



International Mother Language Day 'Languages Without Borders'

21 February 2020

Concept Note

Background

UNESCO launched International Mother Language Day (IMLD) in 1999¹ with the goal of rallying international support for the preservation of linguistic diversity, placing particular emphasis on the protection of indigenous languages. According to ²UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, there are currently 3000 languages at risk of disappearance. Furthermore, linguistic diversity is threatened as multilingual landscapes and the use of local languages are hampered by monolingual education models and language building approaches.

The celebration of this International Day has become an important occasion to promote the right to Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (30 C/Res. 12), which UNESCO defines as the use of at least three languages in the classroom: the mother tongue(s), a regional or national language and an international language in schools. The rationale behind this approach is that children entering primary school cannot learn effectively in any language other than the one spoken at home. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report's 2016 policy paper, [If you don't understand, how can you learn?](#) is among research that supports this statement. The need for governments to implement Mother Tongue Instruction is an urgent one. The paper cited research from 2012 showing that 40% of the world's children did not have access to education in a language they understood. This [figure helps to explain the scale of the global learning crisis](#).

¹ First announced by UNESCO on 17 November 1999 it was formally recognized by the United Nations General Assembly with the adoption of UN resolution 56/262 Multilingualism in 2002. Mother Language Day is part of a broader initiative "to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by peoples of the world" as adopted by the UN General Assembly on May 16, 2007 in UN resolution 61/266, which also established 2008 as the International Year of Languages. The idea to celebrate International Mother Language Day was the initiative of Bangladesh

² Published in 2010

It has been observed that the failure to teach children in their mother tongue can further entrench existing disadvantage and result in social marginalization. According to the findings of a regional study measuring learning in Latin America (Verdisco, Cueto, Thompson, & Engle, 2014), in general, indigenous children's scores were considerably lower than those of other children. Research also highlights a gender disparity: girls are more disadvantaged than boys when they are not educated in their mother tongues.

The preservation of indigenous languages is at the heart of the Sustainable Development Agenda

UNESCO's work on languages and sustainable development is based on a Human Rights approach, and guided by Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure quality education to enable every woman and man to acquire the skills, knowledge and values they need to participate fully in the peaceful development of their societies. Mother tongue education is a key component of quality education, as reflected in UNESCO's [Education 2030 Framework for Action](#), the global road map to implement the Education 2030 Agenda. The UN declared [The International Year of Indigenous Languages](#) (IYIL 2019), to underscore these languages' capacity for preserving knowledge systems, promoting peace, advancing the human rights of indigenous peoples and fostering social inclusion. The same year, UNESCO celebrated indigenous languages as a vehicle for [peace-building and reconciliation](#) on International Mother Language Day.

Building on the momentum of IYIL 2019, the UN General Assembly proclaimed 2022-2032 as the [International Decade of Indigenous Languages](#). The decade will renew and reinforce international efforts to preserve "this endangered facet of Indigenous peoples' cultural and social life".

International Mother language Day 2020

At the dawn of this new decade, the threat of conflict is present in all corners of the globe, prompting the need for new, innovative approaches to establishing peaceful dialogue and social inclusion. For this reason, UNESCO has declared 'Languages without borders' as the theme for International Mother Language Day 2020.

In all regions of the world, some local languages, rather than vanishing, are in fact flourishing. Many of these fast-evolving languages are cross-border languages. Both regional variants of Maori –spoken in New Zealand and in the Cook Islands, and Sami, spoken across Northern Europe, have benefitted from efforts on the part of governments to revitalize these languages which started in the 1980s.

It is important to recall that borders in many parts of the world have been artificially imposed. From sub-Saharan Africa to the Middle East to Latin America, many borders were negotiated and drawn arbitrarily splitting communities, which had existed for centuries. This process has contributed to conflict all over the world. Linguists specializing in cross border languages have pointed out that for such communities very often official borders do not 'exist'. They continue to trade, share cultural practices and communicate in a common local language. Cross-border languages are naturally dynamic because they are cross-fertilized by people from two or more countries.

Among many other cross-border languages, Kiswahili is one such example. This sub-Saharan African language is spoken by 120 to 150 million people. It is a hybrid tongue composed of linguistic elements from Southern Africa, Arabia, Europe and India. Its evolution tells a rich story of migration, trade, slavery, colonialism. Today, it is both sub-Saharan Africa's most important lingua franca, and an

enabling force promoting African unity and diplomacy. In 2004, it was declared an official language of the African Union. It is a national and official language in the United Republic of Tanzania, a national language in Kenya and in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is a cross-border lingua franca in Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, northern Mozambique and southern Somalia, and to a lesser extent, Malawi, Zambia and South Sudan.

Quechua is another example. The language of the ancient Incan Empire has now evolved to become a family of related indigenous languages, spoken by some 8 to 10 million people in Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Chile, Colombia and Argentina.

The dynamism of cross-border languages means that they can provide space for indigenous culture and traditions to thrive. In the right circumstances, they can also be powerful tools for the promotion of peace between neighbouring countries. Bonds of empathy and shared heritage on either side of a border and among several countries in a region increase solidarity among neighbouring peoples and allow people to celebrate the complexity of their multi-layered identities.

In summary: the development of Multilingual Education based on Mother Tongue Instruction, not only improves learning outcomes, but also helps to maintain linguistic diversity and multilingualism, a key element of inclusion. Cross-border languages have the potential to foster powerful emotional and cultural ties between neighbouring communities often living on either side of international borders.

Objective of Mother Language Day celebration

The event will provide a space for reflection and dialogue on the contexts, challenges, and strategies for the promotion of cross border languages as a vehicle for “inspiring solidarity based on understanding” dialogue.

Participants

Participants will range from representatives of the Permanent Delegations to UNESCO, to members of civil society organizations, members of academic institutions and students.

The event will be open to the public.

Venue: UNESCO HQs

Format of the celebration

One-day event

Morning session: 10 am to 12.00 pm

The official opening session will be held in the morning. Key remarks will be given by expert linguists specialising in cross border languages, offering distinct perspectives on these languages’ capacity to bridge divides.

Afternoon session: 3 pm to 5 pm

The afternoon session will be dedicated to a round table on the importance of promoting the Kiswahili language in Africa.

Experts from the United Republic of Tanzania, the University Languages and Civilisations (INALCO/Paris), the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) will discuss issues, challenges and perspectives on Kiswahili.

Side events:

At 12,30: in the Foyer

Opening of an exhibition on cross boarder languages organized by the Permanent Delegation of the People's Republic of Bangladesh to UNESCO in collaboration with other Permanent Delegations.

From 5 pm to 8 pm: Room II

Cultural performances and food festival organized by the Permanent Delegation of the People's Republic of Bangladesh to UNESCO in collaboration with other Permanent Delegations.