyone, it means that the state is imposing the way the state looks at the world; this foreign, outside point of view."

Convincing a government to change urgently is never an easy task. While there have been some positive changes in the Costa Rican government, colonial structures run deep and change is slow. Therefore, Alí keeps advocating not only for the protection of the Bribri culture and language, but for just policies for millenary peoples in all possible national and international spaces.

Bribri Grassroots Initiatives

To protect the Bribri language and identity, extensive documentation is needed. Alí García Segura's documentation projects serve 2 goals:

- Safeguard traditional knowledge for Bribri children and future generations.
- Show the outside world the Bribri worldview, wisdom and structure, in order to reach a better understanding by dominant society.

The survival of Bribri language and identity depends on their children. So the place where children spend most of their time—school—should be inclusive of their roots. But merely translating textbooks from Spanish to Bribri is no solution. To truly capture the values and wisdom of the Bribri community, it is important to start with the community. The Bribri people themselves must create the educational materials for schoolchildren. This is the only possible way to reflect the Bribri worldview.

Education is not a foreign concept for the Bribri people, but it is very different from Spanish education. Bribri education is learning by being immersed in the Bribri life.

“

[Mainstream] Education means kindergarten-, primary-, high-school-specific curriculum with a structure. But for our traditional mindset, education is a way of life. The life surrounding us, the animals, plants, water, and myself, the human beings. All of that is one single thing, living together in one moment and time.”

Alí is supporting the Bribri communities in creating their own textbooks and educational videos, instead of starting from the standard Spanish curriculum. To connect with the central government's education plans, the Bribri materials are translated into both Spanish and English. They also include unique topics such as ethnomathematics.

Alí's initiatives also include capturing short video and audio snapshots of daily life in the Bribri community. By sharing these snapshots online via free platforms such as Facebook, the project is not only reaching Bribri youth but is also sharing their knowledge and culture with the rest of the world.

“

It is time to talk about our identity, through the technological tools that hold our young people captive, so that they can take a look at their own roots before copying external models, totally alien to the way of life within the communities.”

With people sheltering in their homes because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been harder to reach young people. By sharing traditional knowledge in an online platform, this project can help reconnect young people to their roots within the communities.

“

This situation that the world is experiencing, not only our people, requires us to adapt in another way in order to continue training children and young people. We believe that through this initiative we can reach them and their homes so that our traditions are maintained and the importance of our ancestral knowledge is shared.”

The Bribri documentation & videography project is also funded by the ILED Network's Small Grants Fund, entitled "Kó tchéł tã Sibò ttékã - In the fourth half Sibó spoke. Because we believe that we are in the moment to talk about our Bribri identity". More information can be found on the ILED webpage. The full project proposal is available upon request.

Video and audio clips also work better with oral languages. They can be the perfect bridge between the older generations, who often do not write, and the younger ones who are already tech savvy. Together they have already produced short videos on traditional environmental river management and food security systems.



But as technology use grows, so too does exposure to other cultures and languages. Time is therefore of the essence to solidify and protect the Bribri language, culture and wisdom.

“

Our language is our identity. We lose the language, we are dead as millenary people.”

This story is based on an interview with Alí García Segura from the Bribri community. During the interview, Viviana Tipani and Daphne Consigliere translated from Spanish to English and vice versa.

Part II:

Our Perspective on the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032

In this section, we offer our perspective on the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032 and specifically relate how the contribution of the ILED Network can play a vital role in its realisation and successful implementation.

We also review the UNESCO Global Action Plan for implementing the International Decade, to identify gaps and potential areas for more attention, based on the grassroots experiences of our network members.

The United Nations International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032

After the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages, the United Nations General Assembly (in Resolution A/RES/74/135) proclaimed the period between 2022 and 2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages ('the International Decade'). The aim of this decade is to draw global attention to the critical situation of many Indigenous languages, while mobilising stakeholders and resources to protect, support, revitalise and promote Indigenous languages.

