



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

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

Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,

Director-General of UNESCO

to the participants of the International Conference

"Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Cyberspace"

Yakutsk, 2-4 July 2008

The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, proclaimed by the UNESCO General Conference in 2001, recognizes cultural diversity as part of the common heritage of humanity and an endless source of new ideas and creative development. Considered by UNESCO Member States as a vital part of human identity, and as essential to humanity as biological diversity is to nature, cultural diversity must be safeguarded for the sake of the present and future generations.

Indeed, there is a strong correlation between cultural diversity and linguistic diversity. Languages are an important element of a people's identity and the primary means of human communication, knowledge and experience sharing. They are also among the principal factors of progress towards sustainable development, playing a vital role in social integration and economic progress. A world devoid of linguistic diversity would not only be a world in which hundreds of thousands of people were denied the opportunity to engage fully in public life, it would also be culturally impoverished.

Yet, within the space of a few generations, more than 50 per cent of the 7,000 languages spoken in the world may disappear. As it is, fewer than a quarter of those languages are used in schools and most are used only sporadically. Thousands of languages – though mastered by those populations for whom they are the daily means of expression – are absent from education systems, the media, publishing and the public domain in general. Less than a hundred are represented in the digital world.

I cannot emphasize strongly enough the theme of my message for the International Year of Languages 2008: we must act now as a matter of urgency to encourage and develop language policies that enable each linguistic community to use its first language as widely and as often as possible, while also mastering a national or regional language and an international language. We should also encourage speakers of a dominant language to master another national or regional language and one or two international languages, because only if multilingualism is fully accepted can all languages find their place in our globalized world.

That is why, as part of its Medium Term Strategy 2008-2013, UNESCO is reinforcing its work to develop national and regional initiatives that promote and safeguard both linguistic and cultural diversity. Given the increasingly dominant role that information and communication technologies play in the daily lives of people around the world, it is vital that these initiatives cover access to multilingual content in cyberspace, as advocated by the Organization's 2003 Recommendation concerning the Promotion of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace.

This international conference is both timely and relevant. I am confident that it will offer ample opportunities to discuss all aspects of preserving and developing linguistic and cultural diversity in cyberspace, and in so doing help us to focus greater attention on the challenges facing the global community in this regard, as well as identifying possible solutions at local, national and regional level.

Please accept my best wishes for a stimulating and fruitful debate over the coming days.



Koïchiro Matsuura