

## Indigenous Languages: Are They in Danger?

### Introduction

The International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples is marked on 9 August every year. This date commemorates the inaugural session of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations at the United Nations (UN) in 1982.<sup>1</sup> As part of the international day, the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues organises an event each year that brings together relevant stakeholders such as UN member states and agencies; indigenous peoples' organisations; and civil society groups. In 2019, the theme is "indigenous languages", focusing on the current situation of indigenous languages around the world.<sup>2</sup> The theme coincides with the UN General Assembly designating 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages.

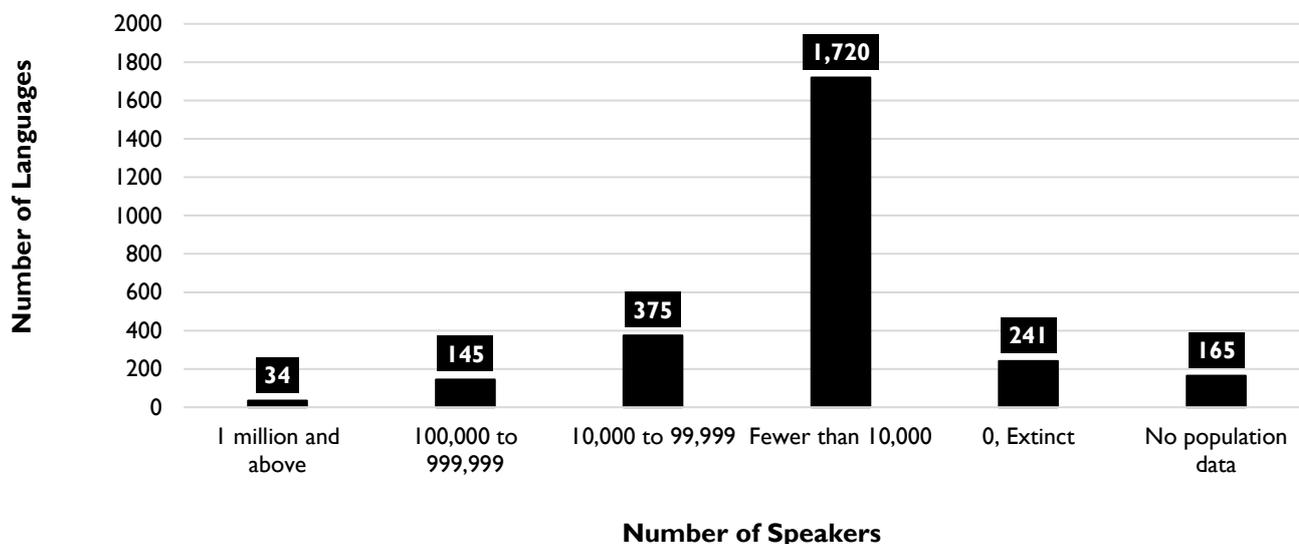
### Statistics on Indigenous Peoples and Languages

There is no formal definition of 'indigenous peoples' within the UN system. However, the UN has described the term 'indigenous peoples' to mean "inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to people and the environment".<sup>3</sup> This includes retaining "social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live".<sup>4</sup> As of 2019, there are an estimated 370 million indigenous people in the world, living in 90 countries.<sup>5</sup> The UN reports that although indigenous peoples make up less than 5% of the world's population, they account for 15% of the poorest people worldwide. In addition, indigenous peoples have a life expectancy up to 20 years lower than that of non-indigenous peoples worldwide.<sup>6</sup> Indigenous peoples inhabit 22% of global land area. This land is estimated to hold 80% of the planet's biodiversity.

The UN estimates that 7,000 languages are spoken worldwide—an "overwhelming majority" of which are spoken by indigenous peoples. However, 2,680 languages are estimated to be in danger.<sup>7</sup> A "large majority" of these are spoken by indigenous peoples. The UN estimated that, every two weeks, an indigenous language "disappears", consequently "placing at risk" indigenous cultures and knowledge systems.<sup>8</sup>

The following chart (figure 1), using data recorded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), outlines the number of languages in danger relative to the number of people who speak them.

**Figure 1: Number of Languages in Danger, 2018<sup>9</sup>**



## **UN Action to Support Indigenous Peoples**

Throughout its history, the UN has introduced several measures to support indigenous people worldwide.<sup>10</sup> This includes creating a special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples.

