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Address by
Mr Koïchiro Matsuura

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the International Expert Meeting on
the UNESCO programme aimed at the
Safeguarding of Endangered Languages

UNESCO, 10 March 2003

Distinguished experts,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very happy to open this expert meeting and welcome all of you to UNESCO. Let me begin by thanking you for your willingness to share your knowledge and expertise with us. I would also like to express my appreciation of the Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO for its cooperation, support and co-sponsorship of this expert meeting.

The subject of endangered languages is a key aspect of the wider question of safeguarding the world's linguistic diversity. In turn, the question of linguistic diversity figures prominently within yet wider debates, such as those concerning cultural diversity, language and education, and communication in the age of knowledge societies. Allow me therefore to briefly signpost the main avenues through which UNESCO's concern for endangered languages is channeled.

The Member States of UNESCO consider the safeguarding of the cultural diversity of humanity as one of the most important tasks for this Organization. The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and the Action Plan that goes with it explicitly mention our linguistic heritage as part and parcel of that diversity. This Declaration, which was adopted unanimously by UNESCO's Member States at the last General Conference in November 2001, provides an essential frame of reference for considering the relationship between linguistic and cultural diversity. Furthermore, the Declaration recognizes the important link between cultural diversity and biodiversity, on which much of the agenda of sustainable development depends; it is a link largely expressed through questions of linguistic diversity.

The safeguarding of the world's linguistic diversity clearly has been and will remain important in all of UNESCO's fields of competence. The Education and Culture sectors of our Organization have been most directly and persistently engaged with language questions over the years. But changing times bring forward new needs and different questions: today, for example, our Communication and Information sector is the motor behind the preparation of a Draft Recommendation on Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace, which, among other things, seeks to promote the use of as many languages in cyberspace as possible.

For UNESCO, therefore, the safeguarding of our linguistic diversity is the main immediate context of our concern for endangered languages but, through that context, this concern links up with all the other fields of competence of the Organization. As you will hear this afternoon from Mr. Bouchenaki, the

Assistant Director-General for Culture, UNESCO began serious reflection on the subject of endangered languages about ten years ago. One of the tangible results was UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing* (published in 1996 and updated in 2001), which aroused widespread interest among scholars and journalists, and became a reference book on endangered languages for the general public. Indeed, the issue of language endangerment has attracted greatly increased attention over the last decade or so within different sectors of society. But much remains to be done, as I am sure all of you are aware.

For UNESCO, the identification, documenting and archiving of endangered languages are essential for their safeguarding. But we are well aware that it will not be possible to create the optimal conditions for the survival and further development of *all* languages. It is clear that activities like the protection, promotion and modernization of languages require considerable funds and can only be successful if the communities concerned see their ancestral languages as crucial to their identity and, as a result, have the desire and the will to continue using their languages.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Linguistic heritage also forms an essential dimension of intangible cultural heritage, which now enjoys a high priority among UNESCO programmes. I would like to quickly remind you of the process I launched following the last session of the General Conference in order to prepare a preliminary draft of a convention on the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

With the assistance of high-level experts in anthropology and linguistics, we engaged in the preparation of a definition of intangible cultural heritage in which languages, and in particular traditional languages in danger of disappearing, were considered an important component.

Following several experts meetings - held in Turin, Italy, in February 2001; in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in January 2002; and at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris in March/April 2002 - a proposed definition was recommended to the first session of the intergovernmental experts meeting that was held in Paris in September 2002. This was followed by a second session held here last month (February 2003) during which a very rich debate was held about the role and place of language in intangible cultural heritage. I should also mention that we have received valuable support from Leiden University in the Netherlands where a group of experts has prepared a glossary of the scientific terminology used for understanding intangible cultural heritage.

On the basis of all this documentation and the comments sent by a large number of Member States on the first draft proposal, the last session of the intergovernmental experts meeting proposed that the definition of intangible cultural heritage covers - *inter alia* – “oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage”.

Given that there is a lot more work to be done in other areas, I have decided to convene a third session of this intergovernmental experts meeting in June or in July. I shall be able to present, as requested by the 31st session of the General Conference, a preliminary draft convention on intangible cultural heritage to its 32nd session next October.

As you can see from this quick review of the process of preparing an important normative text on intangible cultural heritage, the question of languages is one of the major issues in the drafting of this text, which will have a great impact on this particular matter in the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In spite of the already numerous programmes that have been carried out world-wide and that are being carried out at the moment, it is clear that much more action is necessary. UNESCO, too, has to renew and strengthen its role in the field of protecting endangered languages, a field which draws strength from the Organization’s commitment to foster our cultural diversity.

I have high expectations of this forum, which has brought together eminent linguists, outstanding specialists on language policies, as well as representatives of leading academic institutions and civil society from around the world.

UNESCO is looking forward to your inputs. I can assure you that we will listen to your presentations and discussions with great interest: we wish to learn from your views and experiences. Most particularly, we are anxious to hear about the constructive and concrete solutions you can elaborate when faced with the problem of language endangerment in various parts of the world. We also hope to learn from the methodological choices you make and the motivations behind these choices. Finally, we are also interested in how and why you define the problem of language endangerment as you do.

I hope you will be able to propose concrete, realistic lines of action that will help UNESCO to clearly define its role in the safeguarding of endangered languages and thereby enable the Organization to assist its Member States in

their efforts to preserve their linguistic heritage in the years ahead. I wish you every success in your deliberations on these important issues.

In concluding my remarks, I would like to make reference to UNESCO's partnership with Discovery Communications Inc. aimed at celebrating diversity and drawing attention to endangered languages around the world. I propose that we see together nine of the first vignettes produced within the framework of this partnership with Discovery. Before doing so, however, I call upon M. Maurice Paleau, Vice President of Discovery Networks International, to say a few words.

Thank you.