

# The Global Extinction of Languages and Its Consequences for Cultural Diversity

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**Abstract** Most people are aware that global biodiversity in the early 21st century is experiencing mass extinction. Yet few are aware of a parallel crisis for languages, with predicted extinction rates ranging from 50 to 90 % of the world's some 7,000 languages by the end of this century. Many regard languages as a benchmark for cultural diversity because virtually every major aspect of human culture ranging from kinship classification to religion is dependent on language for its transmission. This chapter focuses primarily on the consequences of the global loss of linguistic diversity for cultural diversity. Discontinuities in transmission of culture and language are frequently accompanied by large human and social costs. Maintaining the world's languages can be seen as part of a larger strategy of cultural survival providing an indispensable foundation for well-being and resilience.

**Keywords** Linguistic diversity · Cultural diversity · Language death · Human rights · Multilingualism

## 1 Introduction

Most people know that global biodiversity in the early 21st century is experiencing mass extinction. According to some accounts, annual losses of plant and animal species are occurring at 1,000 times or more historic background rates.<sup>1</sup> Yet few are aware of a parallel crisis for languages, with predicted extinction rates ranging from 50 to 90 % of the world's 6,900 languages by the end of this century (Nettle and Romaine 2000). Indeed, languages may be at even greater immediate risk of disappearance than species (Sutherland 2003). UNESCO's launch of 2008 as a special year with the slogan "languages matter" was intended to direct attention to the possible disappearance of much of the world's linguistic diversity. UNESCO's World Report (2009, 1) on cultural diversity followed quickly on the heels of this special year, reiterating its firm commitment to languages as a key vector of cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005 <http://www.maweb.org>.

diversity and “the view that full and unqualified recognition of cultural diversity strengthens the universality of human rights and ensures their effective exercise”. This chapter contends that a satisfactory answer to the question of why languages matter requires a new understanding of the critical role of linguistic diversity in the survival of cultural diversity.

## 2 Human Rights and Linguistic Human Rights

The issue of human rights comes into play in connection with the disappearance of languages and the erosion of cultural diversity when we confront the fact that people do not normally give up their languages or cultures willingly, but continue to transmit them, albeit in changed form over time. Not coincidentally, the vast majority of today’s threatened languages and cultures are found among socially and politically marginalized and/or subordinated national and ethnic minority groups. Estimates of the number of such groups range from 5,000 to 8,000 and include among them the world’s indigenous peoples, who comprise about 4 % of the world’s population but speak up to 60 % of its languages (Nettle and Romaine 2000, ix). The disappearance of a language and its related culture almost always forms part of a wider process of social, cultural and political displacement where national cultures and languages are in effect those of dominant ethnic groups. Although language is only one of many features (e.g. dress, behavior patterns, race, religion, nationality, occupation, etc.) that may mark identity, either individually or collectively, many regard languages as a benchmark for cultural diversity because virtually every major aspect of human culture ranging from kinship classification to religion is dependent on language for its transmission. UNESCO (2010b) recognizes culture as a fundamental component of sustainable development because it functions as a repository of knowledge, meanings and values permeating all aspects of our lives and defines the way humans live and interact both at local and global scales. Because such a large part of any language is culture-specific, people often feel that an important part of their traditional culture and identity is also lost when that language disappears. Moreover, once lost, a language is far less easily recoverable than other identity markers that might stand in its place.

