



National Association
of Friendship Centres
Association nationale
des centres d'amitié



Our Languages, Our Stories

*Towards the Revitalization and Retention of
Indigenous Languages in Urban Environments*



Discussion Paper

The National Association of Friendship Centres gratefully acknowledges the support of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

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2018

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1 Introduction

I Lost My Talk

I lost my talk
The talk you took away.
When I was a little girl
At Shubenacadie school.

You snatched it away:
I speak like you
I think like you
I create like you
The scrambled ballad, about my word.

Two ways I talk
Both ways I say,
Your way is more powerful.

So gently I offer my hand and ask,
Let me find my talk
So I can teach you about me.¹



Mi'kmaq poet Rita Joe penned this poignant poem 40 years ago but the sentiment still rings true for many Indigenous people today. Many studies and reports, from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, to the Truth and Reconciliation report stress the vital importance of maintaining and revitalizing Indigenous languages. These languages contain the cultures, ways of being and worldview of Indigenous peoples. The vast majority of Indigenous languages are on the verge of extinction and this loss is keenly felt by Indigenous people across the country, for the loss of a language spells the loss of a distinct people. Efforts are underway in a number of regions, to varying levels of success, to revitalize, remember and teach Indigenous languages to new generations of Indigenous people. Various levels of governments have realized the urgency of this and are supporting Indigenous language initiatives.

In late 2016, the Federal Government announced that it would “enact an Indigenous Languages Act, co-developed with Indigenous Peoples, with the goal of ensuring the preservation, protection and revitalization of Métis, Inuit and First Nations languages in Canada”².

2 Government of Canada. (2017, June 15). Important Step Taken Towards Co-Development of Indigenous Languages Legislation in Meeting Between Government of Canada, Métis, Inuit and First Nations [Press release]. Retrieved from : www.newswire.ca/news-releases/important-step-taken-toward-co-development-of-indigenous-languages-legislation-in-meeting-between-government-of-canada-Métis-inuit-and-first-nations-leaders-628682473.html



Canada declared its intention to collaborate on the co-development of this legislation with the Métis Nation, Inuit and First Nations. Throughout the process, the Department of Canadian Heritage indicated it would “also engage with grassroots organizations, urban populations and experts”.³ As part of this engagement, Canadian Heritage is co-developing a web site and reference material as well as information on direct and indirect engagement activities for all interested Indigenous peoples and organizations to participate and provide input. Canadian Heritage plans to introduce the Indigenous Languages Bill into the House of Commons in the fall of 2018 and seek royal assent in the summer of 2019.

Language revitalization is critical, not only in the regions and communities where these ancestral languages emerged, but in cities across Canada because statistics show that more and more Indigenous people are moving to urban centres and yet many want to maintain connections, including language connections to their ancestral homelands. The National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) convened an Indigenous Language Symposium on March 27 and 28, 2018 in Ottawa. Representatives from Friendship Centres across Canada were invited to share and discuss Indigenous languages and to contribute to this discussion and provide input into the development of Indigenous language legislation.

This discussion paper aims to document and analyze stories from symposium participants about the state of Indigenous languages in the Friendship Centre Movement and in urban centres more broadly. The Symposium provided Friendship Centres with the opportunity to come together, share stories and identify challenges and opportunities. Participants also provided direction to NAFC regarding input into draft Indigenous language legislation.

The discussion paper begins with a brief literature review that highlights the importance of Indigenous languages to First Nations, Inuit and Métis across Canada, including references to Indigenous languages in numerous reports over the years, and urban perspectives on the state of Indigenous languages as well as some wise and promising practices for Indigenous language preservation, revitalization and retention. It then moves onto an analysis of the four key themes that emerged from the symposium: Indigenous languages as sacred and alive; Indigenous languages are central to healing and wellness; Indigenous language learning and preservation as all-encompassing; and responsibility and leadership in Indigenous language revitalization and retention.

3 Ibid.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The State of Indigenous languages

It is estimated that prior to contact with Europeans, there were approximately 450 languages and dialects spoken by Indigenous peoples throughout the lands that now encompass Canada⁴. In 2016, Statistics Canada data suggests there are now around 70 that remain⁵. This decrease is devastating and prompts the assertion that, “Indigenous languages in Canada are critically endangered and urgent action is required.”⁶ It is important to note, however, that some Indigenous languages are more endangered than others. According to Statistics Canada’s Census of Population 2016, the language family with the most concentration of speakers was Algonquian (175, 825) with Cree, Ojibway and Oji-Cree speakers being the most often reported⁷. On this current trajectory, it is anticipated that in Canada, only three Indigenous languages are expected to survive: Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut⁸.

Despite these bleak statistics and predictions, it is interesting to note that the number of Indigenous languages speakers increased (and exceeded the number who reported an Indigenous language as a mother tongue) since the last Census in 2011, which suggests the acquisition of second-language speaking as a relatively successful pursuit⁹. However, despite an overall increase in the number of Indigenous peoples learning Indigenous languages, it is reported that less than 2% of Métis people speak an Indigenous language. Further, the majority of Métis peoples speak Cree languages (5,960), then Dene (1,555), followed by Michif (1,030)¹⁰. This suggests that the Michif language is more likely to disappear, given the small number of people who speak it, but also that Métis peoples generally tend to speak other Indigenous languages.

Nearly two in three Inuit can speak Inuktitut; however, many speakers are concentrated in Inuit Nunangat - the Inuit homelands. Outside of Inuit Nunangat, 10.9% of Inuit reported being able

4 Mclvor, Onawa. *Building the Nests: Indigenous Language Revitalization in Canada* (Master of Arts). *University of Victoria*, 1998.

