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Organización
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International Mother Language Day 2009

Report of the Round Table *Languages matter for communities – the way forward*

(20 February 2009)

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Context

The launch of the third edition of UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* formed part of the 2009 celebration of International Mother Language Day (IMLD) held at UNESCO, Paris on February 20. The event began in the morning with the presentation of the *Atlas* by its editor-in-chief **Mr Christopher Moseley** and the regional editor for lowland South America **Ms Marleen Haboud**. The digital interactive version of the *Atlas* is available at:

<http://www.unesco.org/culture/en/endangeredlanguages/atlas>. The launch of the *Atlas* was followed by a report on the International Year of Languages, presenting some 200 activities implemented during 2008.. In the afternoon, a round table on the theme "Languages matter for communities – the way forward" was moderated by **Mr Clinton Robinson** (Education Sector, UNESCO). This day-long celebration took place as the International Year of Languages was coming to a close. The Year had raised awareness on how languages matter most to the people who speak them; to communities, for communication, literacy, media, learning, cultural identity, social dialogues, and self-expression.

Aims

The focus of the morning session had been languages of ethnic minorities and smaller populations of the world who had close cultural ties with their languages. The moderator noted that communities have a crucial role in the further development of their languages, supported by positive policies and capacity development. At the close of the International Year of Languages it is useful to look forward to see how the momentum might be sustained and what role language communities themselves have in that. Thus, the focus of the Round Table was on how six thriving linguistic communities of the world were investing in their own languages, using them, and facing such challenges as multilingualism and globalisation. Panellists would explore how language is connected to culture, science, social science, education and information. They would also touch on the knowledge, history, environmental aspects and various structures and movements within their linguistic communities.

Speaker Introductions

The Round Table was organised as a discussion among six speakers.

Mr Martin Benjamin is the Executive Director of the Kamusi Project which first began as an online Swahili dictionary that will soon be expanded to include languages from Rwanda, Burundi, Malawi and Zambia. He is involved with the 100 African Locales Initiative which is collecting the basic set of data needed to configure a computer or other technological device to run in 100 different African languages.

Mr Ahmed Boukous is Rector of the Institut Royal de la Culture Amazigh in Morocco (IRCAM). The Institut was created in 2001 with the main goal of pursuing political,

economic, and social democratisation in Morocco. It promotes the Amazigh language through linguistic and cultural policies in education and media.

Ms Gloria Cáceres is both a teacher of Quechua and Castellano and works in the Ministry of Education in Peru where she supports the intercultural and bilingual programme.

Mr Andrew Ikupu works at the Department of Education in Papua New Guinea, a country of over 800 languages for 6 million inhabitants. His work involves the promotion and planning of education in local languages.

Mr Akinwumi Isola is a former professor of Yoruba in the Department of Linguistics and African Languages at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. As an academic, he is concerned with the precarious linguistic situation in which many Anglophone Nigerians find themselves today; they are a people without a language of their own. He works to promote local languages through image and sound making in the media to reach young Africans.

Mr Mathura Tripura is Executive Director of Zabarang Kalyan Samity, an NGO based in Bangladesh. His organization is engaged in development projects to promote community empowerment, mobilisation, and education.

Presentations and debate

The ensuing discussion among the panellists focused on a number of themes, including community attitudes towards languages, movements to promote local languages, and the prospects for minority language speakers' access to new technology. Panellists introduced the linguistic context of each of their countries and spoke about main concerns present about local languages. Mr Ikupu began the discussion by addressing the **attitude of communities toward their languages and how they have been changing**. He pointed to European and Asian colonialism as the major influences on attitudes of local communities towards their own languages. About 400 of the nearly 850 languages in Papua New Guinea had a written alphabet. Many communities have decided to adopt the 26-letter alphabet that major Western languages use and have begun to develop adapted writing systems. Whereas the first three years of primary school are now conducted in the students' mother tongue, many elite members of society still press their children to learn English. There is no documented research on the attitudes of parents towards languages, but he sensed that most parents wanted to revive their cultures through their own language. Parents of the elite class often find themselves in a confused situation, as the mother and father are often of different indigenous origins and each wish for the children to learn his or her own language. This often results in the decision to teach the children to speak in English, which is considered a profitable language for the career opportunities to which it can lead.