Indigenous Peoples comprise less than 6% of the global population, yet they speak 4000 of the world's 6700 languages.	Some estimates say that up to 95% of the world's languages will be gone by the end of the century —most of these being Indigenous languages.	It is estimated that one Indigenous language falls into disuse every 2 weeks.
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Figure 1. The critical status of Indigenous languages globally.²



The Global Action Plan to Implement the International Decade

For the implementation of the International Decade, UNESCO has created a [Global Action Plan](#). It also made an open call to join the International Decade online community; all stakeholders are invited to register, share information about their work, create events and activities, upload resources and tools, and connect with a global community of partners to help promote, revitalise and support Indigenous languages worldwide.

The ILED Network sees itself as a key actor that can and wants to contribute to the realisation of the Global Action Plan.

2 Source: United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (April 2018), [Indigenous Languages Backgrounder](#) [PDF]

ILED Network members welcome the International Decade for Indigenous Languages 2022–2032

“I think it is a great thing. For once we want to acknowledge it globally that it is important to acknowledge the presence and the use of Indigenous languages. Having it as a big celebration and appreciating it, this is wonderful.”

— **Milka Chepkorir**, a young Sengwer leader, Kenya

“It is a good thing, great, and I look forward for it to start, and if nothing, it will initiate all these [...] efforts all across the world to work on these languages.”

— **Snehlata Nath**, Keystone Foundation, India

Our Thoughts on the Global Action Plan

The ILED Network has reviewed the UNESCO Global Action Plan for implementing the International Decade and highlights the following 3 key points on the vitality of Indigenous languages, cultures and communities.

1. Take a holistic approach to Indigenous languages, addressing underlying issues of discrimination and human-rights violations, especially in education

As the earlier grassroots stories illustrate, language is connected to resilience, to culture, to biodiversity, to livelihoods and income, to knowledge, to food, and to many other areas of life. Languages are like treasure chests, containing a wealth of ancient histories, cultures, worldviews and knowledge systems. With every language that is lost, we rob ourselves of this richness and diversity. And this is not an issue that concerns only Indigenous Peoples.

Although a minority, Indigenous Peoples protect 80% of the world's biodiversity. Indigenous languages hold valuable Indigenous knowledge, not only on sustainable land, sea and resource management, but also on how to adapt, mitigate and reduce the risks associated with climate change. Research has found that linguistic and biological diversity are connected: fewer languages mean less biodiversity. And less biodiversity means the disappearance of languages.

The main reason Indigenous languages are disappearing faster than ever is the structural (and historical) discrimination against their speakers, which is responsible for the ongoing marginalisation of Indigenous Peoples across the world. These imposed, daily challenges hinder and prevent Indigenous elders from transmitting their languages to the next generation.

Loss of language affects mental health

Researchers have found a correlation between language use and Indigenous youth suicide rates.³

In Canada, youth suicide rates in Indigenous communities where most people speak their native tongue were low to absent. This is in stark contrast to those Indigenous communities in which less than half of the people spoke their Indigenous language — in these communities, **youth suicide rates were 6 times higher.**

This is a telling example of the power of language and urges us not to underestimate its transformative potential.

Language and land are connected

To understand the dire situation of Indigenous languages globally, one has to grasp that **Indigenous lands are the prime location of cultural practice.**

Therefore, as Madhu Ramnath of NTFP-EP points out:⁴

“...the non-violation of Indigenous territories is a prime requisite for cultures and languages to survive.”

This means that issues such as land grabbing, climate change, economic development projects, deforestation and the expansion of monocultures pose a direct threat to the vitality of Indigenous languages.

“... for instance, a community may no longer be able to hunt, and gradually lose all the terms connected to hunting. [...] Any activity that is discontinued inevitably takes away with it a whole section of language. If a people stop fishing in freshwater streams due to it being dammed or polluted, or denial of access to the area, words and concepts related to fishing, in that language, may disappear over time.”

3 Hallett, Chandler & Lalonde (2007), [Aboriginal language knowledge and youth suicide](#), *Cognitive Development*, Vol. 22, No. 3, July–September 2007, pp. 392–99.

4 Ramnath M. (2021), Editorial, *Leaf Litter*, Winter Solstice Issue, December 2021.

We welcome UNESCO's strategy to take a holistic approach: one that actively connects language vitality and diversity to broader issues and Indigenous wellbeing as a whole. This includes the importance of linguistic diversity for building peace, having good governance, and protecting the environment, human rights and cultures.

This emphasis on language as a cross-cutting issue is highlighted in the Global Action Plan, as illustrated by this image on how the International Decade contributes to the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals.



