



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

21 February 2020

Underscoring the power of language to unite across divides, Octavio Paz, upon accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature, said: "Languages are vast realities that transcend those political and historical entities we call nations."

On this twenty-second edition of International Mother Language Day (IMLD), a day dedicated to all languages, UNESCO would like to highlight the unifying ability of mother tongues. By bringing their speakers closer together, by allowing them to flourish in a shared context, mother tongues generate social inclusion, innovation and imagination. They also breathe life into cultural diversity and serve as instruments of peace.

Moreover, mother tongues are valuable allies in our efforts to achieve quality education for all. In fact, as UNESCO studies have shown, studying in a language which is not one's own interferes with learning and increases inequalities. Yet according to the most recent estimates, 40% of the world's citizens find themselves in this situation. Bilingual or multilingual education based on students' mother tongue not only encourages learning, but also contributes to understanding and dialogue among peoples.

For IMLD 2020, UNESCO has chosen the theme of languages without borders to draw attention to the way in which all languages, including mother tongues, contribute to intercultural dialogue and peace. Indeed, throughout the world, numerous cross-border languages bring their speakers closer to one another, turning borders into bridges instead of barriers.

With 120 to 150 million speakers, Swahili is one of the world's most thriving cross-border languages. Swahili is a hybrid influenced by languages from Southern Africa, Arab countries, Europe and India. A national and official language in the United Republic of Tanzania, as well as a national language of Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Swahili is also a lingua franca in Burundi, northern Mozambique, Uganda, Rwanda and southern Somalia, and to a lesser degree in Malawi, South Sudan and Zambia.

A reflection of the region's cultural diversity, cross-border languages are also part of the riches of Latin America. For example, the language of the ancient Inca empire, Quechua, has evolved into a family of indigenous languages which are spoken by 8 to 10 million people in Argentina, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.

As put so aptly by Vassilis Alexakis in his book *La langue maternelle*, "all languages teach us that we have roots more or less everywhere".

Because they are instruments of diversity and peace, it is important that we protect mother tongues, particularly those which are indigenous languages. In this context, the International Year of Indigenous Languages, celebrated by UNESCO in 2019, provided an opportunity to rally the international community to support diversity, essential in our world.

A new chapter is beginning with this year's edition of International Mother Language Day. At UNESCO Headquarters, several round tables will be held to discuss how cross-border languages and mother tongues can further help to achieve sustainable development. In the same spirit, UNESCO encourages everyone to take advantage of IMLD to celebrate the richness of humanity's languages.

Audrey Azoulay