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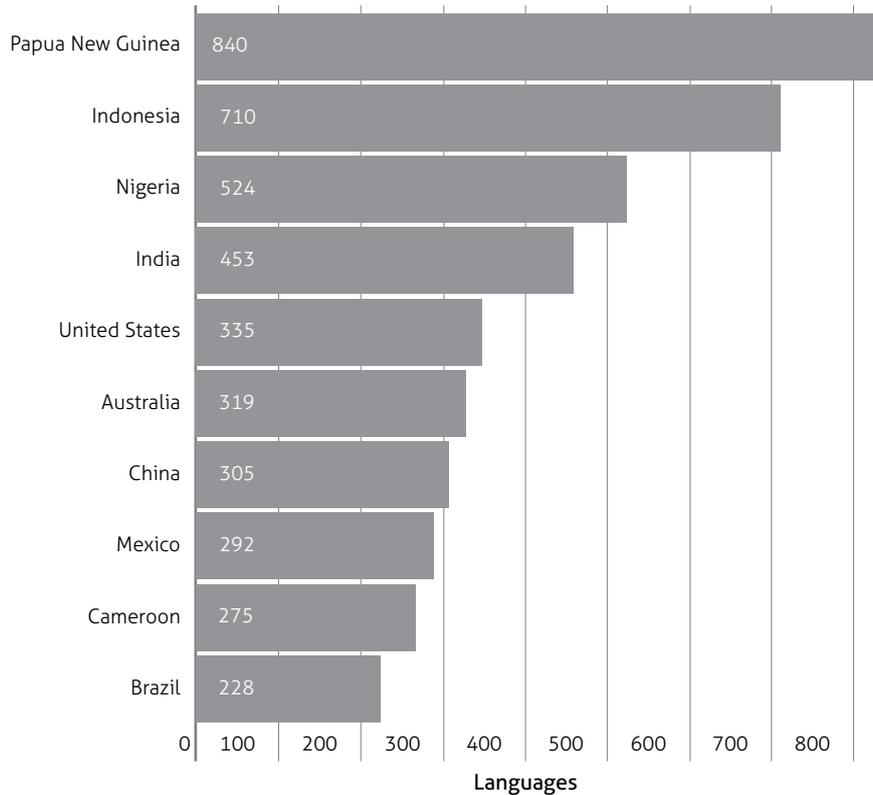
Mexico's Indigenous Languages An Overview

A language is a world view, a way of understanding and interpreting the world, and, with other dimensions of human communication, makes up an episteme, or a mentality.

The great number of indigenous languages spoken in Mexico also denotes the country's very broad cultural diversity, because each language expresses a culture with its mentality, customs, art, construction of values, and thinking. According to United Nations data, the 69 exist-

ing languages nationwide (68 indigenous languages and Spanish) recognized in Article 4 of the General Law on Indigenous Peoples' Linguistic Rights (LGDLP), make ours one of the planet's most multi-cultural countries (see Graph 1). What is more, the number of linguistic variations and dialects is even greater: it comes to 364, according to the *Catálogo de lenguas indígenas nacionales* (Catalogue of National Indigenous Languages).¹

GRAPH 1. TOP 10 COUNTRIES WITH THE MOST LANGUAGES, 2019



Source: *Ethnologue. Languages of the World* magazine, en https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/121653/Infografia_INDI_FINAL_08082016.pdf.

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Unfortunately this cultural and linguistic wealth is at risk. This is partially due to successive governments' historically failed public policies with regard to indigenous peoples. But also at fault are erroneous paternalistic approaches centered on preserving indigenous languages as though they were museum pieces rather than the creation of conditions for the first peoples to participate in national development without renouncing their cultures, customs, and convictions.