5 Statistics Canada. *Aboriginal Languages in Canada*. 2011, www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-314-x/98-314-x2011003_3-eng.pdf

6 Galley, Valerie et al. *Indigenous Languages Recognition, Preservation and Revitalization: A Report on the National Dialogue Session on Indigenous Languages June 24-26, 2016 Victoria, British Columbia*. www.fpcc.ca/files/PDF/General/FPCC_National_Dialogue_Session_Report_Final.pdf

7 Statistics Canada. *The Aboriginal Languages of First Nations People, Métis and Inuit*. 2016, www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016022/98-200-x2016022-eng.pdf

8 Fontaine, Shirley. *First Nations Languages and Improving Student Outcomes*. The Assembly of First Nations, 2012, www.afn.ca/uploads/files/education/improvingstudentoutcomes.pdf

9 Statistics Canada. *The Aboriginal Languages of First Nations People, Métis and Inuit*. 2016, www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016022/98-200-x2016022-eng.pdf

10 Ibid.

to speak enough Inuit language to conduct a conversation¹¹. Relative access and closeness to one's Indigenous homeland (i.e. First Nation reserves, Métis settlements and Inuit hamlets) increases the chances for an Indigenous language to survive. As asserted by Valerie Galley et al., "[i]t is important for the language homelands to ensure accessibility to the off-reserve population."¹² Jurisdictional issues and scarce resources in urban areas are punctuated by the challenge of determining which Indigenous languages to offer¹³ in areas inhabited and visited by a diversity of Indigenous peoples. Given the statistics and the challenges outlined above, a compelling case is made that the state of Indigenous languages is even more dire in urban areas¹⁴.

2.2 Impacts of the loss of language

The impacts of language loss have been profound and devastating. Through various historic and ongoing events such as colonialism, enforced European education, diseases, forced relocations and Indian Residential Schools¹⁵, Indigenous languages were taken from Indigenous peoples, thus severing their ability to transmit cultural knowledge and the worldviews that are embedded in language. There are 266 instances of the word "language" embedded in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Final Report section The History, Part 1: Origins to 1939. The Report acknowledges the deliberate policies and subsequent punishments that occurred when children spoke in their Indigenous language: "As each generation passed through the doorways of the schools, the ability to pass on those languages and traditions were systematically undermined."¹⁶ In *Reconciliation and the Revitalization of Indigenous Languages*, Valerie Galley states that, "one way to get rid of a language is to get rid of all the speakers."¹⁷

Despite the aggressive and at times violent nature of taking away Indigenous languages, Indigenous peoples have and continue to advocate for formal legislative change and sustained funding¹⁸. Further, Indigenous peoples have created community-based and driven activities to preserve languages. As described earlier, the number of second-language learners has increased

11 Statistics Canada. "The Aboriginal Languages of First Nations People, Métis and Inuit." 2016, www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016022/98-200-x2016022-eng.pdf

12 Galley, Valerie et al. "Indigenous Languages Recognition, Preservation and Revitalization: A Report on the National Dialogue Session on Indigenous Languages June 24-26, 2016 Victoria, British Columbia." www.fpcc.ca/files/PDF/General/FPCC_National_Dialogue_Session_Report_Final.pdf

13 Ibid.

14 Norris, Mary Jane. "Aboriginal Languages in Selected Cities in Canada: A Decade Review, 1996 to 2006, Part 2." *Aboriginal Policy Studies*, vol. 1 no. 3, 2011, pp. 3-28.

15 McIvor, Onawa. "Building the Nests: Indigenous Language Revitalization in Canada (Master of Arts)." *University of Victoria*, 1998.

16 The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). "Honoring the Truth, Reconciling the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada", Ottawa, 2015, www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Honouring_the_Truth_Reconciling_for_the_Future_July_23_2015.pdf

17 Galley, Valerie. "Reconciliation and the Revitalization of Indigenous Languages." *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Journey*, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2009, pp. 241-260, www.ahf.ca/downloads/trc2.pdf

18 Besner, Linda. "In Their Own Words: the Fight to Preserve the Cree Language." *The Walrus*, 2017, www.thewalrus.ca/in-their-own-words

(though overall speakers have decreased), which speaks to the resilience and ingenuity of those committed to healing from language loss. Examples of initiatives undertaken to revive and preserve languages will be discussed in further detail in the sections to follow. Indeed, the loss of languages has been ongoing, devastating and a primary concern for Indigenous peoples. While not a whole list, some of the impacts on individuals, families and communities have been:

- An irrevocable loss of knowledge¹⁹
- Social rootlessness, cultural dislocation, depravation of group identity²⁰
- Loss of cultural pride²¹
- Devastation of kinship bonds and feelings of belonging
- Altered worldviews
- Loss of memories of specific places and events

It is important to note that these impacts are intergenerational, which means the effects have been passed on in families from parents to children. The inability to pass on an Indigenous language has huge impacts on families and communities. Even though formal policies to strip away Indigenous languages have largely ended – this is not the end of the story. In some cases, Indigenous languages have been lost forever taking with them intricate knowledges of lands, traditions, place names, songs, ceremony, kinship bonds and the everydayness of being Indigenous (for instance, teasing and humour). Language is the core of worldviews and behaviours in Indigenous communities, and therefore Indigenous families and communities have been altered politically, socially, emotionally, physically and spiritually in profoundly overwhelming – and sometimes irreversible - ways.

2.3 Importance of Indigenous languages

As asserted in the preceding section of this review, the loss of Indigenous languages has resulted in many negative impacts on Indigenous communities. In part, these impacts highlight the importance of Indigenous languages in maintaining social cohesion, encouraging self-esteem, as well as assisting with the transfer of culturally-specific ways of knowing and being. However, the following section illustrates some of the specific ways that Indigenous languages tie communities together and assure the survival of culture, and perhaps most importantly, assure the well-being of Indigenous individuals, families, communities and nations. The importance of Indigenous languages cannot be overstated.

19 Mclvor, Onawa. "Strategies for Indigenous Language Revitalization and Maintenance." *Encyclopedia of Language Literacy and Development*, 2009, pp 1-12.

20 Mclvor, Onawa. *Building the Nests: Indigenous Language Revitalization in Canada* (Master of Arts). *University of Victoria*, 1998.