Some groups see their existence as distinct cultural entities dependent on the maintenance of their language. René Lévesque, former leader of the Parti Québécois and Quebec Prime Minister, stressed the centrality of French to Québécois identity when he said:

Being ourselves is essentially a matter of keeping and developing a personality that has survived for three and a half centuries. At the core of this personality is the fact that we speak French [...] To be unable to live as ourselves, as we should live, in our own language and according to our own ways, would be like living without a heart. (Lévesque 1968, 14)

Sir James Henare expressed similar feelings about Māori when he said “Ko te reo te mauri o te mana Māori.” ‘The language is the essence of Māori identity’ (Waitangi Tribunal 1989, 34). Although distinct cultural and ethnic identities can

survive language shift, a Québécois or Māori identity expressed through English is not the same as one expressed through French or Māori. To say they are different does not imply that one is necessarily better than the other. It does mean, however, that to argue for the preservation of French in Quebec or Māori in New Zealand is to argue for a people's right to choose the language in which they want to express their cultural identity. UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) recognizes cultural rights as an integral part of human rights constituting an enabling environment for cultural diversity. Article 5 declares that "all persons have the right to participate in the cultural life of their choice and conduct their own cultural practices, subject to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms."

At the same time, however, in a world where cultural survival is viable only in connection with well-defined geopolitical boundaries, the nation-state plays a key role in determining which cultures and languages will survive and which will not. As the bedrock of the current political world order, the nation-state is the most critical unit of analysis because it is policies pursued within national boundaries that give some languages (and their speakers) the status of majority and others that of minority. In a rapidly globalizing world with a handful of very large languages and many thousands of small ones, maintenance of linguistic diversity is inextricably linked to the survival of small communities. If all languages were equal in size, each would have around 878,000 speakers. Instead, we find large disparities: 94 % of the world's population speaks 6 % of its languages, while 6 % speaks 94 % of its languages. Only eight out of the currently estimated world total of 7,105 languages have more than 100 million speakers and these are spoken by about 41 % of the world's population. Only 308 (4 %) have a million or more speakers. By contrast, 96 % of the world's languages are spoken by populations comprising fewer than a million speakers. The smallest languages with fewer than 100 speakers are spoken by a mere 0.2 % of the world's population (Lewis et al. 2013). Most, if not all, of these may be at risk because small languages can disappear much faster than larger ones due to the vulnerability of small groups to external pressures in a rapidly changing world. Indeed, the speakers of most of the languages at greatest risk of disappearing over the next few decades are very often also the poorest of the poor at the bottom of the economic ladder, and at the margins of a rapidly globalizing world. Africa, for instance, is simultaneously the linguistically richest, but economically poorest region on earth. Africans speak around 2,146 (30.2 %) of the world's languages but make up about a third of the world's poor surviving on less than 1\$ per day (Romaine 2009b). Moreover, while poverty has been falling for over a quarter century in other parts of the world, in Africa (and sub-Saharan Africa especially) it has been rising (UNDP 2012).

Languages of colonial conquest and dominant languages of nation-states penetrate into, transform and undermine a minority community's ability to maintain its language, culture and identity in various ways. Hence, Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) has referred to language shift occurring within the context of forced assimilation as linguistic genocide. Where education does not support or actively prohibits the use of a group's native language, the state in effect moves children from a minority to the dominant group. The notion of linguistic human rights (LHR) has arisen out of

the concern to situate language loss within the context of the relatively well-defined international legal framework already in existence for human rights. Nevertheless, in spite of efforts to develop international norms for minority rights at both global and regional levels, many problems remain, and the question of whether and when language shift can be required or expected in deliberative democracies is still unresolved. Likewise, one can question whether it is legitimate for the state to insist that all children be schooled in the majority language of the state as the sole or main medium of instruction.

Virtually all major international treaties and other legal instruments regard human rights as inalienable entitlements inherent to the person and belonging equally to all human beings. As embodied above all in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), these rights comprise not only civil and political rights but also social, economic, and cultural rights. The latter category includes, among other things, labor rights, right to an adequate standard of living, social security, food, housing, clothing, education, and health. The inalienability of our common entitlement to these rights follows from the fact that we are all human, and therefore all the same, but paradoxically the need to guarantee such rights in law arises from the fact that we are diversely different. Indeed, Mill (1859, 1955:81) recognized human diversity in life modes as essential for liberty and happiness when he wrote:

If it were only that people have diversities of taste, that is reason enough for not attempting to shape them all after one model. But different persons also require different conditions for their spiritual development; and can no more exist healthily in the same moral, than all the variety of plants can exist in the same physical, atmosphere and climate. The same things which are helps to one person towards the cultivation of his higher nature, are hindrances to another [...] Unless there is a corresponding diversity in their life modes, they neither obtain their fair share of happiness, nor grow up to the mental, moral, and aesthetic stature of which their nature is capable.

