ROADMAP TOWARDS UNESCO'S WORLD ATLAS OF LANGUAGES

SUMMARY

This document provides further details on UNESCO's work to establish a World Atlas of Languages. The feasibility assessment was undertaken by UNESCO, in cooperation with the Intergovernmental Information for All (IFAP) Programme and world leading institutions and experts working in the subject area.

The UNESCO World Atlas of Languages will contribute to safeguarding the world's diverse linguistic, cultural and documentary heritage, in multiple languages, and reinforce the modalities for implementation of UNESCO's Recommendation concerning the Promotion of Universal Access and Multilingualism in Cyberspace (2003).

I.   Background

1.   The rate of language endangerment and disappearance has increased significantly over the past decades due to rapid social, political and economic transformations in societies across the world. At the same time, there has been a renewed interest in safeguarding linguistic diversity as a vehicle of cultural expression and more inclusive, sustainable development. Moreover, the role of cutting-edge information and communication technologies (ICTs) is growing in language documentation, revitalization, inter-generational transmission and the promotion of linguistic diversity and multilingualism. ICTs are vital educational and communicational tools that help communities, public and private organizations to provide access to information, services and goods, to which citizens are entitled in the context of an open, pluralistic, participatory, sustainable and inclusive knowledge societies.

2.   Linguistic diversity is an integral part of cultural diversity, freedom of expression and universal access to information and knowledge. It has the capacity to express and to reconcile ideas, systems of knowledge and values of people from diverse cultural, social, economic, religious and professional backgrounds. It is a key contributor to dialogue, reconciliation, tolerance and peace.

3.   Over 50% of some 6,700 languages spoken nowadays are estimated to be in danger of disappearing. Many other languages will disappear in the near future. This threat should be seen also in the context where only 5% of the world's languages are present on the Internet.

4.   ICTs are making the current Internet landscape increasingly important for users. On the one hand, sophisticated software, mainly from the corporate sector, such as online translation, spell and grammar checkers, as well as navigation systems for language utilization on the Internet, is empowering a wider range of native language users. A number of Member States have already formulated language policies that support their communities' linguistic make-up and have supported language documentation projects in cyberspace. The very nature of global Internet practice and experience could be contributing to the flourishing of a digital *lingua franca*.

5.   Since 1993, UNESCO has carried out its Endangered Languages Programme, and in 1996, the first edition of the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing* was published by UNESCO, working closely with the Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL). The second edition in 2001 listed some 800 endangered languages. A third, fully revised, print edition was published in 2008 to celebrate of the International Year of Languages proclaimed by the United Nations. The online version of the Atlas received support from Norway, and currently includes data on 2,465 endangered languages, providing information on their status along with references to key resources. The Atlas has received coverage from leading press agencies, newspapers and broadcasters, public and private organizations, and the European Parliament.

6.   Over the past years, UNESCO has developed improved methodologies for assessing language endangerment and systematically assembled detailed data on endangered languages, as well as carrying out research on language promotion in cyberspace. UNESCO is revising its methodology to allow for timely and thorough updating, including by introducing a coordinated flow of big data into an enhanced digital version of the World Atlas of Languages.

7.   Following up on the recommendations of the international expert meetings (13 March 2014 in The Hague, and 28-29 October 2014 in Paris) and the regional conference (27-28 November 2015, held in San Jose), an initial two-year plan for the development of the World Atlas was devised with the possibility of a further two-year extension. The expansion of the Atlas would include not only all of the world's languages in danger, but all apparently "safe" languages as well. This would reflect more accurately global linguistic diversity and serve also as learning and teaching resource.

8.   While other initiatives have been undertaken to explore and illustrate language diversity using Internet facilities, they have been restricted in the data upon which they can draw, as regards

quality, quantity, scope, user interactivity and accessibility. UNESCO is convinced that it has the strong mandate, as a leading member of the United Nations family, to facilitate international cooperation and the generation of new ideas for the benefit of users in widest variety of languages.