21 Ibid.

While not a full list, the following are some of ways that Indigenous languages are crucial to Indigenous lifeways:

- Connection to culture
- Reclamation of ways of knowing and being
- Language directs people how to “be Indigenous”
- Crucial for understanding ceremony and traditional stories
- Fosters a sense of identity
- Allows culture to be transmitted and understood
- Provides safety in communities, prevents “lawlessness”²²
- Generates self-esteem²³
- Facilitates Indigenous sovereignty, or helps communities to govern themselves²⁴

While the preceding list is not exhaustive, it demonstrates the connectivity and wide reach of Indigenous languages in communities. Individually, languages are important to the well-being and spiritual conditions of Indigenous peoples. The language then extends out to families and communities, nurturing circles of caring concern that then reaches the socio-political institutions of Indigenous communities (and organizations), such as leadership and governance structures.

In this sense, Indigenous languages are living and sacred, meaning that they are an integral part of social cohesion and individual well-being. Melinda Daniels argues that the sacredness of Indigenous languages cannot be separated from the examination of its structure and form. According to Daniels, “[Indigenous language is] really the bone marrow of our philosophy.”²⁵ Thus, Indigenous languages are seen as an embodiment of Indigenous being - to protect the language is to protect oneself.



22 Besner, Linda. “In Their Own Words: the Fight to Preserve the Cree Language.” *The Walrus*, 2017, www.thewalrus.ca/in-their-own-words

23 Morcom, Lindsay. “Self-Esteem and Cultural Identity in Aboriginal Language Immersion Kindergarten.” *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, vol. 16 no. 6, 2017, pp. 365-380.

24 Abraham, Rawnda. “Nim-bii-go-nini Ojibwe Language Revitalization Strategy: Families Learn our Language at Home (Master of Education)”, *Lakehead University*, 2010.

25 Besner, Linda. “In Their Own Words: the Fight to Preserve the Cree Language.” *The Walrus*, 2017, www.thewalrus.ca/in-their-own-words

2.4 References to Indigenous Languages in UNDRIP and TRC Calls to Action

2.4.1 UNDRIP

Twenty-five years in the making, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was formally adopted at the UN in 2007. At the time, four nations refused to adopt the Declaration – Canada, the United States, New Zealand and Australia. Canada specifically expressed concerns with issues around Free, Prior and Informed Consent²⁶. In 2016, Canada officially removed their “objector status” citing their commitment to implement Declaration in accordance with the Canadian Constitution²⁷. While it is understood that UNDRIP is not legally binding for nation-states, it provides “an important standard of treatment for Indigenous peoples”²⁸. This means that the document is aspirational, and not legally binding but nevertheless emphasizes the rights that nation-states should honour in order to fully uphold the rights and self-determination of Indigenous peoples. Recognizing the importance of Indigenous languages in a rights framework, three out of 46 Articles relate to Indigenous languages²⁹:

- Article 13 1. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected and also to ensure that Indigenous peoples can understand and be understood in political, legal and administrative proceedings, where necessary through the provision of interpretation or by other appropriate means.
- Article 14 1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.

3. States shall, in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for Indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

26 United Nations. FAQ: Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/FAQsindigenousdeclaration.pdf

27 Morin, Brandi. “Where Does Canada Sit 10 Years after the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples?” *CBC News*, 2017, www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/where-does-canada-sit-10-years-after-undrip-1.4288480

28 Ibid.

29 United Nations. “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.” 2007.

- Article 16 1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish their own media in their own languages and to have access to all forms of non-Indigenous media without discrimination.³⁰

These Articles direct nation-states to entrench Indigenous language rights into legal and Constitutional frameworks, and in doing so hand over the power to govern the enactment of Indigenous language education to Indigenous peoples themselves.

2.4.2 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC): Calls to Action

Released in June 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action are a comprehensive collection of ways forward for governments, individuals, the Canadian public, religious institutions and universities to move towards reconciliation. Out of the ninety-four (94) Calls, sixteen (16) refer to UNDRIP, this demonstrates a close connection between reconciliation and the entrenchment of UNDRIP in Canadian legislative exercises.

Specific to Indigenous languages, Calls 13-16 implore:

- The federal government to acknowledge Indigenous language rights
- The federal government to enact an Aboriginal Languages Act
- The federal government to appoint an Aboriginal Languages Commissioner
- Post-secondary institutions to facilitate Indigenous language learning³¹

These Calls align with UNDRIP's position that Indigenous language rights are to be a part of Indigenous self-determining processes and enactments of governance. While there is an implicit undercurrent of healing, there is a strong emphasis on formal legislative exercises that seek to entrench Indigenous language rights in order to a) practice reconciliation and b) reverse/diminish the impacts of previous devastating policies that facilitated the loss of Indigenous languages.

30 Ibid.

31 The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). "Calls to Action." www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

2.5 Wise practices for urban language preservation, revitalization and retention

Indigenous peoples have long recognized that preserving, revitalizing and retaining Indigenous languages is a social, cultural, spiritual, emotional and political requirement³². While advocacy continues to take place at various legislative spaces and places, practical and strategic community-based initiatives have taken hold in ways that have been proven to be successful as well as innovative methods that reflect technological advances, new research and ever-evolving priorities in Indigenous communities. Some of these initiatives and practices include:

- Friendship Centre programming
- Headstart programs
- University courses
- Language nests
- Full immersion camps
- Media (apps, Facebook groups, YouTube)
- Online tutorials
- Self-learning

While some of these practices are funded through various program dollars, many of them are volunteer-run or fundraised through bingos, auctions or other community donations. Scarce dollars and often complex and poorly administered Aboriginal Language Initiative (ALI) funding thwarts the ability for these programs and initiatives to operate and flourish³³. Despite these challenges, Indigenous individuals, communities, nations and organizations have enacted clever, resourceful, innovative and wise methods to preserve, revitalize and retain languages so that the hypothesis at the front end of this review does not ever come true – right now there are around (seventy) 70 Indigenous languages, if things do not change – quickly and aggressively – only three will remain. If this were to ever happen, the magnitude of devastation that would reverberate across hearts and nations would be deafening.

