

Message from Ms Audrey Azoulay Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of International Mother Language Day

21 February 2018

Today, UNESCO marks the nineteenth International Mother Language Day. This is an opportunity to recall our Organization's commitment to defending and promoting languages.

A language is far more than a means of communication; it is the very condition of our humanity. Our values, our beliefs and our identity are embedded within it. It is through language that we transmit our experiences, our traditions and our knowledge. The diversity of languages reflects the incontestable wealth of our imaginations and ways of life.

In order to preserve and vitalize this essential component of the intangible heritage of humanity, UNESCO has been actively engaged for many years in the defence of linguistic diversity and the promotion of multilingual education.

This commitment concerns mother languages in particular, which shape millions of developing young minds, and are the indispensable vector for inclusion in the human community, first at the local level, then at the global level.

UNESCO thus supports language policies, particularly in multilingual countries, which promote mother languages and indigenous languages.

It recommends the use of these languages from the first years of schooling, because children learn best in their mother language. It also encourages their use in public spaces and especially on the Internet, where multilingualism should become the rule.

Everyone, regardless of their first language, should be able to access resources in cyberspace and build online communities of exchange and dialogue. Today, this is one of the major challenges of sustainable development, at the heart of the United Nations 2030 Agenda.

Every two weeks, one of the world's languages disappears, and with it goes part of our human history and cultural heritage. Promoting multilingualism also helps to stop this programmed extinction.

In the wonderful words of Nelson Mandela, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language that, goes to his heart". On the occasion of this international day, UNESCO invites its Member States to celebrate, through a variety of educational and cultural initiatives, the linguistic diversity and multilingualism that make up the living wealth of our world.