Treasuring Each Person’s Mother Language

The International Mother Language Day (IMLD) has been celebrated since 2000 to promote all the languages of the world. Proclaimed by the General Conference of UNESCO in November 1999, the day represents an effective mobilization opportunity for linguistic diversity and multilingualism.

The annual commemoration of this day on 21 February every year highlights the importance of all languages, IRNA reported.

The mother language or “mother tongue” is the language in which first words are spoken and thoughts expressed by an individual. Thus, it is generally the language that a person speaks most fluently.

Cognitively, the mother language is a crucial tool every child uses to understand the world. Culturally, the mother language is a fundamental expression of history and identity.

Language Data
Nearly 7,000 languages are spoken in the world today. Given that the United Nations comprises 193 member-states, multilingual and multicultural nations are clearly the norm—not the exception.

Virtually all countries have citizens whose mother language differs from the majority language.

Often, the most disadvantaged people in a country are those whose mother language is different from the national language. This creates problems in many areas: education, health, income disparity, risk of exploitation, exposure to environmental hazards and access to the legal system.

Policies sympathetic to a diversity of mother languages can help unite a country while strong monolingual policies can contribute to social division.

Governments and development organizations must take language into account when engaging people, rather than embracing a “one size fits all” mentality; as one slogan for the United Nations International Year of Languages declared: “Languages Matter!”

Languages matter for the fulfillment of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted in 2000 by the General Assembly of the United Nations to eradicate extreme poverty and deprivation by 2015.

Languages matter in the quest to eliminate illiteracy and facilitate better learning, as emphasized in the global movement called Education for All.

They matter in fostering openness toward diversity and tolerance of other cultures, which is essential to building inclusive societies. They matter for peace and mutual understanding in areas of inter-ethnic conflict. Indeed, the role of languages in the educational, cultural and economic fabric of our societies is too great to be ignored.

Importance
Evidence from around the world shows that children learn best when taught in their mother language in the initial years at school.

Yet, too often, children are immersed in classrooms and taught in a language that they do not recognize. Children are expected to effortlessly learn in the school language without additional support.

Typically less than 15 percent are able to do so and achieve acceptable marks; the majority does not. While they are physically included in school, the language barrier excludes them from effective learning.

For children of minority language background, learning in their own language in the early years is not a luxury; it is a fundamental right to access educational opportunities. Furthermore, their ability to acquire second and additional languages is determined by the strength of their linguistic foundations in the first language.

Therefore, learning in the mother language is also the right way to promote better learning of the national language.