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Organisation
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Organización
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para la Educación,
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联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,

Director-General of UNESCO

on the occasion

of the International Day of the World's Indigenous People

9 August 2009

Halfway through the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (2005-2014), indigenous communities around the world are encouraging the international community to approach development from the perspective of "development with culture and identity". This theme, selected for the 9th session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in May 2010, is directly linked to the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which recognizes the right of indigenous peoples to development in accordance with their own aspirations, needs and interests. It is therefore fitting, on this International Day, to reflect on the linkages between culture, development and identity.

UNESCO is convinced that development must be based on the diversity of cultures, "one of the roots of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence" as stated in the 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity.

Throughout history, indigenous peoples, who represent 5 per cent of the world population, have demonstrated a capacity to adapt to change while continuing to sustain their unique values and ways of life. Yet, many indigenous individuals and communities are marginalized, deprived of basic human rights, and confronted with the destruction of their ecosystems and their cultures.

In adopting the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and related conventions devoted to the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) and the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005),

UNESCO has built a legal arsenal in which indigenous peoples are recognized as custodians of cultural diversity and biodiversity. Together, these international instruments provide a framework for protecting and promoting cultural expressions, both in their traditional and contemporary forms, with special emphasis on indigenous peoples.

The concept of “development with culture and identity” underpins UNESCO’s development strategy. In its work to promote linguistic diversity, UNESCO launched in 2009 the electronic version of its Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger of Disappearing. The Atlas shows that within a few generations, more than 50 per cent of the estimated 7,000 languages spoken in the world today may disappear. This situation is particularly critical for indigenous peoples, who account for more than 5,000 languages in over 70 countries on six continents; that is nearly 75 per cent of all languages believed to exist. UNESCO is now seeking new responses to address the urgency of indigenous language endangerment, notably by assessing the technical and legal aspects of a possible standard-setting instrument for protecting indigenous and endangered languages.

In line with Article 14 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, UNESCO emphasizes the role of linguistic and cultural diversity in education, including the need to facilitate knowledge-transmission and skills that enable indigenous peoples to participate fully and equally in the national and international community. Among the current priorities of the Organization are the development of mother-tongue-based multilingual education to attain the Education for All (EFA) goals, the integration of indigenous knowledge into school curricula, and the promotion of dialogue with indigenous peoples as stakeholders of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014).

Despite broad recognition that many indigenous communities stand on the frontlines of climate change, their voices have remained largely on the sidelines of international debates on the issue. UNESCO has therefore launched a grassroots Internet forum ‘On the Frontlines of Climate Change’ as a space for local and indigenous voices to contribute to decision-making, notably in the lead up to the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009.

These initiatives are founded on a belief that indigenous peoples’ cultures and worldviews, but also the enjoyment of their human rights, are linked to the

preservation of their eco- and livelihood systems and require more holistic approaches to development.

On International Day of the World's Indigenous People 2009, I call upon the international community to engage in genuine dialogue with indigenous peoples to build an international partnership for development relevant to all communities everywhere.

Koïchiro Matsuura