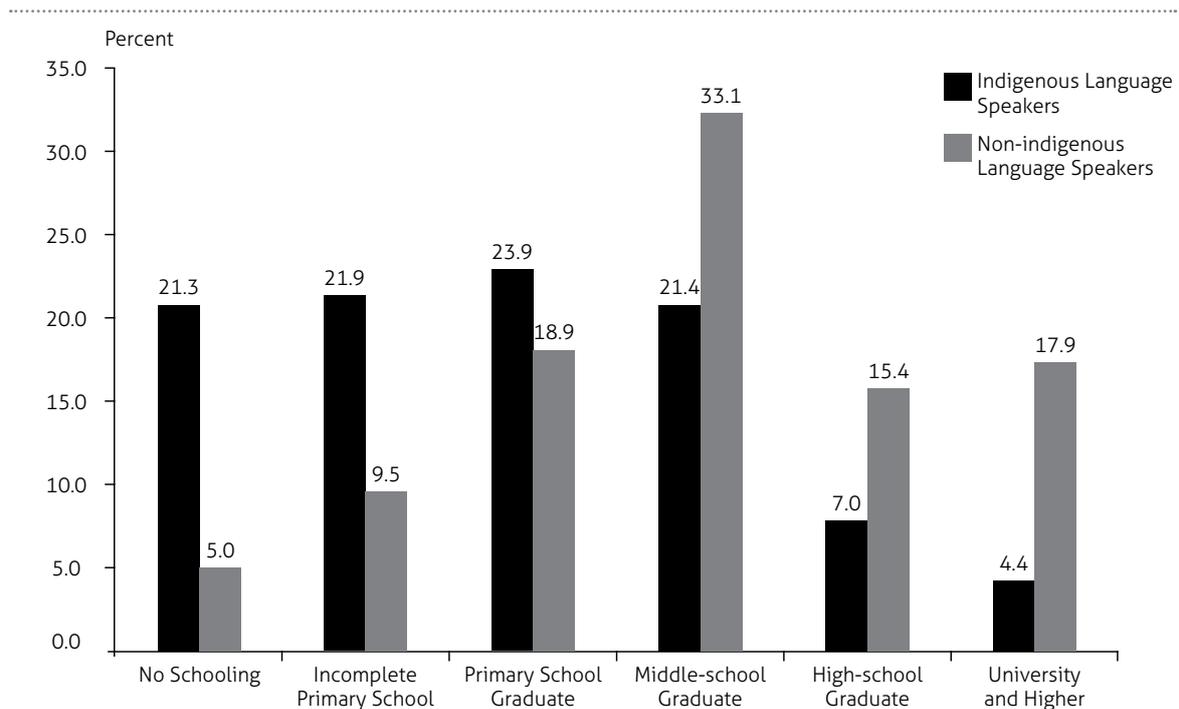
Demographic data from the National Institute for Statistics and Geography (INEGI) indicate that more than 25.6 million persons in Mexico self-identify as indigenous. Of those, approximately 7.4 million still speak an indigenous language: 6 138 000 are bilingual and 810 505 are multilingual.² Among the indigenous-language speakers, socio-demographic statistics point to their social marginalization and, on occasion, even discrimination. Some examples: if compared to mono-lingual Spanish speakers, their formal educational levels are much lower (see

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Graphs 2 and 3); the fertility rate is much higher (with 3.1 children per woman and only 2.2 children among non-indigenous-language speakers) (see Graph 4); and they are much more prone to be living in poverty or extreme poverty, or having a clear disadvantage *vis-à-vis* job opportunities or access to basic services and material well-being than monolingual Spanish speakers (Figures 1 and 2).

