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Intergenerational gaps and linguistic decline in Ecuador's indigenous communities: A socio-legal analysis

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Abstract

This interdisciplinary study assesses the effectiveness of Ecuadorian legislation, specifically the Constitutions of 1998 and 2008, which are pioneers in the recognition of native peoples and nationalities, in protecting indigenous languages as fundamental cultural rights in the face of a marked linguistic decline. Using a mixed methodological approach, we examine the coherence between legislative intentions and their practical implementation in safeguarding indigenous linguistic diversity in Ecuador. Through a quantitative analysis based on data from the 2001, 2010, and 2022 population censuses, a significant reduction in the use of indigenous languages among the younger generations is evidenced, indicating a growth in the transmission gap. This finding highlights the urgent need to develop effective legislative and policy interventions that actively promote the use and transmission of these languages among future generations.

Keywords: Cultural rights, Ecuadorian legislation, Indigenous communities, linguistic decline, linguistic preservation, and a socio-legal perspective.

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1. Introduction

The study aims to assess the coherence and effectiveness of Ecuador's legislation in safeguarding the languages of its indigenous peoples and nationalities as fundamental cultural rights, in the face of evidence of accelerated linguistic decline.

This study shows an alarming reality: indigenous languages in Ecuador are in imminent danger of extinction. Through a qualitative and quantitative analysis, it has been shown that, if urgent and effective measures are not taken, these languages could disappear, erasing with them an irreplaceable part of the cultural identity and heritage of indigenous peoples. The

evidence gathered underscores the critical need for legislative and policy interventions that not only recognize the uniqueness of these cultural expressions but also promote their active use and transmission to future generations [1].

In the National Constituent Assembly [2], Ecuador marked a milestone in its legislation by declaring itself constitutionally, for the first time, a pluricultural and multiethnic state, officially recognizing the diversity of peoples and nationalities that make up the country's social fabric. This recognition, although significant, was considered belated by many, given that it is precisely these groups that are the original inhabitants of Ecuadorian territory. The 1998 Constitution advanced this recognition by granting official status to "ancestral languages" within indigenous communities, establishing a legal precedent for the protection of linguistic diversity [3].

Ten years later, the 2008 Constitution, to deepen this commitment to indigenous peoples, not only reaffirmed their recognition but also incorporated principles such as "Sumak Kawsay" (Good Living). According to Clavero, this concept, rooted in indigenous cosmovisions, promotes a holistic approach to development, emphasizing the preservation of the territorial and cultural rights of ethnic minorities [4]. The adoption of this philosophy in the Magna Carta was the basis for the creation of the "Plan Nacional para el Buen Vivir", orienting national planning, among others, towards cultural preservation and respect for diversity.

As a result of these constitutional advances, the Organic Law of Intercultural Education (Ley Orgánica de Educación Intercultural) LOEI was created and enacted to integrate the principle of interculturality within the educational system. This legislation represented a proposal for the recognition and valuation of cultural and linguistic diversity in the educational sphere [5]. However, a question arises regarding the effective implementation of these regulations: To what extent have these legislative efforts materialized into concrete practices that genuinely benefit the preservation of indigenous cultural wealth?

According to Chisaguano, this question invites a critical evaluation of the distance between legislative intent and its practical application, which is essential for understanding the real impact of intercultural education policy in Ecuador [6].

The quantitative analysis reveals a significant decrease in the use of indigenous languages among the younger generations, contrasting with a higher prevalence among older populations. Using data from the National Institute of Statistics and Census of Ecuador (INEC), from the 2001, 2010, and 2022 Population Censuses, a worrying trend was identified: the intergenerational gap in indigenous language use in Ecuador has progressively increased from 15.03% in 2001 to 48.32% in 2022, indicating a continuous decline in the prevalence of indigenous language use.

This study not only highlights the challenges faced by these communities but also highlights their resilience and ability to adapt to a changing environment while raising critical questions about the effectiveness and fairness of current legal policies in safeguarding their fundamental rights [7]. The relevance of this work extends to the field of international law and human rights, providing a critical view of how national and international regulations address, or in some cases, neglect, the protection of cultural and linguistic diversity [8].