32 Galley, Valerie. "Reconciliation and the Revitalization of Indigenous Languages." *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Journey*, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2009, pp. 241-260, www.ahf.ca/downloads/trc2.pdf

33 Everett-Green, Robert. "Trudeau Promises Aboriginal Language Bill, But Activists Say Whole System Needs Overhaul." *The Globe and Mail*, 2016, www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/trudeau-promises-aboriginal-language-bill-but-the-whole-system-needs-an-overhaul/article33444970/

3 Methodology and Limitations

This discussion paper is based on the preceding literature review and on feedback provided by participants at the NAFC Indigenous Languages Symposium in March 2018.

3.1 Methodology

A preliminary literature review was undertaken in advance of the Symposium and highlights were provided as a PowerPoint presentation. The primary methodology for the literature review was a cursory exploration of publicly available literature relating to Indigenous languages in Canada, specifically: online materials, news articles, previously generated reports, academic writings, and other Web documents.

Regarding the Symposium, more than 45 individuals from all part of Canada participated in the two-day event. A number of methods grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge sharing were used to gather stories and perspectives, including formal facilitated sessions and creative practice.

TALKING CIRCLES

Small group talking circles provided participants an opportunity to discuss questions with their peers: Elders and Senators; youth; and program/policy experts. Each group was asked for their stories about: the role that language plays in building and sustaining healthy thriving urban communities; the challenges in learning and retaining Indigenous languages in urban communities; and examples of wise and innovative practices in language preservation, retention and revitalization.

REGIONAL TABLES

Participants were divided into their respective Provincial and Territorial Associations for regional table discussions. Each region was invited to consider how the Government of Canada could ensure that the needs of urban Indigenous people and Friendship Centres are addressed through Indigenous Language legislation and provide regional recommendations on the implementation of such legislation. As well, the regions articulated how other partners and stakeholders might be involved in the ongoing requirements for urban Indigenous language preservation, retention and revitalization.

DRUM STORIES

Along with formally structured knowledge gathering exercises, NAFC introduced a unique element that gave participants the opportunity to use art as a way of expressing their thoughts and perspectives about Indigenous languages. Each participant was given a mini hand-drum and some pens and markers. Everyone was instructed to tell their language story by writing and drawing on their drum. An accompanying index card was also provided to help tell the story of the drum. Each participant was then invited to share their stories with the rest of the participants and many powerful and meaningful images and stories emerged. These stories are discussed throughout this paper.

3.2 Limitations

The literature review in this discussion paper is not intended to offer a comprehensive analysis of the state of Indigenous languages in Canada, nor does it work toward recommending strategies moving forward.

The limited nature of the engagement and the fact that the 45 participants at the Symposium are not representative of all the views of all Friendship Centres across Canada means that the views and conclusions and recommendations made in this discussion paper are not based on extensive consultations. More research and engagement would need to be undertaken to gather and hear from more Friendship Centre voices across the country.

Notes from all talking circles, drum stories and regional table discussion were coded using NVivo and organized around the primary themes explored during the symposium. Subsequent analysis allowed for the creation of several sub-themes within each of the four main themes. Quotes in this discussion paper are taken from the transcription of drum story presentations.

This discussion paper reflects the perspectives shared at this Symposium through the methods explained above.



4 Sharing Stories about Indigenous Languages in Canada

As previously stated, an initial analysis of the symposium discussions yielded four broad themes. This section of the discussion paper is presented below by theme and sub-themes.

4.1 Indigenous Languages as Sacred and Alive

Across all groups and discussions, the notion of Indigenous languages as a living being that deserves protection was a common theme. Participants pointed out that Indigenous languages are sacred and living; that they contain the words and concepts that embody their ancestral cultures and ways of being. There was an idea that language is a being with a spirit that requires nourishment. In the same way that Indigenous people are stewards of the land; so too are Indigenous people the sacred stewards of the language. This was especially present in the Elder's group discussion in which many participants felt they have an immense legacy to carry forward.

*"The ocean speaks to us, that's where
our language is coming from."*

4.2 Indigenous Languages are tied to Identity and embody culture

All participants, even if they do not currently speak their Indigenous language, stressed the importance of their language and how it formed part of their identity as Indigenous people. Language is at the core of traditional ways; without language, it is difficult, in some cases, impossible, to transmit cultural teachings and a community-specific way of being and thinking without using an Indigenous language. Elders said that specific ceremonies, songs, dances are tied to language and to best understand and celebrate the culture, it is critical to understand the language. One Elder said this was the way to 'walk the Red Road.'

*"When we lose our languages,
our cultures will be lost with them."*

*"Now that I am middle age and a parent to a tweener I will begin
taking steps to return to the languages of my ancestors... They speak
to me. They encourage me to put aside my fear, pride and ego."*

*"Our children are aboriginal children but they don't know their
identity because they can't understand their
culture and their languages."*

“I am finding out within our language is our culture, that’s where all our culture is.”

4.2.1 Indigenous Languages Embody a sense of Pride, Community and Belonging

People are proud of their language, their culture, and their Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Learning and using their language was a source of pride and provided a deep sense of well-being and belonging. Most of the youth felt it was integral to identity, pride and an understanding of where they come from. One participant indicated that, “young people need to know where they come from in order to know where they need to go”. The youth also felt that language binds communities together and connects people to the land. The Elders reiterated that language is the core of traditional ways as well as identity. Many Elders spoke about how their connections to community were strengthened, such as by teaching Indigenous languages in their own urban communities, including schools and Friendship Centres. Youth expressed a sense of belonging when they were in a group (at home with family members, at school, at Friendship Centre, etc.) and they could speak to each other in an Indigenous language or that they were all trying to learn the language together.

“Indigenous languages are essential to learn cultural wisdom and Knowledge to value who we are.”

“My language is important to me because it provides me with a sense of belonging and it is a part of who I am and my culture.”

4.2.2 Indigenous Languages are connected to the land

There is a strong sense that, even for individuals who now live in cities, Indigenous languages are intricately tied to the land and that the land has much to teach us, and that this is often done through Indigenous languages. The land nurtures plants and trees which provide essential medicines for people. To understand these medicines and how they are integrated into the people and the land, it is important to use words and thoughts in Indigenous languages.

