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**Report
NAM Round Table
“Indigenous Languages: worldviews, globalization,
development and peace”**

**18 February 2009
UNESCO House**

Introduction

The round table “Indigenous Languages: worldviews, globalization, development and peace” held on 18 February 2009, was organized by the Non Aligned Movement in UNESCO in the framework of the International Year of Languages 2008 and as part of the celebration of the International Mother languages Day (21 February). Its objective was to raise awareness on the issue of indigenous languages endangerment and to provide in depth reflection on the link between the language-embodied worldviews and the challenges of globalization, development and peace.

The panelists, coming from different regions of the world, were invited in particular to analyze the issue of the round table by focusing on the following sub-themes:

- Indigenous languages as transmitters of cultural, community, identity, solidarity and respect for nature values.
- The insertion of indigenous languages into modernity through oral and written communication, to contribute with their values to solve 21st century challenges.
- How to guarantee the protection and preservation of indigenous and endangered languages?

Opening

In his welcoming speech, Ambassador **Héctor Hernández González-Pardo**, Chair of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM) Group in UNESCO, Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Cuba to UNESCO, presented the objectives of the round table, also aiming to contribute to the reflection on any possible standard-setting instrument specifically designed for languages.

He pointed out that nowadays, taking into account the crises affecting our countries due to the existing selfish expressions without borders is clearly necessary to give way to solidarity and cooperation among human beings as a unique alternative that will prevent the disaster for the human race. He added that many of those ancient cultures, which have in their languages the main communication and transmitting support, are also carriers of solidarity and community-based values. That should serve as an example to people who are interested in stopping individuals who poison and jeopardize whole societies by incorporating and stimulating a wild individualism

that becomes men into wolves of themselves. In this regard, he transmitted the need of safeguarding endangered languages.

The Assistant Director-General for Culture Mrs. **Françoise Rivière** in her opening remarks expressed the interest for the round table and satisfaction for having contributed to its organization at a technical level, namely by seconding the presence of a moderator. She pointed out that the NAM initiative was welcomed both for its content and timeliness. In fact, at first hand, the round table was an opportunity to contribute to UNESCO work on indigenous people's issues, which are indeed at the heart of many UNESCO activities, throughout different sectors. On the other hand, the round table was appropriated and organized in "the right moment", taking into consideration the growing importance given to linguistic diversity, languages, endangered languages, namely Indigenous, in the international agenda (also proved by the proclamation of the International Year of Languages by the UN General Assembly). She also transmitted the urgency of providing feasible options in the framework of the collective reflection, in order to define concrete political responses.

First Panel

The first panel was composed by Dr. Akinwumi Isola, Former Professor of Yoruba literature (Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Nigeria), Dr. Esteban Magannon, from the Philippines, presently "Maître des conférences" in Paris - Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales - INALCO) and Dr. Saad Albazei, Senior Professor of Comparative Literature, at the College of Arts, King Saud University-Riyadh, in Saudi Arabia.

Dr. Akinwumi Isola at his presentation, based on his experience as Yoruba speaker, professor and militant, insisted that languages are extremely wealthy in wisdom, values and knowledge. He affirmed that language is a culture's dictionary, or rather its encyclopaedia, and provided and analyzed a great number of examples drawn from Yoruba (including the concept of Omoluabi, "the good person", and proverbs on fauna and flora). He pointed out that languages have been endangered when the developmental capacities of the culture have been undermined, especially by the fatal effects of interventions like colonialism and globalization. He concluded by underlying the importance of literature, as well as stories, folktales, cartoons, proverbs and songs to preserve and revitalize languages: their promotion and spreading, namely throughout media, books, theatre and the Internet. Likewise, in the case of African cultures, he expressed the need to find ways of inserting African issues into the agenda of the knowledge age in order to make modern Information and Communication technologies (ICT) relevant to African languages.