Mill also cited von Humboldt (1854) in the front matter of his book, in effect endorsing Humboldt's belief in the "absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity".

Nevertheless, cultural and linguistic rights are still being denied and undermined, with negative impacts on the peoples and communities concerned. Discontinuities in transmission of culture and language are frequently accompanied by large human and social costs manifested in poverty, poor health, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, and suicide. William Stanner, for instance, writing from his personal and professional experience as an anthropologist who studied Aboriginal culture, commented thus on Australia's assimilation policies:

Since the 1950s we have known that it is a false assumption, but we have often persisted with substantially the same outlook and new methods. There was already pretty plain evidence in the 1950s that what we were requiring the Aborigines to do was radically maladaptive for them. What clearer meaning could sickness, drunkenness, alcoholism, criminality, prostitution and psychic disorders have? (Stanner 1979, 352)

Similarly, Hallett et al. (2007, 394) conclude that "the generic association between cultural collapse and the rise of public health problems is so uniform and so exceptionless as to be beyond serious doubt." A substantial body of research indicates that

indigenous peoples fare far worse than non-indigenous populations with respect to numerous other health indicators such as morbidity, life expectancy, incidence of diabetes, cardio-vascular disease, etc. By some estimates, suicide rates are as much as 40 % higher among indigenous peoples than among other populations (Hunter and Harvey 2002). This is especially true for young people, whom some have characterized as the lost, broken or stolen generation. Many young people are weakly integrated into traditional culture, and disconnected from their elders, and family support networks (Trudgen 2000). Suicide is a choice of last resort when things go so badly wrong with identity development that youth see no viable way of linking their past, present and future selves.

The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP 2007, 183) observes that “cultural change, such as loss of cultural and spiritual values, languages, and traditional knowledge and practices, is a driver that can cause increasing pressures on biodiversity [...] In turn, these pressures impact human well-being.” Recent empirical studies from countries like Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Norway strongly suggest that cultural diversity has the capacity to increase resilience of social systems in the same way that biological diversity increases resilience of natural systems. While most studies are small in scale, and typically rely on cross-sectional rather than longitudinal data, making causal arguments problematic, a strong sense of cultural identity is associated with higher levels of psychological health among indigenous youth. In a sample of 450 indigenous Sámi adolescents between 15 and 16 years old residing in northern Norway, researchers found that enculturation factors are significantly but moderately associated with decreased mental health problems. Participation in cultural activities and native language competence were the enculturation factors most strongly linked to better mental health symptoms (Bals et al. 2011). A New Zealand study showing positive correlations between high levels of cultural efficacy, identity engagement and subjective well-being among Māori provides support for ‘culture as cure’ rather than culture as problem (Houkamau and Sibley 2011). In other words, restoring attachment of indigenous youth to their culture may be an integral part of the solution to some of the health problems in native communities.

Others looking at the same evidence, however, have drawn opposite conclusions from those of Stanner and the studies just cited; namely, that poor health conditions and serious social problems result from the failure of indigenous peoples to abandon their traditional cultural values and lifeways that will eventually doom them to extinction because they are dysfunctional in the modern world. Within this assimilationist narrative there is no place in the modern world for people who choose not to adapt; indigenous languages and cultures are dismissed as primitive and backward-looking, an argument which is then used to justify their replacement by western languages and cultures as prerequisites to modernization and progress. Former President Festus Mogae of Botswana, for instance, asked in reference to the San minority, “How can you have a stone-age creature continuing to exist in the time of computers? If the Bushmen want to survive, they must change, otherwise, like the dodo they will perish” (Ohenjo et al. 2006, 1942). Despite the fact that Botswana has the fourth highest per capita income in Africa, the poorest 10 % of the population consists largely of San and related minority communities, who receive only 0.7 % of the nation’s income

