

**Message from the Director-General on the occasion of  
International Mother Language Day  
21 February 2003**

This year we are celebrating International Mother Language Day for the fourth time. Our aim in celebrating this Day is to encourage all forms of promotion, development and teaching of the mother language.

Why this focus on the mother language? Because languages constitute an irreducible expression of human creativity in all its diversity. Tools of communication, perception and reflection, they also shape the way we view the world and provide a link between past, present and future. They bear within them the traces of their encounters, the diverse sources from which they have borrowed, each according to its own particular history.

Mother languages are unique in that they mark human beings from their birth, imparting to them a distinctive vision of things that will never really fade, however many languages they subsequently acquire. Learning the language of others is thus a matter of becoming acquainted with other perceptions of the world, other approaches.

To our great satisfaction, this Day is enjoying ever greater success. In many countries, initiatives aimed at highlighting and exploring the richness of the languages of the world are growing in number.

In Kosovo, a primary school has used this Day to launch a series of interchanges with pupils from “different schools and nations”. In Mexico, the Day was celebrated with poems, indigenous songs, stories and plays. In the Philippines, a ceremony entitled “In the galaxy of languages, every word is a star” was organized. In Bangladesh, an International Mother Language Institute was created in Dhaka, the foundation stone of which was laid by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr Kofi Annan in 2000.

I am very pleased that our efforts are being rewarded and am happy to note that cultural and linguistic diversity is recognized, proclaimed and celebrated throughout the world. The stakes are manifold since preservation of the mother language contributes to sustainable development. Linguistic diversity and biodiversity are not unconnected and the disappearance of a language is sometimes also a threat to the world’s biological reserves. Languages are an integral part of humanity’s intangible heritage. While they constitute living processes, being born, evolving and sometimes dying, we must nonetheless spare no effort to preserve them as far as possible so as to safeguard the cultural diversity so precious to us. UNESCO is working tirelessly to that end by addressing the challenge of multilingualism and by giving its support to linguistic policies for the promotion of mother languages.

I hope that this year once again the celebration of this Day will be a success and that we shall receive testimonies from all parts of the world to the various initiatives taken to promote respect for the world’s languages and cultures.

Koïchiro Matsuura