



**Statement**

**on the occasion of**

**The Ninth United Nations  
Conference on the Standardization  
of Geographical Names**

**by**

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Madame la Présidente,  
Honorables Représentants des Etats membres,  
Excellences,  
Chers collègues,  
Mesdames et Messieurs,

C'est pour moi un honneur particulier et un très grand plaisir de participer, au nom de l'UNESCO, aux travaux de cette neuvième Conférence des Nations Unies sur la normalisation des noms géographiques.

L'objet de notre réunion se situe en effet au croisement de deux grands thèmes qui sont depuis longtemps au cœur des préoccupations et de l'action de l'UNESCO, l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour l'éducation, la science et la culture. L'un de ces thèmes porte sur les langues, sur leur diversité, sur leur coexistence harmonieuse dans le cadre d'un environnement multilingue; l'autre thème concerne le patrimoine culturel de l'humanité, en particulier dans sa composante immatérielle.

Il s'agit, bien entendu, de sujets intimement liés, car les langues font aussi partie du patrimoine immatériel. Nous sommes par ailleurs convaincus que, loin de constituer des aires d'intérêt pour la seule UNESCO, ces thèmes ont une portée stratégique au vu de l'ensemble des objectifs stratégiques du Système des Nations Unies.

Nous avons assisté ces dernières années à l'émergence et à la valorisation de ces sujets au sein d'enceintes multilatérales.

Dans ce contexte, l'UNESCO n'a eu de cesse d'attirer l'attention de l'ensemble de la communauté internationale sur la nécessité de sauvegarder et promouvoir les langues et, de façon plus générale, le patrimoine culturel vivant. En témoignent, d'une part, la mise en œuvre d'un programme intersectoriel des langues et de nombreux projets sectoriels ayant trait aux langues, ainsi que, d'autre part, le succès du programme sur la Proclamation des chefs d'œuvres du patrimoine oral et immatériel de l'humanité, suivi par l'adoption en 2003 de la Convention sur la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel, entrée en vigueur le 20 avril dernier.

Permettez-moi de vous fournir rapidement quelques éléments d'information susceptibles d'illustrer plus concrètement mes propos.

Chairperson,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

Language is certainly an essential component of human nature and, as such, a quintessential element of culture, because through language people understand and

express themselves, shape their world and transmit cultural and social expressions and practices. Language is also a key factor for analysis and action in different policy areas.

In fact, as a highly interdisciplinary domain, languages and multilingualism are strategic in regard to the most essential challenges facing humankind. For a number of sound reasons, we think that they should be taken into account in the development of strategies to meet the Millennium Development Goals.

Firstly, linguistic factors play a strategic role in the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger (Millennium Development Goal 1) because the ability to harness the environment, to empower citizens to participate in social and public life, and to engage in dialogue depend, to a great extent, on language skills.

Secondly, linguistic factors are essential to achieving universal primary education (Millennium Development Goal 2) and responding to HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases (Millennium Development Goal 6) because language, as a principal medium of knowledge transmission, affects education and information. To be effective and adapted to the culture and needs of the learners, education programmes (including health education) must be delivered in languages understood by those learners.

Furthermore, languages contribute to environmental sustainability (Millennium Development Goal 7). As languages convey local and indigenous knowledge and know-how of the natural milieu, sustainable management of natural resources is also linked to the protection and promotion of languages.

And finally, we should not forget that languages provide an essential medium for exercising all fundamental rights (like self-expression and education).

Taking into account that languages are tools of culture, UNESCO intends to play an active and specific role within the UN system to develop programs aiming not only to promote cultural diversity and dialogue through multilingualism, but also to consolidate the role of culture in national and global development strategies.

UNESCO's current activities in the field of languages mainly focus on promoting multilingual education including mother language instruction, on safeguarding endangered and indigenous languages, on strengthening linguistic diversity in literary environments, media and cyberspace and on supporting languages as a means of dialogue and international integration.

Languages are pillars of intangible cultural heritage, covered by a specific Convention adopted in 2003 as a result of a two-year series of rich and intense debates. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage entered into force on 20 April 2006. According to this Convention,

intangible cultural heritage – or living heritage – is the wellspring of our cultural diversity and its preservation a necessity for continuing creativity. In this context, intangible cultural heritage is defined as the practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills, that communities, groups and, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.

The Convention states that living heritage is manifested, among others, in the domain of “oral traditions and expressions including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage”. Accordingly, geographical names are an important element of linguistic heritage and oral traditions; but they can often be related to other areas of intangible heritage, such as performing arts (traditional music, dance and theatre), social practices, rituals and festive events, traditional craftsmanship, and knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe.

Moreover, the different socio-cultural functions of geographic names are often closely linked and inter-dependent. In this regard, allow me to cite here a large-scale Canadian research project<sup>1</sup> conducted in 1997-2001, which analyzed at least 310 indigenous (Dogrib) place names and found an interesting pattern: all place names were related to hunting and associated travel. For instance, some place names used terms for topographical features or water flow to make travel safer and easier in areas where caution was needed to avoid hazards. Other place names used biological terms such as those for flora and fish, providing information as to where resources such as food sources or wood should be available. The oral narratives associated with each place name were closely linked to and crucial to understanding the meaning of the name. The Dogrib study concluded that the place names and the related oral traditions together provide reliable baseline information in terms of bio-geographical knowledge.

In this context, may I recall the relevance and timeliness of the Resolution “VIII/9. Geographical names as cultural heritage” of the previous session of this Conference (Berlin, 2002) that recognized the importance of geographical names as part of historical and cultural heritage and urged “countries that have not already done so, to undertake both the systematic collection of geographical names and the promotion of a greater understanding among the wider public of the significance of inherited geographical names with respect to local, regional and national heritage and identity.” In this connection, I would like to refer to a report submitted to this conference by China (document *E/CONF.98/63/Add.1*), introducing the “Master Plan for the Protection Project of China Geographical Names Cultural Heritage”. This is an interesting and noteworthy effort.

Finally, I would like to stress that many elements of intangible cultural heritage have become endangered, due to the effects of globalization, standardization policies, and lack of means, appreciation and understanding. This explains the underlying needs for the 2003 Convention.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.wkss.nt.ca/HTML/08\\_ProjectsReports/08\\_habitat/08\\_habDogribTT.htm](http://www.wkss.nt.ca/HTML/08_ProjectsReports/08_habitat/08_habDogribTT.htm)

This Convention represents, together with the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted in 1972 and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, adopted in 2005, a key element of a standard-setting foundation in the field of culture, forming the bases of the safeguarding and promotion of cultural diversity.

Madame la Présidente,  
Excellences,  
Mesdames et messieurs,

Situé au croisement entre l'action en faveur des langues et celle en faveur du patrimoine immatériel, l'évolution de la question des noms géographiques sera redevable, à l'avenir, du progrès que nous saurons accomplir dans l'ensemble de ces domaines complexes et stratégiques.

L'Organisation que je représente ici, active sur l'ensemble des aires d'intervention concernées par ces questions, s'engage à jouer de manière responsable le rôle qui lui est confié au sein de la famille des Nations Unies. Pour ce qui est d'éventuelles mesures ayant trait, plus particulièrement, à la Convention de 2003, le secrétariat de l'UNESCO se tient prêt à mettre en œuvre les décisions que les Etats membres voudront adopter à ce sujet, notamment à travers le Comité intergouvernemental de sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel.

Je vous remercie.