(1942). The National Constitution makes no reference to the San among the main eight tribes of the country. The government has justified its relocation of San people from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve by claiming that the San deplete the natural resources of the reserve and that providing services to them on the reserve is too expensive. Since their displacement, the San have been unable to adapt to their new surroundings, where they have no means of subsistence, and are increasingly dependent on the government for food relief and cash-for-work programs.

The San, who comprise a number of culturally, linguistically and economically diverse communities with distinct histories and cultural practices, have inhabited the Southern African region for more than 27,000 years. Numbering only about 30,000–40,000, they are widely recognized as the most impoverished, disempowered, and stigmatized ethnic group in Southern Africa. They fare even worse outside Botswana. The human development index for 32,000 some San living in Namibia, where the second largest population resides, is not only the lowest, but they are also the only group whose human development index fell between 1996 and 1998 (Suzman 2002, 4). Health and welfare among San in resettlement areas have declined; alcohol consumption and violence against women have increased. Ohenjo et al. (2006, 1943) regard these trends ultimately as “a problem of poverty stemming from the loss of land and livelihoods without a viable alternative”.

The circumstances of the Kxoe community of San people in Namibia, who number only about 4,000, have greatly deteriorated since the 1960s to the point where their prospects for survival are extremely poor. Once highly mobile hunter-gatherers, they were settled on agricultural schemes in the western part of the Caprivi Strip of northeastern Namibia after independence in 1990. An influx of workers involved in the construction of the trans-Caprivi highway linking Namibia to Zambia, Botswana and Zimbabwe has made the Kxoe (especially young girls) particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, which occurs at a higher rate along this major transport corridor than anywhere else in sub-Saharan Africa. Since 1996 AIDS has been the major cause of death for all age groups, and the Caprivi region has the worst health indicators in the country (Brenzinger and Harms 2001).

### 3 Why Language Matters

Although the conventional wisdom on which most development theories are premised often assumes that people and places are poor because they lack resources, poverty is clearly a complex phenomenon. Cause and effect are often confused in arguments claiming that poverty is caused by lack of infrastructure, services and employment opportunities in the rural communities where most indigenous peoples live. Thus, prevailing policies have generally entailed assimilation and integration into the dominant society's modes of production and employment, often requiring migration or forced relocation to urban areas. Such strategies are motivated by misperception and stereotyping of indigenous peoples (particularly hunter-gatherers), their life-ways and languages as primitive, backward, and obstacles to development (Romaine

2009b). Widdowson and Howard (2002, 34), for instance, contend that the cultural gap between the Neolithic period and late capitalism rather than cultural loss is at the root of dependency and “all the related social problems in Canada’s native population and throughout the industrialized world.” More recently, they have argued that maintaining indigenous identity, cultural traditions and languages deters development among Canada’s native peoples because it prevents them from acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge for productive participation in the mainstream economy and society. Hence, they reject policies offering financial incentives for cultural preservation because they claim there is no evidence that disappearance of languages is detrimental to humanity’s survival (Widdowson and Howard 2008).

The situation of the San is symptomatic of the circumstances of indigenous peoples throughout Africa and many other parts of the world. Health is systematically worse than among the non-indigenous population, particularly where loss of land and customary resource bases has rendered people unable to maintain their traditional livelihoods and cultural practices, including their languages. Without adequate access to education, health care, and water, many indigenous peoples and other minorities are frequently not recognized by the governments of the states in which they reside and thus are deprived of the right to participate in or direct their own sustainable human development. Taylor (2007, 16), for instance, points to “a clear contradiction between the desire of many Indigenous people to live in remote areas in small dispersed communities on traditional lands, and the general thrust of government policy that is intent on securing Indigenous participation in the mainstream urban economy as the core means to enhance well-being.” Many indigenous people define themselves in terms of their close relationships to land and community, where a good life is associated with maintaining traditional hunting, gathering, and herding practices. Many of the Arctic’s residents, for instance, would not want to exchange this way of life for the lifestyles of residents of southern metropolises, even though such a life may offer higher standards of living in material terms (Einarsson et al. 2004, 16–17).

