

- UNESCO and Multilingualism -



2008 - International Year of Languages

2008 - Année internationale des langues

2008 - Año Internacional de los Idiomas

2008 - Международный год языков

2008 - السنة الدولية للغات

国际语言年 - 2008 年

“Our common goal is to ensure that the importance of linguistic diversity and multilingualism in educational, administrative and legal systems, cultural expressions and the media, cyberspace and trade, is recognized at the national, regional and international levels.”

Mr Koïchiro Matsuura
Director-General of UNESCO

Multilingualism in Cyberspace

Increasingly, information and knowledge are key determinants of wealth creation, social transformation and human development. Language is the primary vector for communicating knowledge and traditions, thus the opportunity to use one's language on global information networks such as the Internet will determine the extent to which one can participate in emerging Knowledge Societies.

Languages: Essential for Development and to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG)

As a principal medium for knowledge transmission and participation in social and public life, languages are essential in the development of strategies to meet the **United Nations Millennium Development Goals**, such as the *eradication of poverty and hunger* (MDG 1), *achieving universal primary education* (MDG 2), and *responding to HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases* (MDG 6). In their role for the preservation and transmission of local and indigenous knowledge of the natural milieu, languages are also strategic for *environmental sustainability* (MDG 7). Finally, appropriate language policies provide an essential medium for exercising *fundamental rights* (expression, education, participation in cultural life, benefiting from scientific progress).

UNESCO and Multilingualism

UNESCO's action for multilingualism aims at encouraging the development of coherent regional and national language policies that are conducive to the appropriate use of languages in a given community and country.

Starting in 1960, UNESCO has developed many international normative instruments for promoting cultural diversity and multilingualism. Recent ones include:

- **UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001)**, which especially raises cultural diversity to the level of “the common heritage of humanity”, “as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature” and makes its defense an ethical imperative essential to from respect for the dignity of the individual.
- **Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace (2003)**, which acknowledges that linguistic diversity in the global information networks and universal access to information in cyberspace are at the core of contemporary debates and are a determining factor in the development of a knowledge-based society

UNESCO's work with Languages

To promote languages, especially if endangered, UNESCO works at three main levels: 1) Raising awareness – in government institutions and among the general public, media, experts and NGOs – of the importance of preserving linguistic diversity, endangered languages and oral traditions. 2) Developing UNESCO's capacity as a clearing house

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for information (including databases) both in printed form and online to all those concerned with safeguarding and promoting linguistic diversity. 3) Building capacity in Member States (e.g. by training local people in language description and encouraging governments to carry out surveys and research on endangered languages) so that they can implement effective policies and projects to revitalize such languages.

UNESCO's Activities

UNESCO and the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

UNESCO was designated as one of the lead facilitator agencies for the WSIS Implementation. In particular, Action Line C3 "Access to Information and Knowledge" and Action Line C8 "Cultural and Linguistic Diversity" are essential to the development of a truly multilingual, universally accessible Internet. As stated in the **Geneva Plan of Action for the Information Society**: "*ICTs allow people, anywhere in the world, to access information and knowledge almost instantaneously. Individuals, organizations and communities should benefit from access to knowledge and information.*" Further, stimulating respect for cultural identity, traditions and religions, is essential to the development of an Information Society based on the dialogue among cultures and regional and international cooperation.

UNESCO and the Internet Governance Forum (IGF)

UNESCO advocates for an open, transparent and inclusive approach to Internet Governance based on the principles of openness, freedom of expression and technical interoperability. At the second IGF in Rio de Janeiro, November 2007, a joint workshop was organized by UNESCO, ITU and ICANN where the three organizations committed themselves to cooperatively develop international standards for building a truly multilingual Internet, including Internationalized Domain Names. At the next IGF meeting December 2008 in Hyderabad, India, UNESCO will organize four workshops on access to public information, freedom of expression, privacy and protection of personal data, and promoting multilingualism in the Internet.

B@BEL Initiative uses Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to support linguistic and cultural diversity on the Internet, and to protect and preserve languages in danger of disappearance. UNESCO can support a number of projects to facilitate the inclusion of new languages into the digital world and build capacity of communities to create and disseminate contents in local languages in cyberspace.

UNESCO can provide a platform for discussions and exchanges on the issues arising from the development and deployment of IDNs. In an open and participatory process, UNESCO can facilitate the development of a common understanding of IDNs between actors within a region or language community in a multistakeholder spirit. UNESCO is also willing to identify linguistic experts to assist in the implementation of IDNs and help find solutions concerning proposed languages, scripts or strings.

UNESCO's Communication and Information Sector:

www.unesco.org/webworld

UNESCO's website on Multilingualism in Cyberspace:

www.unesco.org/webworld/en/multilingualism

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