This study is structured in three main parts: first, the legal framework and public policies related to language preservation are analyzed; second, quantitative findings on the intergenerational gap in the use of indigenous languages are presented; and third, the implications of these findings in the socio-legal context are discussed. Throughout the article, we seek to demonstrate how quantitative data supports qualitative observations and how both approaches complement each other to provide a comprehensive view of the problem.

2. Methodology

The mixed methodological approach of this study allows for an in-depth understanding of linguistic decline in indigenous communities. While the qualitative analysis examines the legal framework and public policies, the quantitative analysis, based on census data, provides empirical evidence on intergenerational trends. This combination of methods ensures that hard data and vice versa, qualitative findings support.

This study is based on a mixed methodological approach that combines qualitative and quantitative analysis to provide a comprehensive socio-legal evaluation of the laws in Ecuador in terms of cultural rights, specifically in the linguistic preservation of the ancestral languages of indigenous communities. The qualitative phase begins with an examination of legal texts, official documents, and relevant academic literature, allowing us to interpret and understand the trajectory and impact of legislation and public policies on indigenous linguistic diversity [9].

This analysis focuses on a review of certain features of Ecuador's 1998 and 2008 Constitutions, relevant legislation reports from governmental entities and non-governmental organizations, and national public policy strategies. Through this approach, a comprehensive view of the current legal and political framework is obtained, critically evaluating how it has affected the conservation and promotion of ancestral languages in the country.

In the quantitative stage of this research, we meticulously selected primary information sources known for their rigor and high reliability. For this purpose, we chose to use the data provided by the Population Censuses of Ecuador corresponding to the years 2001, 2010, and 2022 [10]. This analysis focused specifically on that segment of the population that self-identifies as "indigenous".

The target population was segmented into different age groups to adopt an intergenerational perspective and analyze the variability in the prevalence of indigenous language use among generations. We proceeded to calculate both the percentage and the number of self-identified Indigenous individuals who, within each age group, do or do not speak an indigenous language. This facilitated the identification of patterns of linguistic transmission across generations and made it possible to evaluate the effectiveness of public policies focused on the preservation of these languages. The concept of "gap in indigenous language use" was introduced to refer to the percentage disparity in language use among the selected age groups, which provides a quantitative indicator of generational change in language preservation, as seen in each of the censuses.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Indigenous Languages Condemned to Oblivion

The disappearance of indigenous languages represents not only the loss of a language but also of invaluable symbolic capital that encompasses knowledge, traditions, and cultural practices unique to each linguistic community. The consequences of implementing intercultural policies superficially in areas such as education and communication, instead of fostering a true understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity, end up trivializing and folklorizing indigenous cultures. Alvarez states that "folklorization" is the process of reducing significant cultural aspects to superficial stereotypes, consumed as curiosities or entertainment, thereby stripping them of their original meaning and value.

In addition, there is a significant challenge to the preservation of indigenous languages: the negative perception that some communities have of their own language and culture. As Hernández states, this phenomenon is best understood by considering a variety of socioeconomic and cultural factors that affect the appreciation of mother tongues, which in turn impact individual and collective decisions regarding their use and transmission [11]. This suggests that the protection of cultural rights should not be limited to addressing this factor in isolation; instead, it requires an integrated approach that also contemplates improving the living conditions of these communities. It is often mistakenly believed that learning and using the mother tongue can restrict opportunities for socioeconomic advancement. Taking into account what [12] says, this problem is not isolated and is deeply rooted in community history, influenced by colonization, globalization, and educational and linguistic policies that have privileged dominant languages, relegating indigenous languages to the background [12]. According to Garcés [13], the intersection of linguistic revitalization and socioeconomic development offers a promising path toward the preservation of indigenous languages within a framework of respect, dignity, and equal opportunity [13].

According to Jorge [14], the viability of strategies aimed at rescuing endangered or weakened languages depends mainly on the availability of speakers who still actively use the language in question [14]. This availability refers to the existence of a significant corpus of spoken language that can serve as an authentic model for those individuals who do not speak the language or who have ceased to use it. The presence of speakers who continue to use the language in their daily lives, encoding and transmitting ancestral and cultural knowledge through oral means such as myths, songs, and the naming of natural and cultural elements, is a fundamental pillar for any linguistic revitalization effort.

