

“Languages Matter”

Mr Koichiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, on the celebration of 2008, International Year of Languages – 5 November 2007

The year 2008 has been proclaimed International Year of Languages by the United Nations General Assembly. UNESCO, which has been entrusted with the task of coordinating activities for the Year, is determined to fulfil its role as lead agency.

The Organization is fully aware of the crucial importance of languages when seen against the many challenges that humanity will have to face over the next few decades.

Languages are indeed essential to the identity of groups and individuals and to their peaceful coexistence. They constitute a strategic factor of progress towards sustainable development and a harmonious relationship between the global and the local context.

They are of utmost importance in achieving the six goals of education for all (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on which the United Nations agreed in 2000.

As factors of social integration, languages effectively play a strategic role in the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger (MDG 1); as supports for literacy, learning and life skills, they are essential to achieving universal primary education (MDG 2); the combat against HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases (MDG 6) must be waged in the languages of the populations concerned if they are to be reached; and the safeguarding of local and indigenous knowledge and know-how with a view to ensuring environmental sustainability (MDG 7) is intrinsically linked to local and indigenous languages.

Moreover, cultural diversity is closely linked to linguistic diversity, as indicated in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and its action plan (2001), the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005).

However, within the space of a few generations, more than 50% of the 7,000 languages spoken in the world may disappear. Less than a quarter of those languages are currently used in schools and in cyberspace, and most are used only sporadically. Thousands of languages – though mastered by those populations for whom it is the daily means of expression – are absent from education systems, the media, publishing and the public domain in general.

We must act now as a matter of urgency. How? By encouraging and developing language policies that enable each linguistic community to use its first language, or mother tongue, as widely and as often as possible, including in education, while also mastering a national or regional language and an international language.

Also by encouraging speakers of a dominant language to master another national or regional language and one or two international languages. Only if multilingualism is fully accepted can all languages find their place in our globalized world.

UNESCO therefore invites governments, United Nations organizations, civil society organizations, educational institutions, professional associations and all other stakeholders to increase their own activities to foster respect for, and the promotion

and protection of all languages, particularly endangered languages, in all individual and collective contexts.

Whether it be through initiatives in the fields of education, cyberspace or the literate environment; be it through projects to safeguard endangered languages or to promote languages as a tool for social integration; or to explore the relationship between languages and the economy, languages and indigenous knowledge or languages and creation, it is important that the idea that "languages matter!" be promoted everywhere.

The date of 21 February 2008, that of the ninth International Mother Language Day, will have a special significance and provide a particularly appropriate deadline for the introduction of initiatives to promote languages.

Our common goal is to ensure that the importance of linguistic diversity and multilingualism in educational, administrative and legal systems, cultural expressions and the media, cyberspace and trade, is recognized at the national, regional and international levels.

The International Year of Languages 2008 will provide a unique opportunity to make decisive progress towards achieving these goals.

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