This does not mean, however, that they want to remain unchanged and unengaged with the dominant society or the modern world. Many critics of efforts to preserve endangered languages think in a simplistic dichotomizing fashion; namely, that maintaining small languages means abandoning modernity, while abandoning them in favor of world languages such as French or English means joining the modern world. These prejudices reverberate in other parts of the world, such as among Navajo youth who “feel they must make an either-or choice between language affiliations” because they have been told that Navajo is linked with backwardness and English with modernity and opportunity (McCarty et al. 2006, 672). This view of modernity suggests erroneously that societies or cultures are anchored to different historical points aligned on a single linear trajectory from a traditional past to a modern present according to the extent of their socioeconomic and political development. The opposing ends of this supposed developmental pathway get reified in terms such as ‘developing’, ‘primitive’ versus ‘developed’, ‘modern’, etc. At the same time ideological constructions of the languages spoken in such contexts derive their perceived values in terms of these oppositions. Ultimately, what the Inuit,



Navajo and other indigenous peoples are being told by Widdowson and Howard and others is to forget their past, stop being themselves, move from their homeland, assimilate, and they will be all right. However, without access to land, many indigenous peoples find it hard to maintain their ways of life and their cultural identity on which transmission of their languages depends. There are strong associations between the physical and mental health of people and places. Research conducted among some of the 300,000–500,000 Pygmy people living in ten central African countries shows that those able to maintain their traditional forest-based life have better health than those who have lost access to the forest through logging and farming. Forests are a vital component of a Pygmy sense of physical and spiritual well-being. Pygmy communities living outside the forest in fixed settlements cannot meet their food needs and experience higher rates of infectious diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and parasites. In the absence of traditional cultural practices reducing social tensions, domestic violence against women and alcohol abuse have increased (Ohenjo et al. 2006, 1939–1941).

Some of the strongest and most powerful evidence supporting the value of language and culture maintenance to community well-being comes from research based on data from ca. 7,800 indigenous adults collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (2009). Four separate elements of ‘cultural attachment’ (i.e. participation in cultural events, cultural identification, indigenous language use, and participation in traditional economic activities), were associated with better outcomes across a diverse range of dimensions of socio-economic well-being. Not surprisingly, those residing in remote areas generally had higher attachment than those living elsewhere, as did older rather than younger people. Contrary to claims frequently made about Aboriginal culture and language being maladaptive and leading to poverty and despair, stronger cultural attachment and identity were associated with greater participation and achievement in education and training and a higher probability of being employed. Speaking an indigenous language was also associated with markedly superior health, and a lower likelihood of abusing alcohol or being arrested (Dockery 2010, 329, 2012, 2013). Moreover, Aboriginal Australians living in remote areas also appeared not only to be better able to maintain aspects of language and culture, but also to achieve other aspects of well-being, in particular higher levels of self-reported happiness (Biddle and Sweet 2012).

Hence, maintaining the world’s languages can be seen as part of a larger strategy of cultural survival providing an indispensable foundation for well-being and resilience. Safeguarding linguistic and cultural diversity does not mean preserving the status quo, which is in any case impossible. Languages and cultures are constantly changing, and so our concepts of them cannot be static. The survival of many indigenous peoples is now often dependent on modern means of production. Many appreciate that there are some benefits arising from increased interaction with the dominant society, and most want to acquire dominant languages as a means of accessing economic and other resources associated with them. At the same time, however, they want to preserve some cultural autonomy for themselves and to have some say in determining their own fate, in particular, the right to educate their children