3.2. Recognition of Indigenous Peoples, Constitutions: 1998 and 2008

The 1998 Constitution in Ecuador marked a turning point in the recognition, albeit belated, of the rights of indigenous peoples, by establishing a change in the way the country recognized its cultural and ethnic diversity [2]. This document established a unity of the nation based on the diversity of regions, peoples, ethnicities, and cultures. In its form of government, Article 1, proclaimed Ecuador as a "unitary, pluricultural and multiethnic social state". It also declared Spanish as the official language and recognized ancestral languages as being of "official use for indigenous peoples". By limiting the official use of indigenous languages exclusively to indigenous peoples, linguistic segregation can be perceived. This limitation suggests that, although indigenous languages are recognized, their use and relevance are circumscribed to indigenous communities, without promoting their integration into the broader national sphere. According to Pere [15], restricting the official use of these languages to indigenous communities creates barriers to cultural integration [15].

Further on, Article 3 states that the State must "Defend the natural and cultural heritage of the country and protect the environment", something that seems static, and that presupposes that culture is intact and that there is no need for effective promotion of cultures, besides the fact that in the 1998 Constitution Ecuador conceives the idea of rurality (environment or natural heritage) with culture. This concept does not have clear support.

Articles 62 to 65 of this Constitution, which fall under the section dedicated to "economic, social and cultural rights," recognize culture as a fundamental component of a people's identity. However, these same articles conceptualize culture in a way that seems external to the everyday life of the population, treating it as an element that may or may not be accessed. Although the importance of conserving, protecting, and restoring language is mentioned as a critical aspect, there is a tendency to confuse cultural manifestations with the intrinsic culture of different peoples. This approach suggests an interpretation of culture as something separate from the living, everyday practices of communities, instead of seeing it as an integrated and vital fabric within which language and other cultural expressions are inseparable and dynamic components of collective identity. According to Juan [16], this distinction is fundamental to understanding and implementing cultural policies that truly reflect and foster the richness and diversity of each community's cultural practices [16]. Preservation policies must integrate cultural manifestations, reflecting their vital, everyday community roles and the complementary nature of Western and indigenous perspectives. This approach is based on the idea that indigenous thinking, with its holistic nature, and Western thinking can coexist harmoniously, offering a richer and fuller vision of life and wisdom. Indigenous peoples, by maintaining their cultural traditions and practices, demonstrate not only their relevance in the present but also their ability to integrate into modernity. According to Martínez Novo, this understanding highlights the need for cultural policies that not only protect cultural expressions as relics of the past but also recognize their active and evolving role in contemporary society [17].

Article 69 of the 1998 Constitution, by establishing intercultural education and recognizing the use of the corresponding indigenous language (corresponding to each population) as the main language, along with Spanish for intercultural relations, reflects an effort to preserve linguistic and cultural diversity that is superfluous since, from a critical perspective, this provision may inadvertently contribute to the segregation of the use of indigenous languages within their communities. Limiting the scope of use of these languages to the internal educational context and not promoting their integration into broader public and national spaces does not effectively encourage their revitalization but rather perpetuates their exclusion [18]. This approach reinforces, intentionally or unintentionally, linguistic and cultural barriers, confining the use and

development of indigenous languages to specific contexts and not as an integral part of the public sphere and national interaction. According to Sayago Armas [19], the true revitalization of indigenous languages requires strategies that transcend intercultural education and seek their normalization in all spheres of society [19].

In April 2007, Ecuador's decision to convene a Constituent Assembly to draft a new Constitution was a remarkable event, resonating deeply with social movements and, in particular, with the indigenous movement. CONAIE's proposal, articulated in its document "propuesta frente a la Asamblea Constituyente", called for the "construction of a plurinational state" that would eradicate the "colonial and monocultural shadows" [20]. This call to action criticized the previous 1998 Constitution for its lack of progress on indigenous rights, highlighting the challenges of discrimination and poverty faced by indigenous peoples. This analysis reflects an effort to redefine national identity and promote a more equitable society [21].

