



Office of the Commissioner of  
**INDIGENOUS  
LANGUAGES**



**Summary Report:  
First Nations and Métis Language Gathering**

## Our Story

On June 21, 2019, following extensive and collaborative engagement with Indigenous peoples across the country, the co-developed [Indigenous Languages Act \(the Act\)](#) received Royal Assent. The Act responds to Calls to Action 13, 14 and 15 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and is intended to promote and support the reclamation, revitalization, strengthening, and maintenance of Indigenous languages in Canada.

The Act recognizes, among other things, that the history of colonial and paternalistic policies and practices have directly contributed to the erosion of Indigenous languages and affirms that Indigenous language rights are Aboriginal rights under the Constitution Act 1982 that must be protected and preserved.

The Act establishes an Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages (the Commission), with a Commissioner and up to three Directors appointed by the Governor in Council. The Commission is an independent organization and is not part of the federal administration.

If you would like to read our Commission profile, please [click here](#).

## Connect

For questions about the Commission, our mandate, or for any other inquiries, please contact us at [general.inquiries@ocil-ila.ca](mailto:general.inquiries@ocil-ila.ca).

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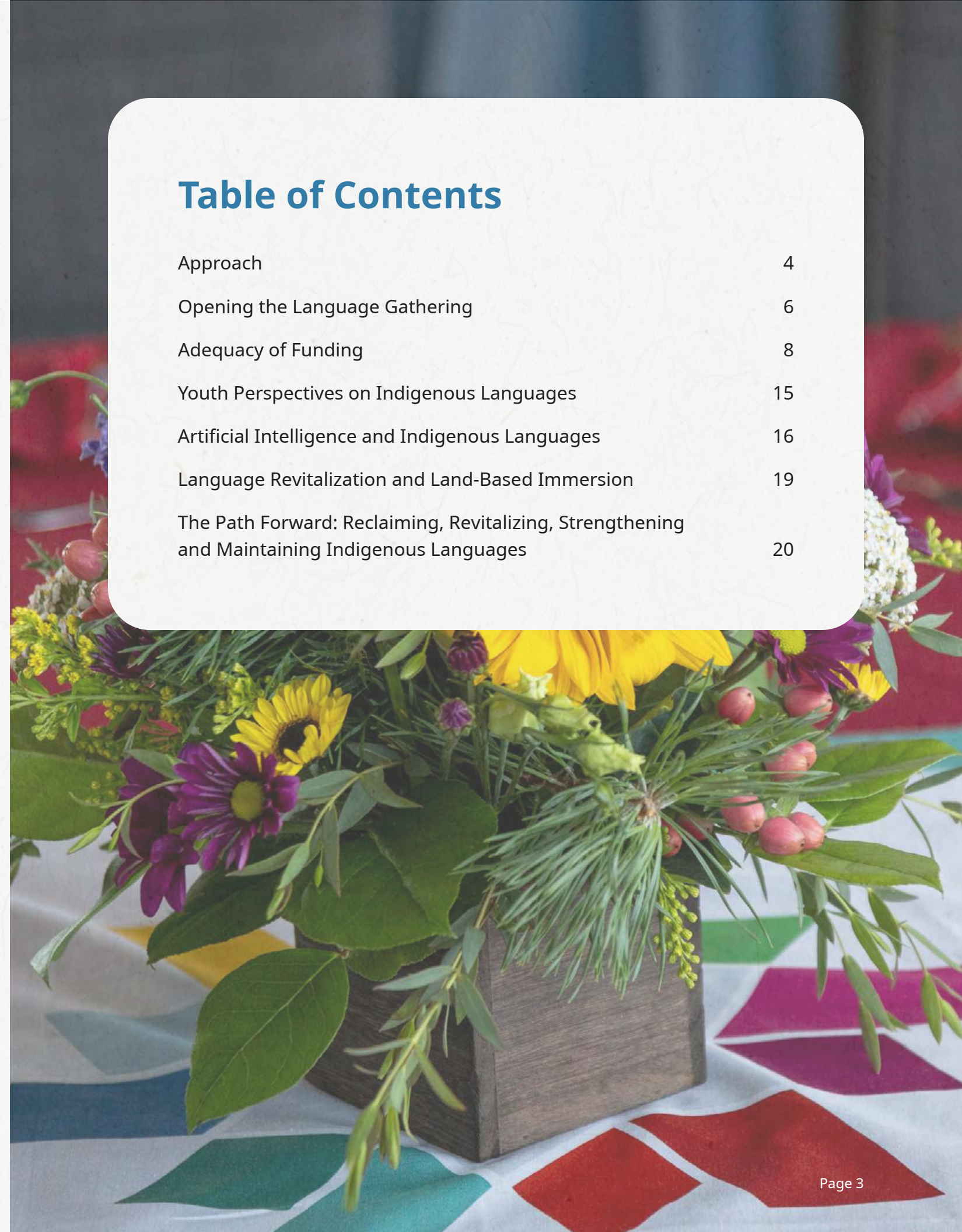
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On August 7 and 8, 2024, the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages (the Commission) hosted a language gathering in Treaty Six territory and within Métis homelands (Edmonton) as a part of its continuing dialogue with First Nations and Métis peoples on their language revitalization efforts. The gathering brought together speakers, champions, Elders, youth, researchers, teachers, and community members, all of whom shared their experiences and perspectives related to the reclamation, revitalization, strengthening and maintenance of their languages.