Figure 2. Language is a cross-cutting issue that contributes to several Sustainable Development Goals, directly and indirectly.⁵

The Harm Being Done by Mainstream Education

By adopting a holistic approach, the Global Action Plan acknowledges the connection between structural (and historical) discrimination and the disappearance of Indigenous languages. It does not, however, mention the harmful effects of today's mainstream education. The word 'assimilation' is not mentioned in the Global Action Plan, despite the many stories of mainstream schools separating Indigenous children from their roots, culture and language. For example, Survival International estimates that, globally, around 2 million Indigenous children are attending so-called [factory schools](#) aimed at eliminating everything that is Indigenous, starting with the youngest generation.

Earlier we shared stories of how ILED Network member communities are negatively affected by mainstream school systems. For example, Indigenous children are being ridiculed, prohibited and sometimes even punished for speaking their language.

In school, dominant languages such as English or Spanish prevail and Indigenous languages, culture and knowledge are seen as inferior and excluded from mainstream teaching materials. This makes the wellbeing of Indigenous languages also a human-rights issue.

5 Source: UNESCO Global Action Plan for implementing the International Decade for Indigenous Languages 2022–2032

Several human rights are implicated when Indigenous children are not permitted to speak their mother tongue at school.⁶ See Figure 3 for details.



Figure 3. Several human rights are implicated when Indigenous children are not permitted to speak their mother tongue at school. Copyright: Ellen-Rose Kambel, 2021

For the International Decade to be successful, we must challenge these harmful practices, and especially the role that national governments play in upholding them.

“

I would like the UN agencies [...] to put some pressure on the Thai government as a member of the UN. [...] Otherwise the government will not care or do anything about Indigenous languages...”

— Wilailuck Yerbaw, IMPECT Association

6 Hurwitz DR & Kambel ER (2020), '[Redressing language-based exclusion and punishment in education and the Language Friendly School initiative](#)', Vol. 4, Global Campus Human Rights Journal, pp. 5–24.

This includes considering how national schools and curricula can become more inclusive and respectful of Indigenous cultures and languages. But even this is not enough. Indigenous Peoples also have a right to develop their own educational systems (art. 14, UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). This is where Indigenous-led, self-determined, culturally appropriate and community-based educational initiatives provide a much-needed solution.

The ILED Network's pledge is to continuously remind society of this holistic and human-rights-based perspective. This is a much-needed approach to support linguistic diversity, as it is this perspective that allows us to address underlying issues such as discrimination and human-rights violations (especially in education). We intend to do this by sharing examples, good practices and lessons from Indigenous-led education initiatives (on language and more), and we will continue to critique education-related systems and programmes that undermine Indigenous rights. During the International Decade, we will be producing more spotlight publications and organising events to keep this approach on the radar.

2. Place a key focus on transforming education at all levels, based on community needs and proposals

A key output specified in the Global Action Plan is output 1, which calls for: "Inclusive, equitable, intercultural, quality education and lifelong learning environments and opportunities in Indigenous languages provided in formal, non-formal and informal educational settings." This output is linked to the following activities:

- 1. Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4:** to support mother-tongue-based and multilingual education (through curriculum development, education policies, plans and programmes).
- 2. Improvement of Indigenous and multilingual education competencies** (by creating teaching and learning methodologies, tools and resources, among others).
- 3. Development of Community-Based programmes,** systems and institutions (that are culturally appropriate, established by Indigenous Peoples, and focus specifically on girls and women).

There is a strong match between these proposed activities and the ILED Network's initiatives, many examples of which are found throughout this publication; for example, one ILED Network member is creating multilingual schoolbooks and another is running a community-based tree planting project. The fact that all educational settings (formal, non-formal and informal) are mentioned is crucial, as our members are working both inside and outside the formal education system. This is dependent on each local context, as Indigenous communities are navigating the limitations and opportunities available to them.

The Global Action Plan rightly acknowledges that the engagement of Indigenous Peoples will determine the success of the International Decade (hence the slogan 'Nothing For Us Without Us'). This supports the focus of the ILED Network on Indigenous-led initiatives, as Indigenous Peoples should be at the heart of any language initiative to guarantee maximum impact.