Dr. Esteban Magannon spoke about problems of disappearance, protection and conservation of languages in their two forms, oral and written or code, and emphasized that these problems are not linguistic but social, economic and political, thus the necessity to elaborate policies and programmes for the protection and promotion of cultural identity, human rights and peace, so every effort to safeguard languages must also be an effort in favor of their speakers. He concluded saying that the dynamic side of history and culture change in relation to the evolution and development of languages has been so far understudied, and this is fundamental to

elaborate concrete and realistic policies and programmes for the pursuit of intercultural communication.

Dr Saad Albazei talked about the establishment of language academies since past centuries in the Arab countries, aimed to protect the Arabic language and organizing its interaction with new developments in the various fields of arts, sciences, technologies, commerce, etc. He transmitted that the establishment of those language academies and their incessant efforts indicate a deep-seated anxiety that Arabic is under threat, and pointed out the impact of colonialism over the entire Arabic and Islam heritage and the fragmentation of Arabic into dialects as the main reasons for that anxiety. He added that efforts continue in the Arab world to stave off unwanted influences in the context of cultural and geopolitical constraints and challenges, in order to preserve cultural identity, with an intrinsic conviction that an intercultural/ interlinguistic conflict is a reality. Dr. Albazei concluded saying the belief that languages and cultures are self-regulatory can be harmful, and a linguistic breakdown similar to the one witnessed on the economic level nowadays the world over is not impossible, bearing in mind that many languages have already vanished.

Second Panel

The second panel was composed by Dr. Jesús García Ruiz, from Guatemala, presently Director of Research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in Paris, Dr. Satyanarayan Chakraborty, from India, Chair of Visiting Professors of Sanskrit, at Sorbonne Nouvelle University, Paris and Mrs. Rozenn Milin, Director of "SOROSORO Program, so the languages of the world may prosper!" of the Fondation Chirac.

Dr. Jesús García Ruiz denounced the high languages endangerment level in Latin America, referring in particular to Guatemala, where over 70% of the existing languages (the last expression of the cultural heritage having survived since the colonial conquer) could disappear. He pointed out that globalization has had a homogenizing and fragmenting effect on languages. He underlined, based on his experience in this field, that it is not enough local, national and regional policies to preserve languages; it is necessary higher UNESCO's will to achieve it. He emphasized that the Organization could vigorously enhance multilingual-based policies through an international non-legal binding declaration focused in the safeguarding of endangered languages, as it was previously done in the field of cultural diversity.

Dr. Satyanarayan Chakraborty focused his speech on the importance of Sanskrit, one of the oldest languages of human civilization, not only as a common root for a high number of widely spoken languages and a common identity element shared by all in a multifaceted India, but also as common cultural heritage of humanity to be more widely spread, studied and promoted both in its ancient and contemporary expressions. He expressed that Sanskrit contributes to propagate humanity, equality, fraternity, tolerance and all other basic values for a healthy atmosphere in the world and for a future peaceful existence. He transmitted that in school-level education

Sanskrit, both as a vehicle of oral and written communication should have a place as a compulsory subject for a longer period for all practical purposes.

Mrs. Rozenn Milin, Director of "SOROSORO Program", comprehensively presented the reasons to safeguard languages worldwide, explaining the content of the programme undertaken by The Fondation Chirac in this regard. She expressed that languages are not only an essential element of cultural and social identity, but they are also strategic to face important humankind challenges. She emphasized the importance of linguistic diversity for developing countries, which is closely related to their struggle for eradicating illiteracy. She underlined that education; media and public administration are essential fields to safeguard languages, and the need to encouraging the set up of international legal binding instruments to preserve them. The role of public policies in revitalizing or endangering languages was demonstrated through a parallel experience of two Celtic languages like Welsh (a tongue that is now thriving) and Breton (severely endangered).