A preamble that highlights its intercultural identity distinguished the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution, recognizing the deep millenary roots and the essential importance of the "Pacha Mama" for the existence of the Ecuadorian people. This preamble underlines the country's commitment to diversity and harmony with nature, fundamental to the concept of good living (*sumak kawsay*), reflecting the intrinsic value of interculturality in the state structure. This approach represents an alternative to Western constitutional models by prioritizing the cultural and traditional elements in the protection of fundamental rights, without establishing a hierarchy among them [22]. It also suggests that the adoption of indigenous values and legal systems in Andean constitutions does not minimize the importance of fundamental rights, but interprets and integrates them within an ancestral and indigenous value and legal framework. According to Nocera, the pre-existence of indigenous peoples and their traditions is highlighted as a vital factor in the definition of fundamental rights and freedoms, suggesting that the inclusion of indigenous principles broadens the protection of human rights by embracing cultural aspects [23].

This 2008 Constitution, which followed the 1998 constitutional reform, was presented as an even more significant advance, declaring Ecuador as an intercultural and plurinational state (National Assembly of Ecuador, 2008). This reform expanded the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples, including aspects such as the right to maintain and strengthen their identities, traditions, languages, and ways of life.

The concept of multinationalism is closely related to the principle of plurinationalism by recognizing the coexistence of various nations or "national minorities" within a state, each with its self-government, culture, and history, before their integration into a majority culture. This perspective is aligned with ILO Convention 169, highlighting the importance of preserving indigenous peoples' own institutions and their right to a territory where they can guarantee their survival.

In this framework, plurinationalism is presented as an evolution of multinationalism, emphasizing a state that not only recognizes but actively supports and promotes cultural and national diversity within its political and social structure, ensuring an equitable and respectful participation of all the nations that compose it [24].

Article 2 of the Constitution of Ecuador establishes Spanish as the official language, and also recognizes Kichwa and Shuar as official languages for intercultural dialogue, marking a state commitment to linguistic diversity. This recognition obliges the State to adopt a proactive role in the preservation and promotion of these languages, reflecting a willingness to integrate and value the rich cultural heritage of indigenous peoples in national life.

Of the latter Constitution, the articles dedicated to the rights of indigenous peoples, in particular Article 57, establish a range of collective rights that include the preservation of identities, traditions, and languages. Despite these important recognitions, the post-2008 practical reality has demonstrated significant challenges in the effective materialization of these rights. The gaps between legal recognition and effective implementation have become a central issue of concern, highlighting the need for more effective mechanisms to guarantee the fulfillment of these rights, especially the preservation of indigenous language, which, as demonstrated later in this study, is in worrying decline.

3.3. The Organic Law on Intercultural Education and Some Legislative Initiatives for the Promotion of the Cultural Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Legislative action and the implementation of policies in Ecuador aimed at the protection of linguistic rights have been slow to materialize. This delay, evident in the years that have elapsed since the establishment of the initial constitutional framework, highlights the evolving and often slow nature of legal consolidation in the field of indigenous and other minority rights. The relevance and urgency of these measures are accentuated when considering the time elapsed, highlighting the importance of a timely and effective legislative response.

In 2007 and 2008, Ecuador's National Constituent Assembly undertook reforms in the education system, as reflected in the Montecristi Constitution. These reforms were aimed at centralizing the education system, including the inclusion of at least one ancestral language in the curricula, as specified in Article 347. Article 345 categorizes education as an essential public service, but the practice has shown challenges in achieving the anticipated ideals of inclusion and cultural diversity.

The Organic Law of Intercultural Education, which emerged under this framework, attempted to give institutional form to the aforementioned reforms. However, it has been criticized for its effectiveness in comprehensively promoting intercultural education and in its ability to adequately respond to the needs and realities of indigenous and ancestral communities. This scenario suggests that the strategy adopted may not have been fully effective in addressing historical and contemporary barriers, maintaining, in certain cases, the marginalization of these communities within the country's educational system. This situation has developed in the context of international regulations, such as ILO Convention 169 and the decisions of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which mandate prior, free, and informed consultation with indigenous communities for actions or decisions that affect their interests and territories [25]. As Lennon del Villar states, the discrepancy between the educational policies implemented and these international commitments reflects the complexity of harmonizing national educational reforms with the rights of indigenous peoples [26].