in their own way, and to maintain their language and culture. In order to preserve their distinctive identities, cultures and languages, however, most need and want economic resources gained in the dominant market. Today the maintenance of Inuktitut in the eastern Canadian Arctic is partly a product of its integration into the dominant linguistic market and political economy, where it has been standardized and promoted in education, government publications, and other written forms. Some newly adopted western practices have come to be defined as Inuit, such as the syllabic writing system introduced by Christian missionaries, and are now being used to justify and pursue modern goals such as increased political autonomy (Patrick 2003, 107). Despite numerous transformations in traditional lifestyles, it is possible for indigenous peoples to find a new niche within dominant cultures and still maintain their language and culture. Driving snowmobiles instead of sleds drawn by dogs or reindeer, wearing jeans and listening to pop music are not inherently incompatible with cultural continuity and indigenous identity. Indeed, one consequence of globalization has been the emergence of a new common global indigenous identity through the international movement of indigenous peoples (Niezen 2003).

Recent studies from First Nations communities in British Columbia have provided powerful evidence in support of the value of language maintenance to community well-being. Bands with fewer than 50 % of members reporting conversational language knowledge of their ancestral language had more than six times (96.59 per 100,000) the number of suicides as communities with higher levels of language knowledge. Among the latter the suicide rate was 13.00 per 100,000, well below the provincial average for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth. In fact, reported language knowledge proved to have predictive power over and above that of the six other cultural continuity factors identified in previous research (Hallett et al. 2007, 396). This constitutes strong empirical evidence against the view that assimilation to dominant cultures is harmless or even beneficial to individuals and communities in the ways suggested by prevailing policies and ideologies. Language does indeed matter. When communities are successful in promoting their linguistic and cultural heritage, they are better positioned to claim ownership of their past and future (Lalonde 2006). The positive effects reverberate in a variety of measures relating to youth health and welfare: suicide rates fall, along with rates for intentional injuries. Fewer children get taken into care and school completion rates rise. If what we really care about is people's well-being, then we must acknowledge that policies pursuing higher rates of employment and integration with the mainstream economy at the expense of culture may address economic disadvantage, but will likely have negative impacts on well-being (Dockery 2010, 317), as well increased costs for health care and resource management when people are removed from places they are attached to.

The treatment of the San and many other indigenous peoples by the respective governments of the countries where they reside constitutes a clear violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966/1967) and of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992). Efforts at developing international norms of minority rights at both global and regional levels have resulted in a post-1990 flood of international declarations, conventions and recommendations, including, for example, the

Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995) and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). Kymlicka and Patten (2003, 11) doubt whether international law will ever be able to specify more than the most minimal of standards. Nor is there an international legal consensus on how to define a minority. For example, the ten to twelve million Roma who comprise Europe's largest ethnic minority, and are present in most European Union member states, are recognized as national minorities in some countries but not in others. While some have recognized the Roma and the Romani language under the provisions of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, a long history of European repression against the Roma goes back several hundred years following Roma migration from the Indian subcontinent (COE 2012). In discussing the evolution of the United Nations framework for human rights and minority protection, Duchêne (2008, 17) highlighted a series of paradoxes arising from the necessity and impossibility of defining minority groups at supranational and national level. Minorities demand protection from the state and what they demand to be protected from is the state. Meanwhile, the state seeks to protect itself from the risk posed by the very existence of minorities. The need for specifically targeted minority rights has emerged in response to demands from different types of groups wanting to belong to states in different ways, and to exercise specific promotion rights going beyond anti-discrimination and toleration. The resulting patchwork coverage whereby different types of minorities like national minorities and indigenous peoples are accorded different kinds of rights, powers, or accommodations from the state, but others have only generic rights has emerged in an ad hoc way and is riddled with gaps and inconsistencies.

