



ICC Press Release

INUIT

Inuit Commemorate International Mother Language Day

February 21, 2019 – Ottawa, Canada – On this day the Inuit Circumpolar Council honours and commemorates International Mother Language Day. It is a day to promote the preservation and protection of all languages. The day has been celebrated each 21st of February since 2000 when it was proclaimed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO).

As Inuit, our language is the way in which Inuit knowledge is transmitted. It is how we express our cultural values, relationship with our kin and fellow Inuit, our communities and the outside world.

In Alaska, buoyed by the enthusiasm of our young people, one of our members, Cordelia Qiġñaq Kellie, an Iñupiaq language advocate and organizer and also the Government Affairs Advisor at Iļisaġvik College, stated that "Language revitalization is Inuit and Indigenous revitalization because our languages are the spirit of who we are; they are thoughts made tangible and they are about connecting with one another. Growing our Indigenous languages provides us with access to our ancestors and every Inuit since the beginning of time."

In Nuuk, ICC Greenland will mark the day at the Katuaq Cultural House. ICC Greenland President Hjalmar Dahl will be one of the speakers. "It is an exceptional opportunity to use the day to promote the International Day on Indigenous languages. We have invited our Minister on Education to open our celebration. We will have speakers from our Language Secretariat and Greenland Authors Association. All will focus on use of the Greenlandic Inuit language and how we promote and protect it. ICC Greenland will also focus on the human rights aspects of education and language," said Mr. Dahl. After the speakers there will be cultural entertainment.

Language expert Valentina Leonova from Chukotka, Russia, stated: "Mother tongue is what distinguishes me from one and unites with others - with my fellow countrymen. The opportunity to hear it and the rare luck to speak it - is an incredible pleasure. It is not clear how and from where these feelings rise in the soul. But it is very correctly called our native tongue. Perhaps this is like an energy machine that charges and gives strength to overcome difficulties, to move."

"During the International Year of Indigenous Languages, we honour Inuit and institutions that actively promote our language," said ICC (Canada) President Monica Ell-Kanayuk from Iqaluit, Nunavut. "Inuktitut is an official language spoken in the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and the Nunatsiavut Government. In Nunavik the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement recognizes Inuktitut in the education system, and the Kativik Regional Government Council meetings are held in Inuktitut. We honour our Inuit broadcasters, writers, artists and filmmakers who keep our language alive. We honour mothers and fathers, elders, and youth who speak Inuktitut every day."

According to the 2016 Canadian Census 41,650 Inuit reported speaking an Inuit language well enough to conduct a conversation, representing 64.0% of Inuit. The same census pointed out that Inuktitut is the mother tongue for 57% of Inuit. In Canada, while Inuktitut is one of the strongest Indigenous languages, Inuit must guard against language loss, and constantly engage in efforts to revive the language in areas where loss has occurred.

There are approximately 6000 languages spoken worldwide. An estimated 43% are endangered. According to the UN, only a few hundred languages have been given a place in education systems and the public domain. Less than 100 are in use in the digital world. The Inuit language is widely used on digital platforms.

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The Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) is an Indigenous Peoples' Organization (IPO), founded in 1977 to promote and celebrate the unity of 160,000 Inuit from Alaska (USA), Canada, Greenland, and Chukotka (Russia). ICC works to promote Inuit rights, safeguard the Arctic environment, and protect and promote the Inuit way of life. In regard to climate change, we believe that it is crucial for world leaders and governments to recognize, respect and fully implement the human rights of Inuit and all other Indigenous peoples across the globe.