Third Panel

The third panel was composed by H.E. Mrs. Aziza Bennani, Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Morocco to UNESCO, by H.E. Mr. Luis Fernando Ávalos Giménez, Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Paraguay to UNESCO, and by H.E. Mr. Olabiyi Babalola Joseph Yai, Chairman of the Executive Board, Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Benin to UNESCO.

The Ambassador of Morocco, **Mrs. Aziza Bennani**, recalled the importance of indigenous languages (mother, vernacular, local languages) and underlined their role as means of communication, vector of thought and philosophy, of the global view of the concerning community, as well as a tool to transmit values and knowledge, which is an essential element of identity and cultural diversity. She explained that towards the consolidation of the Rule of law and the respect of human rights (constitutionally registered with their universal acceptance), Morocco undertook some reforms in different fields, including the linguistic field, since the end of last century. After having exposed the pursued policy since the creation of the Royal Institute of the Amazighe Culture - IRCAM- and the integration of the Amazighe language in the educational system and national media, she announced its positive impact which already starts to be perceived due to the new statute of Amazighe and the promotional actions undertaken to achieve it. She demonstrated the importance of the political determination and the scientifically based action- taking carried out in a systematic manner, in the field of safeguarding and promoting languages. She concluded expressing that Morocco is very interested, not only at national level, in contributing to safeguard the linguistic heritage of humanity and working on the building of inclusive societies, sustainable development, harmony and peace. Mme. Bennani exhorted UNESCO, as the only international organization who has competencies in the field of languages, to make an evaluation of its programmes and to establish an action plan for permitting more intense target-oriented actions, in order to reinforce its normative role on this matter and to spread the good practices.

H.E. Mr. Luis Fernando Ávalos Giménez explained through his presentation the philosophy and wisdom reflected in "Ayvu rapita", a series of mythological texts of the Mbya-guarani people of Paraguay, which is rich in knowledge and ancestral values. He indicated that currently the subject of languages requires the efforts of everybody and the linguistic policies have acquired certain importance at national and regional level. Ambassador Ávalos Giménez expressed that in his country the guarani linguistic heritage constitutes an essential instrument to face the contemporary challenges. He added that safeguarding languages means to save knowledge and values. He emphasized on the role that UNESCO should play to spread successful experiences and practices of preserving indigenous languages and talked about the view shared by several countries with regard to explore the possibilities and feasibility of advancing towards a universal convention that could face globally and jointly the existing problematic on endangered languages.

The Chairman of the Executive Board, Ambassador and permanent Delegate of Benin to UNESCO, **H.E. Mr. Olabiyi Babalola Joseph Yai**, made an approach regarding the reality of the 5 official languages in Africa, a region in which the oral language should be rescued as a key element to promote the dialogue, the cultural exchange, equitable and sustainable development and peace. He expressed that spoken language should not be opposed to the written language. He indicated that UNESCO must face the challenge of assuming the reflection on languages and culture, and going beyond the former tradition of promoting multilingualism. The Ambassador of Benin exhorted the Non Aligned Movement to push forward this subject, working beyond the International Year of Languages 2008, in order to express clearly our position in the Executive Board and with a view to further presented this matter in the United Nations General Assembly.

Conclusions

In her closing remarks, the Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Guatemala, Coordinator of the NAM Working Group on indigenous and endangered languages, **H.E. Mrs. Anaisabel Prera**, stated that it is time to fully recognize the linguistic diversity and that the international community is committed to safeguarding languages. She pointed out that the International Year of Languages 2008 should mean an inflection point to raise awareness on the close linkage between languages and the humankind evolution, with a view to develop a convention in the future. She indicated that UNESCO would have provided, pursuant to its role, a definitive contribution to this aim. She proposed to start the drafting process of a non-legal binding declaration of principles, without any budgetary impact, in light of the 35th General Conference. The Ambassador of Guatemala concluded saying that the Non-Aligned Movement will continue working on raising awareness and mobilizing the international community in defence of the endangered and indigenous languages and in favour of an international normative instrument for its preservation.