

Letter to SLTU from the speakers of the world's unwritten languages – Steven Bird

The speakers of the world's unwritten languages number in the billions, but they were unfortunately unable to be here today, as they were too busy looking for resources. So they asked me to read this letter.

Dear SLTU-16 delegates,

Thank you for your interest in under-resourced languages. When you are ready to look at the smallest 95% of languages, please note these three points:

1. Our villages are geographically isolated. When we are displaced to big cities we feel alienated. We want to access the world's information too. So please help us learn other languages, and please help us translate *into* our languages, not just from our languages.
2. We are different from those people in the next valley. We're ready to tell you every word they have and the corresponding word in our language. Perhaps you could help us make a dictionary app.
3. Our oral history and environmental knowledge are the last things not taken from us. So we're reluctant to translate these stories into your language. But we like the idea of sharing our stories and knowledge with other minorities, and don't mind using your language as a pivot.

Finally, in your rush to translate and index everything, don't forget that we have untranslatable words. We have ideas you can never fully access. Our cosmology cannot be reduced to yours. Please recognise this, since it motivates us to keep our language strong.

Thank you.