In the specific field of the protection of ancestral languages, the legislative initiative presented in Global Diaspora News [27] which culminated in a first debate in the National Assembly, stands as a relevant milestone [28]. The Organic Law on the Linguistic Rights of Peoples and Nationalities, approved in its first instance, represents a significant effort to regulate the safeguarding and promotion of the linguistic rights of indigenous communities and peoples. This law aspires to actively promote the use and development of indigenous languages, a crucial aspect for the preservation of these cultural identities; however, it has not materialized in practice [29]. The delay in prioritizing these key areas possibly reveals a disconnect between policy formulation and a deep understanding of indigenous cultural and economic practices.

3.4. Ancestral Languages Condemned to Oblivion: Quantitative Analysis of Linguistic Trends in the Indigenous Population of Ecuador

For this analysis, three primary, rigorous, and highly reliable sources of information have been selected: the 2001, 2010, and 2022 population censuses. In the analysis of the data, a segmentation of the population that self-identifies as indigenous was carried out, which is the central study group of this document.

Contingency tables were used as an analysis tool. In particular, a detailed analysis of the variable "speaks indigenous language" was carried out, dividing the population into age ranges from ten to ten years old up to 60, and finally, a range for those 60 years old or older. This strategy allowed for a more granular approach to understanding intergenerational differences in indigenous language speaking. From this data, percentages were calculated for each generation of those who self-identify as "indigenous" and speak their native language.

In the context of this study, it is important to discern the interactions and dependencies between the various variables involved. According to Pedro and Sandra [30] contingency tables emerge as fundamental tools in this field, since they allow us to unravel and visualize the existing connections between two variables that play a role in the manifestation of a specific political phenomenon [30]. Using these tables gives us the ability to not only observe these interactions but also to provide a deeper explanation of the phenomenon in question, allowing for a more holistic and informed interpretation of the data.

3.5. Evolution of the Prevalence of the Use of Indigenous Languages in Ecuador: An Intergenerational Analysis Based on Census Data

This chapter presents an interpretation of the prevalence of indigenous language use among different age groups in Ecuador, exploring intergenerational trends, focusing particularly on how these may influence the transmission and preservation of indigenous languages in future generations.

3.6. 2001 Census

After the adoption of the 1998 Constitution, the 2001 Population Census emerged as the first and most immediate source of information following this "transformative" legal framework. The Constitution brought to the forefront the importance of recognizing the country's cultural and linguistic diversity and plurality, establishing a state commitment to guarantee these rights. In this census, a total of 12,156,608 inhabitants were registered, and of this figure, 830,418 individuals identified themselves as speakers of an indigenous language, which provides us with a solid basis for understanding the demographic trends related to linguistic and cultural identity in post-constitutional Ecuador.

Table 1.

Age - Speaks indigenous language.

		2001 Census		
		Speaks indigenous language		Total
		Yes	No	
Age	Up to 10 years	139.202	113.419	252.621
		55.10%	44.90%	100.00%
	11-20	120.594	69.949	190.543
		63.29%	36.71%	100.00%
	21-30	79.687	42.333	122.020
		65.31%	34.69%	100.00%
	31-40	58.776	27.265	86.041
		68.31%	31.69%	100.00%
	41-50	45.626	19.617	65.243
		69.93%	30.07%	100.00%
	51-60	35.715	14.729	50.444
		70.8%	29.20%	100.00%
	Older than 60	44.536	18.970	63.506
		70.13%	29.87%	100.00%
	Total	524.136	306.282	830.418
		63.12%	36.88%	100.00%

Source: INEC, 2001 population census.

Table 1 reflects data from the 2001 Census of Ecuador and shows the number and percentage of Indigenous people who speak an indigenous language versus those who do not, organized by age group.

In all age groups, the proportion of individuals who report speaking an indigenous language is higher than those who do not.

For example, in the group up to 10 years old, about 55.10% of individuals reported speaking an indigenous language, while 44.90% did not. In contrast, in the group over 60 years of age, 70.13% spoke an indigenous language, compared to 29.87% who did not. This trend suggests that indigenous language use is more prevalent among older generations compared to younger generations.

Overall, out of a total of 830,418 people, approximately 63.12% reported speaking an indigenous language, while 36.88% did not. This shows that, in 2001, the use of the indigenous language was quite common in the target population.

These 2001 census data suggest that there may be an intergenerational decline in indigenous language use, with younger generations being less likely to speak an indigenous language compared to older generations. This could have significant implications for the preservation and transmission of indigenous languages.