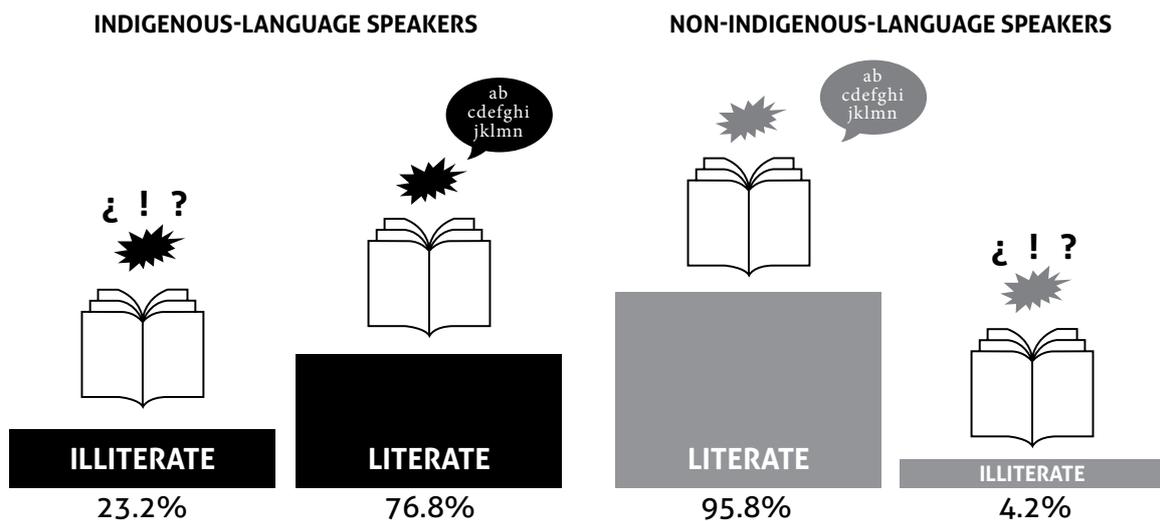
Their marginality and often frank exclusion have also led in practice to the new generations of indigenous-language speakers being smaller and smaller; many of the

GRAPH 2
PERCENT OF THE POPULATION 15 AND OLDER BY LEVEL OF SCHOOLING AND LANGUAGE SPOKEN (2015)



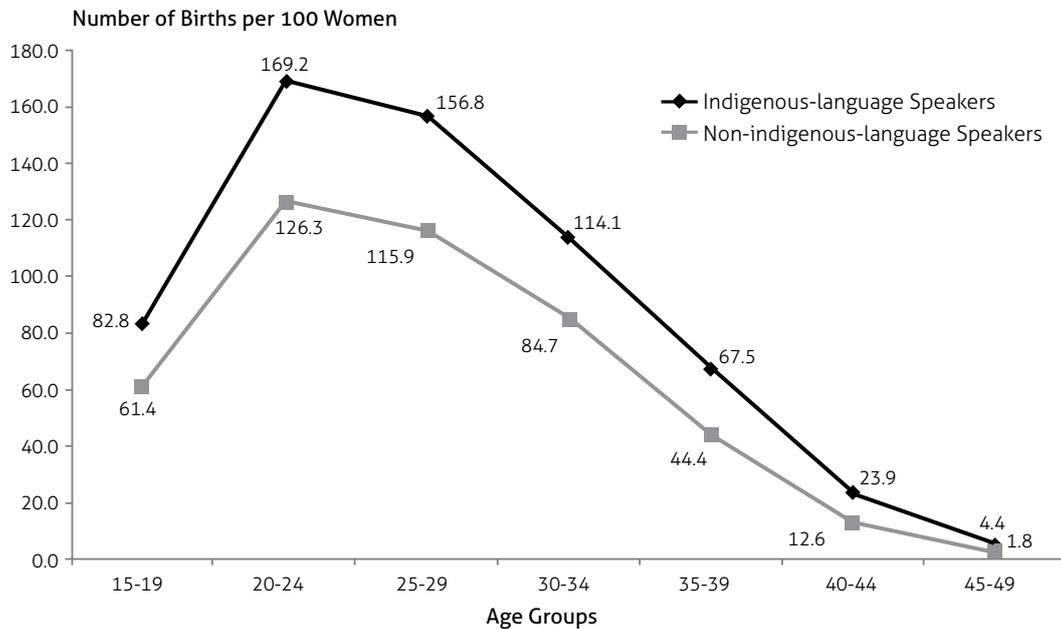
Source: Estimates by Conapo (Consejo Nacional de Población), based on Encuesta Intercensal 2015, https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/121653/Infografia_INDI_FINAL_08082016.pdf.

GRAPH 3
LITERACY



Source: INEGI (2015), <http://cuentame.inegi.org.mx/impression/poblacion/lindigena.asp>.

