

UNESCO

## Languages are the keys to life

### Millennium Development Goals rely on effective global communication

By: ABDUL HAKEEM

Published: 24/02/2009 at 12:00 AM

Newspaper section: [Learningpost](#)

Languages are increasingly under threat. Of over 6,000 languages, 50 percent are "dying", 40 percent are "endangered" and only 10 percent are considered secure.



Ninety-six percent of 6,000 languages are spoken by only four percent of the world's population. UNESCO

Of the 6,000 languages, 96 percent are spoken by only four percent of the world's population. Only a few hundred languages have genuinely been given the pride of place in education systems and the public domain; and less than one hundred are used in the digital world.

Most of the endangered languages are spoken by ethnic minorities. If nothing is done, these languages and their cultures will soon die out.

Unesco's General Conference has therefore proclaimed "International Mother Language Day", celebrated annually on Feb 21 since 2000, to promote linguistic, cultural diversity and multilingualism.

#### Disappearing languages

With the death of a language, an irreplaceable facet of our knowledge and an understanding of human thought and a particular world view is lost.

Language is essential for development. Linguistic factors are strategic for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

These goals are to: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop global partnerships for developments.

The eight MDGs have been adopted by the international community as a framework for the development activities of over 190 countries in 10 regions.

Regarding the MDG on eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, language is closely linked to the ability to obtain a livelihood, to participate in social and public life, and to engage in dialogue.

Language is the principal medium of knowledge transmission - it is essential to achieve the MDGs related to achieving universal primary education and to respond to diseases, such as HIV/Aids and malaria.

Language is also essential to the enjoyment of fundamental rights, such as the rights to expression, education, participation in cultural life and benefits from scientific progresses. These are all linked to linguistic factors.

#### Preserving languages

An endangered language will survive and thrive if its speakers increase their prestige within the dominant community, increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community, create a written record of their language and make use of electronic technology. It helps if their language has a strong presence in education systems.

Education systems play a critical role in whether languages become extinct - or are able to survive and thrive. Many education systems are inappropriate, or are even hostile to indigenous minority groups and their languages.

It is critical, both for cultural and linguistic development and for academic achievement, that early education and initial literacy, for both children and adults, be conducted in the learner's mother tongue.

It is impossible to teach the majority of people to read and write in a language they do not understand.

A strategy of bilingualism produces better learning outcomes and higher rates of internal efficiency. Skills in the first language of instruction must be consolidated before the second is mastered.

The world community must promote the idea that improved integration will enable excluded ethnic minority communities to become contributors to national economic and social development.

Also, in order for local communities to draw benefits from the education system, these communities need to have a significant influence on the governance of the education programmes and the determination of the content and methods of instruction.

The focus of Unesco Bangkok's work in language and education is to raise awareness among policymakers, planners, teachers, community leaders and communities on the importance of early learning in the mother tongue as well as bilingual/multilingual education.

Abdul Hakeem is the education adviser and coordinator of the Asia and Pacific Programme for Education for All (Appeal) at Unesco Bangkok. He can be contacted at [a.hakeem@unesco.org](mailto:a.hakeem@unesco.org).

Bangkok Post : [News](#) | [Business](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Travel](#) | [Leisure](#) | [Tech](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Auto](#) | [Life](#) | [Teen](#) | [Guru Bangkok](#)  
Services : [Article search](#) | [Job search](#) | [Forum](#) | [Classified](#) | [SMS news](#) | [Read e-paper](#) | [Digital print page](#) | [Read Bangkok Post](#)  
Post Today : [Home](#) | [Local news](#) | [Finance](#) | [Investment](#) | [Leisure](#) | [Business](#) | [International](#) | [Sports](#)  
Post Publishing PCL : [Corporate info download](#) | [Subscribe newspaper](#) | [Online advertising](#) | [Web suggestion](#) | [Corporate contact](#)  
© Copyright 1996-2008 The Post Publishing Public Company Limited | [Privacy policy](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#)