

**UNESCO/ACALAN meeting “Joining forces for preserving Africa’s linguistic diversity”
23-25 March 2006 in Bamako (Mali)**

- Preliminary notes -

1. Background

1.1 This paper is meant to give introductory information for the meeting “Joining forces for preserving Africa’s linguistic diversity” that UNESCO’s Intangible Heritage Section is organising in cooperation with the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) and the UNESCO Bamako Office in Bamako on 23-25 March 2006. The meeting is the first of a series of two which are the main components of the project “Capacity-building for safeguarding languages and oral traditions and expressions in Sub-Saharan Africa”, funded by Norway. It will provide representatives of linguistic departments of African universities and national and regional research institutions with a platform for discussion and exchange of experiences and reflections on safeguarding African languages and oral traditions and expressions. The meeting will bring together representatives of University departments and national research institutes specialized in African languages from all over sub-Saharan Africa.

1.2 Over the last decades most African countries have made efforts to safeguard their linguistic diversity. A wide variety of actions have been conducted involving different actors (linguists, national and local governments, NGOs, the scientific community, speaker communities, international organisations) in all regions of Sub-Saharan Africa. These actions have led to some remarkable results. In various countries (i.e. South Africa, Ethiopia, Tanzania, etc.), African languages are given official status in the Constitution, providing these languages with the necessary legal basis to be used in the public domain (administration, education, media, etc.). In several other African countries, local languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, Kiswahili, Igbo, Wolof, Bambara, Sango, Shona, Amharic, Lingala, Setswana and Ffulfulde are spoken in public space and often taught at school, even though not all of them have an official status.

Despite these positive developments, the threat to linguistic diversity in Africa remains strong, only a restricted number of African languages are being extensively used in the public domain; worse, hundreds of languages – both large and small – are endangered and with them the oral traditions and expressions of hundreds of communities and peoples. There is an urgent need for more and more concerted efforts. This meeting wishes to address the contribution of African linguists and related experts to the safeguarding of Africa’s linguistic diversity through documentation, research, teaching, developing practical materials that can be used in education and for communication in public space.

1.3 Awareness among African policy-makers that culture plays an essential role in development is increasing. Cultural renaissance is one of the priority programmes of the Commission of the African Union in its 2004-2007 Plan of Action. The Assembly of the Heads of State of the African Union in January 2006 in Khartoum (Sudan), which was dedicated to

culture and education, testifies to this. This Assembly proclaimed 2006 the “Year of African Languages” and recognized ACALAN, the African Academy of Languages, as an AU specialised office charged with coordinating language policy and planning on the continent and advising member states in this domain. This decision can be seen as a serious commitment by the Member States of the African Union to the promotion and development of African languages. By associating ACALAN to this project right from the beginning (December 2004), UNESCO reiterates its support to this institution aiming at ensuring pan-African cooperation and concerted action in the field of African languages. The role of African linguists in the safeguarding of African languages and oral traditions and expressions is crucial. While working for the documentation of African languages, providing these languages with the necessary tools to become widely used languages and researching and testing the most appropriate measures for the sustainable use of African languages in as many domains as possible, African linguists play a major role as advocates of the preservation of Africa’s linguistic diversity.

1.4 In 2004, UNESCO carried out a questionnaire-based survey among over 80 linguistic departments and research institutes of African universities, as well as among a number of national and regional governmental and non-governmental organizations and institutions involved in language-related activities. This survey allowed to establish a state of the art concerning current activities in research and education, concerning cooperation, and to assess major needs.

The survey shows that there is extensive capacity in Africa in the field of African linguistics. Nearly every Sub-Saharan country has a university and/or a national research institution providing education and/or conducting research in the mentioned field. The survey also shows that the existing potential can be reinforced when, in addition to appropriate funding, more cooperation will be facilitated among various universities and institutes, especially in neighbouring countries, and especially among such institutions that are working on the same or related languages.

2. The *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* adopted by UNESCO in 2003, and entering into force as of April 20th 2006, provides its States Parties with a valuable framework for concrete action and cooperation in the field of safeguarding oral traditions and expressions and of the languages in which they are transmitted. So far, the Convention has 8 States Parties from Sub-Saharan Africa (Mauritius, Gabon, Central African Republic, Seychelles, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Ethiopia).

Safeguarding in the spirit of the Convention means measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage (article 2.3). The intangible cultural heritage is manifested inter alia in the following domains: (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; (b) performing arts; (c) social practices, rituals and festive events; (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; (e) traditional craftsmanship (article 2.2). According to the Convention, one step to ensure safeguarding at national levels is to foster scientific studies, as well as research methodologies. In implementing the Convention at national and regional levels, African linguists may become important partners for

communities, groups and individuals who are the bearers of the intangible cultural heritage and for States wishing to implement this Convention.

2. Purpose of the meeting

2.1 Through the exchange of views and experiences between linguists representing university departments and national and regional research institutions from all over Africa, and through the presentation of existing and future cooperation projects, the purpose of the meeting is:

- to identify good practices and experiences of activities carried out by cooperating African institutions focusing on the safeguarding of African languages;
- to collect views and proposals on ways how the potential existing in universities and other institutions for the safeguarding of African languages and oral traditions and expressions can be maximally used and reinforced;
- to establish what new approaches might be further developed to strengthen local capacities and to further promote pan-African cooperation;
- to exchange good practices concerning resource mobilization (including project planning and project management) and language planning and to formulate whether training workshops in these domains could make sense;
- to raise awareness about the 2003 UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* in view of its relevance for the safeguarding of oral practices and expressions, and, consequently, for the languages that are the vehicles of such expressions.

2.2 The outcome of the meeting might be a set of recommendations reflecting the different experiences and expectations and offering a concrete plan of action for short term and long term initiatives. The UNESCO project foresees a second meeting of African linguists aiming at capacity-building in the field of language policies and planning, as well as safeguarding of languages and oral traditions and expressions. The agenda of this second meeting, to be organised by the end of 2006 in Addis Ababa, will be based on the recommendations made by the participants in Bamako.