GRAPH 4
FERTILITY RATES FOR INDIGENOUS-LANGUAGE SPEAKERS
AND NON-SPEAKERS (2015)



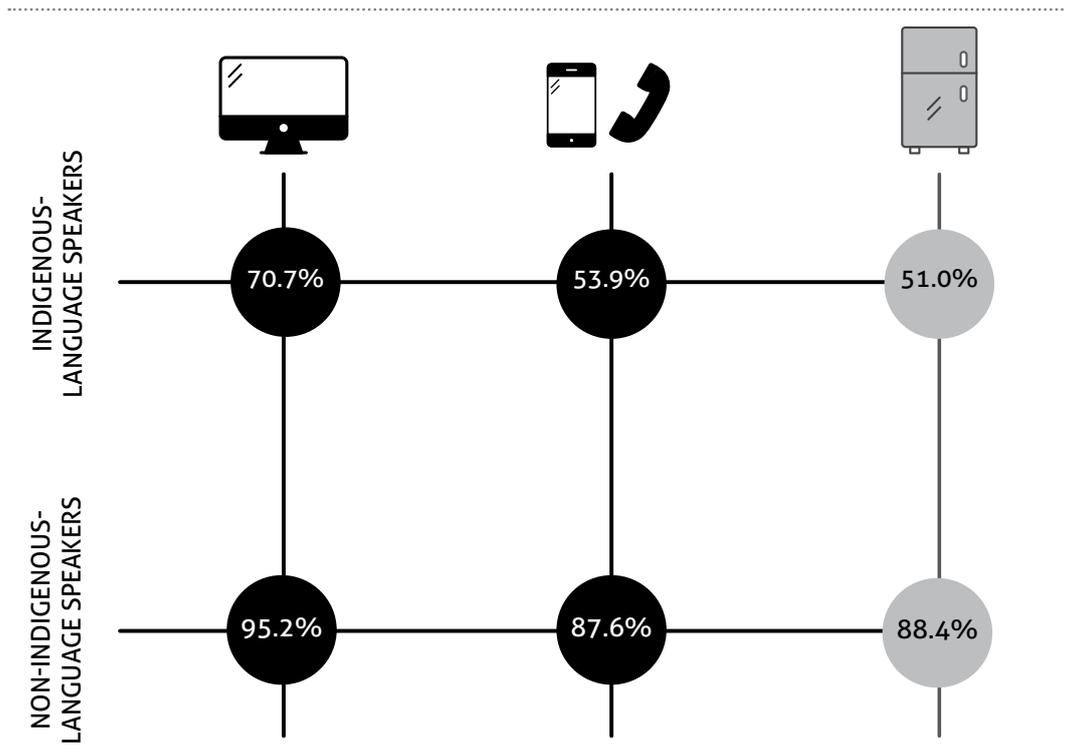
Source: Estimates by Conapo (Consejo Nacional de Población), based on Encuesta Intercensal 2015, https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/121653/Infografia_INDI_FINAL_08082016.pdf.

FIGURE 1
RATE OF PARTICIPATION IN THE ECONOMY



Source: Estimates by Conapo (Consejo Nacional de Población), based on Encuesta Intercensal 2015, https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/121653/Infografia_INDI_FINAL_08082016.pdf.

FIGURE 2
ACCESS TO SERVICES



Source: Estimates by Conapo (Consejo Nacional de Población), based on Encuesta Intercensal 2015, https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/121653/Infografia_INDI_FINAL_08082016.pdf.

languages are at grave risk of disappearing, and with them, entire cultures. Others have already disappeared (see Table 1); and few—or practically none—have been able to maintain a proportional number of speakers in recent years. The three most widely disseminated languages are

Náhuatl, Mayan, and Tzeltal (Table 2). The geographical areas with the largest number of speakers are in Mexico's South and Southeast, followed by Central Mexico, Veracruz, and Michoacán (Map 1). The states with the largest population of indigenous-language speakers are Oaxaca,

