

U N E S C O

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Presentation by  
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*Safeguarding of Endangered Languages*

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Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen

Dear Colleagues,

I am very pleased to address this unique and important forum which has brought together so many eminent experts: linguists, speakers of endangered languages, representatives of specialized research institutions, and representatives of non-governmental organizations and foundations, so to speak, the people who are at breast with the problems of endangered languages and who strive to redress the alarming situation in this particular field.

I wish to express as early as now UNESCO's thanks to groups of academics who supported us in the preparation of this meeting and who provided us with valuable suggestions, such as the International Permanent Council of Linguists, the Pacific Rim Ad Hoc group and the taskforce on endangered languages of the Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO.

I am fully confident that thanks to your knowledgeable and enthusiastic input UNESCO will be able to identify its role in safeguarding the world's endangered languages and that, as a result, UNESCO will be equipped with concrete suggestions for its programme in the 2004-2005 biennium and beyond. For our Organisation this meeting is of paramount importance not only in terms of identifying trends, dangers and challenges at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but

first and foremost in apprehending the most adequate means and ways to tackle the problems of language endangerment in all their complexity and emergency.

UNESCO has always endeavoured to enhance all languages, whether small or big ones, irrespective of numbers of speakers, status or location. Our commitment to the domain of languages lies in the very heart of our mandate and it spans over fifty years of activities.

Based on this principle, UNESCO has developed programmes aimed at promoting languages as instruments of education and culture. In the 1960s UNESCO launched a series of conferences on the subject of development of education, with a particular focus on African countries. Through these conferences, wide-ranging issues concerning language preservation and development were addressed. In 1978, for example, a meeting was held to examine problems of transcription and terminology of African languages. As its result, existing transcription systems of African languages were improved through the adoption of an African reference alphabet. In the field of training, UNESCO practised study grants, seminars on the problems of transcription and standardization of technical terminology, training courses in the translation from African languages into other languages and vice-versa, round tables involving scientists, practitioners and general public in debates on language use and functionality. In 1972, UNESCO adopted a 'Ten-year plan for the systematic study of oral traditions and the promotion of African languages as a media of

culture and as instrument of life-long education'. The Plan incorporated such principal directions for action, as:

- (i) the standardization of language transcription and the codification of orthographies;
- (ii) the drafting and publication of education materials;
- (iii) the preparation and dissemination of representative works of African cultures;
- (iv) the promotion and dissemination of African culture through the mass media; and
- (v) the training of key scientific and technical personnel.

UNESCO has developed language policies since its foundation. However, it was largely due to activities undertaken during the 1970-1990s that the issue of language policy gained greater acknowledgement through a series of conferences on cultural policies. Particularly important was the 1997 intergovernmental conference on language policies in Africa. The conference adopted two principal documents - the Harare Declaration, and a Plan of Action which reflected such needs as the elimination of illiteracy, the elaboration of language management plans and extensive inventories of African languages, and the production of linguistic and didactic tools.

To a large extent, it was through the ongoing efforts of UNESCO and other organisations, and of governments concerned with the protection and promotion of languages, that a significant shift occurred in our thinking about language. In a broad sense, languages came to be recognized as 'heritage'. The recognition of languages as constituting valuable heritage was further strengthened through continuing efforts to address languages threatened with disappearance. The concept of 'endangered languages' and indigenous perspectives concerning languages gained increasing recognition in 1993, during the United Nations International year of the World's Indigenous Population, which was followed by a Decade devoted to this very same subject. At the same time, greater attention was granted to this burning issue by descriptive linguists and by specialised non-governmental organisations. Within this context, the particular significance and vulnerability of many endangered languages became a central issue. In recognition of this situation, UNESCO, too, took action.

In 1993, a project entitled "*The Red Book of Languages in Danger of Disappearing*" was adopted during the International Consultation on New Perspectives for UNESCO's Programme for Intangible Cultural heritage, which was held here in Paris. The objectives of the "Red Book" project were as follows: (i) to gather information on endangered languages, including their status, and the degree of urgency for undertaking action; (ii) to strengthen research and the collection of materials relating to underdescribed endangered

languages which belong to specific categories, such as isolated languages, languages of special interest for typology and historical-comparative linguistics, and languages that are in imminent danger of extinction; (iii) to undertake activities aiming to establish a world-wide project committee, and a network of regional centres as focal points for large areas on the basis of existing contacts, and (iv) to encourage publication of studies on endangered languages. Within the framework of this project, at the initiative of the Japanese authorities, an International Clearing House and Data Bank Centre for Endangered Language was set up at the Tokyo University in 1995. This Centre is mandated to collect, study and disseminate information on the world's endangered languages. The Tokyo Clearing House created an online database, called "UNESCO Red Book of Endangered languages". As foreseen by our agenda, Prof. Kazuto Matsumura will make his presentation on the work of the Clearing House during our meeting.

