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**REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL ON AN
OVERALL STRATEGY FOR AN INTERSECTORAL
PROGRAMME FOR LANGUAGES AT UNESCO**

SUMMARY

The present document is submitted in pursuance of 170 EX/Decision 9.5 adopted by the Executive Board at its 170th session, requesting the Director-General to prepare “an intersectoral review of activities already carried out by UNESCO relating to the safeguarding and promotion of languages”, and to propose “an overall strategy for an intersectoral programme of languages at UNESCO, together with an implementation plan that specifies the results to be achieved and an estimated budget”. By the same decision, the Executive Board also invited the Director-General “to take account of the needs relating to this programme in the forthcoming Programme and Budget (33 C/5)”.

This document provides the requested programme review and overall strategy.

Decision proposed: paragraph 34.

I. BACKGROUND

1. In recent years, several normative texts and declarations have testified to a growing awareness of the importance of language issues at the international level. Examples include: (i) the “Declaration of Vienna” of the World Conference on Human Rights (1993), affirming the right for “persons belonging to minorities to use their own language” (art. 19); (ii) the call of the General Assembly of the United Nations for more attention to “multilingualism” (December 1999); (iii) resolution 56/262 (Part II) of the General Assembly of the United Nations focusing on the preservation and protection of all languages; and (iv) the report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations at its fifty-eighth session (2003), on measures to protect, promote and preserve all languages, which included a contribution by UNESCO. Moreover, linguistic diversity and its promotion are emphasized in the “Declaration of Principles” approved by the “World Summit on the Information Society (paras. 52 and 53) in Geneva in December 2003.

2. Recognizing the need for an integrated vision of the issue of language in all its aspects, UNESCO has developed a number of normative tools addressing language issues such as the *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* and its *Action Plan*, adopted at the 31st session of the General Conference in 2001, the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* and the *Recommendation on the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace*, both of which were adopted at the 32nd session of the General Conference in October 2003.

3. The need to address this matter is becoming more acute under the pressure of accelerating globalization, in which languages with their complex implications in terms of identity and social integration, both globally and locally, are of strategic importance. Thousands of languages worldwide are still absent from cyberspace. Processes related to globalization have also increased the pace at which languages are disappearing, thereby leading to an immeasurable loss for both linguistic and cultural diversity.

4. A summary review of sectoral and interdisciplinary activities already carried out by UNESCO with regard to language promotion and safeguarding is presented below (Part II). On the basis of the results of this review, the Director-General presents thereafter elements for a strategy to improve UNESCO’s impact in the promotion and safeguarding of languages (Part III), taking into account their relevance – on national, regional and international levels – to tackle priority issues in all the Organization’s fields of competence.

II. PROGRAMME REVIEW

5. UNESCO’s action in the field of **education** has focused, both on international and regional levels, on four main areas: (i) the elaboration of education policies in multilingual contexts; (ii) the promotion of mother tongue literacy; (iii) the language component of indigenous education; and (iv) awareness raising of the importance of language preservation in relation to education and schooling. This action has been mainly developed within the Dakar EFA Framework for Action and in conformity with the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* and its Action Plan, which urges countries to encourage “linguistic diversity at all levels of education, wherever possible, and foster the learning of several languages from the earliest age” (para. 6).

6. On the **educational policies** side, UNESCO works mainly through international exchange and dialogue, in collaboration with other United Nations agencies and international organizations (e.g. the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the Council of Europe and the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN)). Recent important expert group meetings on education policies held at

Headquarters include: *Education in Multilingual Contexts* (2002), *Quality Education for Indigenous Peoples* (2003), and *Indigenous Education in the 21st Century* (2004). These have produced a range of recommendations on mother tongue instruction as a means of improving literacy levels and on the recognition of languages in education as a key to achieving culturally-sensitive quality education for all.

7. International and regional consultations relating to the production and dissemination of reference documents also lie at the core of UNESCO initiatives concerning languages in education, often managed at regional level. UNESCO's regional education bureaux in Latin America, Asia and Africa have organized a wide range of training workshops, produced learning materials and fostered regional exchange on language and education policies. One recent example is the subregional workshop on "Training of teachers on bilingual education" (Ouagadougou, December 2004).

