

Sustainable Futures: Promotion of Diversity at all Levels

The preservation of a language in its fullest sense entails the maintenance of the speech community. Reversing language death therefore requires the preservation of the culture and habitat in which a language is spoken. While many of the languages spoken as mother tongues in the Himalayas today will likely only survive as second languages in the coming years, that is in itself no small feat. Supporting minority languages and halting linguistic decline must become an integral element in securing the sustainable livelihoods of diverse mountain peoples. Integrated development programmes which focus on the vulnerability of marginalised peoples in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region should introduce a component of support for the languages which are presently under threat.

Language Policy in Neighbouring Himalayan States

Given the incredible linguistic diversity of the region, it is worth comparing how other Himalayan states do, or do not, address the linguistic rights of minority language communities within their borders. This comparative perspective is instructive as the linguistic provisions in Nepal's new interim constitution are being framed.

Article 3 of the Constitution of Bangladesh as adopted on 4 November 1972 defines the 'state language of the Republic' as Bangla. Article 1.8 of the entirely bilingual (Dzongkha and English) Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan of 2005 clearly states that 'Dzongkha is the National Language of Bhutan'. The Constitution of Pakistan, adopted on 10 April 1973, is similarly unambiguous on the importance of its national language in promoting unity: 'the national language of Pakistan is Urdu, and arrangements shall be made for its being used for official and other purposes' (Article 251.1). However, unlike Bangladesh and Bhutan, the Constitution of Pakistan accepts that 'the English language may be used for official purposes' until the transition to Urdu is complete, and that provincial assemblies may 'by law prescribe measures for the teaching, promotion and use of a provincial language in addition to the national language' (Article 251.3).

While the laws of Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Pakistan promote a monolingual national identity, the Constitution of the People's Republic of China adopted on 4 December 1982 is in text at least more tolerant of minority languages. While the state 'promotes the nationwide use of Putonghua [Mandarin]' according to Article 19, 'people of all nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written

languages, and to preserve or reform their own ways and customs' particularly in autonomous areas or in local government (Articles 4 and 21).

The Republic of India has a more nuanced view of linguistic diversity, particularly compared to its regional neighbours, and many clauses of its constitution, most recently updated in 1996, allude to or explicitly specify the rights of minority language communities. Although Article 343 of the Constitution states that the 'official language of the Union shall be Hindi in the Devanagari script', parliamentary business may also be conducted in English (Article 120). Across India, however, individual states have considerable control over which languages should be used as the official media of state legislative and administrative business, and the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution lists 21 languages which have been officially endorsed by the central government as languages of state communication.

Looking at constitutional and legal provisions alone, then, Nepal appears to boast a fairly forward-looking policy with regard to minority languages, particularly when compared to its neighbours. It can be argued that smaller nations, almost by definition, must strive to foster linguistic unity – in the manner that Bhutan is attempting – to avoid balkanisation and ethnic strife. Large nation states, such as China and India, being at once so vast and heterogeneous, have little choice but to tolerate and even encourage local languages as tools of administration and education.

Another conclusion which might be drawn is that constitutional ambiguity is a shrewd form of governance. Ram Kumar Dahal, writing on the multiplicity of speech communities in India, notes that the aim of including English as the 'auxiliary language for at least fifteen years' was to help standardise and institutionalise Hindi 'all over India' (2000, p. 156-157). India's failure to achieve this goal has resulted in two languages of administration, education, and prestige, best illustrated by the kind of code-switching and rampant Hindi-English bilingualism which is so often seen in Bollywood films.

Signs of Hope: Projects Underway in Nepal and the Himalayas

To date, there are no active projects on languages and livelihoods in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region which interweave biological and cultural diversity with the aim of building sustainable futures for disadvantaged mountain communities. The Culture, Equity, Gender and Governance Programme (CEGG) at ICIMOD, which promotes the equality and empowerment of vulnerable mountain peoples for enhanced social security and reduced conflict, is planning to introduce a layer of project support for linguistic and cultural diversity to initiatives previously focused exclusively on biological and ecological diversity.

This author has been involved in a recent ICIMOD initiative to develop an atlas of minority languages of the Himalayas. Using scalable vector graphics (SVG) and JavaScript, this digital interactive Atlas of Minority Languages of the greater Himalayas allows users to search and retrieve data on endangered mother tongues in the region. The central interface is a scalable and zoomable map of the administrative districts



Welcome to ICIMOD...in eight different languages. The sign at the entrance to the old office gives an indication of the multilingualism and linguistic diversity of the 140 staff.


of all ICIMOD member nations onto which cities and rivers can be overlaid. The tools allow users to select from a list of language families or from individual languages, and to see in which districts they are spoken. More information about each language and its distribution, the number of speakers and its endangered status are provided. The Atlas is being prepared as a CD-ROM and web resource (Figures 10, 11, 12). Only languages spoken by under 100,000 speakers have been included and mapped in this Atlas, since the focus is on marginalised or vulnerable speech forms.

