



United Nations
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Organisation
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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

Address by Irina Bokova,

Director-General of UNESCO

**on the occasion of signature of the agreement between UNESCO and the
Republic of Iceland, for the Vigdís International Centre for Multilingualism
and Intercultural Understanding, Category 2 Centre**

UNESCO, 27 June 2013

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Vigdis,

I am delighted to welcome you all to UNESCO Headquarters for this ceremony to establish our newest Category 2 Centre -- the *Vigdís International Centre for Multilingualism and Intercultural Understanding*.

We celebrate today the culmination of a process that began in February 2009, when the Government of Iceland informed us of its wish to establish an international centre to promote multilingualism.

I wish to thank everyone in Iceland involved with bringing this idea to fruition -- in the Government and in civil society and especially Vigdis Finnbogadottir, former President of Iceland and *UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador*.

Let me thank also the team from the University of Iceland, whose expertise will be essential to the vitality of the Centre.

The Centre is inspired by a single idea -- that language is a core part of the identity and cultural heritage of humanity.

Languages are who we are.

Multilingualism embodies our cultural diversity and encourages the exchange of views, the renewal of ideas, the broadening of our collective capacity to imagine and to create.

Multilingualism is also a bridge between people, the link through which to share world-views and experiences.

This is essential for intercultural understanding, and it is vital for dialogue based on respect.

Multilingualism has perhaps never been as important as it is now -- at a time of rapid change, when societies are increasingly interconnected and vulnerable.

Passive tolerance is no longer enough – we have to live together, we need to build genuine dialogue, and this starts with languages.

Because, as the great Nelson Mandela once said – and I take this opportunity to send my warmest wishes and support to him, his family, and the people of South Africa :

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.

A plural linguistic space is essential to a more harmonious, prosperous and just 21st century.

Mesdames et Messieurs,

La création de ce centre est opportune, alors que nous discutons des moyens de renforcer l'action de l'UNESCO dans le domaine de l'inclusion sociale, du dialogue interculturel, et tandis que l'UNESCO pilote la Décennie des Nations Unies pour le rapprochement des cultures.

J'y vois aussi le symbole de l'engagement de l'Islande à investir dans le potentiel de la culture et de la diversité culturelle.

Je garde un souvenir très fort des paroles du Président de l'Islande, l'un des premiers pays touchés par la crise économique, qui m'avait dit que sa première décision avait été de lancer la construction d'une salle de concert à Reykjavik, comme moyen de créer de nouveaux emplois, de redonner confiance au pays.

Cela témoigne que la Culture importe plus que jamais en temps de crise – tel est le message de l'UNESCO et ce message, nous devons le porter d'une voix plus forte et plus déterminée que jamais.

Je tiens à remercier particulièrement notre Ambassadrice de bonne volonté UNESCO, Vigdis Finnbogadottir, pour sa contribution décisive à la création de ce centre.

Merci, Madame la Présidente, de votre soutien, de votre engagement, de votre attachement à l'UNESCO, et de votre passion pour le multilinguisme.