The pervasive presence of some degree of multilingualism in practically every nation in the world, whether officially recognized or not, indicates a universal need for multilingual/multicultural policy and planning to ensure that all members of different language groups within nations have access to and can participate in national affairs without discrimination. Nevertheless, despite insistence from some experts that there should be no distinction in law between the linguistic rights of autochthonous and allochthonous minorities in human rights treaties (de Varennes 1996), national ethnic minorities still have many more internationally and nationally coded rights than immigrants under current international conventions and laws. Some, like the Roma and Travellers, have suffered such severe and deeply rooted discrimination and human rights abuses that "no European government can claim a fully successful record in protecting the human rights of the members of these minorities" (COE 2012, 11). In its annual reports and other statements the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance has repeatedly criticized the Italian government for its lack of policy with respect to non-territorial minorities such as the Roma and Sinti, at the same time as it urged granting citizenship to all children born in Italy (ECRI 2006, 6–8). In 2008 Amnesty International condemned Italian politicians for embracing increasingly racist and xenophobic language which created a climate in which vulnerable groups were targets of violence and the European Parliament

voted to condemn the government's policy of fingerprinting Roma, who are widely stereotyped as vagrants, thieves and child kidnappers.

We are still far from a coherent account of the kinds of targeting appropriate in international law. Targeted norms have emerged in an ad hoc way and are often presented as unique exceptions to the rule of generic minority rights. Kymlicka (2007) argues that this sort of ad hoc 'mono-targeting' where one particular type of group is singled out for distinctive legal rights, while according all other groups only generic minority rights, is unlikely to be stable. Similarly, Romaine (2007) contends that the legal approach to reconciling status differences in languages with equality in a world where majority rights are implicit, and minority rights are seen as 'special' and in need of justification, is fraught with difficulty. Because traditional peoples have adopted a large number of western practices voluntarily and involuntarily, this appears to suggest that they have assimilated. Hence demands for what outsiders see as 'special' rights in order to maintain their language and culture often generate resentment. To many non-indigenous inhabitants of Canada, for instance, the idea of Inuit living in houses with running water, using snowmobiles, and shopping in supermarkets violates the dominant culture's stereotypical and romantic images of Inuit living in igloos, hunting with dogsleds, and living off the land (Brody 1987). This results in irreconcilably contradictory demands for assimilation on the one hand, and a denial of their modernity on the other. Many Inuit would prefer to adopt only those outside elements that facilitate their own practices. They have chosen rifles and snowmobiles, but want to continue speaking their own language alongside English, French and other languages.

In the absence of both clarity about defining which groups should be targeted as well as bodies empowered to enforce norms, rights to maintain distinctive cultural and linguistic identities are further undermined by an almost complete lack of recourse for individuals whose rights have been violated. Signing an agreement is not the same thing as implementing and complying with it. The non-binding nature of declarations and recommendations permits states to claim that they are meeting the requirements, even if only in a minimalist fashion. The adoption of the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Convention No. 169 in 1989 marked a break with the integrationist approach to indigenous peoples. Although it is a legally binding instrument recognizing "the aspirations of indigenous peoples to exercise control over their own institutions, ways of life and economic development, which includes the maintenance and development of their identities, languages and religions", as of 2013 it has been ratified by only twenty countries. Despite attempts to guarantee freedom of expression and non-discrimination on grounds of language as fundamental human rights, and implicit recognition of the intimate connections between language and forms of cultural expression, national policies are radically out of line with the realities of multilingualism. The majority of countries in the world actually operate either *de facto* or *de jure* as monolingual in recognizing only one language for use in education. Only a quarter of all nations recognize more than one language (Edwards 2007, 44). When a multilingual country uses one or more languages exclusively in public schools, and in the administration of government services and activities, it is making a distinction based on language. In showing a preference for some

language(s), whether designated as official or national or not, the state's decision benefits those for whom the chosen language(s) is a primary language, to the detriment or disadvantage of others who either have no or lower proficiency and are denied the benefit of using and identifying with their primary language (Romaine 2007).

