Thank you, Madam Chair,

I make this statement in my capacity as Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, on behalf of the Australian Human Rights Commission, Australia’s National Human Rights Institution.

I acknowledge all First Nations Peoples. I pay my respects to you and your ancestors as cultural custodians, and as language speakers and teachers, because our languages are central to our cultural identities. They place us on and connect us to country and each other. They provide us with clear protocols and obligations for how to carry a collective and intergenerational responsibility to care for each other and our Country, and they encompass our sacred traditional ecological knowledges that have maintained our cultures, our laws, our country, and our economies for millennia.

I acknowledge Government representatives here today, and I particularly want to acknowledge UNESCO which led global efforts for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages through the Global Task Force.

Madam Chair,

It is a fundamental human right to speak your own language.

Australia is home to two of the oldest living cultures in the world, supported and sustained by more than 250 of the world’s oldest living languages and 800 dialects.

These ancient languages now form part of Australia’s shared cultural heritage and should be valued and celebrated. However, the process of colonisation has dispossessed and displaced First Nations peoples across Australia, stretching and breaking connections between peoples and the lands and waters with which their languages and ways of being are inextricably linked.

As a result, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are in a critical and precarious state. In 2014, the National Indigenous Languages Survey report estimated that only 120 of our languages are still being spoken, of which 100 were considered severely or critically endangered, and only 13 were considered to be “strong”.

Experiences vary widely across the country, with children in some communities continuing to speak their language as a first language, and other communities, often those who were subjected to colonisation earliest, now seeking to breathe life into languages which are no longer spoken.

In this regard, I highlight the engagement of our elders and language teachers with linguists, which enabled the recording and documentation of some of our languages. These records, held within national and local libraries and government archives, provide a foundation for the establishment of Indigenous language dictionaries. These institutions of memory, supported by governments should take steps to work with First Nations to repatriate these records and recordings, understanding that they are also Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, and are subject to Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance CARE principles – being Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility and Ethics.

Madam Chair,

I am encouraged by the international focus, and the investment being made by governments, including the Australian governments to provide redress for language loss through action plans, language programs and supporting the revitalisation, maintenance and preservation of these languages by First Nations People; and that governments are realising the invaluable gift to the world and future generations through Indigenous languages.

Australia is a member of the Global Task Force as one of three UNESCO Member States from the Asia and Pacific region. First Languages Australia, Australia’s peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, is also a member of the Global Task Force as one of three Indigenous Peoples Organisations representing the Pacific region.

That action is taken to support communities in all their diversity to maintain and revive language is critical, and I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Craig Ritchie, Karina Lester and the Directions Group members who worked together to produce Voices of Country, Australia’s Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032.

**Recommendations:**

In addition to monitoring the implementation of national action plans, we recommend that the Expert Mechanism work with:

* governments and institutions of memory and collection to facilitate the repatriation of Indigenous language materials to First Nations Peoples, and support them to establish appropriate holding, preservation and teaching capacities
* UNESCO and the World Intellectual Property Organisation to establish appropriate data sovereignty and date governance protocols to protect and promote the ongoing preservation and conservation of Indigenous languages.