What is really needed is a transformation where Indigenous Peoples fully participate, engage, and shape educational policies and plans that are relevant for them. Too often, education still misses the mark and, despite the right to culturally and linguistically appropriate education, in many countries this right is not recognised, understood, or actively implemented or encouraged; or worse, it is discouraged.

The contribution that the ILED Network has to offer is to: support ongoing and tireless advocacy efforts of ILED members and to raise awareness among educators and policymakers. Not only about Indigenous Peoples' rights to culturally and linguistically appropriate education, but also pointing out the benefits of this for everyone. We will continue to highlight the success, innovative creativity and cost-effectiveness of our existing initiatives that can be scaled up and transformed into official programmes.

It pays to promote mother-tongue-based, multilingual education

A study in the United States found that students with immigrant roots who master both their mother tongue and the national language may earn US\$3000 more than bilinguals who master English, but not their home language.⁷

Mother-tongue-based and multilingual education has many benefits: children learn faster and better, it reduces the risk of grade repetition, and lowers the dropout rates. This is beneficial for the students, society as a whole and the state.

- In Guatemala, research by the World Bank showed that Indigenous children who were educated in both Spanish and their Indigenous language stayed in school longer and earned more than those who were educated only in Spanish.⁸
- Grade repetition comes with high individual and societal costs. In the Netherlands, for example, the direct costs of grade repetition are estimated to be EUR500 million a year. In the case of dropouts, individual costs include lower income and less financial security, higher risk of unemployment, lower self-esteem and health issues. Societal costs include more reliance on social services, less tax income and less social cohesion.⁹

“We know that the majority of the world is plurilingual: there are more people who speak more than one language than there are monolinguals. [...] Yet, our education systems continue to be based on the premise that the average student is a mother-tongue speaker of the national language.”

— Ellen-Rose Kambel, Rutu Foundation

7 Agirdag, O (2014), '[The long-term effects of bilingualism on children of immigration: Student bilingualism and future earnings](#)', International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, vol. 17, pp. 449–464.

8 Patrinos, H & Velez, E (2009). '[Costs and benefits of bilingual education in Guatemala: A partial analysis](#)', International Journal of Educational Development, vol. 29, pp. 594–598.

9 Kambel, ER (2016), '[The cost of doing nothing: Educating language-minoritized students](#)', Discussion paper for the European Commission, Rutu Foundation/University of Amsterdam.

Indigenous Languages and the World of Academics

...and they could take out all this research that is sitting in universities and papers and [...] bring it to the communities in some form. [Making it more] more active in a way that it becomes alive: a revival process, rather than a research and storage kind of exercise. It would be really great to do something on that.”

— Snehlata Nath, Keystone Foundation, India

Another goal of the Global Action Plan is to stimulate **more research on Indigenous languages** and language revitalisation processes. Although more attention to Indigenous issues is needed, the emphasis of the plan on more research calls for caution. A lot of research has already been conducted, yet it often fails to reach Indigenous communities. Most of the time, the new information remains within academia. Already, the historically tense relationship between academia and Indigenous Peoples has caused (and is still causing) much harm to Indigenous communities, all in the name of research.

Therefore, more research is not necessarily better, if there is no strategy on how it can serve Indigenous communities. It is, therefore, the hope of the ILED Network that the International Decade will be an opportunity to look at the existing research and use it for the benefit of Indigenous youth.

3. Ensure increased and more direct resources for grassroots initiatives

The Global Action Plan proposes a **multi-donor funding mechanism** to ensure adequate, sustainable and flexible funding for Indigenous-language-related programmes and projects. One of the main goals is also to encourage a re-evaluation and revision of funding priorities by donors that favour Indigenous languages.

This aligns with a key strategy of the ILED Network of engaging (and educating, where needed) donors to prioritise, and to make accessible, funding and resources for smaller grassroots initiatives.

We are keen to see how the proposed funding mechanism will play out. Do local and small-scale initiatives stand a chance? Will these funds actually reach Indigenous Peoples? These are important questions to raise, as it is such a key issue in a context where most funding fails to reach grassroots initiatives and organisations.

Statistics on funding for Indigenous language and education initiatives are lacking, but from the experiences that spurred our members to create the ILED Network, funding seems to be minimal. Another issue is that for most Indigenous grassroots organisations and groups, the larger funding mechanisms are inaccessible due to their extensive bureaucratic and technical requirements.