### ***Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples***

In 2001, the UN Commission on Human Rights appointed a special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples. To fulfil the role's mandate, the special rapporteur is tasked with:

- promoting good practices, such as new laws, government programs and agreements between indigenous peoples and states, to implement “international standards” concerning the rights of indigenous peoples;
- reporting on the overall human rights situations of indigenous peoples in selected countries and addressing specific cases of alleged violations to the rights of indigenous peoples through communications with governments and others; and
- conducting or contributing to studies on topics of “special importance” regarding the “promotion and protection” of the rights of indigenous peoples.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples***

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 13 September 2007. In voting, 144 countries voted in favour of it, with four against and eleven abstentions.<sup>12</sup> The declaration is formed of 45 articles, which address both the individual and collective rights of indigenous peoples. The declaration includes articles on:

- indigenous culture and the protection and promotion of it;
- indigenous peoples' participation in “all decisions that will affect their lives”;
- the right to “revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their languages, oral traditions, writing systems and literatures”.<sup>13</sup>

Since 2007, the four countries who voted against it (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the USA) have reversed their positions and now support the declaration.

### United Kingdom: Official Native Languages

Since 2001, the UK has recognised seven languages under the Council of Europe’s charter for regional or minority languages. The languages are: Welsh; Gaelic; Irish; Scots; Ulster Scots; Cornish; and Manx. The charter aims to “protect and promote the historical regional or minority languages of Europe”.<sup>14</sup>

According to the 2011 Census for England and Wales, 4,770 people spoke a regional or native minority language (excluding English or Welsh). This is outlined in the following table:

**Table 1: Total Number of People Speaking a Regional or Minority Language in England and Wales, 2011**<sup>15</sup>

Main Language	England and Wales	England	Wales
English (English or Welsh if in Wales)	49,808,185	46,936,780	2,871,405
Welsh/Cymraeg (in England only)	8,248	8,248	N/A
Gaelic (Irish)	1,559	1,512	47
Gaelic (Scottish)	58	57	1
Manx Gaelic	33	32	1
Gaelic (Not otherwise specified)	516	503	13
Cornish	557	554	3
Scots	1,586	1,542	44
Gypsy/Traveller languages	461	437	24

Results of other UK regional censuses (also published in 2011) show that English is the most prevalent language used in Scotland (93%) and Northern Ireland (96.9%), respectively. In relation to minority languages, the following are also used:

- **Scotland:** 1.5 million respondents to the 2011 Census reported that they could speak Scots. In addition, 59,000 respondents were Gaelic speakers.<sup>16</sup>
- **Northern Ireland:** Respondents had “some ability” to speak, read, write, or understand Irish (11%) and Ulster-Scots (8.1%), respectively.<sup>17</sup>

The UK Government has stated that it is committed to preserving native minority and regional languages spoken in the UK.<sup>18</sup> In July 2019, the Government announced a new £200,000 fund to preserve Cornish culture, language and heritage. It would aim to do this by helping deliver Cornish language education for adults and young people, in addition to providing media and technology opportunities for learners and speakers of Cornish. In a press release, Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth, then Parliamentary Under Secretary at the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, said the Government would support the Cornish language and help it “flourish” for “generations to come”.<sup>19</sup>

Measures have also been put in place by devolved governments in the UK to preserve and support native languages. In Wales, the Welsh Government has created a bilingual website aimed at supporting

and promoting the use of the Welsh language. The aim of the website is to “support people to use more Welsh in their everyday life”.<sup>20</sup> In Scotland, several initiatives have been introduced to promote the use of Gaelic and Scots in the country. In 2015, the Scottish Government published its Scots language policy. This outlined several policy commitments, such as promoting the use and development of Scots in education, media and publishing.<sup>21</sup> In May 2017, the Scottish Government published its second Gaelic language plan, which sought to increase the number of people in Scotland learning, speaking and using Gaelic.<sup>22</sup> The Northern Ireland Executive introduced a strategy for the Irish language, published in March 2016, as part of its programme for government. Objectives in the strategy included increasing the number of those learning and acquiring the Irish language through Irish-medium education.<sup>23</sup>

## Background

The first annual observance of an International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples on 9 August was mandated by UN General Assembly resolution 49/214 on 23 December 1994.<sup>24</sup> The date marks the day of the first meeting of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in 1982.