## Approach

Presentations and panels on key revitalization themes, as well as focused breakout groups on the topic of adequacy of funding, provided important insights for the Commission with regards to the needs, challenges, and opportunities regarding language initiatives led by First Nations and Métis peoples. Celebrating Indigenous languages together in community, with those that are at the forefront of these efforts, was at the heart of this gathering.

The aim was to foster an environment for participants to openly share challenges and barriers and the most promising practices in their respective areas. The importance of relationality with all things (the land) and interconnectedness between participants are critical in building lasting relationships, rooted in trust and reciprocity, that can exist beyond the gathering. Elders opened each day with a prayer and teachings, tobacco protocols were respected, and additional cultural supports were available



## Opening the Language Gathering

The gathering was opened in a good way by Elder Rick Lightning, who has been a lifelong advocate for Indigenous languages and who shared his prayers and vision for a future where Indigenous languages are vibrant and thriving. Commissioner Ignace's keynote shared his personal journey of fighting for Indigenous languages and becoming the first Commissioner of Indigenous Languages in Canada. He also spoke about the mandate and key activities of the Commission.

The performances by the Eagle Nation Drum Group, the Maskwacis singers and dancers, as well as Alex Kusturok, Donny Lhironnelle and Robert Genaille were a powerful display of the inherent connection that dancing, drumming, and music have to language and knowledge transmission.

The launch of the Our Languages, Our Voices video centred the importance and essence of Indigenous languages, which set the tone for discussions throughout the gathering. The opening provided by Directors Joan Greyeyes and Georgina Liberty highlighted their roles as Directors at the Commission in addition to sharing the purpose, intent, and spirit of the language gatherings: hearing directly from Indigenous Peoples and supporting their language revitalization and preservation efforts.



## Adequacy of Funding

The language gathering highlighted adequacy of funding for Indigenous languages as an important area of focus. Dr. Daniel Brant outlined the current state of Indigenous languages in Canada and issues related to funding for language programming and initiatives.

**Dr. Brant's research uses the following indicators as identifying factors:**

- ✦ Models of success;
- ✦ Innovative methods of instruction;
- ✦ Effective metrics of language propagation; and
- ✦ Measures necessary to indicate success.

Using these indicators as the baseline, his research positions immersion programs as the most successful models of language propagation, noting that there is a trend of increased involvement from post-secondary institutions. The research also highlights, however, that the number of first language speakers is declining rapidly and the veracity of second language speakers is questionable.



The keynote further outlined that language programs continue to struggle for long-term, sustainable, and adequate funding, in addition to reaffirming the fact that proposal-based funding is still not meaningfully supporting Indigenous languages on the ground. In contrast, the degree of financial support provided for official languages is significantly more substantial in comparison to Indigenous languages. Dr. Brant highlighted that the vitality of Indigenous languages can be strengthened through an increase in the intergenerational transmission of languages, which critically requires access to sustainable, long-term, and adequate funding.

**The keynote outlined current needs to ensure the revitalization, protection, and promotion of Indigenous languages, including:**

- ✦ More access to community-led and developed data to make effective cases for sustainable funding and actions to preserve languages;
- ✦ Increased access to effective language propagation approaches that will increase the number of speakers, including adult immersion learning programs;
- ✦ Effective measurement tools that enable more precise outcomes and pedagogical methods;
- ✦ Clear information about funding distribution; and
- ✦ Long-term, sustainable, and adequate funding for Indigenous languages programming and initiatives.



**In addition to the keynote, the Commission facilitated group discussions with participants to better understand their needs. Participants share insights, feedback, and experiences with the following key themes emerging from the discussions:**

- ✦ A need for more structures that support grassroots initiatives in accessing opportunities, including supports to help people navigate and understand application processes and governance structures;
- ✦ More support for immersion-based language programs across the lifespan;
- ✦ More supports for the whole family and community to encourage intergenerational transmission;
- ✦ Importance of dedicated time, resources, and spaces for language programs;
- ✦ Need for long-term, sustainable, and adequate funding for language programming and initiatives;
- ✦ Inadequacy of centralized funding, which does not meet the needs for many communities. Self-government and self-determination play a significant role in supporting language revitalization;
- ✦ The importance of celebrating milestones and achievements in language revitalization journeys, including the creation of new speakers;
- ✦ Need databases or hub as a place to compile learning resources and tools;
- ✦ Embedding supports and funding within initiatives to strengthen the role of Elders in language transmission and ensuring languages exist within homes;
- ✦ Need for additional research and databases, which uplift the important role that technology (e.g. Artificial Intelligence) can play in supporting language revitalization; and
- ✦ Importance of supporting, encouraging and uplifting each other as we embark on our language journeys, whether that is teaching the language or learning it.