Furthermore, some ILED Network members did not even know about the existence of the International Decade. This is a telling example of how decisions made by those at the international level sometimes fail to reach those communities it is supposed to serve. This is an important issue for the international community to address if it wishes to be successful. It highlights even more the need for the ILED Network as a connector that bridges these 2 different worlds and ensures that the much-needed resources reach those Indigenous grassroots initiatives.

Funding is not reaching Indigenous Peoples, especially women

Although global announcements suggest an increase in financial support for Indigenous Peoples (in areas such as sustainability, climate change and biodiversity conservation), very little funding reaches their local priorities and self-determined collective actions.

Indigenous Peoples, especially women, are also disproportionately affected by climate change, yet funding priorities do not reflect this. To exemplify:

- Between 2003 and 2016, less than 10% of climate finance reached the local level. Almost half (45%) of the funding from the Green Climate Fund goes to 4 international players—UNDP, EBRD, ADB, and the World Bank. These institutions focus mostly on large-scale projects, and are not well known for their ability to reach the local level.¹⁰
- In 2021, [Rainforest Foundation Norway](#) found that less than 1% of climate finance goes to Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs) in tropical countries:

“This report finds that projects supporting IPLC tenure and forest management received approximately \$2.7 billion between 2011-2020, from bilateral and multilateral donors and private philanthropies—just \$270 million per year. This is equivalent to less than one percent of Official Development Assistance (ODA) for climate change mitigation and adaptation over the same period.”

“To date, most of the disbursed funding to IPLC tenure and forest management flows through large intermediaries or part of larger programs, where IPLC organisations may receive smaller sub-grants. Therefore, only a small fraction reaches the Indigenous Peoples organizations and local communities themselves. Of all the projects identified in this study, only 17 percent included the name of an IPLC organization in the project implementation description. This amounts to an average of \$46.3 million per year across the tropics.”¹¹

- Only 0.2% of all foundation funding focuses explicitly on women and the environment.¹² Indigenous women received 0.7% of all recorded human-rights funding between 2010 and 2013.¹³

10 Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action (2021), [Call to action for gender-just climate finance](#) [PDF].

11 Rainforest Foundation Norway (2021), [‘Indigenous people receive little climate funding’](#).

12 Global Green Grants Fund (2018), [Our Voices, Our Environment: The State of Funding for Women’s Environmental Action](#) [PDF].

13 International Funders for Indigenous Peoples, [A Call to Action: Insights into the Status of Funding for Indigenous Women’s Groups](#) [PDF].

The ILED Network aims to tackle the issues raised above, thereby contributing directly to the goals of the Global Action Plan:

- We will increase the visibility of Indigenous-led education initiatives and gain more attention to the importance of Indigenous languages. Our aim is for Indigenous-led education to become the number one priority for donors and other supporters.
- We will bridge the gap so that donors, allies and Indigenous grassroots initiatives can find one another. Donors often struggle to reach communities and we play an important role as a connector.
- We have made a conscious choice to create a small grants fund (SGF). SGFs shift the decision-making power to the recipient, and are characterised by their accessibility, flexibility, being needs-based and context specific. This type of fund is ideal for grassroots initiatives, as there is less bureaucracy and funds are quickly made available.



A key added value of SGFs, therefore, is that they fund groups that others do not.”

— Both ENDS, [Putting People First](#)

SGFs are also more sustainable, as they ensure long-term support and have the biggest potential for impact. For more information on the transformative impact of SGFs, download the 3-page summary of the Both ENDS report, [Putting People First](#) [PDF].

Part III:

Key Takeaways

Here, we share our key takeaways, drawn first from the grassroots stories of Indigenous-led education and then from our perspective on the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2023.



Credits: IMPECT Association.

Key Takeaways from the Grassroots Stories of Indigenous-led Education

1. The mismatch between mainstream education and Indigenous languages

The grassroots stories included earlier show that there is no place for Indigenous languages in most mainstream education systems. In fact, mainstream schooling often contributes to the gradual disappearance of Indigenous languages, because it is delivered only in the mainstream language. This problem is compounded by harmful practices such as prohibiting Indigenous children from speaking their mother tongue. Indigenous youth are thus being deprived of a part of their heritage and source of belonging.

