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THEMATIC DEBATE: PROTECTING INDIGENOUS AND ENDANGERED LANGUAGES AND THE ROLE OF LANGUAGES IN PROMOTING EFA IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

SUMMARY

This document provides background information pertaining to the thematic debate to be held at the 180th session. It places the debate in the context of UNESCO's mission and provides information on the Organization's involvement in the protection of indigenous and endangered languages and on the links between multilingualism, EFA and sustainable development.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. As an essential dimension of human existence conveying human emotions, views and values, language has always been at the heart of UNESCO's mission and main interests. Languages are expressly mentioned in the first article of the UNESCO Constitution: its first paragraph echoes the United Nations Charter, by affirming that the Organization's purpose is "to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of laws and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion". Paragraph 2 of the same article considers language (literally the "word") as the natural medium for advancing knowledge and understanding: UNESCO will "to that end recommend such international agreements as may be necessary to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image".

2. These articles have been reflected in the Organization's various programmes throughout its existence, until the present time. For example, our support for translation,¹ education in the mother tongue, and the forging of strategic links between languages and education,² have been very much in evidence since the Organization's earliest initiatives. Examples of the great diversity and breadth of UNESCO's language-related programmes throughout the last 60 years, at the operational as well as the standard-setting level, include the international seminar on teaching of modern languages (Ceylon, 1953), the adoption of the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), the Intergovernmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa (Harare, 1997), the publication of the first Arabic translation of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* in the framework of the UNESCO Collection of Representative Works (1954) and the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing* (2001), the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), as well as the guide in French devoted to ensuring a language's presence in cyberspace, *Comment assurer la présence d'une langue dans le cyberspace* (2007). In terms of policies on languages in education, the 1953 UNESCO statement on vernacular education and its successor 50 years later in 2003 clearly show the continuity of UNESCO's standard-setting role in this field.

Languages, multilingualism, sustainable development

3. In the light of the conclusions of the World Commission on Culture and Development (1995),³ the Stockholm Conference on Cultural Policies for Development (1998) and of the Johannesburg World Summit (2002), sustainable development is grounded in culture and involves an improvement in the quality of life through managed change and respect for present-day people, the planet and future generations. Languages are central to these processes because communication is the lifeblood of collective and cooperative action for change, and language determines participation, access to knowledge, leadership and depth of understanding. In this sense, whether to include or marginalize is also a matter of language policy, either explicitly or implicitly, be it as a deliberate goal or an unintended consequence. As integration and communications means, local languages and languages of wider communication play a key role in development that leads to sustainable management of change. A multilingual approach both to policy and to practice is essential for sustainable development so that, no matter the language used, equitable opportunities will be available to all and forms of exclusion based on languages can be prevented.

¹ Like in the Index Translationum translation bibliography, collecting some 3 million data and still available free of charge on line (www.unesco.org/culture/translationum), or in the UNESCO Collection of Representative Works (www.unesco.org/culture/lit/rep), devoted to encouraging the translation, publication and distribution of texts that were significant from the cultural and literary points of view but still unknown internationally. Some 1,300 works have been translated and published in the framework of this programme between 1948 and 2000.

² UNESCO's basic education programmes have from the outset contained a language element. In 1947, for instance, UNESCO staged an international meeting on "language problems in fundamental education", whose agenda included methods of teaching in the mother tongue, standardization of unwritten languages and learning of "auxiliary languages".

³ Our Creative Diversity: Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development. Paris, UNESCO, 1995.

4. Multilingualism, as a practice facilitating the complementary use of local, national and international languages, promotes communication among social groups and permits access to new knowledge and cultural expressions. Multilingualism at individual and societal levels expresses mutual respect and fosters intercultural dialogue. Language policies that enable harmonious interaction between the global and the local are a prerequisite for peace and for the open, plural and sustainable development that UNESCO aims to promote.⁴ As shown by the creation of a specific line of action within the World Summit on Information Society action plan,⁵ knowledge societies and cyberspace are also fundamental domains in which multilingualism should be strengthened.