“My Language story is very much connected to the land and geography. It is inclusive of many different languages that reflect my family history. It is a story of loss and a story of resurrection. It has shame but it has so much hope.”

*“Language is inextricably linked
to ceremony and to the land”*

*“Our language is here on Turtle Island
and we should try very hard to keep it
and restore it and have it come back”*

4.3 Indigenous Languages Promote Health and Wellness

When speaking about the importance of language, there emerged a theme that learning and using Indigenous languages sits at the core of wellness and health. As one Elder said, “the language is not healthy now” and there must be healing for the language and as the language ‘heals’, so too will the people. Healing is also not just physical but mental. Participants linked a sense of mental and spiritual well-being with knowledge of their Indigenous language.

4.3.1 Language is Medicine

The Elders made frequent references to how Indigenous language promotes health and well-being, with many participants indicating how being or getting connected to language and culture has helped them on their own healing journeys, including in addiction recovery. Most Elders pointed to how Indian Residential Schools caused immense language loss and feelings of shame and self-loathing but that language revitalization can heal those feelings and overcome that prevailing sense of shame into a sense of pride, including pride in knowing that, despite everything that the colonial and Canadian governments have done over the years to destroy Indigenous languages, they continue to exist. Embedded in Indigenous languages are the elements that promote an Indigenous worldview; a view that is holistic and life-giving; a view that gives people the tools to live a healthy life.

*“Language is healing, when you return to (own language),
that means you are going to see yourself whole and
healthy and I think it’s the way to our prosperity
– mentally, spiritually and emotionally”*

4.3.2 Community Wellness

Discussions brought out comments from participants about a collective sense of well-being through the use of Indigenous languages; that languages do not only give people a sense of individual pride but that there is a sense of community pride and well-being when use of language is strong. This was linked to the importance of community learning and community healing; language revitalization must happen at the individual level but there must be concerted efforts to involve everyone in the community and to heal as a community so that everyone works together in the difficult task of language preservation.

“Language keeps us together, we need to stick together.”

4.4 Indigenous Language Learning and Preservation is All-Encompassing

Participants shared many ideas about successful Indigenous language learning and revitalization. The key theme was that the learning must be immersive; it must be incorporated into every aspect of peoples' lives in a wholistic way and there must be opportunities to speak the language, at every age, through the cycle of life.

“We all have different paths that we take in trying to figure out our languages. Some of us have started better than others, or we started off knowing more but at the end of the day we all have a different road we need to take to try and get there”

4.4.1 Immersive Learning Environments

Given that a number of the symposium participants said they were not fluent language speakers, there was a plethora of ideas and discussions regarding various Indigenous language learning needs. There was an emphasis on the need to learn Indigenous languages as a family unit so that the language is spoken in the home, and during everyday situations and occurrences. There must be consistency in programming, materials and teaching style. There must be safe spaces where people are not afraid to fail or to speak without being judged. There were also a number of specific language learning needs expressed by participants, including: better use and integration of technologies; more curriculum development; language teacher training (though not necessarily or only for government-recognized credentials); learning from each other in order to develop more innovative initiatives.

4.4.2 Use Innovative Teaching Strategies

Participants were eager to share their suggestions and recommendations for teaching Indigenous languages, particularly in an urban setting and had a number of other innovative suggestions and strategies that they believe would be effective in teaching indigenous languages. These include: land-based culture and language camps; language nests and other early-childhood interventions; language bingos; skits and dinners; videoconferencing and webinars.

Youth also had a number of suggestions related to technology and modern methods to teach Indigenous languages. These include:

- Developing Twitter/Google Translator/other online learning capacities
- Indigenous board games
- Internet home devices similar to those offered by big tech (“Kokum”)
- Adapting strategies with youth to meet technology
- Social media “memes” in Indigenous languages

“One day at a time and one word at a time, that’s what it’s going to take for me to learn my language.”

- Translating and covering popular music in Indigenous languages
- TV shows with captioning in Indigenous languages

4.4.3 Policy Considerations

The participants emphasized the importance of Indigenous language policy and legislation that is committed, builds capacity and focusses on a decolonizing approach. Figuring heavily into the discussions of funding matters was the imperative to build capacity and effective protocols and services. Specifically, when considering legislative development, participants urged that policies be:

- Permanent core funding; longer than five (5) years; not year-to-year
- Funded according to community needs and realities, for instance take into account Northern/remote costs
- Directed to Friendship Centres; urban-specific

- Inclusive of various languages and dialects
- Reflective of treaties, UNDRIP and TRC Calls to Action
- Incentivized to encourage young learners and families
- Respective of regional differences, challenges and needs
- Developed by Indigenous peoples, and
- Cognizant of urban Indigenous self-determination.

4.5 Responsibility and Leadership in Indigenous Language Revitalization

4.5.1 Elders and Youth

Elders frequently expressed their desire to teach their language and pass on their knowledge to younger generations. Teaching, however, is not just about formal teaching but also includes modelling cultural teachings such as humility, truth, love and respect. The Elders understand they have a heavy responsibility to share what they have learned and not to make excuses for not doing so. The youth, in turn, cannot make excuses for not learning and reaching out to Elders and teachers, because they carry the responsibility of learning, so that they will be the future teachers. Youth also expressed a desire for greater participation in the development of policy and legislation related to Indigenous languages to ensure that it reflects the needs and aspirations of Indigenous youth.

“Language helps me want to be more involved with our elders. They aren’t going to be around for long and we have so much to learn from them.”

“I am reclaiming my language. Although I had a broken life, all through my life I had teachers, [who] were willing to teach me.”

“To learn my language would be reconnecting with family, elders and community.”

4.5.2 NAFC and Friendship Centres

NAFC and Friendship Centres play a pivotal role in advocacy, coordination and communication. NAFC and Provincial and Territorial Associations (PTA's) will continue to advocate for the needs and aspirations of Friendship Centres and urban Indigenous people. NAFC and PTA's will continue to advocate for adequate funding. NAFC can also play a role in coordinating research and policy papers on Indigenous languages, such as a national framework on Indigenous language learning, a national research project into existing promising practices in Indigenous language learning in urban settings and providing networking and sharing opportunities for Friendship Centres to learn from each other.