8. In the field of **social and human sciences**, UNESCO's action for languages has generally focused on debates and research on the effects of major social transformations (international migration, urban development and poverty) on linguistic diversity and on the formulation of effective policies, through comparative studies, to ensure multilingualism. In 2004 the Sector published a special thematic issue of the *International Journal on Multicultural Societies*, on the subject of the debate on the use of languages on the Internet. The basic research for this issue was executed in the interdisciplinary context of the Initiative B@bel (see paragraph 17).

9. As far as **culture** is concerned, since the adoption by the General Conference of the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001), UNESCO has taken greater account of the linguistic factor when assisting Member States in setting up cultural action plans and policies. When developing national book policies with stakeholders and partners both in the education and culture sectors, for example, the enhancement of different national languages, in the production of both textbooks and of literature in general, is an essential part of UNESCO's strategy.

10. Concerning the safeguarding of endangered languages, the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* aims at safeguarding language as "a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage" (art. 2, para. 2 a), i.e. as a crucial tool with which to express intangible cultural heritage and to transmit it from generation to generation. To this end, the Organization has worked both with governments (promoting appropriate language policies) and with civil society (academic institutions and speaker communities) for the implementation of concrete projects. In the current biennium, 20 field projects aimed at building national and local capacities for language preservation are being implemented in Member States in all regions of the world. Furthermore, the main line of action (MLA) "Enhancing the linkages between biological and cultural diversity as a key basis for sustainable development", which involves the Natural Sciences Sector and the Culture Sector, is in the ongoing biennium paying due attention to studying the importance of linguistic diversity for the transmission of traditional knowledge and the preservation of biological diversity.

11. In March 2003, UNESCO brought together experts from all over the world to enhance the Organization's action in the field of endangered languages. The experts recommended a set of Action Plans to guide UNESCO's work in years to come, comprising three areas of intervention: (i) advising Member States on measures to safeguard endangered languages; (ii) establishing an administrative and financial mechanism for the same purpose; and (iii) promoting UNESCO's function as a major information source for language diversity and endangerment. Among other actions, Member States are encouraged to carry out surveys, research and documentation on endangered languages in order to develop policies and operational activities that will lead to the promotion and revitalization of such languages.

12. UNESCO has also produced considerable information and databases, available both in printed form and online, providing references to specialists, media and decision-makers involved in the safeguarding and promotion of languages. Particular mention should be made of the *UNESCO Red Book of Languages in Danger of Disappearing Project*, a series of studies of seriously endangered languages, the database of the International Clearing House for Endangered Languages (Tokyo), the *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*, and monitoring tools such as the *Index Translationum*.

13. In the **communication and information** field, UNESCO supports, through its Creative Content programme, creativity and innovation in local content production in radio, television and the new media focusing on improving the local production and distribution of quality audiovisual programmes in developing countries and the promotion of public service broadcasting and the educational and cultural dimensions of audiovisual media in all languages.

14. In complying with its function of developing and upholding standards in cyberspace, UNESCO is also supporting initiatives for script encoding using Unicode, a standard to specify the representation of texts in modern software products and standards.

15. In particular relation to the **promotion of multilingualism in cyberspace** (in line with paragraph 10 of the Action Plan of the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*), the 32nd session of the General Conference adopted the *Recommendation on the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace*, which focuses on four priority areas: development and promotion of multilingual content and systems; access to networks and services; development of public domain content; and reaffirmation and promotion of a fair balance between the interests of rights-holders and the public interest.

16. Pursuant to the principles outlined in the recommendation above, the Organization has strongly advocated the inclusion of multilingualism and the issue of multilingual domain names in the debates of the Working Group on Internet Governance set up by the United Nations Secretary-General as a follow-up to the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (Geneva, 2003).