As one way of reaching out to the multilingual base of its constituents at the grassroots level, ICIMOD produced a brochure on the International Year of the Mountains (IYM) in four languages of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas: Chinese, English, Hindi, and Nepali, and has a welcome sign in eight regional languages (see above).

Terralingua <www.terralingua.org> supports the integrated protection, maintenance, and restoration of the world's biological, cultural, and linguistic diversity through an innovative programme of research, education, policy, and on-the-ground action. Collaborating with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and UNESCO, Terralingua staff have authored a number of excellent reports and maps on biocultural diversity and indigenous and traditional peoples in the world's 200 global ecoregions. The Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, India, recently announced that it is embarking on a new Linguistic Survey of India in 2007. A massive exercise involving at least 10,000 language and linguistic experts, the survey – the first in post-Independence India – will be conducted over a period of 10 years at a cost of IRs 280 crore (IRs 2.8 billion).² The survey is expected to examine the different speech varieties in the country, their structures, functions, scripts, history and demography as well as their spread, including diasporas, literacy and education, literature and all the linguistic artefacts, and media products that these speech varieties produce.

² USD 71.7 million approx. as of 2007

HKH Region Linguistic Mapping




Zoom (0%)

MOVE MAP

LAYERS

- HKH Cities
- HKH Rivers
- HKH Boundaries
- River
- Cities



Amu Darya, Indus, Ganges, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong, Huang He

Kabul, Islamabad, New Delhi, Kathmandu, Thimphu, Lhasa, Biqinapulla, Dhaka, Chulagong, Yangon, Yangtze, Kunming, Chengdu

HKH LANGUAGES

LANGUAGE FAMILY

ALL

LANGUAGES

- Kati (Bashgali, Katiwiri)
- Lasi (Lassi)
- Gangte (Gantie)
- Angika (Anga)
- Pangwali (Pahari, Pangli)
- Tseku (Tseku, Tzoku)

Extinct
 Moribund
 Highly Endangered
 Endangered
 Safe

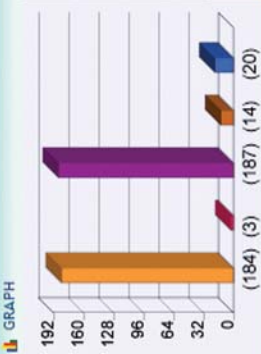
QUERY

Min No. of Speakers

Values: 10, 100, 500, 1000, 2000, 5000, 10000

Refresh Find

GRAPH



Language Family	Count
Extinct	3
Moribund	14
Highly Endangered	184
Endangered	187
Safe	20

LEGENDS

Language Family

- all
- Extinct
- Moribund
- Highly Endangered
- Endangered
- Safe
- Language Family
- Districts

INFO

User Location Other

Figure 10: Linguistic Diversity: An Atlas of Endangered Languages in the Himalayas (in preparation as a CD-ROM and web resource)

