

# Ethnologue Global Collaboration

A project overview  
November 2014

## The founding vision

When *Ethnologue* was launched in 1951, it was 10 mimeographed pages with the title *Missionary Ethnologue* for Intercrossors, Translators, Missionaries, and Mission Councils. The focus was on discovering and monitoring the situation of all the Bibleless peoples of the world. The frontiers of Christian ministry involved thousands of unknown and isolated people groups that were monolingual. Thus the most basic question addressed by *Ethnologue* was: What are all the distinct languages used in the world today? Once a language group was identified, the most basic questions for describing it were things like: What is it called? Where is it located? How many people speak it? Does it have the Bible? Having sought the answers to these questions and more for over 60 years, *Ethnologue* has grown into an indispensable source of information for any organization that is involved in ministry to the nations of the world.

## The changing world context

The world context has changed dramatically since the founding of the *Ethnologue*. The frontiers of ministry no longer involve thousands of unknown people groups — the list of languages in the world is now basically known. Nor are most of those groups any longer isolated and monolingual. National and regional languages have made inroads almost everywhere with the result that a new basic question is relevant today: How many members of the language group speak and read what other languages and for what domains of use? And the new frontier of ministry to minority language groups is diaspora as the pressures of globalization and urbanization are moving community members out of the home language area and creating displaced subcommunities in cities all over the world. Another newly relevant question is: Where are the displaced communities of this language group? In order for *Ethnologue* to maintain its strategic value for those involved in ministry to the nations, it must begin to answer these new questions as well.



## Global collaboration: The next frontier

To this point in time, the *Ethnologue* database has been maintained by a small editorial team at SIL's international headquarters. Our primary method has been to contact each of SIL's field centers every few years and ask them to validate and update the information that is reported for the languages in their area. But there are two reasons why this will not continue to serve well as the primary method. First, SIL's footprint on the ground is shrinking in many places as we rely more heavily on strategies of partnership. Second, the frontiers of information gathering involve displaced language communities in urban centers, but these have not been the focus of SIL's ministry. In order to maintain its strategic value for those in ministry, *Ethnologue* needs to develop a new primary method for information gathering that is based on collaboration with a large global network of contributors from many organizations.

## Call for participation

With funding by grants from the Tyndale Foundation and Wycliffe US, SIL International has launched a project to build such a network of collaborators. Key to the strategy is the development of a forms-based editor that will allow experts in the field to use a Web browser to contribute directly to the *Ethnologue* database. The funding allows us to bring these new contributors together for a training event in which they will learn how the database is organized, exactly what information we are looking for in each database field, and how to use the Web editor. Each contributor will take on a portfolio of languages to monitor (for instance, all the languages in a particular country — or just part of a country when the country has hundreds of languages). We are now recruiting for this cadre of new contributors. If you would like to be an *Ethnologue* contributor, or if you can tell us of people who would be good candidates, please send us email at [Editor\\_Ethnologue@sil.org](mailto:Editor_Ethnologue@sil.org).