Mr Tripura continued in the theme of community attitudes toward languages and additionally explained **how languages link up with local development efforts**. He stated that language is the entry point for development because it allows for direct communication with and thus motivation for the people. Initially there was doubt among Bangladeshi leadership in education about the feasibility of bilingual and multilingual education. But after two years of curriculum development and creating alphabet charts, those doubts were proven unfounded. As for the parents, Mr Tripura reported that many parents originally demanded for international language education so that their children might be able to keep up with a highly "commercialised" world. Nevertheless, once their children have completed their education including the two-

year primary school programme in multiple languages, parents are generally very pleased with the results.

Mr Isola then spoke on **individuals' and community's ideas on language and how it is linked with education and development**. Men and women in rural African communities have no choice but to speak their own languages but it is clear, through their words and actions, that they wish they could have the opportunity to attend school and to learn English. Parents would be proud of their children if they could speak English. Mr Isola pointed out the absurdity of English nursery rhymes being taught in primary school in Nigeria. UNESCO's extensive work to document and promote Yoruba has not truly reached the people, and this is coupled with the will of the elite to press for the use of English in their families. Mr Isola has responded to this ongoing problem by directing five films in which Yoruba is spoken. Radio has in fact a stronger influence than television on young people in Africa because it is a more affordable medium. Furthermore, private organizations are working to "scientificate" the Yoruba language and prepare it to be used in cyberspace.

The next theme that speakers touched on was **community-level movements and organizations that promote their languages**. Mr Boukous said that since the 1960s there have been a number of social movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and cultural associations that have concentrated notably on cultural and linguistic rights of Moroccan communities. Cultural associations seek to preserve Amazigh and the different varieties of Arabic and to promote their use in media and education. Human rights organizations work to advance linguistic and cultural rights which had until recently been excluded from Moroccan law. For example, the organization *Instance Équité et Réconciliation* has reconstructed individual and collective memories of the wrongs done to Amazigh communities in Morocco's past. Yet other organizations take a more concrete approach to language and development by protecting the rights of men, women and children who speak Amazigh. By presenting Amazigh symbols on traditional rugs, women can contribute to the preservation of their language and culture. Finally, more politically-oriented associations seek to include linguistic rights for Amazigh speakers in the Moroccan Constitution.

Ms Cáceres spoke about the **linguistic richness of Peru**, including Spanish, Quechua, and Aymara as the three major languages spoken with an additional forty languages spoken in Amazonia. The Ministry of Education in Peru launched a bilingual education programme in 1975 when General Velazco approved Quechua as the second official language of Peru. After that, the Peruvian government made sure that all the Andean and Amazonian communities could have access to general primary education. She remarked that Quechua speakers count on the attitudes of those who are currently studying the language to continue to develop its role in education. Community participation is manifest in poem writing competitions that the regional governments organize along with the universities. Ms Cáceres then emphasized that Quechua is not only current in Peru, but is international, by highlighting two international prize-winning films which feature aspects of the language. Finally, she addressed the Ministry of Education's cooperation with UNESCO to purchase one laptop per child and to work on translating "Windows" into Quechua. Other technological advances include the creation of a cellular telephone interface in Quechua.

Mr Benjamin continued in the vein of **technological advancement** by explaining what communities can hope for from the new technologies in terms of their language and culture, and how this use of language could affect their lives. He first made the distinction between what technologies will be produced and what technologies will be

accessible to the people. The Worldwide Web has become highly accessible on many continents but remains out of reach to the more rural communities of Africa, where Mr Benjamin currently works. However, mobile phones have emerged as a prominent technology even in less well wired communities where a few business owners own individual mobile phones. Others in the village commonly pay these individuals a nominal fee so that they may use the mobile phone. Today not only do mobile phones allow users to make phone calls, but they also provide access to the internet and record images and videos. These features are becoming increasingly affordable, but the cost remains a considerable obstacle for poor individuals. Regardless, it is not useful for a mobile phone interface to be in English or French for an individual who does not speak those languages. Mr Benjamin is working to expand the number of languages that are at mobile phone users' disposal, but he sensed that it would take a lot more time and effort to create interfaces in a truly sufficient number of languages.

Mr Boukous followed by addressing the **promotion of individual cultures and languages through linguistic policies** that are favourable for such community action. He first highlighted that Amazigh began to be taught in schools in 2003. During the 2008-2009 school year, Amazigh is taught for three hours per week in all primary schools. In addition, three undergraduate degrees and two masters at the higher education level have been pursued to teach students about Amazigh language and culture. He then spoke about what the Institut Royal de la Culture Amazigh is doing to influence language policy in education. In fact, the Institut organises three training sessions per year in Amazigh for teachers and educators, has created curriculum for the study of Amazigh, and has published an Amazigh dictionary. It has also developed a standardised alphabet and spelling for Amazigh words and has produced a keyboard in Amazigh. A channel with Amazigh expressions will soon be launched in Morocco and there are already a number of programmes broadcast in Amazigh.

