Let us treasure and value each person's mother language

The International Mother Language Day (IMLD) was proclaimed by the General Conference of UNESCO in November 1999. It has been celebrated since 2000 to promote all the languages of the world.

This 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 in this region and worldwide.

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.

Nearly 7,000 languages are spoken in our world today. Given that the United Nations comprises 193 member states, multilingual, 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, access to the legal system, etc.

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 Education for All movement.

They matter in fostering openness towards 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.

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 per cent 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.

Language is perhaps the most human of human traits. International Mother Language Day provides an opportunity for us all to reflect on the vital importance of language to ourselves, to our nations, and to our world.

So delight in cultural diversity. Learn other languages. Share your language with others. But never forget the value of each person’s mother language.

Below is the message from Ms. Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO to mark the International Mother Language Day on 21 February 2012.

“Nelson Mandela once said that “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”. The language of our thoughts and our emotions is our most valuable asset.
“Multilingualism is our ally in ensuring quality education for all, in promoting inclusion and in combating discrimination. Building genuine dialogue is premised on respect for languages. Each representation of a better life, each development goal is expressed in a language, with specific words to bring it to life and communicate it. Languages are who we are; by protecting them, we protect ourselves.

“UNESCO has celebrated International Mother Language Day for 12 years now and directs its energies towards protecting linguistic diversity. This thirteenth celebration is dedicated to multilingualism for inclusive education. The work of researchers and the impact of multilingualism policies have proven that people perceive intuitively that linguistic diversity accelerates the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All goals in particular. Use of the mother tongue at school is a powerful remedy against illiteracy.

’The challenge, however, lies in achieving this truth in the classroom. Excluded population groups, such as indigenous peoples, are often those whose mother tongues are ignored by education systems. Allowing them to learn from a very early age in their mother tongue, and then in national, official or other languages, promotes equality and social inclusion.

“UNESCO Mobile Learning Week has shown that use of mobile technologies in education is an excellent means of boosting inclusive education. Combined with multilingualism, these technologies increase our scope for action tenfold. Let us make the most of them. Our generation is advantaged by having new communication media and a new Internet-based worldwide public arena: it cannot accept an impoverishment of languages.

“Linguistic diversity is our common heritage. It is fragile heritage. Nearly half of the more than 6,000 languages spoken in the world could die out by the end of the century. UNESCO's Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger is the performance chart for this struggle. Language loss impoverishes humanity. It is a retreat in the defence of everyone’s rights to be heard, to learn and to communicate. Moreover, each language also conveys cultural heritage that increases our creative diversity. Cultural diversity is as important as biological diversity in nature. They are closely linked. Some indigenous peoples’ languages carry knowledge on the biodiversity and management of ecosystems. This linguistic potential is an asset for sustainable development and deserves to be shared. UNESCO also intends to highlight this message at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio.

“The vitality of languages depends on all those who speak them and rally round to protect them. UNESCO pays tribute to them and ensures that their voices are heard when education, development and social cohesion policies are being formulated. Multilingualism is a living resource: let us use it for the benefit of all.”
By: Ms. Tarja Virtanen, Director and Representative, UNESCO Tehran Cluster Office