3.7. 2010 Census

Ten years after the 2001 Census, the 2010 Population Census provides an opportunity to evaluate the continuity or evolution of the trends observed in the previous decade. The subsequent census not only provides a contemporary view of demographic and cultural transformations but also reflects the impacts of policies and programs implemented during that period, in the context of the 2008 Constitution, which reaffirmed and expanded many of the commitments to indigenous peoples that were established in 1998. It is important to note that, in 2010, the country counted a total of 14,483,499 inhabitants. From this set, it is essential to evaluate how many identified themselves as speakers of indigenous languages to understand whether there was progress, stagnation, or setbacks in terms of the preservation and use of these languages. This census, therefore, acts as a fundamental analytical tool to observe the trajectory and challenges facing indigenous linguistic heritage in 21st-century Ecuador.

Table 2.

Age - Speaks indigenous language.

		2010 Census		
		Speaks indigenous language		Total
		Yes	No	
Age	Up to 10 years	148.140	133.356	281.496
		52.63%	47.37%	100.00%
	11-20	144.147	82.337	226.484
		63.65%	36.35%	100.00%
	21-30	109.585	59.436	169.021
		64.84%	35.16%	100.00%
	31-40	77.890	37.008	114.898
		67.79%	32.21%	100.00%
	41-50	58.930	24.715	83.645
		70.45%	29.55%	100.00%
	51-60	44.998	16.513	61.511
		73.15%	26.85%	100.00%
	Older than 60	61.284	19.837	81.121
		75.55%	24.45%	100.0%
	Total	644.974	373.202	1.018.176
		63.35%	36.65%	100.00%

Source: INEC, population census 2010.

Table 2 shows that, in each age group, a majority of indigenous people reported speaking an indigenous language. However, there is a clear trend: as age increases, so does the percentage of people who speak an indigenous language. A pattern similar to the 2001 Census data is observed: the proportion of indigenous language speakers increases with age.

For example, in the group up to 10 years of age, approximately 52.63% of individuals spoke an indigenous language, while 47.37% did not. In contrast, in the group over 60 years of age, 75.55% spoke an indigenous language, compared to only 24.45% who did not. This indicates that indigenous language use is more common among older generations compared to younger ones.

In terms of overall totals, out of a total of 1,018,176 people, approximately 63.35% reported speaking an indigenous language, while 36.65% did not. This highlights that, at a general level, the use of an indigenous language is quite common in the population studied.

3.8. 2022 Census

This census is of particular importance for our analysis. Not only does it offer a contemporary view, but it stands out for being the last and most recent study that incorporates the variable "indigenous language speaker".

Table 3.

Age - Speaks an indigenous language.

		2022 Census		
		Speaks indigenous language.		Total
		Yes	No	
Age	Up to 10 years	78.747	236.467	315.214
		24.98%	75.02%	100,00%
	11-20	119.669	178.282	297.951
		40.16%	59.84%	100.00%
	21-30	107.507	94.005	201.512
		53.35%	46.65%	100.00%
	31-40	99.505	62.322	161.827
		61.49%	38.51%	100.00%
	41-50	81.062	41.651	122.713
		66.06%	33.94%	100.00%
	51-60	59.987	26.349	86.336
		69,48%	30,52%	100.00%
	Older than 60	85.399	31.105	116.504
		73.30%	26.70%	100.00%
Total		631.876	670.181	1.302.057
		48.53%	51.47%	100.00%

Source: INEC, population census 2022.

Data from the 2022 Census show a worrying trend in the decline of the use of indigenous languages among the younger generations. Looking at the group up to 10 years old, only 24.98% of children speak an indigenous language, which shows a significant decrease compared to the higher percentages of speakers in older age groups, where, for example, more than 73% of those over 60 years old speak an indigenous language.

Contrasting this with earlier data, such as that provided for previous censuses where the proportions of younger speakers of indigenous languages were higher, there is a shift towards less intergenerational transmission of these languages. In the past, although it was already noticeable that older generations tended to speak more of their indigenous languages compared to younger generations, the decrease in the proportion of children speaking indigenous languages in the 2022 Census highlights an acceleration in this phenomenon.

