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“Role of linguistic diversity in building a global community with shared future: protection, access and promotion of language resources”

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Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China

National Commission of the People's Republic of China for UNESCO

National Language Commission of the People's Republic of China

People's Government of Hunan Province of the People's Republic of China

Introduction

In today's world, we live in a society that is comprised of differing languages, cultures, ethnicities, skin colors, religions, and social systems, rendering it a mutually inclusive community where the peoples of different countries co-exist. Language is one of the fundamental preconditions to human life, human development and the existence of human society.

Language, as a complex phenomenon, has many entry points for a discussion.

People need language to communicate with one another and pass along from one generation to the next generation knowledge, ideas, beliefs and traditions which are essential for survival, evolution and peaceful co-existence. This means that a systematic form of communication helps people to have proper ways to communicate with others and share their experience. It is also a set of rules for an efficient language acquisition and important for achievement of educational and occupational goals. Moreover, language is one of the essential characteristics of culture enabling people to socialize and form a joint future through shared patterns of behaviors, interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding. Furthermore, language encodes human traditional knowledge built over centuries of development and application; and stored as a repository to further exploitation as well as seen as human ability to modify, adapt and make necessary adjustment to the environment.

Therefore, language is one of the essential contributors to dialogue, reconciliation, tolerance and peace in the world. As importantly, language matters for sustainable development as future cannot be envisioned in the absence of languages.

Languages are diverse as people are different, lived and created those languages in different historical periods, geographical locations, and acted differently. Diversity of languages appears from human ability to express freely and opening own feelings and ideas, imagination and creativity to describe different realities around them, and share in various forms and tools with others. Freedom to express in own language is closely linked to the linguistic diversity and contribute to the realization of individual rights - use own language with other members of their linguistic group, regardless of the status of their language.

Throughout the course of history, language played a vital role in maintaining stability among a group of people, regions and countries. Directives, rules, legislation and policies involving languages have been in effect in many countries, however there were often cases where some languages were being imposed upon people while other languages were neglected, discouraged or even forbidden.

A notion of language being a part of nationhood has evolved during the last decades. The paradigm shift is reflected in the national languages policies and integrated into the international normative instruments which emphasizes linguistic rights in the context of education settings, social inclusion, political participation and economic development. Moreover, the tremendous importance of language in society, in general, gained new momentum with the advent of the Internet. The technological connectivity at a global scale provided new opportunities for sharing and preservation of traditional knowledge and languages resources, facilitated communication among community members and raised new employment and business opportunities.

Yet the world's languages are disappearing at an alarming rate. There is evidence ascertaining that global linguistic diversity has long been in decline. The implications of language loss are profound at all levels and have an evidently negative effect on societal development and individual empowerment. These

knowledge which have been fostered through hundreds of thousands of years will never be retrieved once the languages disappeared.

According to the UNESCO's Atlas of Languages in Danger (2018), 40% of approximately 6,700 languages in the world are endangered. Every two weeks, one of the world's languages disappears, and with it goes part of our human history and cultural heritage. This considerable number of endangered languages not only embodies a threat to the preservation of people's cultural identity and tradition, but also limits equal opportunities to quality education, employment, social inclusion and participation in society and therefore, perpetuates illiteracy, inequality and poverty. Moreover, it is important to point out that the extinction of languages has direct impacts on realization of human rights and sustainable development. Endangerment of languages will lead to the denial of other rights.

Discussing aspects of language diversity and the implications of languages goes beyond linguistic theories, as it has a direct and immediate impact at all levels of society. Linguistic diversity has an important role in building global community with shared future.

Therefore, the issues related to language endangerment, vitality and diversity should be addressed at the international, regional, national and local levels. No matter whether these languages are called minority languages, indigenous languages or lesser-used languages, they require the special attention and concrete actions, including protection, access and promotion, of all stakeholders. This challenge should be approached in cooperation with all relevant stakeholders at various levels – community, national, regional and international.

Rationale for the international conference

A notion of language being a part of nationhood and societal development has evolved during the last decades. This has resulted in the development and endorsement of several international normative instruments by UNESCO and other regional and national organizations.

The core stone for ensuring linguistic diversity around the world is grounded in the Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty".

Few other international normative documents recognize the rights of members of national minorities to carry own educational activities, including the use and the teaching of own language, importance of mother tongue for education of children, sign language as the medium of communication among people with disabilities, as well as promotion of frameworks for a range of actions that promote cultural diversity and the preservation of endangered languages, and safeguarding intangible heritage such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events. One of the international normative instruments, which explicitly focuses on multilingualism, is the Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace adopted by UNESCO General Conference in 2003. This Recommendation recognizes the importance and significance of promoting multilingualism and equitable access to information and knowledge in cyberspace e, especially in the public domain. It also encourages UNESCO to take a lead in encouraging an equal access to information

for all people, regardless of languages, by multilingualism and cultural diversity on the global information networks.

In response to this Recommendation, UNESCO in cooperation with its Member States, national organizations responsible for language policies, researchers, civil society, and private sector partners, has been implementing a large variety of language-related programmes around the world. These programmes were focused on policy formulation, language tools development, capacity building, promotion of creation of multilingual content on the Internet, efforts to measure linguistic diversity on the Internet, supporting international cooperation and special initiatives.

