



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Organisation  
des Nations Unies  
pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

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

Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
вопросам образования,  
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

## Message from

**Ms Irina Bokova,  
Director-General of UNESCO,**

**on the occasion of International Mother Language Day**

**UNESCO, 21 February 2012**

Nelson Mandela once said that “if you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart”. The language of our thoughts and our emotions is our most valuable asset. Multilingualism is our ally in ensuring quality education for all, in promoting inclusion and in combating discrimination. Building genuine dialogue is premised on respect for languages. Each representation of a better life, each development goal is expressed in a language, with specific words to bring it to life and communicate it. Languages are who we are; by protecting them, we protect ourselves.

UNESCO has celebrated International Mother Language Day for 12 years now and directs its energies towards protecting linguistic diversity. This thirteenth celebration is dedicated to multilingualism for inclusive education. The work of researchers and the impact of multilingualism policies have proven that people perceive intuitively that linguistic diversity accelerates the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All goals in particular. Use of the mother tongue at school is a powerful remedy against illiteracy. The challenge, however, lies in achieving this truth in the classroom. Excluded population groups, such as indigenous peoples, are often those whose mother tongues are ignored by education systems. Allowing them to learn from a very early age in their mother tongue, and then in national, official or other languages, promotes equality and social inclusion.

UNESCO Mobile Learning Week has shown that use of mobile technologies in education is an excellent means of boosting inclusive education. Combined with multilingualism, these technologies increase our scope for action tenfold. Let us

make the most of them. Our generation is advantaged by having new communication media and a new Internet-based worldwide public arena: it cannot accept an impoverishment of languages.

Linguistic diversity is our common heritage. It is fragile heritage. Nearly half of the more than 6,000 languages spoken in the world could die out by the end of the century. UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger is the performance chart for this struggle. Language loss impoverishes humanity. It is a retreat in the defence of everyone's rights to be heard, to learn and to communicate. Moreover, each language also conveys cultural heritage that increases our creative diversity. Cultural diversity is as important as biological diversity in nature. They are closely linked. Some indigenous peoples' languages carry knowledge on the biodiversity and management of ecosystems. This linguistic potential is an asset for sustainable development and deserves to be shared. UNESCO also intends to highlight this message at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio.

The vitality of languages depends on all those who speak them and rally round to protect them. UNESCO pays tribute to them and ensures that their voices are heard when education, development and social cohesion policies are being formulated. Multilingualism is a living resource; let us use it for the benefit of all.

Irina Bokova