Friendship Centres themselves can be central hubs for language revitalization, including providing safe and culturally relevant spaces for language learning, encourage youth and Elders to connect to share and promote Indigenous languages, and support initiatives that promote cultural teachings and language learning.

“Learning Indigenous language in the urban environment requires the identified Indigenous people to work together in love, respect, and peace to ensure the people in our communities are immersed in the languages.”

“My story starts in the city. Without my Friendship Centre community, I would be lost. In Halifax we continue to learn and grow while bringing back the Mi'kmaq language one word at a time.”

“Friendship centres should be on the ground, delivering language preservation programs.”

4.5.3 Government

The Government of Canada may be responsible for enacting federal legislation but Canada must follow through on its commitment for co-development; Indigenous people must be actively involved, and their considerations must be taken into account and reflected in the legislation.

Canada is also responsible for ensuring all Indigenous peoples, including Friendship Centres, are adequately funded to develop language revitalization and preservation initiatives. These initiatives must be self-determined and Canada must provide the autonomy to enable Friendship Centres to develop initiatives that meet the needs of urban Indigenous people.

4.5.4 Others

Participants emphasized the need for all Canadians to understand the importance of language to Indigenous people so that the revitalization of Indigenous languages is part of reconciliation, and that everyone can celebrate the unique and vital languages that come from this land.

4.6 What gets in the way of Indigenous Language learning and teaching

Throughout the discussions, participants outlined various challenges and negative experiences around Indigenous language learning and teaching. These are barriers and the things that get in the way of moving towards full revitalization of Indigenous languages. These are important considerations for NAFC in the context of the co-development of Indigenous language legislation with the federal government.

4.6.1 Critical state of language loss

All participants decried the rapid rate of decline and loss of language among Indigenous people, particularly in urban environments. Elders are passing on and they have not yet had the opportunity to share all of their wisdom and knowledge. Despite the awareness of this, there is not yet a concerted effort to capture and preserve the stories, thoughts and words of language speakers so that future generations can take advantage of this. Youth are particularly frustrated because there are so few opportunities in urban areas for meaningful Indigenous language learning and opportunities to speak and ‘live’ in the language. Some participants spoke of particular languages that are on the verge of extinction, such as Michif, and that this impending loss creates a sense of despair because there is a lot of work to do and not enough time.

“I recently went home for a family gathering. Some people were able to speak their language fluently. I listened and was able to pick out words meaning of their conversations. I felt like I lost my connection to family and relatives, my home.”

“The language is being lost and it’s being lost quickly. There are some communities that are fluent, that are speaking it but their children are leaving the community and losing it and not using it.”

“[Our] language is critically endangered. It’s just frightening to think about it. I hate to have to lose such a beautiful gift from our Creator, our mother tongue.”

4.6.2 Lack of funding

Most Indigenous language and community-based programs are run on shoestring budgets and are buffeted around on the whim of funding allocations and priorities of various levels of governments and other funders. Programs are established, funding is pulled and programs close.

This cycle is not only disheartening but frustrating because organizations and community groups and language instructors are unable to do long-term planning or build a foundation on which to build solid language skills. There is no long-term funding that is stable and predictable.

“The Government of Canada has to provide substantial funding...to make sure that language is being protected, promoted and saved for centuries. Not decades, not a couple of years – forever.”

4.6.3 Second language learning

For many Indigenous people, their Indigenous language is not their first language. This means there are many challenges to second language learning that must be overcome. If students are not in an immersive environment, this second language learning does not produce strong, bilingual speakers.

4.6.4 Lack of access to language learning opportunities

Friendship Centres welcome individuals from all cultures and regions and individuals are sometimes far from their home communities and their ancestral language and culture. This makes it difficult to find other speakers and converse in their own language. Friendship Centres are also currently not equipped to offer language learning opportunities for all of the people whose languages are represented in their urban centre.

Living in an urban environment also means that people are continually confronted with signs, documents, school and work environments in English or French. Many participants feel overwhelmed by how the dominant languages have infiltrated all aspects of their lives. This constant exposure to these languages has eroded the use of Indigenous languages. Youth were particularly critical of the lack of access to immersive and holistic language learning opportunities.

4.6.5 Language Teaching Credential Requirements

When students are taught a language in a school setting, the teacher must meet provincial/territorial or other government or school board criteria and credentials. This precludes many Elders and indigenous language speakers from being able to teach people in an educational

institution setting. If there is no language spoken at home, if there are no land-based learning opportunities and no speakers available, then people, particularly youth and those in urban centres, turn to the education system to teach them their Indigenous language yet they are not being taught by community language speakers; they are taught by formally trained teachers, which are not providing the immersive environment required for lifelong learning.

4.6.6 Shame and Trauma

There were a number of dimensions to comments about shame and trauma as it relates to Indigenous languages. A number of participants, particularly youth, said they have been made to feel ashamed that they do not speak their ancestral language. They said they felt disheartened and discouraged because sometimes their efforts to speak and learn their language is met with derision and even ridicule. There are deep and painful layers to this, partly related to how older generations were made to feel when they spoke their languages. Elders said there is still a long way to go in understanding the trauma caused by loss of language. The effects of residential schools were mentioned many times. When these individuals had their languages beat out of them and they were punished for speaking their language and when they were told that their language was inferior and useless, then some people internalized this hatred for their own language. Many stopped speaking their language and refused to teach their own children and grandchildren. This has led to lateral violence, fear of remembering or re-learning their language, triggers that keep people from discussing anything to do with language, especially among the older generation and also to a frustrated younger generation who now lament the loss of language and desperately want to learn it but find resistance from the very people who could help them on their Indigenous language journey.

“We all have to come together in a loving, peaceful and safe environment [...] in trying to learn our language. I find, myself, I don’t attempt it because I don’t feel safe in saying any words because I’m afraid I’ll say them wrong and they all come out wrong.”

“[English] totally bastardized the word “squaw” and made our women believe that it was derogatory, that it was shameful, that in fact it was swearing [...] Somehow, we let somebody else’s language come and vilify our mothers.”