The experiences of ILED Network members with mainstream education strongly resonate with the 'Education' mandated area of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) and the high-level advisory body to the Economic and Social Council. They point out that, too often, education systems fail to respect Indigenous cultures, they do not meet the needs of Indigenous students, and they lead to a loss of identity. The [UNPFII](#) states that, although education is a universal right, Indigenous Peoples

“do not enjoy these rights, and an education gap between indigenous peoples and the rest of the population – caused by lack of respect and resources – remains critical, worldwide”.

2. Indigenous resilience: navigating opportunities & challenges

More pressing daily threats and challenges distract attention from Indigenous languages and intergenerational knowledge transfer. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation, with many important community-based activities on hold and other more pressing survival issues emerging. It is in this context that Indigenous communities are navigating the opportunities available to them.

As the earlier stories show, a large number of successful grassroots initiatives support the intergenerational transfer of Indigenous knowledge and languages. These initiatives directly benefit Indigenous youth and contribute to the long-term wellbeing and resilience of Indigenous communities as a whole. The impact and diversity of Indigenous-led education initiatives show us that **Indigenous-led education is the way forward**, and we will continue to shine the spotlight on these initiatives to give them the attention and support they deserve.

3. Time to make space for oral languages

Many Indigenous languages are oral languages, with no written script. This poses an additional challenge, as dominant systems attach more value to written forms of communication and information, rather than creating a space in which oral traditions, cultures and languages can thrive. This requires a paradigm shift, both inside and outside the classroom.

4. More funding and support for Indigenous-led education is crucial

Most Indigenous-led education initiatives receive no governmental support or lack an enabling environment in which their efforts are supported (at times, they are even hindered). This requires a shift in global and governmental funding priorities to Indigenous-led education to ensure that they get the support that is needed to create long-term, sustainable and maximum impact. It is about enabling Indigenous children and youth to know the language of their elders and grandparents, to be connected to their communities' culture, to feel pride about their unique heritage and knowledge, and to be fortified by their roots to chart their own course in life.



Porivarai Activities Credits: IMPECT Association.

Key Takeaways from our Perspective on the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032

1. The time to act is now

The status of Indigenous languages is critical, and urgent, collaborative action is needed from all stakeholders worldwide to support Indigenous youth and their communities. The International Decade offers a valuable opportunity to capitalise on the momentum that this decade offers: creating a global movement in support of Indigenous languages, all working together **to protect, support, revitalise and promote Indigenous languages**.

2. A holistic approach is essential

Promoting and supporting Indigenous languages requires a holistic perspective and understanding of how language and linguistic diversity are connected to territory, health, livelihoods, knowledge, spirituality, nature, biodiversity, intergenerational relations, and the roles of women, youth and children. Indigenous languages do not exist in isolation, and language vitality is essential for Indigenous wellbeing and resilience.

3. Underlying human-rights issues need addressing, especially in mainstream education

The promotion of indigenous languages can succeed only if underlying issues—such as discrimination, gender-power imbalances and human-rights violations that undermine the continued existence of Indigenous languages—are acknowledged and addressed. These issues are especially prevalent in mainstream education, as we have seen earlier, in several examples of harmful practices that jeopardise the wellbeing of Indigenous cultures and languages. Therefore, a human-rights-based perspective is needed to address the complexity of the issues facing Indigenous communities today. This starts with creating wider awareness and understanding of Indigenous Peoples' right to culturally and linguistically appropriate education.

Gender – How the vital role of Indigenous women as knowledge-keepers is being undermined

Indigenous women hold important positions in many economic, cultural, spiritual and educational activities within their communities.¹⁴ As such, they play a vital role in transmitting Indigenous knowledge and language to the next generation.

For example, early-childhood parenting practices are vital in language acquisition, but the dynamic between mother and child is hindered by mainstream education; for example, by the introduction of early-childhood school programmes.

This, combined with structural, disproportionate and gender-based marginalisation, inequality and a consistent lack of funding, undermines the role of Indigenous women as knowledge-keepers.