3.8. Analysis of Intergenerational Gaps and Discrepancies in the Use of Indigenous Language

This approach consists of subtracting the percentages of the younger population (those 10 years old or younger) from the percentages of the older population (those 60 years old or older) who reported speaking an indigenous language. By performing this calculation, we obtain a percentage value that indicates the magnitude of the intergenerational gap in indigenous language use.

It is critical to note that this calculation provides a measure that allows us to observe trends over time, and the decline in the transmission of the indigenous language from one generation to the next. This analysis allows us to understand how intergenerational dynamics can affect the survival of this ancestral language.

Table 4.

Intergenerational gaps.

Year	Age Group	Percentage of people who speak Indigenous Language	Age Group	Percentage of people who speak Indigenous languages.	Indigenous Language Use Gap
2001	Up to 10 years	55.10%	Older than 60 years	70.10%	15.03%
2010	Up to 10 years	52.60%	Older than 60 years	75.50%	22.92%
2022	Up to 10 years	24.98%	Older than 60 years	73.30%	48.32%

Source: INEC.

Table 4 shows the gaps in indigenous language use between two age groups in Ecuador's indigenous population: those aged 10 and under and those aged 60 and over. These figures have been recorded in three different years: 2001, 2010, and 2022.

In 2001, the gap in indigenous language use between the two age groups was 15.03%. This suggests that there was a significant difference in the prevalence of indigenous language use between younger and older indigenous people. This gap could be indicative of several factors, including acculturation, migration, education, or integration policies.

In 2010, the gap increased to 22.92%, indicating that the difference in indigenous language use between the two age groups has widened. This increase may suggest that fewer indigenous children are learning or using the indigenous language compared to those over 60 years of age.

By 2022, a steep increase in the gap to 48.32% was observed, underscoring the persistence of the trend already identified in 2010. This sustained increase in the disparity worryingly suggests that indigenous languages are experiencing a significant loss among the younger generations of Ecuador's indigenous population. This phenomenon highlights the urgent need to address the transmission and revitalization of indigenous languages as a cultural and educational priority.

The quantitative results, which show a growing intergenerational gap in the use of indigenous languages, support the qualitative observations on the lack of effective implementation of intercultural educational policies. For example, while the 2008 Constitution promotes the use of indigenous languages in the educational system, census data reveal that younger generations are rapidly losing proficiency in these languages, suggesting a disconnect between legislative intentions and their practical application.

3.9. Linkage with International Commitments

The findings of this study not only highlight the urgency of preserving indigenous languages in Ecuador but also demonstrate the need to align national policies with the country's international commitments. In particular, Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO), ratified by Ecuador in 1998, establishes that States must adopt measures to guarantee the linguistic rights of indigenous peoples, including the promotion and revitalization of their languages [25]. However, census data show a growing intergenerational gap in the use of indigenous languages, suggesting that the measures implemented so far have not been sufficient to comply with these international commitments.

In addition, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 4 (Quality Education), promote inclusion and equity in education, including the preservation of indigenous languages as a fundamental part of cultural diversity. The decline in the use of indigenous languages among younger generations, as evidenced in this study, represents a direct challenge to this goal, as the loss of these languages not only affects the cultural identity of indigenous communities but also their ability to transmit traditional and sustainable knowledge, which is essential to achieve other SDGs, such as SDG 13 (Action for the Climate) and SDG 15 (Life on Terrestrial Ecosystems).

It is therefore imperative that Ecuador strengthen its public and legislative policies to align with these international commitments, ensuring that indigenous languages are not only recognized but also actively promoted and revitalized in all spheres of society.

4. Conclusion

This study has evidenced an alarming trend in the decline of indigenous language use among younger generations in Ecuador, with the intergenerational gap increasing from 15.03% in 2001 to 48.32% in 2022. These findings not only confirm the urgency of intervening to preserve linguistic diversity but also highlight the limitations of current policies on intercultural education and cultural rights. The following are concrete recommendations and a reflection on the implications of failing to act on this issue.

The growing language gap may indicate a process of cultural assimilation in which indigenous languages are gradually being replaced by the dominant language [31]. Indigenous languages, in particular, are repositories of ancestral traditions, knowledge about the natural environment, and sustainable living practices, all of which may be lost if measures are not taken to preserve and revitalize these languages.

