



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 Irina Bokova,**

**Director-General of UNESCO**

**on the occasion of the International Day  
of the World's Indigenous Peoples**

**9 August 2011**

From the Kalahari Desert to the Himalayas, from the Amazon to the Arctic region, the indigenous peoples of the world are living change at the sharp end. They stand also on the frontline of the global struggle for human rights and fundamental freedoms, wrestling every day with the challenges of discrimination and the deprivations of poverty.

This *International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples* is an opportunity to strengthen our common resolve to promote the rights and dignity of indigenous peoples across the world.

Indigenous peoples hold some of the keys to tackling global challenges. They speak the majority of humanity's languages. They have crafted livelihoods that marry cultural and biological diversity. They have developed knowledge systems with unique insight to sustainable development.

This year's International Day is held under the theme of "indigenous designs: celebrating stories and cultures, crafting our own future." As we strive to foster sustainable and equitable development, it is vital we listen to the voices of indigenous peoples. It is imperative that we learn from their knowledge.

This starts with protecting their human rights and fundamental freedoms. The adoption of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2007 marked a turning point. With increasing support, the Declaration has become the reference point for promoting equity, inclusion and social justice.

UNESCO's contribution starts with normative action. The *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, whose 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary we celebrate this year, and the conventions devoted to the *Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003) and *the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (2005) are milestones, recognizing indigenous peoples as unique custodians of cultural and biological diversity. For UNESCO, development and culture must move forward together — starting with the cultures of the most marginalised peoples.

We work also to promote the knowledge systems of indigenous peoples. Our *Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems* programme seeks global recognition of the importance of indigenous knowledge for understanding the impacts of climate change and for developing ways to adapt at the community level. It is vital we integrate this knowledge into global approaches to climate change.

UNESCO acts also to protect endangered languages. We lead global efforts to monitor language vitality as an indicator of the status and trends of the traditional knowledge of indigenous and local communities. We work here in partnership, with the World Conservation Monitoring Centre's Biodiversity Indicators Partnership and in the framework of the 2020 targets of the Convention of Biological Diversity.

On these foundations, UNESCO is now sharpening its comprehensive approach to supporting indigenous peoples. This is leading us to think today about the goals we set for the future, especially after 2015 and the Millennium Development Goals. Indigenous peoples have unique needs, but they have also universally-valuable experience to share on poverty reduction, equitable education, and environmental sustainability.

Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be crafted from within individual societies. It must meet local needs and fulfil the aspirations of indigenous peoples. This spirit guides UNESCO. This idea must inspire all governments and international organizations. In crafting their own futures, indigenous peoples are building a future of equity and justice for us all.

Irina Bokova