

SOLVING THE SGIG LANGUAGE CRISIS

Self-Governing Indigenous Governments (“SGIGs”) across Canada are making significant advances in bringing our visions for self-government to life under our treaties and agreements. But most SGIGs are at a crisis point when it comes to our languages because there are so few fluent speakers remaining. Our languages are all endangered, most of them critically so, and there is an urgent need to ensure the language is passed on to a new generation of speakers.

Under the Collaborative Fiscal Policy Development Process, First Nation SGIGs¹ and federal officials have spent two years working together with Canadian Heritage and expert practitioners to develop a language expenditure need model to meet SGIGs’ urgent and ongoing need in this area. The model is based on research about proven best practices in language revitalization, and what it actually takes to implement language programs that create new speakers. **Providing funding for language programs now will help ensure that our languages, and the histories and values they embody, are passed on to future generations.**

WHAT ARE SGIGS ASKING FOR?

We are asking Canada to support the phased implementation of the language expenditure need model. This would require **annual funding of approximately \$80 million beginning in the next budget cycle**, which amounts to 60% of the full model, or on average about \$2.5M per single community SGIG per year depending on its population. This immediate funding would allow SGIGs to develop and implement intensive immersion programs that have proven to be effective for creating high-level intermediate speakers within a few years. This is essential for creating a next generation of speakers and teachers in order to build the program foundation needed to implement the full \$135M annual model over the next 10 years. **We estimate a total investment of approximately \$995M needed over the next decade.**

The model outlines the capacity needed by SGIGs to deliver proven language learning programs for a wide range of community members.² These include:

- **Adult Immersion** – A cohort-based program, where participants commit to full-time learning over a two-year period. Drawing on the successful programs with Mohawk and Coast Salish languages, and in the Yukon by Champagne & Aishihik First Nations.
- **Preschool Nests** – Daily early learning immersion in the language, drawing on successful Maori programs from New Zealand that have been implemented worldwide.
- **Mentor-Apprentice** – One-on-one active immersion, using everyday activities and cultural practices as the vehicle for learning. One of the most commonly used and flexible approaches to language transmission.
- **Silent Speaker Programs** – Support for people who can understand the language but not speak it (often survivors of residential schools), including trauma-informed mental health support as well as language practice.

¹ Nunatsiavut Government is working on language resourcing through the Inuit Crown Partnership Committee.

² This model does not address K-12 language programs, as expenditure need for education is a separate matter under Canada’s fiscal policy on Indigenous self-government.

- Basic Proficiency Lessons – Weekly lessons to provide foundations for more intensive programs, and to support language use amongst those who cannot currently commit to intensive immersion.
- Multimedia Resources – Staff and contract capacity to support the development of multimedia resources in support of the above learning programs.
- Translation Services – In-house and contract capacity for translation of key government documents, communications, and meetings.
- Management & Administration Functions – In support of the above programs and services, including strategic direction, policy development, and inter-governmental support.

For each of these program and service elements, the model identifies a base level of staff capacity and operational funding required to deliver them well, plus incremental capacity and resources needed to address increased demand for larger populations.

The SGIG request for 60% of the resources identified by the model would enable us to implement first versions of key immersion programs, with a focus on immediate transmission of language knowledge from current speakers to a next generation.³ Many of this next generation of speakers would become the teachers for future cycles of these learning programs, which would be expected to expand over time.

WHY THE SGIG LANGUAGE MODEL SHOULD BE A FEDERAL PRIORITY

Our languages are key to our identities. Our languages are fundamental to who we are as distinct Indigenous peoples. Reintroducing our citizens to our languages is not just about learning to speak the words. It is about upholding the values and way of life that are embedded in our languages. We carry the sacred obligation of ensuring the knowledge and wisdom of our ancestors are preserved and revitalized for generations to come.

Language reclamation and well-being are deeply connected. The federal government has spent billions of dollars on social, justice, education, and health programming for citizens of Indigenous communities. But these programs do not address the root causes of the problems our communities face. Studies have repeatedly shown that reclamation of language has direct links to enhanced wellbeing and better socioeconomic outcomes at the individual and community levels. Many of us have seen firsthand how language learning has contributed to individual healing and has had a positive impact on our citizens' lives. Working together to bring the language model to life will help us get to the root of the problems, instead of just treating the symptoms.

Our languages infuse all aspects of self-government and modern treaty implementation. Connecting with our languages and cultures is not only important to us as individuals, but is key to our ability to operate as Indigenous governments. For many of us, the journey to self-government and the negotiation of land

³ Each SGIG would design and implement language learning programs according to its specific circumstances. The model is a well-researched proxy for expected capacity required, with resources to be provided via SGIGs' treaty-based fiscal arrangements.

claims was guided by a desire to regain our identity and to reinfuse our communities and governments with our core values. Building thriving communities means centring our languages in all we do.

We need sustainable resources to see this work through, and we can put them to work. Since entering into self-government and land claims agreements, SGIGs have invested significant time and effort into setting up the basic machinery of our governments. But we have not had the consistent and adequate resourcing necessary to do the work of truly reclaiming our languages. Self-government distinguishes us as a group, and gives us the tools and authorities to make these investments a success. We have taken on the responsibility for our affairs, and have the commitment and expertise to put this funding to work.

The *Indigenous Languages Act* commits Canada to establishing adequate, sustainable, and long-term funding for Indigenous language revitalization. Our collaborative work on the language expenditure need model is a government-to-government approach to assessing funding adequacy, in keeping with the fiscal relationship established under SGIGs’ self-government arrangements. The language model developed in the Collaborative Fiscal Policy process was co-created by SGIGs and Canadian Heritage staff. It implements Minister Rodriguez’s mandate to work alongside Indigenous partners to provide long-term, predictable and sustainable funding to preserve, promote and revitalize Indigenous languages. The model is evidence based, and represents the true costs of effectively bringing back our languages.

The time to do this work is now. Past federal policies have created the situation we face today when it comes to our languages. Now, we must work together as partners under our agreements to find a new and better path forward. If Canada is serious about reconciliation, investing in the recovery of our languages is one of the biggest and most important decisions the federal government can make.

CONCLUSION

The federal government has stated that Canada *“will support Indigenous Peoples in building the next generations of speakers of Indigenous languages. We know that Indigenous Peoples themselves are best placed to lead these efforts. For these reasons and more, the revitalization of Indigenous languages throughout Canada is and will remain a priority for me and for our government.”* Our work together on the language expenditure need model provides Canada a well-researched evidentiary basis on which to fulfill this priority and live up to the commitments the federal government has made to revitalizing Indigenous languages. We are inviting you to work with your SGIG partners to fundamentally reshape the future of this country for the better. Thank you in advance for your support.