Mr Isola pointed out how **language policy favours linguistic diversity** and the use of languages in Nigeria, a country in which nearly 400 languages are spoken. He stated that Nigerian law requires that pre-primary and primary schooling be in the mother tongue; however this is not enforced. Teachers are often under pressure from the parents to teach in English so that their children can "make it in life." Parents may also circumvent these laws by sending their children to the increasing number of private schools that are being built. In closing, Mr Isola reiterated that linguistic policies can be on target but in the absence of enforcement, laws alone are not enough to preserve a dying language.

Mr Ikupu addressed the **community perspective of education in local languages**. He evoked the rich linguistic diversity of Papua New Guinea and how it complicates the diffusion of policies on language and education. Policies are developed in English, and pamphlets distributed to the villages are written in English and a dominant creole language which is a mixture of English, German, and Asian languages. Upon receiving the documentation, villages translate them into their local languages for use and reference. Language policy in Papua New Guinea is targeting literacy in students' mother tongue at the primary level.

Mr Mathura reported that there are currently no policies on the use of languages in Bangladesh, but a related poverty reduction strategy and certain education policies have been implemented. The drop-out rate among tribal children is estimated at 55.5% and is attributed to frustration with language barriers, and this remains a major challenge for the Ministry of Education. A strategic plan has been written to address **education of tribal children** but work remains to be done before it can be implemented.

The moderator then opened the floor for questions from the audience for general debate. Audience members put a number of questions to the panellists ranging in theme from linguistic diversity to the challenges of local language instruction to certification of minority language translators. Mr Ikupu explained why there is such **extensive linguistic diversity in Papua New Guinea**. In fact, there are two language groups on the island, the Austronesian and the non-Austronesian languages. The speakers of non-Austronesian languages include the original inhabitants of the island. There are additionally a vast number of races represented on the island, which grew after Spanish colonialism to include the “Asian race” as well as “African-negrityo-pygmy races.”

Mr Ikupu was then prompted to address **the challenges of using all the languages in Papua New Guinea as languages of instruction**. He referred to his experience in managing primary level schools and literacy programmes in the mother tongue. Experts say that once a child has obtained a basic education in a language he or she understands, the student will be able to perform in most other languages within his or her cultural reach. When prompted to address the feasibility of expenses linked to investing in multiple languages of instruction, Mr Ikupu reiterated that preservation of identity and cultural heritage through language is worth the investment.

An audience member suggested the idea that UNESCO introduce **certification for translators of minority languages** so they might be called upon by researchers. This would demonstrate that languages have a place in the international community because of their heritage not in spite of it. Mr Isola commented on this question stating that it would be “delightful” to establish such a system and that it is only UNESCO that could assess the possibility to do so. He continued by evoking the desirability of having African writers’ works translated back into their own languages. For example, one Igbo writer has published stories of Igbo origin in a foreign language, but those Igbo people who have not gone to school cannot enjoy these written materials.

Mr Boukous was asked to comment on the idea that UNESCO could create a **database and network for access by linguistic researchers**, which would allow them to be aware of the extent of research being done instead of working in isolation. He suggested that UNESCO organize a conference to further explore the feasibility of this idea. Secondly, he addressed a question regarding the place that Amazigh occupies in secondary education. In fact, Amazigh is taught neither in middle school nor in high school due to shortage of resources. This is due in part to the fact that training to teach Amazigh culture and language was instituted relatively recently. The Institut Royal de la Culture Amazigh believes in the efficacy of merging linguistic, cultural, pedagogical and didactic training for teachers and professors in Amazigh. This is now a vision which is shared by the Minister of Education of Morocco.

Mr Boukous continued by addressing a question regarding **the choice of Tifinagh characters and the possibility that it might pose problems for Berber speakers** who are not familiar with these characters. There was extensive debate within the Institut’s administration over which written alphabet should be used to write Amazigh. This led to a vote in which a simple majority supported Tifinagh characters, and the decision was then approved by the King of Morocco. At the beginning, there was some difficulty in adopting this written form. However, it was quickly revealed that children in primary school had absolutely no difficulty learning Tifinagh characters.

Concluding remarks

The moderator closed by highlighting the major themes of the discussion, including the fundamental value of multilingualism, the complementarity between minority languages

and those of mass communication, differing perspectives of present and future generations, and above all the ever-changing dynamics of language. He thanked the panellists for their enlightening comments and invited the round table participants and audience to maintain the dialogue.