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Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
at the opening ceremony for
International Mother Language Day (21 February)**

UNESCO, 20 February 2009

Mr Chair of the Executive Board,
Mr President of the African Academy of Languages,
Mr Ambassador of Bangladesh,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very happy to welcome you today to UNESCO Headquarters for the International Mother Language Day celebrations.

As we have just finished celebrating the International Year of Languages (2008), International Mother Language Day reminds us of how much the use and promotion of the mother tongue is a vital component of linguistic and cultural diversity, multilingualism and quality education for all.

I therefore wish to acknowledge the presence here today of the Chair of the Executive Board, the President of the African Academy of Languages, the Ambassador of Bangladesh and many other guests and experts. Your presence here denotes your commitment, professionally and through personal conviction, to taking action with UNESCO in resolutely defending the cause of languages. I should like to express heartfelt thanks to you.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As proposed by Bangladesh and subsequently proclaimed by the General Conference in 1999, International Mother Language Day has been celebrated every year since February 2000.

Ever growing attention has since been paid to languages and multilingualism.

This is illustrated most clearly by the inclusion of languages as a core issue in numerous standard-setting instruments drawn up and adopted by UNESCO. The role of languages in sustainable development and the promotion of cultural diversity

have accordingly been acknowledged in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Languages, as bearers of cultural traditions and oral expressions, are also at the heart of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Lastly, I must mention the Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace, which promotes linguistic and cultural diversity and the protection of endangered languages.

The proclamation of 2008 as the International Year of Languages, coordinated by UNESCO at the behest of the General Assembly of the United Nations, has afforded an opportunity to take all of those challenges into account.

Accordingly, quality education for all, multilingualism in cyberspace, the safeguarding of endangered languages and the recognition of languages as instruments of cultural and social integration, development and creativity were selected concurrently as priorities. The promotion of mother tongues, however, is an area requiring action under quality education and multilingual policies.

As you can see from the report which is available on our website and which will be presented to you shortly, more than 200 activities have been carried out under the awareness-building campaign conducted by UNESCO throughout 2008 owing to a wide variety of partnerships.

With the support of the National Commissions for UNESCO, conferences and seminars have been held in Johannesburg, Dar es Salaam, Eisenstadt, Bangkok, Yakutsk, Tokyo, New York and Bamako.

I should like also to mention the very keen interest aroused at the previous session of the Executive Board by the thematic debate, which was devoted to the link between languages, education for all and sustainable development.

Ladies and gentlemen,

A growing number and variety of actors from governmental organizations and civil society recognize that languages are at the heart of all manifestations of social, economic and cultural life. Those actors must now be given the means of fulfilling their legitimate ambitions.

Furthermore, we must continue to encourage Member States to integrate the issues of languages and multilingualism into their education policies and national development plans.

At the same time, however, it must be borne in mind that the processes of globalization, have increasingly brought languages to the brink of extinction. Once languages die out, cultural diversity is diminished. For that reason, I welcome the publication of the new edition of the *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, which is now, for the first time, in the form of an interactive digital tool. This working and research tool, which is designed to serve sustainable linguistic diversity policies, will help us to win greater recognition of the importance of multilingual education.

Before concluding, I should like to recall that we had decided to extend the International Year of Languages until today in order to give full emphasis to the importance to the celebration of International Mother Language Day. We can thus highlight the vital link between linguistic, educational and cultural diversity and strengthen the principle of the equality of all cultures and languages.

As I declare the International Year of Languages officially closed, I take this opportunity to urge the international community to ensure that the numerous initiatives announced in 2008 in order to promote multilingualism will be followed up with concrete and sustainable measures.

I hope that this appeal will be heard, for it is crucial to our capacity to build bridges between fields of knowledge, to promote dialogue among cultures and to foster universal access to quality basic education.

Thank you for your attention.