“My mother made the decision when we moved north that she didn’t want my father to speak [our language] in the home anymore so the younger kids could be successful in the English community.”

5 Conclusion

This discussion paper offers relevant insights and direction for NAFC and greater awareness of the issues and priorities of Friendship Centres regarding Indigenous languages. Findings indicate that past colonial practices and policies particularly residential schools, have had a devastating impact on the lives of First Nations, Inuit and Métis in Canada. This is particularly evident in the decimation of Indigenous languages and the inherent shame, anger and deep sadness at this loss. During discussions at the Indigenous Language Symposium, participants were adamant that, despite the devastating loss of language and culture over the past centuries, there is a renewed sense of hope and optimism mixed with the sense of urgency and desire towards positive action. Indigenous languages are seen as living and embodied; they contain the cultures, stories, songs and Indigenous ways of being that connect Indigenous people to their history, their identity and to land. Indigenous language is medicine and has healing powers for those who know or are learning it; there is an indelible link between Indigenous languages and wellness.

There are still considerable challenges to Indigenous language revitalization, particularly in urban settings across Canada. Elders are passing on every day and taking their knowledge and wisdom with them. There is a critical need to record and capture that knowledge but capacity and resources are scarce. There are not enough language resources, teachers or curriculum for all of the Indigenous languages in danger across the country and in most cases, there is not a critical mass of learners in each city to offer relevant language learning in all of the dozens of languages spoken by urban Indigenous people. Young people, in particular, are frustrated and acutely aware of a sense of shame because they do not speak their Indigenous language yet are desperate to learn it, only to find that there are few places and spaces where they can learn in a safe, immersive and holistic way.

Indigenous language revitalization is not only urgent and necessary but entirely possible, as long as it is Indigenous-led and there is adequate support (financial, political and human resource) from all levels of government. Friendship Centres are uniquely positioned to support language revitalization efforts in urban centres and can do so with the support of its wide network of Elders and Senators, Youth, Policy experts, teachers and instructors, researchers and curriculum and policy developers. NAFC is a leader in urban Indigenous service delivery and has an important voice in the co-development of Indigenous language legislation that meets the unique needs of urban Indigenous people and reflects the perspectives of First Nations, Inuit and Métis who are part of the Friendship Centre Movement across this country.

6 Recommendations

The following recommendations reflect the key findings and bold steps that emerged as a result of the literature review conducted as part of this project as well as the reflections from participants at the Language Symposium. They are listed in no particular order.

6.1 Create a National Institute of Indigenous Languages in Canada

Symposium participants made a number of similar and related recommendations regarding the establishment of a national institute and/or archive and/or database. A few participants compared this to business clusters or superclusters, which is an area of activity containing a critical mass of partners that foster innovation.

NAFC could play a significant role in the development and maintenance of an archive, which will include all First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages while also respecting regional and community autonomy and self-determination. NAFC could be a central repository for Indigenous language materials, programs and curriculum and partner with other regional and community-based organizations for access to additional resources. Linked to this is the establishment of an Indigenous language database. NAFC could conduct the research and house the online database of all known resources in Indigenous languages. Canada recently provided funding to Library and Archives Canada (LAC) to support Indigenous communities in their efforts to preserve and revitalize Indigenous languages. NAFC could approach LAC and potentially partner in these efforts.³⁴

6.2 Conduct a National Indigenous Languages Needs Assessment and Research Project

There are widely divergent needs across the country and currently no accurate assessment of existing programs and initiatives trying to meet those needs.

NAFC and Friendship Centres could play a key role in the coordination and oversight of a national needs assessment by partnering with First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities and organizations to identify existing promising practices, curriculum and other materials, and community-developed research into specific needs for language revitalization and preservation. Ensure all research respects community research protocols and is led by Indigenous

³⁴ <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/aboriginal-heritage/Pages/indigenous-documentary-heritage-initiatives.aspx>

organizations and researchers (rather than educational institutions, or private companies, for example). There should also be an emphasis on promising practices and needs for the growing urban Indigenous population.

Results from the needs assessment and research can be shared with all levels of government to improve the teaching, learning and revitalization of Indigenous languages across Canada. This could also feed into the institute/database/archive recommended previously.

6.3 Advocate to make all Indigenous languages official languages in Canada

In the co-development of Indigenous language legislation, NAFC can advocate for the recognition of all Indigenous languages as official languages. This will elevate the status of Indigenous languages, ensure there is adequate funding for language preservation and a coordinated approach to ensuring Indigenous languages are monitored and supported. An additional recommendation is to install a Commissioner of Indigenous Languages who will be able to oversee the implementation of this official language designation.

6.4 Support Indigenous language signage in urban centres across Canada

NAFC and PTA's can advocate for federal and provincial funding to support Indigenous language signage in urban spaces (street names, parks, signage on buildings and public spaces for example). Friendship Centres can partner with municipal governments and local Indigenous communities and organizations to coordinate and implement an Indigenous signage initiative that reflects the particular language/s spoken in each urban centre where Friendship Centres are located.

6.5 Establish a federal department of Indigenous languages and education

This department would be led by an Indigenous person fluent in an Indigenous language. This department would oversee the dissemination of funding for Indigenous language revitalization initiatives. The initiatives themselves would be self-determined and community-developed and driven. The department can also liaise with regional organizations and governments regarding language speaker teacher training to ensure that there are not unnecessary barriers for language speakers to teach the language in an educational setting. If a language institute is created, as outlined in a previous recommendation, the department could work closely with the institute to implement departmental initiatives.

This department would work with all Indigenous groups and nations and support research and policy initiatives to strengthen Indigenous language revitalization. This department could also coordinate needs assessments, data gathering and other research (respecting OCAP© and other community research protocols) and share this information widely.

6.6 Support Friendship Centres to be Indigenous language learning hubs

This will require NAFC to advocate for funding for Friendship Centres and it will require Friendship Centres to conduct needs assessments and research to determine which languages are spoken by Indigenous people in their particular city. Friendship Centres will then need to develop or adapt curriculum, seek out and contract language teachers, and make space available for language learning. It may involve partnerships with local post-secondary institutions already offering Indigenous language learning.