In seeking to address current and urgent issues relating to endangered languages, UNESCO developed a project which had for its aim to attract the attention of the international community to the urgency of the situation. Within the framework of the 'Red Book' an outlet for inexpensive and efficient publications was developed. In 1996, thanks to financial support from the UNESCO/Japan Funds-In-Trust for Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO published a small *'Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing'*. This monograph was developed to raise awareness about the global nature of

the problem of languages threatened with disappearance, and to provide graphic representations of threatened languages worldwide. This was not a simple goal; however, the Atlas, published in English, French and Spanish, served the valuable purpose of presenting the urgent situation in an accessible and effective manner to a broad audience and it significantly raised awareness of the global nature of endangered languages. The Atlas's scientific supervision was ensured by the Permanent International Committee of Linguists (CIPL) and by the late and eminent Professor Stephen Wurm. This publication also helped to establish the concept of "endangered languages" worldwide.

In 2001, a thoroughly updated English edition of the 'Atlas' was issued. This edition also provides an outline of some of UNESCO's activities in the field of documentation of the world's endangered languages. The second edition reflects the unprecedented interest amongst the scientific community and general public for endangered languages.

Trying to use all available means to raise awareness among the international community to the issue of endangered languages, UNESCO in 2002 formally entered into partnership with Discovery Communications, Inc. and the UN Works to produce a series of 1-2 minute short-form programmes (or vignettes) on various endangered languages. The languages were selected in consultation with the Member States concerned. The vignettes were shot in

October/November 2002 and they were aired world-wide on Discovery Channel, on 21 February 2003 – on the occasion of International Mother Language Day. You saw them this morning. I should also mention here that the issue of endangered languages was discussed during the 2002 and 2003 celebrations of International Mother Language Day at UNESCO.

Let me now describe briefly some activities, which have been undertaken by other Sectors of UNESCO in the field of languages.

An expert group meeting on education in a multilingual world was organised by UNESCO's education sector in September 2002. This put the final touches to the Organization's policy on education and multilingualism and resulted in three basic principles of policy:

1. UNESCO supports mother tongue instruction as a means of improving educational quality.
2. UNESCO encourages bilingual and/or multilingual education at all levels of education as a means of promoting both social and gender equality, and as a prerequisite for linguistically diverse societies.
3. UNESCO supports language as an essential component of intercultural education as it wishes to contribute to understanding between different population groups and to ensure respect for fundamental rights.



The Social and Human Sciences Sector of UNESCO, too, is deepening its involvement with the subject of endangered and minority languages. The 2002 issue of the “International Journal on Multicultural Societies”, published by the Section on International Migration, is entirely devoted to endangered languages. The Journal includes studies on minority languages in India and Bolivia, and on an Albanian dialect spoken in Italy. It analyses the marginalization and loss of minority languages, both of indigenous and migrant populations, and it discusses the impact of different language policies.

The next issue of the Journal will examine the impact of the Internet on language diversity. The articles address the Internet and its implications in a variety of cultural and social contexts in different parts of the world.

I would further like to draw your attention to a project on Local and Indigenous Systems, the inter-sectoral LINKS project, led by the Natural Sciences Sector of UNESCO. Intimate knowledge of the natural environment – the focus of the LINKS undertaking – is encoded in naming and classification systems that provide the basis for traditional systems of resource use and management. The LINKS project addresses the need to ensure the continuing transmission of local and indigenous knowledge. Protection of language is fundamental to the success of such an endeavour.

An interactive online extension of the *UNESCO Atlas of Languages in Danger of Disappearing* is being created, within the framework of UNESCO Communication and Information Sector’s *Initiative Babel*, which seeks to

promote multilingualism on the Internet. Another example of concrete activities being carried out under Initiative Babel is the creation of a sound record library of endangered Caucasian languages. Other priorities include the formulation of policy measures and guidelines supporting linguistic diversity as well as the development of electronic tools for languages using non-roman scripts.

The role of media in preserving and promoting languages and cultures in modern societies is of paramount importance. Hence our increased effort in stimulating the production and distribution of content in local languages for community radio, television and new media.

Paying tribute to what has been done in the past, we are at the same time aware that UNESCO's activities in the safeguarding of endangered languages need to be complemented and reinforced. The mandate of the present meeting is precisely to propose concrete action plans, recommendations and suggestions for UNESCO. I am sure that thanks to your devotion and knowledge UNESCO will be equipped with an efficient and far-reaching programme on the safeguarding of endangered languages. In conclusion, I would like to state that we will follow with due attention your discussions and proposals.

Thank you for your attention.