II. Objectives

9.   UNESCO is considering the scaling up of the online version of a UNESCO's Atlas of Languages in Danger[1] to the UNESCO's World Atlas of Language. This would embrace all existing work by academic scholars, and various public and private bodies would also add for the first time the vast range of language materials, services and potential solutions made possible by the Internet. The UNESCO World Atlas of Languages would contribute to the safeguarding of the world's diverse linguistic, cultural and documentary heritage in multiple languages, and reinforce the modalities for implementation of UNESCO's Recommendation concerning the Promotion of Universal Access and Multilingualism in Cyberspace (2003).

10.   The long-term goal would be to contribute to the safeguarding of the world's linguistic diversity, and the promotion of multilingualism in cyberspace through effective application of ICTs, including by maintaining language resources, increasing accessibility to and dissemination of these items through effective application of ICTs, institutional networks and civic engagement.

11.   These goals could be achieved through the UNESCO World Atlas of Languages as a multi-tiered interactive platform, with input mainly from the Global Task Force (GTF), International Consultative Committee (ICC), Global Institutional Network (GIN) and language speaker communities. It is expected that this online platform would nurture education, build new knowledge, encourage exchange of scientific results among higher educational institutions, libraries, archives and other public and private organizations, promote open access to scientific resources, and empower local communities to use their own languages in cyberspace.

III. Implementation strategy

12.   The proposal to scale up the Atlas of Languages in Danger to the World Atlas of Languages could be formulated around three axes:

- Enriching the current online platform, entitled *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger,* to make it, as the *UNESCO World Atlas of Languages,* as a top resource for language preservation, monitoring, promotion, knowledge sharing on language-related issues, as well as an interactive tool for language teaching and learning;

- Building professional and institutional capacities to nourish language revitalization and documentation efforts through the use of multilingual web interfaces, ICTs and collaborative contributions from involved stakeholders;

- Raising awareness among UNESCO's Member States about the importance of linguistic diversity and multilingualism, particularly in cyberspace, and securing extrabudgetary resources for the implementation of this global initiative.

13.   To achieve this goal, UNESCO would:

- (a)   Carry out a global-scale awareness-raising and standard-setting work through the planned **Global Task Force on Multilingualism** (GTF), with special emphasis on cyberspace. The GTF would include national language organizations, United Nations, public and private stakeholders, and would adopt a human rights-based approach, in terms of gender equality, non-discrimination, geographical representation, and wide outreach to language communities;

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[1]   http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/

(b)   Establish an ***International Consultative Committee*** (ICC) composed of a selected group of world leading experts,[2] operating mainly online on a four-year rotational basis. The ICC would be responsible for the formulation of recommendations with a special focus on defining and refining the *language vitality criteria*;

(c)   Create a ***Global Institutional Network*** (GIN) comprising higher educational institutions working in the language documentation field. The Network's remit would be to share language-related data and information about available language resources within higher educational institutions, archives, museums, libraries, language standardization bodies, as well as to keep track of cutting-edge technological solutions being developed by the private sector.

(d)   Involve the general public and, in particular, *specific language speaker communities* through dedicated *online language windows* – using what are now almost universal social media techniques – to create in cyberspace their own linguistic family and friendship groups reinforcing the value of individual languages.

14.   The Atlas would also contribute in the fulfilment of the international commitments embodied in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a whole – and, in particular to eliminating poverty, illiteracy and fighting against discrimination. Within the United Nations system, the Atlas could be developed in line with the recommendations of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, contributing to the realization of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and other pertinent United Nations initiatives. Clear linkages could be established also with UNESCO's IFAP, the WSIS process and could have direct relevance to the implementation of UNESCO's Conventions on the Protection and Promotion of the Cultural Diversity (2003), for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2005), and the Recommendation concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage including in Digital Form (2015).

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[2]   Six members to represent all UNESCO's regions and one Chair.