This important issue needs to be addressed, and for this reason we are dedicating the next ILED Network project to the topic of gender—highlighting the importance of Indigenous women for Indigenous-led education, and for the resilience and wellbeing of Indigenous cultures, children and youth.

Stay tuned by following us on [social media](#) and keep an eye out on the ILED Network's webpage.

4. A transformation of education at all levels, from an Indigenous perspective

The critical state of Indigenous languages should be addressed across all educational levels, putting the needs, aspirations and potential of Indigenous youth at the centre. This includes informal, non-formal and formal education, academia, and at the political level where educational policies and plans are made.

Too often, these domains miss the mark. Indigenous Peoples must be at the heart of this transformation process—this entails securing their full participation and reshaping education based on their needs, proposals and way of life. As we have seen, culturally and linguistically appropriate education is not only important for Indigenous Peoples, but also for all of society.

5. More direct support and resources to grassroots initiatives

Very little funding, support and resources reaches grassroots initiatives, despite these initiatives having the biggest potential for impact. This is partly due to the lack of accessibility of larger funding mechanisms. It raises the question of how local and small-scale initiatives stand a better chance of securing funds through the multi-donor funding mechanism of the International Decade. The ILED Network plays an important role in addressing this issue and bridging the gap between donors and grassroots initiatives. We have a well-thought-out strategy, including a Small Grants Fund set up to make sure that more adequate, sustainable and flexible funding and other direct support reaches the grassroots.

14 FAO (2021), [The White/Wiphala Paper on Indigenous Peoples' food systems](#), Rome.

Recommendations

Our recommendations are for those who are inspired by our message and who would like to support Indigenous languages, capitalising on the momentum that the International Decade offers.

Recommendations for Supporters and Allies

The media, donors, allies, academics and other supporters.

- Donors should consider supporting smaller, grassroots initiatives (while also ensuring more accessible and direct funding mechanisms and Southern-based small grants funds). Talk to local organisations about their needs and capacities. The ILED Network can help with this. Providing seed funding for our Small Grants Fund is also a good place to start. We have several [Indigenous-led education initiatives](#) that need funding.
- Support capacity building and knowledge sharing. Some grassroots initiatives are looking for specific knowledge and skills to get their initiative off the ground. For example, our member Keystone Foundation in India is looking for someone with experience in revitalising oral languages. If you know someone with such experience, please get in touch.
- Highlight Indigenous grassroots initiatives in your newspaper, website and social media channels. Together, we can raise awareness and increase the visibility of inspiring Indigenous-led education initiatives. It also provides you with unique stories and content for your followers.

Recommendations for Duty-Bearers

Policymakers and decision-makers in government and public institutions.

- Challenge discrimination and harmful practices in mainstream education policies and practices that undermine the wellbeing of Indigenous languages and cultures.
- Start transforming national schools and curricula to become more inclusive and respectful of Indigenous cultures, ways of learning and (oral) languages (especially endangered languages!). In doing so, shape educational policies together with Indigenous Peoples, based on their needs and proposals. Reach out to grassroots and community-based organisations and start a dialogue, making sure that you involve Indigenous women and youth.
- Support initiatives that are led by Indigenous Peoples. A lot of funding and support goes to bigger organisations and entities, but these often fail to reach Indigenous communities (youth and young women, in particular).
- Create a supporting legal environment for Indigenous-led education initiatives, in line with Art.14 of UNDRIP.

Recommendations for Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous communities, Indigenous organisations and others working on Indigenous-led education and language initiatives.

- Reach out to the ILED Network. We are curious to hear your perspective and to discover what the network could do for you.
- Follow us on [social media](#) and get inspired by other Indigenous-led initiatives from across the world. Visit our webpage for more information.
- Initiate or organise dialogues in your region or country with policymakers and institutions. Help them to understand holistic and human-rights-based perspectives on language and education; share with them your initiatives, needs and ideas for transforming education.
- Register yourself and/or your community/organisation on the International Decade online community platform and engage with others working to promote Indigenous languages. Take advantage of the platform by sharing your own initiatives.

Contact the ILED Network

Email: iledsecretariat@rutufoundation.org

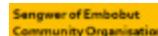
Find out more by following us on social media or have a look at our website:

Social media: <https://www.instagram.com/ilednetwork/>

Website: <https://www.rutufoundation.org/indigenous-led-education-network/>



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