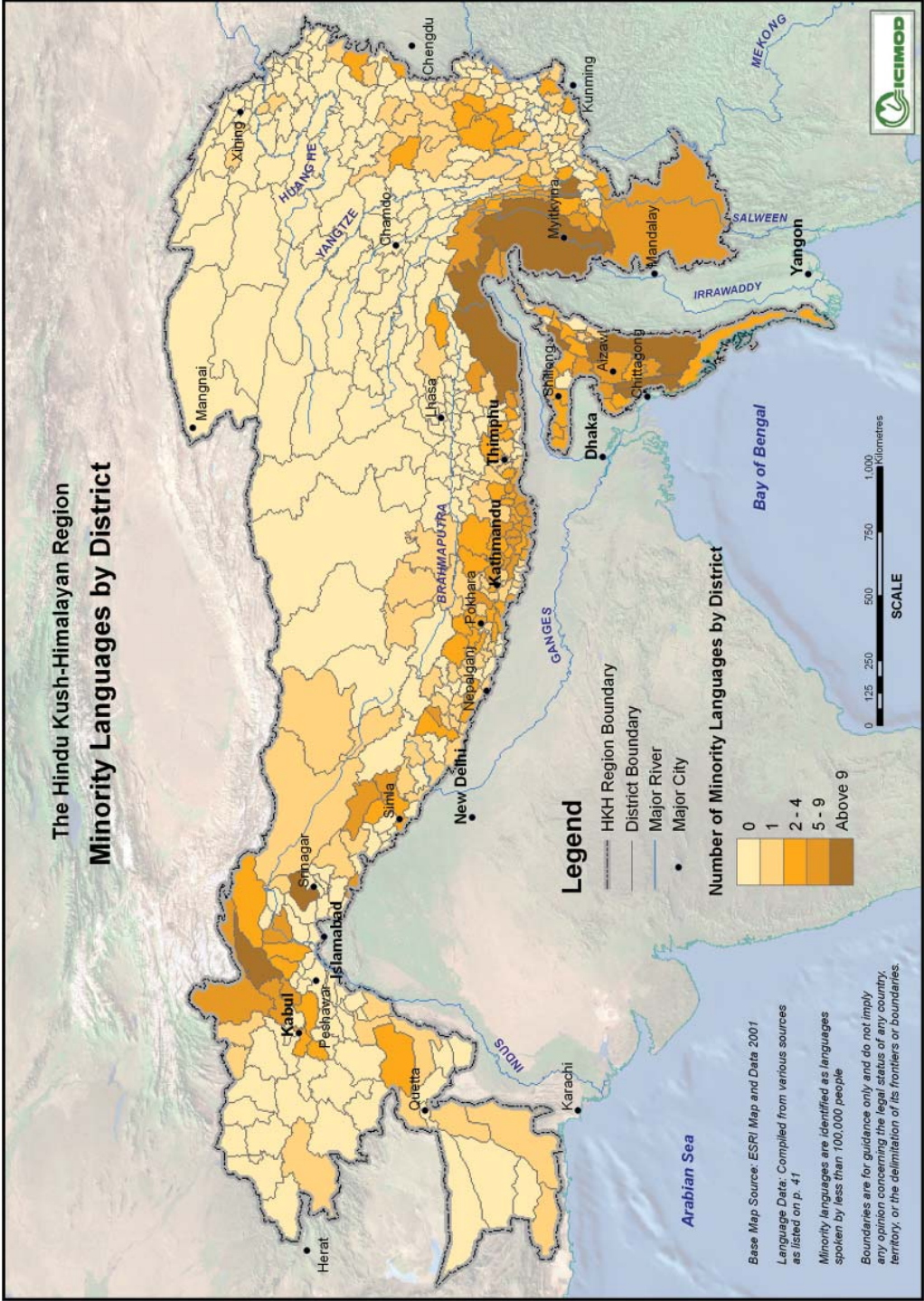


Figure 11: Map of minority languages by district in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region
Source: CD-ROM (in preparation), based on language data sources found on page 41