5. Language policies are most frequently determined by governments at the national level. However, particular states or provinces may also decide on language policy, as indeed may particular institutions, such as educational establishments or commercial enterprises. Wherever policy decisions are made, they may respect multilingual practices to a greater or lesser extent. Too often, language policies have been based on the perception that a multiplicity of languages is a problem to be solved, rather than an asset to be exploited. This attitude is related, especially in former colonies, which inherited it from their colonizers, with a strong consideration for the nation state as an unavoidable historical step towards development. Policies that best promote multilingualism will take full account of patterns of language use as actually encountered in communities, with the aim of fostering communication, inclusion, and identity at local and national levels, and for the purposes of individual and collective development in socio-cultural and economic areas. They also will take into account the social cohesion and peace endangerment sometimes represented by stiff mono-lingualism.

6. Achieving the Millennium Development Goals and other international development targets is essential to building peace and ensuring equitable development in today's world, with languages and multilingualism playing a strategic role, in particular as regards:

- eradication of extreme poverty and hunger (Millennium Development Goal 1), given that social integration and community empowerment are affected in large measure by language choices and policies;
- achieving universal primary education (Millennium Development Goal 2) because language is the principal medium of learning and self-expression, and therefore of education;
- responding to HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases (Millennium Development Goal 6), since access to information and sharing of knowledge, depend on language;
- environmental sustainability (Millennium Development Goal 7), as languages subsume and express local and indigenous knowledge and wisdom, including the sound management of natural resources.

7. In this way, languages also play a key role in the various pillars of sustainable development, be they economic, social or environmental. In addition to the importance of languages in achieving the MDGs, therefore, they provide the basis for economic development through their role not only in structured education, but also in effective learning and mentoring in the workplace. Languages support social integration when all the languages of a community or country are given respect and used freely in appropriate contexts. Languages may become the symbol of harmonious relations, or conflicts, between social groups, for example majorities and minorities. To moderate these

⁴ The main actions implemented in this field by UNESCO are presented in the "Compendium on ongoing activities concerning languages and multilingualism (2006-2007) (document CLT/CEI/CID/2007/PI/35 of 3 May 2007) issued by the Task Force on Languages and Multilingualism (available on line through www.unesco.org).

⁵ See for instance the second thematic meeting on "Multilingualism for Cultural Diversity and Participation for All in Cyberspace" organized by UNESCO in cooperation with the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) in Bamako, Mali, on 6 and 7 May 2005.

tensions, judicious and open multilingual policies can go a long way to promote social cohesion, respect and harmony. The environmental pillar of sustainable development is referred to in MDG 7 (noted above), with local languages, particularly minority and indigenous languages, offering privileged access to traditional knowledge of environmental management. Recognizing the many factors these issues entail, UNESCO's Education, Science and Culture Sectors work together within the framework of the Intersectoral Platform for languages and multilingualism.

Protecting indigenous and endangered languages

8. Safeguarding languages constitutes the basis for an effective policy for linguistic diversity and multilingualism, especially in the domain of education. In particular, to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, the protection of indigenous and endangered languages through the promotion of mother languages at home and in school is especially important. More than a tool, language is an essential feature of human existence. Through language, people understand and express emotions, intentions and values; shape their personality and their world; strengthen social relations; share cultural expressions and – as stressed in particular in the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) – transmit social practices. The Convention also underlines that language constitutes a salient factor of the identity of individuals and groups, and part and parcel of our living heritage. Like cultural diversity, linguistic diversity should be viewed as the common heritage of humanity, and all persons have “the right to express themselves and to create and disseminate their work in the language of their choice, and particularly in their mother tongue”, as indicated in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001).