17. As a major action for the implementation of the principles of the *Recommendation on the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace*, UNESCO launched the Initiative B@bel in order to promote an interdisciplinary approach to universal access to information in all languages in cyberspace by: (i) formulating guiding principles and supporting Member States initiatives; (ii) disseminating linguistic resources and best practices; (iii) developing surveys and research; and (iv) setting up online multilingual tools to preserve endangered languages. Projects implemented under the Initiative B@bel include the creation of a sound record library of endangered languages; the development of an interactive online extension of the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*; the development of a multilingual content management platform supporting the use of Internet; the development of pilot free software projects for digital inclusion of indigenous languages; and the creation of a module for endangered language communities which includes a mechanism for systematic support to language preservation. Although the Initiative B@bel is coordinated by UNESCO's Communication and Information Sector, its multiple activities are developed on an intersectoral basis.

18. Other examples of interdisciplinary action include the yearly celebration, through exhibitions, concerts and presentations, of International Mother Language Day (21 February) geared to the promotion of linguistic diversity, multilingualism and quality education. Synergetic efforts have also been directed at book development and literate environment promotion.

III. PROPOSED STRATEGY

19. The proposed strategy for languages is rooted in the acknowledgement of **the vital interaction between culture and development**, which has been a major conceptual landmark for the Organization since the Stockholm Conference on Cultural Policies for Development (1998). Within this context, languages are viewed as tools of communication and cooperation, as vectors of culture and as filters of our worldviews and values that lie at the heart of human interaction. Representing **a fundamental dimension of existence** and a primary vehicle for all kinds of communication and information, languages are an essential constituent of the self-consciousness and identity of individuals and societies. They are the basis for the creation, processing and transmission of knowledge. The capacity to use and modify the environment, to interact and to socialize are heavily dependent on and marked by the language faculty. Thus, marginalization or integration, exclusion or empowerment, poverty or development, are to a certain extent determined by linguistic choices and strategies. Cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and inclusive knowledge societies promoted by UNESCO cannot but fail without appropriate commitment of all stakeholders to promote languages and multilingualism.

20. In light of the above, the **proposed strategic goal** of the Organization is twofold: first, to enhance and preserve linguistic diversity worldwide; second, to mainstream the “linguistic dimension” (i.e. the recognition of the importance of languages and of linguistic diversity) in all its policies and fields of action, at international, regional and national levels. As a result, languages will become a strategic factor to be taken into due consideration in conceptualizing, implementing and assessing development programmes worldwide. This main goal will be achieved through the attainment of three specific steps.

21. The **first step** is to further harmonize and improve the quality of the different available resources and programmatic elements focusing on languages at UNESCO, notably by optimizing the use of the existing assets and producing greater synergy. Having done that, the **second step** will be the integration of the linguistic dimension as a key factor in planning UNESCO’s programme activities and improving internal functioning, notably through awareness-raising and advocacy directed at UNESCO staff. **A third and more challenging step** will be for UNESCO to sensitize its stakeholders and partners with the aim of raising increasing awareness of the linguistic dimension of development at all levels.

22. As a **final expected result**, languages and multilingualism should be recognized as factors of the utmost importance in legal and administrative environments, as well as in cyberspace, in education systems, in cultural expressions and exchanges, on the international, regional and national levels. Ultimately, policies and strategies are to be developed at the national level for the safeguarding of linguistic diversity through the protection and revitalization of endangered languages, and the promotion of multilingualism, thus contributing to providing equal chances to communities and peoples while sustaining cultural diversity.

23. In pursuing these objectives, UNESCO will aim at preserving linguistic diversity as a prerequisite for the fostering of cultural diversity. The Organization will also promote multilingualism to foster intercultural dialogue, thereby ensuring the free flow of ideas and knowledge. Successful implementation of the strategy depends on effective mobilization of Member States, civil society and private partners in a context of dynamic partnership schemes. Stakeholders involved should also regard languages and multilingualism as a key factor in planning and implementing UNESCO’s programme activities, viewing languages both as an area and as a tool for action. The success of the strategy could be assessed by studying the status of linguistic diversity and acquisition of languages, and the availability of descriptive, curriculum and ITC tools as indicators of its educational, cultural, societal and political impact.

