Panel:
Language Rights to meet the Sustainable Development Goals

Convenor: Dr Hilary Smith
Affiliate, ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language (COEDL)
Honorary Affiliate, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian National University
hilary_smith@xtra.co.nz

Overview

Language rights have been called the "Cinderella" human right (May, 2011), reflecting their status in the wider "family" of human rights as currently problematic with their true value yet to be acknowledged. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in (United Nations, 1948) stated in Article 2 that all rights should be without discrimination based on language, and several United Nations rights statements include mention of language rights. However, a proposed Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (Follow-up Committee, 1998) has yet to be ratified.

Although language rights are often argued from a moral perspective, they are increasingly underpinned by evidence which leads to the social and economic benefits articulated by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Language rights in education, described as the nexus of language rights and the SDGs by the Study Group on Language and the UN (2016), has been a focus for much of this evidence-gathering. In addition, there is a increasing evidence of the value of a language rights approach in other areas covered by the SDGs; these include conflict prevention, environmental sustainability, and health and wellbeing. These in turn result in economic benefits and poverty alleviation.

In this panel we will discuss how language rights are important for meeting the SDGs in a variety of contexts in Australia, southeast Asia, and the Pacific. From a theoretical examination of language rights in the SDGs we will explore examples of policy, planning and practice in the region.

May, S. (2011). Language rights: The "Cinderella" human right. *Journal of Human Rights,* 10:3, 265-289.

Follow-up Committee. (1998). *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights*.

United Nations. 1948. *Universal Declaration on Linguistic Rights.*

Language and the UN. 2016. 'Conclusions. *Symposium on Language and the Sustainable Development Goals,* April 21-22. www.languageandtheun.org

Papers

Dimensions of language rights in the SDGs

Dr Hilary Smith
Honorary Affiliate, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian National University
Affiliate, Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language (COEDL)
hilary_smith@xtra.co.nz

The discussion of language rights has often referred to a distinction between 'negative' or non-discriminatory tolerance-oriented rights, and 'positive' or affirmative promotion-oriented rights, although this division is increasingly being challenged. A more useful distinction may be between language rights for an individual (particularly a child), and language rights for a group or community. At an individual level, the right for a child to use and learn through their mother tongue confers cognitive and psycho-social benefits, resulting in better educational (bilingual and/or multilingual) and social outcomes. At a group level, the rights of communities to use their mother tongues as well as gain access to the dominant language results in better communication and participation in wider society.

These rights underpin all of the SDGs, and need to be accounted for in policy and planning by governments, donors and implementing organisations.

The changing ecology of Australian languages

Prof Jane Simpson
Chair of Indigenous Linguistics, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian National University
Deputy Director, ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language (COEDL)

The 2016 Australian census provides evidence that the language ecology of Australia is changing rapidly, with respect to the Indigenous languages spoken by children, the Indigenous languages undergoing revival, and the new languages that have developed from the contact between speakers of traditional Indigenous languages and English speakers. Most of the big Indigenous languages still spoken by children have suffered declines in number of speakers. This includes both in remote communities where English is a foreign language, and in some towns - for example in the 2006 census the local Indigenous language Arrernte was reported as the most commonly spoken language other than English. In the 2016 census, Arrernte has been replaced as top by a language from south India, Malayalam, with 406 speakers. As well, diaspora communities of Indigenous language speakers are developing in urban centres away from the heartlands where the Indigenous languages are spoken. On the other hand, the number of people asserting that they speak revived languages as their home language continues to grow, as does the number of people asserting that they speak a new language such as Kriol or Yumplatok. These changes need to be considered by communities and governments when planning for schools, for interpreter services and for maintenance of Australia's heritage.

Multilingual education for ethnic minorities in Cambodia

Jan Noorlander
Assistant Country Director, Programs at CARE International in Cambodia

Takara Morgan
Coordinator (Asia), CARE Australia

In Cambodia, people from ethnic minority communities who do not speak the national language, Khmer, have been largely excluded from formal education. Instruction in a language other than their own negatively impacts school enrollment and completion. Since 2002, CARE has been working with communities, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, and other partners to ensure ethnic minority children commence learning at school in their mother tongue before progressively learning Khmer. The innovative model, based on best practices in multilingual education, was trialled in Ratanak Kiri, a province in the North East part of Cambodia. CARE provided teachers with curriculum and reading guides, teacher training, and ongoing monitoring and coaching. Textbooks and teaching materials were also developed to support students to learn in their home language. Over time, a sustainable model for multilingual education has been successfully developed, with strong government ownership. The model guided development of a Multilingual Education policy framework and a proclamation by the Ministry. It has now been adopted under the Government's Multilingual Education National Action Plan and replicated across the country, ensuring that future generations of ethnic minority children have access to and can succeed in school. By 2018, over 10,000 children will have access.

Ongoing longitudinal research has found that school enrolments of ethnic minority children increased six-fold. In addition, students from minority groups achieved the same levels in literacy tests and performed better in mathematics than their peers from mainstream schools who had only studied in one language. Multilingual education provides social benefits as parents and other family members are more able to participate in their children's education and contributes to preservation of indigenous languages.

Leave No One Behind: Including the Deaf community in the Sustainable Development Goals

Erin Ryan
Policy and Advocacy – Political Lead/ Inclusive Development, CBM Australia

Around the world, Deaf people face systemic barriers to realising many of the basic human rights prioritised in the Sustainable Development Goals and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In some parts of the world – particularly geographically remote areas – these challenges are exacerbated as formal, documented and widely-shared sign languages do not exist. Here, many Deaf people live without language. Without a shared means of communication, people are blocked from accessing education, services, livelihoods, justice, or community decision-making. In these places, Deaf people are among those left furthest behind.

In the Pacific region, CBM Australia and its partner organisations have observed the geographical and social barriers that prevent Deaf people from meeting, building communities and developing sign languages. While some shared sign languages exist, often building upon a foundation of languages introduced by missionaries or volunteers, many Deaf Pacific islanders can express themselves only through limited, domestic-focused 'home signs'. These home signs do not constitute expressive or receptive language, and are usually only understood by family members. Without sign language, the isolation experienced by Deaf people is extreme, and the barriers to 'a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity' outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development may seem insurmountable. This presentation will seek to outline the first steps – based on global evidence and Deaf-driven approaches to language development – to begin including some of the Pacific's most marginalised people through language.