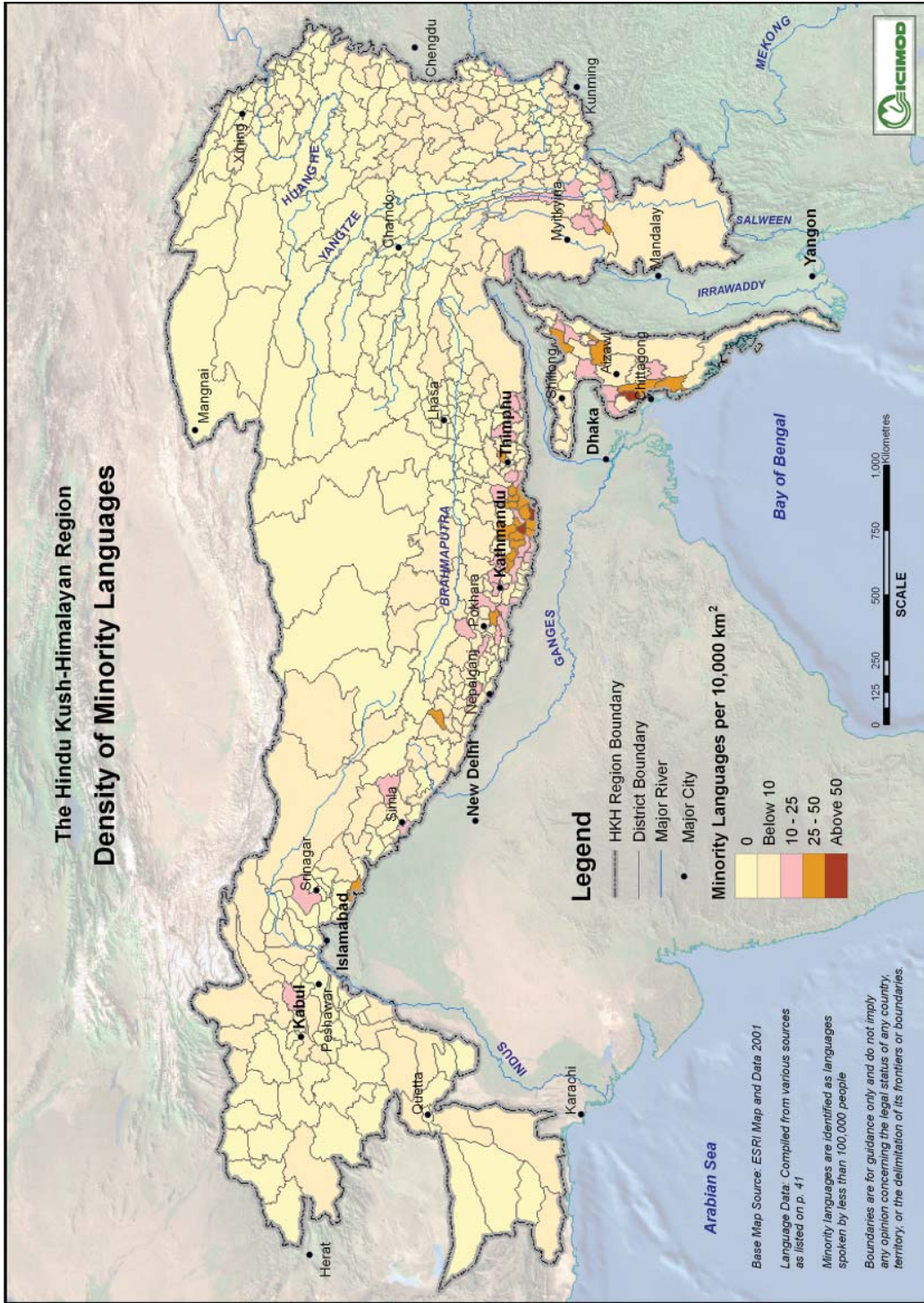


Figure 12: Map of density of minority languages in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region
Source: CD-ROM (in preparation), based on language data sources found on page 41

The British Department for International Development (DFID), through its Enabling State Programme (ESP), recently provided a substantial three-year grant to the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) to support the empowerment of Nepal's marginalised ethnic groups. Entitled the Janajati (indigenous ethnic group) Empowerment Project (JEP), the programme has the explicit purpose of increasing the participation of Nepal's disadvantaged ethnic peoples in socioeconomic and political processes at central and district levels. Focusing on local capacity building and strengthening civil society networks, JEP proposes to preserve and further develop Nepal's ethnic languages and help advocate for linguistic rights. Following on from JEP, NEFIN has been granted substantial funding in the form of the Janajati Social and Economic Empowerment Project (JANASEEP). The project is funded by European Commission and will be jointly implemented by NEFIN and CARE Nepal. The project aims to enhance economic and livelihood opportunities through empowerment of Dhanuk, Thami, and Surel Janajatis in Dhanusha and Dolakha districts, with a particular focus on the preservation of linguistic and cultural forms.

In terms of research output, the Central Department of Linguistics in Nepal has embarked upon an ambitious interdisciplinary project known as the Linguistic Survey of Nepal (LINSUN) which will identify and analyse Nepal's languages to produce an encyclopaedia and an archive for linguistic data on endangered languages. The Chintang and Puma Documentation Project, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation and administered jointly by the University of Leipzig in Germany and Tribhuvan University in Nepal, is working on the linguistic and ethnographic documentation of two endangered Kiranti languages of Nepal. The core objective of the project is to provide audiovisual documentation of language practice along with rich linguistic and ethnographic description. With financial assistance from the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project (HRELP) at the School of Oriental and African Studies, the Central Department of Linguistics has recently embarked on a new project to document Baram, a seriously endangered language of central Nepal, for its preservation and promotion.

Language revitalisation campaigns aim to increase the prestige, wealth, and power of speakers of endangered mother tongues, to give the language a strong presence in the educational system, and to provide the language with a written form to encourage literacy and improve access to electronic technology. Linguistic diversity is, after all, the human store of historically acquired knowledge about how to use and maintain some of the world's most vulnerable and biologically diverse environments.

As the writers of a hard-hitting UNESCO report conclude, "If during the next century we lose more than half of our languages, we also seriously undermine our chances for life on Earth. From this perspective, fostering the health and vigour of ecosystems is one and the same goal as fostering the health and vigour of human societies, their cultures, and their languages. We need an integrated biocultural approach to the planet's environmental crisis" (UNESCO 2003b, p. 44). Biocultural development projects need to involve and mobilise communities to revalue indigenous languages. Nowhere is this more the case than Nepal, where the country's vanishing voices are dangerously close to disappearing forever, taking with them much of the cultural heritage that makes the Himalayan region so unique.