TABLE 1
DEAD LANGUAGES OF MEXICO

Extinct Indigenous Languages in Mexico	
Language	Last Spoken
Ópata	2000
Eudeve	1940
Lipán	1970
Pochutec	1980
Tubar	1940
Piro	XIX Century
Cuitlatec	1960

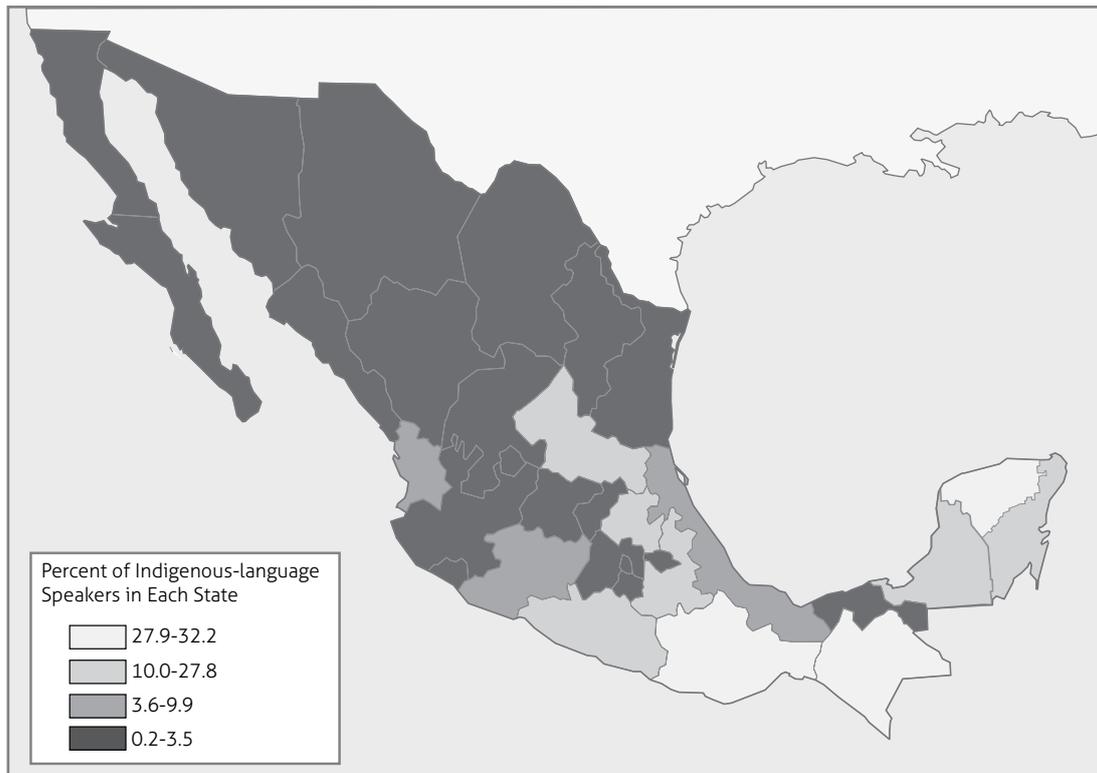
Source: INEGI (2015), <http://cuentame.inegi.org.mx/impresion/poblacion/lindigena.asp>.

TABLE 2 INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES MOST SPOKEN IN MEXICO

• Náhuatl	1 275 620 speakers (23.4%)
• Mayan	859 000 607 (11.6%)
• Tzeltal	556 720 (7.5%)
• Mixtec	517 665 (7.0%)
• Tzotzil	487 898 (6.6%)
• Zapotec	479 474 (6.5%)
• Otomí	307 928 (4.2%)
• Totonac	267 635 (3.6%)
• Chol	251 809 (3.4%) and,
• Mazatec	239 078 (3.2%)

