

**Message from Ms Audrey Azoulay,
Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of International Literacy Day**

8 September 2024

Children learn to read and write best in their mother tongue. Yet 40 per cent of people lack access to education in a language they speak or understand. In Africa, 8 in 10 children start school in a language different from the one they speak at home.

This is a major barrier to literacy that we cannot accept—when 3 out of 4 children in developing countries cannot read and understand a simple text by the age of 10, and when there are still 754 million illiterate adults worldwide, two-thirds of whom are women.

Those struggling to learn in an unfamiliar language are sent the wrong message—the message that the education system does not recognize their language or their culture; that the opportunities made possible by education are not for them.

To address this situation, this year's International Literacy Day focuses on 'Promoting multilingual education: Literacy for mutual understanding and peace.' The benefits of multilingual education are well documented and evidenced by research. When children are offered education in their household language, more of them attend school, girls from rural areas stay in education longer, and all children acquire better thinking skills.

Multilingual education also supports intercultural dialogue, social cohesion and peace. For language is a passport to communication with others: it connects us across cultures; it opens us to new ways of perceiving and interpreting the world; it strengthens understanding within and between peoples.

This is one of the convictions enshrined in the new UNESCO Recommendation on education for peace, human rights and sustainable development. Adopted unanimously by our Member States in November 2023, this text underlines the importance of multilingualism for social cohesion and mutual understanding—and the power of education in imparting them.

UNESCO has long supported efforts to build literacy and strengthen multilingual education. For example, we recently ran workshops and capacity building activities in Central African countries to promote and protect linguistic diversity. In Cameroon, we promoted the integration of national languages in school curricula.

As celebrations for this year's International Literacy Day kick off in Cameroon—one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world—let us be inspired to continue our collective efforts to promote linguistic and cultural diversity as a foundation of peace.