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8 Drum Stories

The NAFC would like to thank all of those who participated in the NAFC's "Our Languages, Our Stories: Indigenous Languages Symposium." The NAFC would also like to thank those participants who participated by telling their stories through the drum. Many of the following pictures tell stories about, deep pain and loss but each also told stories of love, healing, hope and resilience. Participants shared their stories with fellow participants and these stories were used by facilitators in the preparation of the report. We are pleased to include the written verbatim narratives that were submitted along with some of the drums.



My name is Mayanidiy and I am from the Kwakwaka'wakw, Tsimshian, Coast Salish and Nuu - chah - nulth people.

My drum is done as a facemask representing my lineage and journey with language. I am third generation urban on my momma's side which is the apartment buildings and the big smoke. The mountain range and ocean represent the people I descend from.

As a young child my granny had me speak [our language] so I could eat. Then I started school and put my ability to sleep. When I entered junior high school, my need for language stirred so I studied French and Mandarin which was depicted by the red lanterns in the upper right corner.

Now that I am middle-aged and a parent to a tweener I will begin taking the steps to return to the languages of my ancestors. These steps are represented by the trails from the mountains to the ocean.

This returning is brought on by the desire of myself, child and close family.

The mouth in the ocean represents the voice of my ancestors. The wind/breath from the mouth is their voice in the wind and waves They speak to me. They encourage me to put aside my fear, pride and ego.

My granny gave me a drum when I graduated high school, she told me, "one day you will sing."



My language story is very much connected to the land and geography. It is inclusive of many different languages that reflect my family history. It is the story of loss and the story of resurrection. It has shame, but it also has so much hope - hope for kindness and generosity of who we were, who we are and who we will be. It's the story of love, lost and found and moving forward in a good way.



Relocation – loss of language and identity.

I left my home at 15 years of age, I had no one to speak my Anishnabe language with. I slowly quit speaking it and now when I speak it the words come out funny. I lost my accent. I recently went home for a family gathering, some people were able to speak our language fluently. I listened and was able to pick out words and meanings of the conversation, I felt like I lost my connection to family and relatives, my home!



Sookinchoot: Seeing one's self (Sukanakin)

Indigenous languages are a connection to creation, the earth, and our stories of belonging. Indigenous languages are essential to learn cultural wisdom and knowledge to value who we are. This artwork depicts healing within through reclaiming Indigenous languages

A return to one's self and community through reclaiming Indigenous languages.



My name is Shayna Burnouf. I am from Ile-a-la-Crosse, Saskatchewan. My language is important to me because it provides me with a sense of belonging and it is part of who I am and my culture.



Mother Earth: Giver of Life!



Learning Indigenous languages in the urban environment requires the identified Indigenous people to work together in love, respect and peace to ensure the people in our communities are immersed in the language.



The mountains to me are large and powerful. The river flows down from it. This is my power source. Mountains and water that moves can carry your troubles away, I give my worries to the water. A full moon rises behind the mountains, this is calling me to rise. The northern lights are my ancestors dancing above to remind me they are always there. The upside-down hearts represent the love from the spirit world being sent for me to carry on. The fireweed is the Yukon flower, it is also the first flower to return after the land has been devastated so to me represents hope.



The Red River cart was the Michif way of travel. Horses and dogs were valuable in our means of life.



The sun is shining on this beautiful morning over the mountain to the Michif tent down below people are still sleeping. "Wake up now, it's time to go picking roots and plants."



My name is Teila Whiteduck (Wapa-chi chi). Language helps me want to be more involved with our elders they aren't going to be around for long and we have so much to learn from them. Our language explains their feelings and words more than they can in English. My family is very spiritual. The Sundance Tree, the sun and the moon in the tree and the water represents that the land is very important part of our culture.



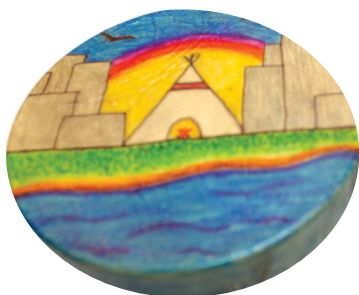
Three areas of my life:

1st: birth to adolescence;

2nd: 36 years of age.

Broken – Spaced – Lost – Drunk - Drugged up – Jail - Homeless!

3rd: Today! Happy – Healthy – Holistic!



My story starts in the city. Without my Friendship Centre community. I would be lost in Halifax. We continue to learn and grow while bringing back the Mi'kmaq language one word at a time. Our language is our culture and it is up to us to keep it alive. This is my experience growing up as a Mi'kmaq woman off-reserve. This is my reality and I'm going to live it to the best of my ability.



Mi'kmaw language forever.

This drum represents our resiliency as Mi'kmaw People to continue is to work together to preserve our language and culture.

The double curves represent our strength passing from generation to generation - our connectedness.

The light blue tears represent our grief and loss.

The two traditional symbols are symbols for native person and now - today representing our continuance. The feather is our spiritual connection.



Nitassinan = Innu Aimun

Language is not only culture but also a part of our identity. Speaking our language a way to connect your roots fully to our territory.

Those flowers, Orange Hawkeyes are blooming nearby my community. I like to think that those flowers are coming back every year since centuries like proof of survival. Each of us is a flower!



The journey from understanding much about your language when you were younger forgetting and then starting to relearn.



This symbolizes the flag of my First Nation (Piikani). Always be proud of where you come from and your mother language and teach the young people to be proud of your heritage.



*It is said the drum is given to the child.
The drum is the child.
The child was born holding
the drum in his hand.
He will change the world.
He will help us regain
our strength as people.
The drum is the circle of life!*

30

Drum Edmundson

*Voice – Rhythm – Ancestors –
Earth – Water – Air – Fire;
Grandmothers gather –
Storytelling – Interaction –
Food prep – Fun – Protocol –
Kindness – Sharing;
Come for tea.*



National Association
of Friendship Centres
Association nationale
des centres d'amitié