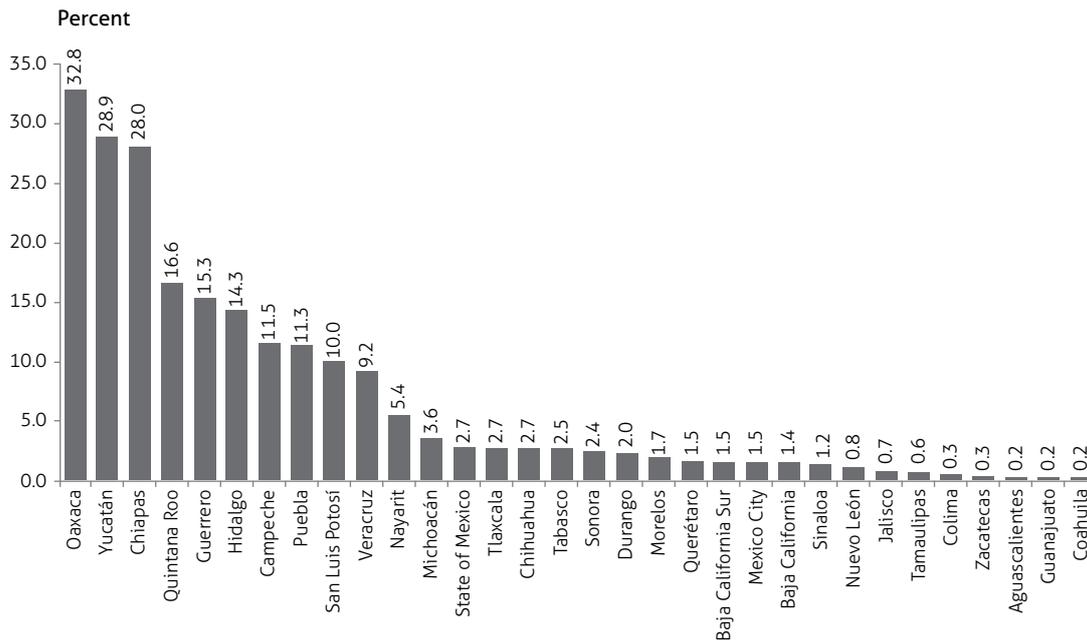
Source: Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas (Inali), https://site.inali.gob.mx/Micrositios/flin_2018/informacion.html.

MAP 1
PERCENT OF POPULATION AGE 5 AND OVER THAT SPEAKS AN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE (BY STATE)



Source: Estimates by Conapo (Consejo Nacional de Población), based on Encuesta Intercensal 2015, https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/121653/Infografia_INDI_FINAL_08082016.pdf.

GRAPH 5
PERCENT OF THE POPULATION THAT SPEAKS AN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE (BY STATE)



Source: Estimates by Conapo (Consejo Nacional de Población), based on Encuesta Intercensal 2015, https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/121653/Infografia_INDI_FINAL_08082016.pdf.

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Yucatán, and Chiapas, in that order, which together concentrate 42.6 percent of the total (Graph 5).

The National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI) and the Inali have made great efforts not only to support the preservation and development of indigenous cultures and languages, but also to create awareness among the general public of the need to create conditions that will guarantee them fully equal rights and obligations. However, socio-demographic indicators show that government actions and public policies have not been enough. Perhaps it is also necessary to allow the indigenous peoples themselves and their independent, non-government-influenced organizations, such as the National Coordinating Committee of Indigenous Peoples or the Chiapas autonomous Zapatista communities, to play more of a leading role in defining the public strategies that affect their interests. This would

presuppose a change in paradigms, moving away from a vision that seeks to integrate, “assimilate” the communities into national development, implying that they generally take on board the language and culture of mainstream society, and toward a multicultural perspective that, rather, promotes or fosters peaceful and mutually enriching co-existence among all the country’s groups and cultural world views. ■■■

▼
Notes

- 1 The catalogue indicates the language, its variations, and the places it is spoken; the names of the languages are listed in their original phonetic form and in Spanish; https://site.inali.gob.mx/pdf/catalogo_lenguas_indigenas.pdf.
- 2 Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas (Inali), Sections “Datos duros” and “Lenguas más habladas,” https://site.inali.gob.mx/Mi_crositios/flin_2018/informacion.html.