

Esperanto and the UN

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Highlights from Tanzania and the 109th World Congress of Esperanto

For the first time in its history, the annual World Congress of Esperanto took place on the continent of Africa -- from August 3 to 10, 2024. Under the general topic "Language, People and Environment for a Better World," some 850 people gathered in Arusha, Tanzania, for a week of business meetings, scientific and cultural events, lectures, and (preceding the congress itself) excursions.



Almost half the attendees came from the African continent itself, particularly Tanzania, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo – for a total of some seventeen African countries in all.

The congress was preceded by the Second International Conference of African Women, chaired by Dr. Miora Raveloharison (Madagascar) and addressed by, among others, Dr. Gong Xiaofeng (China), UEA board member for women's affairs, and Dr. Duncan Charters (USA), president of UEA. In her remarks, Dr. Gong announced the formation of a new UEA Commission on Women's Affairs.

Also preceding the congress was a reception in The Hague, Netherlands (the headquarters country of UEA), in which Ambassador Giorgio Novello of Italy, on behalf of last year's host country for the World Congress of Esperanto, ceremonially passed the baton to the Ambassador of Tanzania, H.E. Caroline Kitana Chipeta, in the company of other members of the diplomatic community.

The final congress resolution, in addition to calling for greater attention to environmental protection and the reduction of greenhouse gases, drew attention to the Swahili language's role as a regional, supranational language facilitating communication among East African nations "without the need to use a language of former colonial empires", and to the similar use of Esperanto as a worldwide language identified with no single state: "For worldwide communication a common neutral international language is needed, which everyone can speak, in parallel with their mother tongue."

A full report will appear in the UEA's journal *Revuo Esperanto*. The daily congress publication *Kongresa Kuriero* is available at <https://uk.esperanto.net/2024/kuriero> .

UEA-Geneva and UEA-New York stress indigenous language rights and sustainability



In advance of its celebration of the International Day of Indigenous Languages of the World (August 9), UEA spoke out on the importance of such languages at the 17th session of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) in Geneva from July 8 to 12, and organized a side event in New York at the UN High-Level Political Forum on July 9.

“We note, on the one hand, the great value of the languages of indigenous cultures and, on the other, their rapid disappearance,” declared Mireille Grosjean, a representative of UEA at Geneva. Everyone in the world should have the right to understand messages coming to them from government, she suggested, and also the right to respond to them in their own languages. “When indigenous peoples see that their rights are guaranteed, they will feel that they are treated with justice... Such a situation will contribute to a peaceful life at the individual and collective levels” and, by implication, make them partners in humankind’s common interest in the sustainable development of our planet.

Meanwhile, in New York, UEA partnered with the NGO Committee on Language and Languages and with SIL International, an NGO focused on linguistic diversity, in an official side event of the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), the global annual meeting to assess progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Multilingualism, a “core value” of the UN, is rarely approached in relation to the targets and indicators of the SDGs, as several speakers pointed out. The focus on SDG 16 at HLPF 2024 presented an opportunity to explore the essential connections between languages on the one hand and “peace, justice and strong institutions” on the other. In particular, the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL), running from 2022 to 2032 under the leadership of UNESCO, brings new attention to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

Indigenous people suffer disproportionately from poverty and the effects of climate change. “Equal access to justice for all,” an aim of SDG 16, is difficult to achieve while linguistic discrimination continues to exist; and “inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making,” another aim, requires ensuring that all voices are heard. In this way, indigenous languages play a vital role as a medium for equal access to justice, as well as to educational, economic and social opportunities.

The side event brought together scientific experts in the field of language rights, leaders of indigenous communities, and civil society representatives who actively work in the field. The event was moderated and coordinated by Prof. Francis Hult with an introduction by Prof. Humphrey Tonkin, respectively chair and vice-chair of the Committee, who are also UEA representatives at the UN in New York. Other prominent speakers were Dr. Irmgarda

Kasinskaite-Buddeberg of UNESCO, who until recently was the global lead for IDIL, Prof. Rawinia Higgins who heads the Māori Language Commission in New Zealand, and Dr. Barbara Trudell from SIL International as well as indigenous leaders and scholars Tania Pariona from Peru (Quechua), Prof. Hanna-Máret Outakoski from Finland (Sami), Mario Swampy from Canada (Samson Cree Nation), and Leslie Harper (Ojibwe), and Dr. Anton Treuer (Ojibwe), both from the United States.

