
UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning

Announcement, 21 February 2008



International Year of Languages 2008

The United Nations General Assembly has designated 2008 as the International Year of Languages and entrusted its coordination to UNESCO. This year's International Mother Language Day, which has been celebrated annually on 21 February since 2000, marks the start of the International Year of Languages.

UNESCO invites governments, United Nations organizations, civil society organizations, educational institutions, professional associations and all other stakeholders to increase their own activities to foster respect for, promote and protect all languages, particularly those which are endangered, in all individual and collective contexts.

The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) is contributing to the International Year of Languages through a variety of activities in order to promote equity and social justice through access to quality basic education and lifelong learning. Many educational programmes in multilingual contexts fail because they do not reflect or respond to the learners' linguistic development and learning needs. Language is one of the most important factors determining the success or failure of education programmes.

In the framework of International Mother Language Day and the International Year of Languages, the UIL was one of four UNESCO partners – in cooperation with the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) – behind the organization of an International Seminar on Literacy of Indigenous Youth and Adults held in Guatemala from 11 to 13 February 2008. Drawing on studies carried out in their respective countries, researchers from seven Latin American countries – Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua and Peru – met to discuss both the current literacy situation of indigenous populations and effective literacy practices in multicultural and multilingual contexts. The event's participants included the Minister of Education from Guatemala, Ms Ana Ordóñez de Molina, and several NGOs, universities and other stakeholders. There is clear evidence that illiteracy rates among indigenous populations exceed the national average, and are particularly high among indigenous women and in rural areas. Even when progressive constitutions and legislation are developed to address the particular learning needs of indigenous youth and adults in multilingual contexts, very few of these are implemented. On the other hand, a number of literacy programmes have succeeded in integrating an intercultural and bilingual approach. The evolving concept of literacy has also had some impact on how indigenous youth and adults contribute to the development of Latin American societies. In the discussions, it became clear that literacy cannot be separated from other social processes and that interculturality implies collective rights and the sharing of power.

UIL is also completing an advocacy policy guide in favour of the use of African languages in education addressing the prevailing multilingualism. This evidence based guide is almost ready for publication and dissemination. Furthermore, a research report on mother tongue and multilingual education in Africa will be co-published with the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) in 2008. Together with ADEA, a ministerial forum on multilingualism and language use in education will be organized in the second half of the year.

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For further information on the International Year of Languages (IYL):

UNESCO portal for the promotion of languages: www.unesco.org/en/languages
Coordinator of the IYL: Mr Mauro Rosi (unyl2008@unesco.org)

Please keep UNESCO informed of your initiatives in the field of languages and multilingualism. You will be contributing towards enlarging UNESCO's network of committed partners. To submit your project for publication in the UNESCO's International Year of Languages list, please fill out the form on the web site cited above.

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