In addition to all these difficulties, many legal experts and political theorists see signs of an impending retreat from the international commitment to multiculturalism. Bell (2007, 602) for instance, refers to a standoff over how far it is possible to accommodate the marginalized without committing suicide as a state, which is countered by concerns of the marginalized not to let states define them. Many are not hopeful about achieving more than minimal tolerance rights plus minor accommodations within LHR. Although the LHR movement has focused on securing a universal right to mother tongue primary education in line with UNESCO's (1953, 6) much cited axiom "that the best medium for teaching is the mother tongue of the pupil" Kymlicka and Patten (2003, 36), contend that this sounds more like the conclusion of an argument than the argument itself. A more realistic way forward may reside not in trying to specify a particular policy, but to establish fair background conditions under which members of different language communities can survive.

Despite evidence of growing rather than decreasing diversity in many education systems, in some countries the trend has been not towards recognition of the need for policy and planning, but the imposition of ever more centralized provision and greater intolerance of diversity (Romaine 2009a). Although there are some encouraging developments in some countries, in most parts of the world schooling is still virtually synonymous with learning a second language. Education for minorities in many parts of the world still operates in ways that contradict best practices, with fewer than 10 % of the world's languages used in education (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). The continuation of educational policies favoring international languages at the expense of local ones is part of a more general development fiasco. Use of local languages is inseparable from participatory development. A high-level roundtable convened at the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) summit at the United Nations in September 2010 emphasized strong linkages between primary education, other components of basic education and the MDGs, the largest and arguably most ambitious initiative on the international development agenda (UNESCO 2010a, 6). Above all, however, the roundtable stressed that "a basic education of good quality is an essential human right and as such should be a priority for governments and donors" (7). Exclusion of most of the world's languages from school severely compromises the power of education to improve the lives of those suffering multiple sources of disadvantage, who have least access to the small number of dominant languages favored at school, i.e. ethnolinguistic minorities (especially girls) living in rural areas. UNESCO's (2003) position paper on education in a multilingual world also endorsed many of the recommendations that have emerged from the debate about linguistic human rights as a means of reaching consensus on the rights of linguistic minorities to ensure social justice. These include the rights of indigenous and minority groups to education in their own language, access to the language of the larger community, and that of the national education system, and international languages.

## 4 Conclusion

As a species humans display remarkable cultural diversity despite a high degree of genetic uniformity (Pagel and Mace 2004). This chapter has argued that this diversity is at risk when languages become extinct because languages are a critical vector for cultural diversity. As the world becomes less biologically diverse, it is becoming linguistically and culturally less diverse as well. The fate of most of the world's linguistic diversity, and by implication its cultural diversity, lies in the hands of a small number of people who are the most vulnerable to pressures of globalization. Sen (2006) stressed that all development is ultimately about expanding human potential and enlarging human freedom. It is about people developing the capabilities that empower them to make choices and to lead lives that they value. Freedom of choice is therefore both a principal means and end of development. Good development involves local community involvement, control and accountability. Nettle and Romaine (2000) see the need to preserve languages and the need for development in the world's peripheral societies as complementary aspects of the same problem rather than opposing ones. Although impediments to participation in and the right to exercise control over development processes affecting peoples such as the San are increasingly being recognized internationally as human rights violations, the neoliberal ideology underpinning the United Nations Development Programme approach to poverty reduction through prioritizing economic growth has propelled human rights and development down increasingly separate paths (Romaine 2009b). Linguistic diversity receives almost no mention in the Millennium Development Goals (Romaine 2013). Safeguarding and sustaining linguistic and cultural diversity does not, however, mean preserving the status quo. Lévi-Strauss (1952, 258) emphasized that it is "diversity itself which must be saved, not the outward and visible form in which each period has clothed that diversity." Protecting cultural and linguistic diversity means ensuring their continued existence, not the perpetuation of a given state of diversity. Policies that promote a community's economic and cultural well-being will be likely to sustain linguistic diversity as well.

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