## Youth Perspectives on Indigenous Languages

Throughout the gathering a series of short videos developed by youth were shared covering what language means to them and what they would like to see moving forward to better support their efforts.

A panel of young people immersed in language revitalization discussed their language journeys and the ways in which they are preserving and speaking their languages in both community and urban settings, including online forums, land-based immersion curricula, as well as ceremonies and cultural practices. Participants shared their desire and ambition for learning which highlights the critical role of youth in the future of language revitalization.

The youth spoke about the urgent need for emergency measures to keep languages alive while the mother tongue language speakers are still with them. They highlighted the reality of balancing between maintaining a sense of hope while also recognizing that if this issue is not addressed carefully and quickly that their languages “can and will be lost.”

**The panelists shared what they would like to see reflected in the language learning and revitalization sphere, including:**

- ✦ Urgent and emergency measures to increase the number of speakers;
- ✦ Additional resources and programming for hands-on learning;
- ✦ More places and institutions to practice languages;
- ✦ Increased number of language classes and sessions;
- ✦ Increased advertisement and promotion of existing language initiatives;
- ✦ Additional funding to sustain current efforts and support the creation of new programs; and
- ✦ Need for language speakers to come forward and be increasingly involved in language learning initiatives.





# Artificial Intelligence and Indigenous Languages

A consistent theme which has emerged from the various language gatherings hosted by the Commission is the role that technology can play in supporting Indigenous languages. In particular, the importance of Indigenous participation in use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a tool for language revitalization efforts.

## A presentation by Shingai Manjengwa discussed ways in which AI can support Indigenous languages, including:

- ✦ Language preservation;
- ✦ Mapping Indigenous languages into a logic sequence which can assist with transmission and learning;
- ✦ Enhancing supports for language immersion; and
- ✦ Developing tailored language curricula, courses, and resources.

A key point of focus during discussion were ways in which AI can be leveraged to increase productivity and adapted to reflect needs of communities, while noting the challenges with AI in relation to the quality and degree of data that needs to be input into the model to mitigate errors, misrepresentation and misinformation. Shingai reaffirmed that

the spirit of language cannot and should not be replaced with AI, meaning that it will always need to be held by language champions with AI as merely a tool to support them.

## Participants actively engaged with the presentation and brought forward important considerations as it relates to language revitalization, including:

- ✦ Potential challenges related to misinformation and misrepresentation;
- ✦ The use of AI does not mean abdicating the roles and responsibilities of Indigenous Peoples and communities;
- ✦ AI can be a helpful tool in language preservation and documentation efforts; and
- ✦ Caution should be exercised with regards to data ownership.

The presentation and subsequent discussion reaffirm that although the conversation about AI is ongoing, it is imperative that the values of Indigenous Peoples and communities are meaningfully reflected.





## Language Revitalization and Land-Based Immersion

A presentation by Rupertsland Institute on their Michif programming in Métis education curricula turned the focus to current language revitalization activities. The Institute meaningfully engages with communities on program development and implementation to incorporate Michif and cultural teachings in education, training, and research frameworks. The Institute's centre for teaching develops resources specifically for educators which include foundational knowledge resources, engaging lesson plans, professional development opportunities and classroom learning tools that are meaningfully reflective of Métis values.

The presenters provided examples of resources for educators and learners include Michif language resources, digital stories gathered from storytellers, interactive guides providing an overview of Métis history as well as videos which share knowledge about Métis relationships with the land. The Institute develops its engagement and research frameworks with direct input from communities and has created interactive tools which are designed to support all learners in various stages of their journeys.

Similarly, Dr. Kevin Lewis' presentation reaffirmed the point that Indigenous

Peoples across communities and urban areas want greater access to language programming. His presentation spoke about the immense value and contribution of Indigenous worldviews and knowledge to research, especially as it relates to the transmission of languages, ceremonies, cultural teachings, and land-based learning. Dr. Lewis also shared with participants the importance of basing research assessment and measurement criteria in Indigenous traditional knowledge, so that the main priority is geared towards strengthening our future generations physically, mentally, and spiritually.

The presentation further highlighted that land-based curricula and programming provide the opportunity for full immersive language and cultural learning. Land-based immersion programs inherently position Indigenous worldviews and pedagogies as the foundation of teachings, which allows for Indigenous autonomy to flourish over Indigenous education. The kâniyâsihk Research and Development Institute (kRDI) implements these principles by offering professional development workshops, language revitalization projects and land-based cultural camps.

## The Path Forward: Reclaiming, Revitalizing, Strengthening and Maintaining Indigenous Languages

The language gathering in Edmonton is part of ongoing efforts by the Commission to centre the perspectives of Indigenous Peoples and communities in the language revitalization and preservation spheres. The insights shared by participants in Edmonton, and in future gatherings, will continue to help build momentum of language revitalization moving forward. With these endeavours, the goal of the Commission is to amplify the voices of Indigenous Peoples and uplift the language warriors at the forefront of our fight for our languages.





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