Currently, UNESCO is in the process of creating a new World Atlas of Languages to provide a more accurate overview of linguistic diversity around the world. The innovative and interactive online platform for language-related information is designed in line with the “Roadmap towards UNESCO’s World Atlas of Languages” (199 EX/4.INF).

In his speech at the UNESCO Headquarters in March 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping points out: “It’s impossible to imagine a world with only one life style, one language, one type of music, and one clothing style.” “Civilizations are multi-colored. The value of human civilizations concerning exchange and mutual learning lies in its very diversity.” In 2015, The Ministry of Education of China and the State Language Commission of China launched the China Language Resources Protection Project, which initiated many programs that centered around the evaluation, protection, showcasing, and development of language resources in China, with special attention to the evaluation and preservation of endangered languages and relevant cultures. This project has drawn heightened attention and wide acclaim from the international society.

In her speech on the International Mother Language Day on February 21, 2018, Audrey Azoulay, Director General of UNESCO, said: “A language is far more than a means of communication; it is the very condition of our humanity. Our values, our beliefs and our identity are embedded within it. It is through language that we transmit our experiences, our traditions and our knowledge. The diversity of languages reflects the incontestable wealth of our imaginations and ways of life.” She encouraged member nations of UNESCO to promote language diversity and multi-language use through various educational and cultural activities.

Furthermore, a global attention to language related issues was renewed by the United Nations General Assembly in its Resolution (Ref.: A/RES/71/178) on “Rights of Indigenous Peoples” proclaiming 2019 the Year of Indigenous Languages.

Despite the growing interest briefly described above, it is important to state that the global development agenda and frameworks poorly reflect language issues. The Millennium Development Goals put forth in 2000 failed to address language issues, especially concerning communities of people with disadvantaged backgrounds – speakers of lesser-used languages, persons with disabilities, people in displaced situations and those who live in remote areas. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development already include more issues of marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities issues and women which are well mainstreamed across different Goals. However, there is no specific goal focusing on language aspects. The only point in the SDGs when language is mentioned is Article 19 emphasizing the responsibilities of all States, to protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms, without distinction of any kind as to race, colour, sex, language and other. This demonstrate that language and linguistic diversity are not yet recognized to have an impact for development.

International conference

It is to carry on with and deepen this debate that UNESCO, Ministry of Education, State Language Commission and National Commission to UNESCO of People's Republic of China in collaboration with other partners are planning to organize an International conference in September 2018 in China.

The purpose of the International conference entitled "Role of linguistic diversity in building a global community with shared future: protection, access and promotion to global language resources" is to discuss the broad areas of language-related issues, with special attention to the language protection, access to language resources and promotion of emerging initiatives in Asia-Pacific region as well as to contribute to the organization of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages and further development of UNESCO's World Atlas of Languages.

This event will consist of three thematic discussion areas:

- **Policies and Measures on Language and Cultural Diversity.** Language policy is seen as a powerful political instrument for promoting the peaceful co-existence of different language speaker communities. International normative instruments can be reinforced and relevant tools designed at national level if comprehensive language policies are formulated, concrete measures are introduced, resources are allocated, and effective language tools and resources are provided and shared by all stakeholders concerned.
- **Standards and Talent Cultivation for Language Resource Protection.** In order to strengthen normative framework at national level, it is essential to build institutional capacities to foster the implementation of language policies, produce self-learning and training tools and training manuals, as well as promote sharing of scientific information and research results of academia at national, regional and international levels.
- **Development, Application, and Promotion of Language Resources.** National capacity goes beyond acquisition of information, including on languages, but also it encourage transformation into knowledge and livelihoods which contribute to the social and economic development of society. It therefore is important to provide opportunities for dissemination and promotion of language resources using Information and Communication Technologies and involve in this work other stakeholders, such as young researchers, media professionals, representatives of library and memory organizations, students, as well as encourage private sector organizations to provide more language related services, tools and resources.

Major objectives of the international conference

The International conference aims to:

- Review the status and situation of language diversity in the Asia-Pacific and other regions;
- Explore new avenues for language resource protection, support, and promotion in the Asia-Pacific and other regions;
- Share knowledge and good practices as well as discuss the new research methods for protection, support and promotion of languages in Asia-Pacific region, especially in the different regions of China;
- Discover the possible ways for language documentation particular those in danger and lesser-used languages;

- Present latest state-of-the-art technological solutions for language documentation, protection, access and promotion;
- Review and discuss the key terminologies related to language-related issues;
- Discuss the existing practices and national policies related to sign languages;
- Discuss the celebration of the International Year 2019 in Asia-Pacific region (including a decade of Asia-Pacific languages – to be confirmed);
- Contribute to the World Atlas of Languages by providing inputs and building institutional partnerships of the on the development of Chinese Language Atlas.

Expected outcomes

The deliverables of this international conference will be as follows:

1. Outcome summary document. The discussion during the international conference will be summarized into a final summary document which explains the key issues concerning the international protection, access, promotion and revitalization of minority languages all over the world (ISBN document).
2. Reach a consensus on language diversity and language resource protection through Yuelu Proclamation.
3. Provide policy recommendations in Asia-Pacific region.
4. Identify potential events and initiatives which could be linked to the organization of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Language.
5. Launch a network/partnership among Chinese language institutions and universities ready to contribute to the development of the Chinese Linguistic Atlas within the context of UNESCO World Atlas of Languages.