In 2016, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues contended that 40 percent of world languages were in “danger of disappearing”.<sup>25</sup> The forum also argued that most of the languages in danger were indigenous languages, which “puts the cultures and knowledge systems to which they belong at risk”.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming 2019 as the international year of indigenous languages, based on a recommendation by the forum.<sup>27</sup> The resolution also requested that UNESCO serve as the lead organisation. It works with governments, indigenous peoples’ organisations, researchers and other stakeholders to create an action plan that sets out the path to achieving the objectives of the international year.<sup>28</sup>

## *International Year of Indigenous Languages*

In 2016, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming 2019 as the international year of indigenous languages.<sup>29</sup> The resolution saw the creation of a multi-stakeholder partnership to prepare for the international year led by UNESCO. As part of this, UNESCO has worked with governments, indigenous peoples’ organisations, and other stakeholders to create an action plan detailing “key measurable objectives” to be taken during the international year and in the future. This includes increasing understanding, reconciliation and international cooperation for indigenous languages, and those who speak them, through “coordinated advocacy” and awareness-raising programmes “focused on upholding and reinforcing the human rights of indigenous language speakers”.<sup>30</sup>

## Further Information

- Benedict Kingsbury, ‘[Indigenous Peoples](#)’, *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law* (£), updated November 2006

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- <sup>1</sup> United Nations, '[International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples 2019](#)', accessed 28 July 2019.
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> United Nations Commission on Human Rights, [United Nations Development Group Guidelines on Indigenous Peoples' Issues](#), February 2008, p 8.
- <sup>4</sup> United Nations, '[Indigenous Peoples at the UN](#)', accessed 28 July 2019.
- <sup>5</sup> United Nations, '[International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples](#)', accessed 31 July 2019.
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 'Official [Twitter Account](#)', 21 February 2018.
- <sup>10</sup> United Nations, '[Indigenous Peoples at the UN](#)', accessed 31 July 2019.
- <sup>11</sup> United Nations Commission on Human Rights, '[Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)', accessed 24 July 2019.
- <sup>12</sup> United Nations, '[United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)', accessed 31 July 2019.
- <sup>13</sup> United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, [Indigenous Languages](#), 10 April 2018.
- <sup>14</sup> Council of Europe, '[Details of Treaty Number 148: European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages](#)', accessed 24 July 2019.
- <sup>15</sup> Office for National Statistics, '[QS204EW—Main Language \(Detailed\)](#)', accessed 24 July 2019. The data shows the total number from residents aged 3 and over. Please note that the data in the table relates to the person's first or preferred language.
- <sup>16</sup> Scotland's Census, '[Ethnicity, Identity, Language and Religion](#)', accessed 24 July 2019.
- <sup>17</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, [Census 2011: Key Statistics for Northern Ireland](#), 11 December 2012, p 18.
- <sup>18</sup> House of Commons, '[Written Question: Department for Communities and Local Government—Languages](#)', 4 May 2016, 35522.
- <sup>19</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, '[New Funding to Preserve Cornish Culture, Language and Heritage](#)', 5 July 2019.
- <sup>20</sup> Welsh Government, '[Cymraeg: About Us](#)', accessed 31 July 2019.
- <sup>21</sup> Scottish Government, [Scots Language Policy](#), September 2015, p 4.
- <sup>22</sup> Scottish Government, '[Scottish Government Gaelic Language Plan 2016–2021](#)', 5 May 2017.
- <sup>23</sup> Northern Irish Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, [Strategy to Enhance and Protect the Development of the Irish Language 2015–35](#), 14 March 2016, p 3. Please note that since January 2017, there has been no Executive in Northern Ireland.
- <sup>24</sup> United Nations, '[International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples: Background](#)', accessed 31 July 2019.
- <sup>25</sup> United Nations, '[2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages](#)', 14 January 2019.
- <sup>26</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, '[About IYIL 2019](#)', accessed 31 July 2019.
- <sup>27</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> United Nations, '[2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages](#)', 14 January 2019.
- <sup>30</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Council, [Action Plan for Organising the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages](#), 21 February 2018, p 10.

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