9. Although the main international human rights or cultural instruments have for decades made provisions relating to languages,⁶ the need for international attention and cooperation has not diminished. Languages evolve and may die (language loss being a natural process), but the rate of language endangerment and disappearance has increased substantially in recent decades. The report of the World Commission on Culture and Development (1996)⁷ took note of the pressures on speaker communities to assimilate to languages of wider communication. UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing* (1996 and 2001)⁸ focused attention on the scale of language endangerment, and an experts meeting on Safeguarding Endangered Languages (2003) and the associated working document on Language Vitality and Endangerment identified several other internal and external factors that lead to language shift and, eventually, loss. Most of the languages spoken today (estimated at over 6,000)⁹ are in danger, and experts warn that as many as 90% of them may become extinct by the next century. Indigenous and minority languages, the vast majority of all languages believed to exist, are particularly vulnerable.

10. When a language is at the point of disappearing, the international community should undertake its best efforts to document its structures and the heritage it represents to prevent the irrevocable loss of its cultural and intellectual richness. While such measures will not prevent the disappearance or ‘death’ of a language, they will nevertheless preserve information about a linguistic, and cultural identity and provide data for further research. In some cases, such information may serve to revive an interest in or the use of the language at a later date. The extreme case of language death demonstrates the importance of preventive efforts in protecting languages before they reach such a point.

⁶ Basic outline for discussion, in view of the elaboration of a preliminary study of the technical and legal aspects of a possible international standard-setting instrument for the protection of indigenous and endangered languages, including a study of the outcomes of the programmes implemented by UNESCO relating to this issue (179 EX/INF.6).

⁷ *Our Creative Diversity* (UNESCO Publishing, 1996), pp. 178-182.

⁸ *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*, ed. Stephen Wurm (UNESCO Publishing, 2001); Working document on Language Vitality and Endangerment (UNESCO, 2003: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00120-EN.pdf>).

⁹ Half of these threatened languages are found in eight countries: Papua New Guinea (832); Indonesia (731); Nigeria (515); India (400); Mexico (295); Cameroon (286); Australia (268); and Brazil (234).

11. “Safeguarding” in this context may be defined as measures aimed at ensuring the viability of vulnerable languages, with the understanding that all languages are, in principle, equal and should enjoy equal and adequate status and protection. Many general criteria can be proposed as justification for protecting endangered languages, including their importance for cultural diversity, their social significance for the communities, their role as a vehicle for traditional knowledge, the importance of mother language education for building local capacities and its function in creativity and for intra- and inter-cultural dialogue.

12. This still leaves two important questions: which languages should be safeguarded and who should decide this? To answer these questions, the motivation of the speaker community to preserve its own language is an important factor. But if local and national participation is a paramount factor, then another important question related to this issue concerns the opportunity, presently discussed,¹⁰ of a possible international standard-setting instrument based on the principle of international cooperation and dedicated to the preservation of endangered languages. What would be the added value of such an instrument? The benefits might include the establishment of a framework for international cooperation and assistance, able to bring together a series of cross-sectoral, sometimes too scattered programmes and initiatives; the “educational” and awareness-raising value of an instrument, and placing requirements on States to act where they have been reluctant to do so.

13. On the other hand, the ongoing operational activities are fairly comprehensive in addressing the various aspects of protecting endangered and indigenous languages, with the added advantage that some are also directly targeted towards indigenous languages. They focus on developing methodologies for assessing language vitality and endangerment, as well as on implementing and promoting operational activities and projects in the field of awareness-raising, local and national capacities, and good practices dissemination. They generally also include policy decisions at national level that enable smaller, indigenous and/or minority communities to use and further develop their languages, as part of a multilingual approach. The use of these languages for learning, and in particular their presence at school, is crucial to accomplishing this goal and requires fully addressing the resulting organizational and logistic challenges.