24. To achieve the above purposes, **UNESCO's activities** in the field of education will be developed in connection with: the use of mother-tongues, both as a medium of instruction and as a subject; promotion of multilingualism in and through education; and assistance to Member States in developing appropriate approaches in their education systems to do justice to – and fully profit from – existing linguistic diversity, thus contributing to the Education for All Millennium Goal.

25. UNESCO's action will also include studies in social sciences and debates on the societal aspects of multilingualism (social conflicts, migration and poverty). Dissemination of scientific research in a wide variety of languages and the establishment of linguistics chairs could also be envisaged.

26. A preliminary list of actions focusing on culture to be implemented by UNESCO includes actions for the safeguarding and promotion of endangered languages, literary translations from and into lesser-used languages, and development of multilingual education curricula, cultural policies fostering multilingualism and book policies. Languages must also be promoted and safeguarded as vehicles of oral traditions and expressions and as the medium of transmission of elements of the intangible cultural heritage.

27. As regards the field of communication and information, activities will aim at promoting content and easy access to information in as many languages as possible in public space, including media, court, health systems and cyberspace, while concentrating on production of content in lesser-used languages and promotion of steering programmes and software with interface in non-dominant languages.

28. The production of statistics on interdisciplinary fields such as international linguistic flows, numbers of languages and the numbers of their speakers, level of multilingualism, and use of languages in, *inter alia*, education, media, cyberspace, literature and the arts, as well as in the various domains in which the intangible cultural heritage is manifested, will assist national authorities in designing, implementing and adjusting language policies. It will serve as an indicator for assessing the promotion of cultural diversity worldwide, while helping UNESCO to adapt priority areas for its activities.

29. The success of the strategy will depend ultimately on the coordination of activities in such a way as to enhance consistency and mutual support in the various activities and programmes that are developed in the field of languages.

30. To carry out its action efficiently and cost-effectively, **the Director-General intends, as an immediate measure**, to establish an **Intersectoral Group for Languages (IGL)** composed of focal points in each programme sector and relevant central services within the Organization. The mandate of the IGL will be to elaborate, implement and monitor synchronized strategies and plans of action for the safeguarding and promotion of languages, multilingualism and linguistic diversity within and outside the Organization.

31. To play effectively its informational, communicational, operational, planning and monitoring role, the Intersectoral Group for Languages would rely on a new **“UNESCO Portal for the Promotion of Languages”** as an integral part of the UNESCO Knowledge Portal. The portal would be accessible for contributions by members of the IGL, the Secretariat and third parties (NGOs, experts, scholars), thus grouping together all of UNESCO's relevant institutional functions.

32. As concerns the **implementation schedule**, the proposed strategy should be integrated in a medium-term time-frame aimed at obtaining the main goal – i. e. languages being recognized as a strategic factor in the conceptualization, implementation, and assessment of all kinds of

development programmes. To this end, the integration of the linguistic dimension in UNESCO's programming cycle should be attained in the next Medium-Term Strategy, notably through further harmonization and coordination between existing language-centred initiatives. The IGL should be operational before the end of 2005 and the portal could be fully operational by the end of 2007.

33. In line of the above, whereby the first steps in the implementation of the strategy basically call for efforts to harmonize, coordinate and mesh activities that UNESCO is already carrying out – a task for the IGL – and greater synergy in results, no specific additional budget line has been included in document 33 C/5 over and above the funds earmarked for the various programme activities around the sectors. On the other hand, the Programme and Budget for 2008-2009 could possibly foresee operating funds for the languages portal.

Proposed draft decision

34. Taking into consideration the above strategy, the Executive Board may wish to adopt a decision along the following lines:

The Executive Board,

1. Recalling 170 EX/Decision 9.5,
2. Having examined document 171 EX/20,
3. Taking into account the programme review submitted by the Director-General in this document,
4. Endorses the proposed overall strategy;
5. Requests the Director-General to take into account the needs for the pursuit of the strategy in the preparation of the work plans for document 33 C/5.