Drawing from documented best practices and empirical research, the speakers offered a unique perspective on the way in which the realization of the targets of SDG 16 in relation to indigenous peoples can benefit from the UN Declaration, which codifies indigenous peoples' rights to languages in the context of, for example, education, mass media and government administration. Thus the International Decade can be used to advance SDG 16 by implementing language rights for new multilingual solutions.

As Prof. Hult stated, "IDIL offers a unique opportunity to utilize CDE 16 to improve the implementation of indigenous language rights." He was echoed by Prof. Tonkin, who emphasized the importance of giving indigenous peoples a voice: "Governments and their representatives should not only *speak* the languages of the world but *listen* to the languages of the world and all their speakers."

The International Decade of Indigenous Languages was a key theme at the World Congress of Esperanto, in Montreal in 2022. These further activities reaffirm UEA's dedication to linguistic pluralism and linguistic justice for all.

Scholarly conferences examine Esperanto in Africa and Asia

The 46th Esperantology Conference took place in Arusha, Tanzania, on August 8, chaired by Bengt-Arne Wickström, of the Centre for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems. Sessions addressed (1) Sociolinguistics and Interlinguistics in Africa, (2) African Languages and Esperanto, (3) Major Figures of the Esperanto Movement, and (4) Development and Use of Esperanto. A final discussion on the future of Esperanto followed, led by Adjévi Adjé (Togo) and Alexandrine Omba (DR Congo). Among the speakers were Drs. Daniel Maxwell (USA) and Élisée Byelongo Isheloke (DR Congo) on Esperanto and Swahili, Heidi Goes (Belgium) on the history of the Esperanto movement in Africa, and Ilona Koutny (Poland & Hungary) on the contributions of István Szerdahelyi to Esperanto studies.

The history of Esperanto in Asia was the topic of a scholarly conference at the University of Hong Kong, China, on 30 and 31 August, led by Edwin Michielsen, with fifteen papers on a wide range of topics related to the introduction and history of Esperanto primarily in Japan, China and Korea. Topics included Esperanto radio broadcasting in the Japanese Empire, Esperanto in Japanese theatre, Esperanto in anarchist education in post-1945 South Korea, Esperantists in Manchuria (1905-1945), and the role of Hasegawa Teru in the anti-war movement in China in the 1930s. Other papers touched on Esperanto in colonial Malaya and Singapore, Esperanto resistance literature in Hongkong (1938-39), and the history of Esperanto in British India.

Esperanto Day 2024 echoes around the world

Meetings and events in China and Russia, in France and Japan, in Brazil and Australia; social media lighting up; newspaper articles and messages – Esperanto Day 2024 was a day of celebration in every corner of the world. The reason? On 26 July 1887, Zamenhof published his new language, Esperanto.



UEA's Esperanto Day message stressed the importance of Esperanto from a human rights perspective. It cited Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."

Article 2 "clearly condemns the denial of linguistic human rights to peoples, groups, ethnicities, or communities small, weak, or without political influence, and positively asserts the need to oppose linguistic discrimination," says the message. It goes on to define linguistic discrimination, which occurs "when people stronger, more powerful, more educated, or more wealthy speak in their mother tongues to people who use other languages and are forced to try to understand or try to reply."

"Linguistic discrimination," the message states, "often goes unrecognised by those who practise it, or even by those who are discriminated against." And it does not except the UN: "Even the United Nations, which is the only point of worldwide dialogue available to our planet, does not fully apply what the Declaration of Human Rights implies: everyone's right to understand and be understood. It has several major languages as its official languages, but in practice ...it uses only a few major languages to speak to the world. As a result, it tends to listen only to that small part of the world that is capable of responding in those major languages. Is that the most effective way to mobilise the citizens of the world to achieve solutions to globally important problems, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, dialogue on climate, or the search for peace?"

"By contrast," says UEA's message, Esperanto was created "so that everyone in the world would have the right to speak their own language at home ... and so that all languages could live, and so that dialogue among groups with different languages could take place without the pressure of one language against another, in a spirit of equality, without discrimination."