Languages and Education for All

14. In 1999, UNESCO’s General Conference adopted the term “multilingual education”, which refers to the use of at least three languages, the mother tongue, a regional or national language, and an international language, in education. As demonstrated by a large and growing body of research, the use of mother tongues as the medium of instruction in literacy programmes and basic education enables access to learning, expands inclusion in schools, and improves learning outcomes. In addition, it increases children’s, adolescents’ and adults’ attendance, interaction and performance in school. A multilingual approach to learning that includes the learners’ mother tongue is a recognized condition of quality basic education, for children and adults. In many countries – including, to mention only a few, Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Papua New Guinea, Peru, South Africa – educational policies presently reflect these principles, and there is growing experience in how to implement them effectively.

15. Access to learning and education of all kinds becomes more difficult when the language of learning and the classroom is different from that of the home. Thus certain groups are by definition more excluded from education. Besides the well-known cases of minority and indigenous peoples, others include women and girls, who frequently have less opportunity to learn or to use another language, and migrants, displaced people and refugees caught between the language of their origin and that of their place of residence. Examining closely the language barriers to education for different groups is part of ensuring that education really is for all.

¹⁰ 176 EX/Decision 59 and 179 EX/Decision 10.

16. Successive editions of the EFA Global Monitoring Report have demonstrated how important language considerations are for effective learning at any age. It is critical not only at the primary level, but also for early childhood care and education, and in providing relevant and adequate learning opportunities for out-of-school youth, young adults and older people. Education in a language known well by the learner is identified as a crucial component of quality learning.

17. In many environments, classrooms contain speakers of a number of different languages, and thus no one language can easily be selected as the medium of instruction. This is often the case in urban environments, where speakers of many different languages live in close proximity. This situation requires close analysis, with adequate consultation with parents and school leadership. Frequently a local lingua franca, related to one or more of the other languages present, will prove a viable option. Where the language of the learner cannot itself serve as a language of instruction, a language as closely related linguistically as possible will serve better than a completely unrelated language.

18. When children's cognitive skills are developed in their mother tongue, the acquisition of basic knowledge, of a second language, and of academic skills is much easier for them. On the contrary, where children do not learn in their mother tongue, the EFA goals are not likely to be met, and mono-lingualism turns out to be an expensive and ineffective or limiting choice. Substantial evidence demonstrates that children should learn in their mother tongue in the first years of schooling and learn in the second language once they have acquired a good mastery of their mother tongue. In addition, the use of both languages should be maintained at all levels of education – additive bilingual education – with the introduction of other languages as necessary. These principles are presented in UNESCO's position paper entitled *Education in a Multilingual World*, and recognize the value and role in education of all the languages a learner uses or may need to learn.

19. Every learner – child or adult – needs access to adequate and relevant learning materials. Providing these in local languages to reflect local cultures is often seen as a problem or an excessive expense. However, experience in many different contexts shows that the engagement of the local community in design and content, the flexibility of electronic editing, and the use of local publishing facilities make this possible at reasonable cost.

20. The role of educators is critical in every educational enterprise, and teachers must be adequately trained in order to operate effectively in a multilingual and multicultural environment. Not only is it necessary that a teacher should know the local language of instruction, the socio-cultural contexts of the student body, and the language of wider communication, but he/she should also be able to handle the different pedagogical approaches of teaching in a language familiar to the learners and teaching them a new language – the methods are quite different. Issues of deployment are also important so that teachers with the relevant languages are posted appropriately.

21. As decentralized and school-based governance increasingly brings a community into management of resources, this will also raise questions of the relevance of the curriculum and the application of knowledge. Thus the community itself will play a role in determining the use of languages in education, with a particular role in identifying content and knowledge that is best expressed and learnt through the local language.

22. The use of mother tongues and the promotion of multilingual education may also potentially contribute to safeguarding indigenous and endangered languages, representing an effective avenue to achieve sustainable development in all its expressions. This potential often goes unrealized, and universal education that neglects linguistic diversity may in many instances have the unintended consequence of diminishing respect for indigenous and endangered languages and conveying to children that their own language is inferior or inadequate.

