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Item 61 of the provisional agenda

PROPOSAL FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A CYBER NETWORK FOR LEARNING LANGUAGES

People's Republic of China

SUMMARY

This item has been included in the provisional agenda of the 180th session of the Executive Board at the request of China. An explanatory note together with a proposed decision are attached. This document is presented in the framework of the International Year of Languages proclaimed by the United Nations at the sixty-first session of its General Assembly.

Decision proposed: paragraph 8.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Languages and the promotion of multilingualism lie at the very core of UNESCO's mission and objectives. Languages are the vehicle for understanding between cultures and for dialogue among civilizations. Language learning constitutes an important way towards "building peace in the minds of human beings". It helps develop effective citizenship, ability to participate in social and public life, access to knowledge and high quality of education.

2. 2008 is the International Year of Languages proclaimed by the United Nations at the sixty-first session of its General Assembly. UNESCO has a central role to play in promoting language learning and in implementing decisions and resolutions adopted by the Executive Board and the General Conference with regard to the promotion of multilingualism in cyberspace, such as 32 C/Resolution 41, 171 EX/Decision 55 and 176 EX/Decision 22 inviting Member States to formulate appropriate national policies on the crucial issue of language diversity in cyberspace. This includes promoting the teaching of languages, including mother tongues, in cyberspace and facilitating the development of tools and materials including open learning resources and open source tools for e-learning of languages.

II. MULTILINGUAL LEARNING AND CYBERSPACE

3. In 1999, UNESCO's General Conference adopted the term "multilingual education" (30 C/Resolution 12) which refers to the use of at least three languages in education. Indeed, language competences acquired through school and in lifelong learning settings are conducive to effectively sharing knowledge, promoting intercultural understanding and ultimately building peace among peoples. The use of ICT and online platforms for learning languages can accelerate and facilitate the enhancement of language competences of learners of all age groups and give wider and more affordable access to language learning resources worldwide.

4. It is against this background that China proposes to harness the power of information and communication technologies (ICT) to advance the learning of languages by establishing a "cyber network for learning languages" under UNESCO's auspices.

III. OBJECTIVES

5. The main objective of the proposal is to reduce language barriers, and to promote cultural expression and exchange by establishing an online-based network for learning languages that will facilitate sharing knowledge about languages and promoting learning of languages and their applications.

6. In particular, the cyber network for learning languages will provide an online multilingual platform for:

- (a) elaborating policies on learning languages at the international, regional and national levels and to facilitate international cooperation and exchanges on learning languages;
- (b) facilitating literacy and post-literacy activities by all governments and civil societies through cyberspace, improving competence in mother tongues and other languages of all peoples;
- (c) providing learners worldwide with more open and accessible resources for learning languages and, through them, new cultures.

IV. PRIORITY AREAS OF ACTIVITY

7. The main activities are as follows:

- (a) creating an online platform for the effective dissemination and use of language learning resources under UNESCO's auspices including modules for language teaching and learning; terminology control, machine-based translations, etc.;
- (b) providing a community of practices to formulate proposals for standards and norms for language learning in cyberspace, including for rating systems for online language learning tools; developing language learning resources, tools and systems; and encouraging the use of norms, including Unicode, for making language learning products online available;
- (c) setting up an international network-based research group on language learning to formulate norms and guidelines on the content and quality of language teaching material.

V. PROPOSED DRAFT DECISION

8. After examining this document, the Executive Board may wish to adopt the following decision:

The Executive Board,

1. Having examined document 180 EX/61 concerning the proposal for the establishment of a cyber network for learning languages, which aims to utilize cyberspace to promote language learning and communication,
2. Considering that the proposal is in line with the purpose and content of the Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace,
3. Requests the Director-General to:
 - (a) convene a meeting of experts in the first quarter of 2009 to study the feasibility of establishing a cyber network for learning languages, to elaborate a detailed work plan including budgetary implications and addressing the long-term sustainability of the possible establishment of the network, and to make recommendations as to the role and functions of the UNESCO Secretariat in the possible establishment and operations of the network;
 - (b) submit a report on the results of the work of the experts to it at its 181st session;
4. Takes note of the willingness of the People's Republic of China to cover all the local costs of the above meeting of experts including board and lodging and the international travel costs of the experts from the developing countries;
5. Encourages other Member States to contribute to this initiative.