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## UNESCO chief warns crucial yet ‘fragile’ linguistic heritage in danger



A world without words? - Celebrating International Mother Language Day. Photo: UNESCO

21 February 2012 –

Language is a key ally in the fight against discrimination, the head of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) said today, [warning](#) that the world’s linguistic diversity was nevertheless a “fragile heritage” at risk of being lost.

In her [message](#) commemorating the thirteenth edition of International Mother Language Day, UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova underscored the importance of language preservation in safeguarding the world’s cultural heritage and promoting creative diversity.

“Linguistic diversity is our common heritage. It is a fragile heritage,” stated Ms. Bokova. “Language loss impoverishes humanity. It is a retreat in the defence of everyone’s rights to be heard, to learn and to communicate.”

Noting that over 50 per cent of the estimated 6,700 spoken languages worldwide are in danger of disappearing by the end of the century, Ms. Bokova added that languages “are who we are; by protecting them, we protect ourselves.”

International Mother Language Day has been observed every year since 2000 to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism. The date commemorates the day in 1952 when Bangladeshi students in what was then East Pakistan demonstrating for recognition of their language, Bangla, were shot and killed by police.

Ms. Bokova also pointed out that allowing excluded population groups, such as indigenous peoples, to learn their mother tongues in the classroom from an early age would promote equality and social inclusion.

“Cultural diversity is as important as biological diversity in nature,” Ms. Bokova noted. “The vitality of languages depends on all those who speak them and rally round to protect them.”

Adding to the celebrations, a 30-minute short film narrated by Academy Award-winning actor William Hurt was screened at the UN headquarters in New York on Tuesday.

The film, entitled *Languages Lost and Found: Speaking & Whistling the Mamma Tongue*, explores diverse linguistic and cultural practices from around the world, pointing out how quickly some languages are disappearing while introducing the native tongue as a crucial vehicle for maintaining culture.

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