23. Many indigenous communities are therefore calling for a reformulation of the concept of formal schooling to include more open and comprehensive approaches to learning, which will make education relevant for all learners and contribute to awareness of and respect for indigenous knowledge and local languages. New approaches in both formal and non-formal education should remove the barriers between schools, the community and the environment so that learning can take place in, and through, all of them in a coherent and complementary way. Approaches of this nature will promote quality education for all.

Documents of the Executive Board

170 EX/17 – A programme for languages at UNESCO

170 EX/Decision 9.5 – A programme for languages at UNESCO

171 EX/20 – Report by the Director-General on an overall strategy for an intersectoral programme for languages at UNESCO

176 EX/INF.15 – Intersectoral mid-term strategy on languages and multilingualism

Recent UNESCO Publications

L. King, *Learning, Knowledge and Context* (UNESCO-UIE/Kluwer Academic, 2000).

L. King and S. Schielmann, *The Challenge of Indigenous Education – Practice and Perspectives* (UNESCO Publishing, 2004).

Compendium on ongoing activities concerning languages and multilingualism, UNESCO, 2007 (Working document CLT/CEI/CID/2007/PI/35).

E. Evatt, "Enforcing indigenous cultural rights: Australia as a case study," ch.4 in H. Niec (ed.) *Cultural Rights and Wrongs* (UNESCO Publishing, 1998).

J-N. Montesinos (ed.), *Sociedades multiculturales y democracia en Americana Latina* (UNESCO, Mexico, 1999).

H. Niec, "Casting the foundations for the implementation of cultural rights," in H. Niec (ed.), *Cultural Rights and Wrongs* (UNESCO Publishing, 1998), pp.176-190.

R. Smeets, "Language as a Vehicle of the Intangible Cultural Heritage", (2004) Museum International 221-222.

J. Symonides (ed.), *Human Rights: International Protection, Monitoring and Enforcement* (UNESCO Publishing, 2003).

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UNESCO, *World Culture Report: Cultural Diversity, Conflict and Pluralism* (UNESCO, 2001).

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UNESCO, *Education in a Multilingual World* (UNESCO, 2003a).

UNESCO, *Language Vitality and Endangerment Report of Ad Hoc Expert Meeting* (UNESCO, 2003b).

UNESCO. *The Quality Imperative: EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005* (UNESCO, 2004).

UNESCO, *Lenguas y tradiciones orales de la Amazonia ¿Diversidad en peligro?* (Havana, 2002).

International Treaties, Recommendations, Declarations and Resolutions directly or indirectly relating to languages

Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, (United Nations, 16 November 1945), online:

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001337/133729e.pdf - page=7>

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations: Geneva, 10 December 1948), online: <http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/lang/eng.htm>

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, Geneva, 16 December 1966), online: <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/ccpr.htm>

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations, Geneva, 16 December 1966), online: <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm>

Convention against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO, 1960), online: http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/DISCR1_E.PDF

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (United Nations: 18 December 1979), online: <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/cedaw.htm>

Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations: 2 September 1990), online: <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm - art31>

Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (United Nations: 18 December 1992), online: <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/minorities.htm>

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, No.148 (Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 5 November 1992), online: <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Treaties/html/148.htm>

Convention on Biological Diversity (United Nations, 1992), online: <http://www.cbd.int/convention/convention.shtml>

World Conference on Human Rights, "Vienna Declaration of the World Conference on Human Rights" (25 June 1993), online: <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/pdf/vienna.pdf>

UNESCO Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity and Action Plan (2001) online: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001271/127160m.pdf>

Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 17 October 2003), online: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001325/132540e.pdf>

Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace (2003), online: http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13474&URL_DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. (October 20, Paris, 2005). <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001429/14291e.pdf>

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (adopted United Nations General Assembly, 13 September 2007), online: <http://www.ohchr.org/english/issues/indigenous/docs/draftdeclaration.pdf>