From a legal perspective, the decline of indigenous languages among youth raises serious questions regarding the human and cultural rights of these communities. According to Haboud [31] international treaties and national legislation frequently recognize the right of Indigenous peoples to preserve and revitalize their language and culture. Thus, this decline could be interpreted as a violation of these rights, especially if it is shown to be due to policies or practices that favor the dominant language to the detriment of indigenous languages.

According to Martínez Dalmau [32] the decline of the indigenous language among the youth leads us to reflect on the very nature of law and its intrinsic relationship with the culture and identity of a people [32]. Indigenous languages are not only mere means of communication; they also embody unique ways of understanding the world, justice, morality, and human coexistence. According to Ruiz Morato [33] the erosion of these languages suggests a gradual loss of these alternative philosophical perspectives and, with it, of an ancestral legal wealth that has coexisted, often in tension, with Western legal systems [33]. This phenomenon translates into a legal standardization that marginalizes other ways of understanding and practicing justice, particularly those that have been developed and perfected over generations in indigenous communities [34].

5. Recommendations

1. Comprehensive Educational Policies:

- Implement intercultural bilingual education programs that not only include indigenous languages in the curriculum but also promote their active use in the classroom and extracurricular activities. This requires training teachers in pedagogical methodologies that respect and promote indigenous worldviews.
- Establish incentives for indigenous families to transmit their languages to new generations, such as school scholarships or economic support programs conditioned to the use and teaching of the mother tongue.
- 2. Means of Communication and Public Spaces:
 - Promote the creation of media content (radio, television, social networks) in indigenous languages, especially aimed at children and young people. This will not only increase the visibility of these languages but also position them as relevant tools in everyday life.
 - Encourage the use of indigenous languages in public spaces, such as bilingual signage in government institutions, hospitals, and cultural centers.
- 3. Community Involvement:
 - Involve indigenous communities in the formulation and implementation of language policies, ensuring that these respond to their specific needs and contexts. This includes the creation of community councils to monitor and evaluate language revitalization initiatives.
 - Develop orality-based language revitalization programs, such as oral storytelling workshops, traditional songs, and intergenerational dialogues, that allow young people to connect with their cultural roots.
- 4. Legal Framework and Financing:
 - Strengthen the existing legal framework, such as the Organic Law on Intercultural Education, to ensure its effective implementation. This includes allocating specific financial resources for linguistic revitalization and monitoring compliance with regulations.
 - Establish sanctions for institutions that do not comply with linguistic inclusion mandates, ensuring that policies do not remain only on paper.

6. Implications of Not Intervening

If urgent measures are not taken, the loss of indigenous languages in Ecuador will have irreversible consequences, not only at the national level but also in terms of the country's compliance with its international commitments. ILO Convention 169 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require states to protect and promote the linguistic and cultural rights of indigenous peoples. However, the growing intergenerational gap in the use of indigenous languages, evidenced in this study, suggests that Ecuador is far from meeting these obligations.

The loss of indigenous languages represents not only a violation of the human and cultural rights of these communities but also a setback in global efforts to preserve cultural diversity and promote sustainable development. Therefore, public policy and legislative interventions in Ecuador must align with these international commitments, ensuring that indigenous languages are revitalized and passed on to future generations.

Among the consequences of not intervening in the first place will be the loss of an invaluable cultural heritage, which includes ancestral knowledge about traditional medicine, sustainable agriculture, and natural resource management. These practices, transmitted orally through indigenous languages, are essential not only for the communities that practice them but also for facing global challenges such as climate change.

Second, the disappearance of indigenous languages will deepen social and cultural inequalities, further marginalizing indigenous communities and perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion. The loss of the mother tongue will also affect the identity and self-esteem of indigenous youth, who may feel disconnected from their cultural roots.

6.1. Final Reflection

The revitalization of indigenous languages is not only a responsibility of the State but also a collective commitment that requires the active participation of indigenous communities, civil society, and academia. Current policies, although well-intentioned, have proven to be insufficient to reverse linguistic decline. A comprehensive approach combining educational, cultural, and legal measures, backed by adequate funding and constant monitoring, is needed. Only in this way can we ensure that indigenous languages not only survive but flourish as fundamental pillars of Ecuador's identity and cultural diversity.

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