

**Statement on the occasion of  
The tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of  
Geographical Names  
delivered by Suzanne Bilello,  
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Mr. President,  
Chairperson,  
Honourable Representatives of Member States,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address this 10<sup>th</sup> United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

When UNESCO was asked to speak at this conference I considered what could be UNESCO's role in a technical forum that grapples with issues of linguistic standardization? What does this body have in common with a United Nations Specialized Agency tasked with the preservation of the fruitful diversity of the world's cultures and integral role of culture in sustainable development as well as the promotion of the free flow of ideas of words and image,?

We both engage with essential elements of human cultural heritage

A location anywhere in the world is not simply a place; it is a home to people and their culture. The origin and evolution of the name of someone's home is an essential part of our social and cultural values.

Since the United Nations was founded the map of the world has changed many times as we all know. Five decades ago the birth of new nations with new names in the post colonial era and the social effervescence that ensued, also brought new life to the peoples and cultures of those regions and to the rest of the world.

Today my 11-year-old daughter is learning geography for ancient places with new names such as Nunavut in Northern Canada, a region that has supported a continuous indigenous population for approximately 4,000 years.

Human cultural heritage in its many manifestations is at the heart of UNESCO's mandate.

UNESCO fosters cultural diversity through the safeguarding of various forms of heritage: cultural, natural and in recent decades, intangible or 'living' heritage. As cultural diversity also encompasses languages, UNESCO is a staunch advocate of linguistic diversity and multilingualism.

Language is a quintessential element of culture. Through language people understand and express themselves, shape their world and transmit cultural and social expressions and practices.

With their complex implications for identity, communication, social integration and education languages are of strategic importance for all peoples and the planet and should be taken into account in the development of strategies to meet the Millennium Development Goals and beyond 2015

Linguistic factors play a strategic role in the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger because the ability to harness the environment, to empower citizens to participate in social and public life, and to engage in dialogue depend largely on language skills.

Linguistic factors are essential to achieving universal primary education and responding to HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases since language, as a principal medium of knowledge transmission, is essential to 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.

Languages contribute to environmental sustainability as conveyors of 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 of course languages provide an essential medium for exercising all fundamental rights

UNESCO's activities in the field of languages primarily focus on promoting multilingual education including mother language instruction; however we are also involved in safeguarding endangered and indigenous languages, and strengthening linguistic diversity in literary environments, media and cyberspace. In this connection, it is worth noting that in 2003 UNESCO adopted the Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace, intended to support equitable and affordable access to information and to promote the development of a multicultural information society.

More recently, UNESCO is with working in partnership with the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) to collaborate on the internationalization of the internet.

This joint effort agreement covers a variety of cooperation areas so that the new development can benefit as many language groups as possible. UNESCO agreed notably to call upon its network of linguistic experts to help in the process; inform Member States about the new Internationalized Domain Names IDNs; encourage involvement of other relevant United Nations agencies; and establish working groups to help developing and least-developed countries participate fully.

In September 2010, UNESCO signed a Letter of Intent with ICANN to assist Internet users' access in Member States whose official languages are based on the Cyrillic script. This is achieved through the creation of internationalized country code top-level domains (IDN ccTLDs) in Cyrillic in relation to the country name abbreviations reference table.

I would also like to mention UNESCO's role as lead agency for the International Year of Languages 2008 proclaimed by the UN General Assembly. The International Year,

whose slogan was very simple, but to the point: “Language matters!” provided an excellent opportunity to raise global awareness on the need to develop policies to support multilingualism and linguistic diversity, including the preservation of endangered languages.

UNESCO's flagship activity in safeguarding endangered languages is the [Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger](#), which lists some 2,500 languages in all regions of the world. [The free online edition](#) of the Atlas, launched in 2009, provides valuable information on numbers of speakers, relevant policies and projects, and geographic coordinates. The Atlas has become a valuable tool for monitoring the status of endangered languages and the trends in linguistic diversity at the global level as well as an interactive platform for exchange on this issue. It can also be a rich source of information for research related to indigenous place names.

UNESCO's work in promoting linguistic diversity is just one aspect of a wider overarching objective to promote cultural diversity and dialogue and to consolidate the role of culture in national and global development strategies.

Culture, in its diverse dimensions, is a fundamental component of sustainable development. Through tangible and intangible heritage, creative industries and various forms of artistic expressions, culture is a powerful contributor to economic development, social stability and environmental protection. As a repository of knowledge, meanings and values that permeate all aspects of our lives, culture also defines the way human beings live and interact both at local and global scales. Placing culture at the heart of development policy constitutes an essential investment in the world's future and a pre-condition to successful globalization processes

UNESCO's worldwide advocacy for culture and development has resulted in the adoption of two successive General Assembly resolutions in 2010 and 2011. These resolutions called for the mainstreaming of culture into development policies and strategies, and underscored culture's intrinsic contribution to sustainable development.

On the ground, a series of activities are serving as a valuable testing ground for culture's unique contribution to social and economic development. Throughout the past decade, statistics, indicators and mapping of cultural resources, as well as operational activities - such as the large scale United Nations Inter-agency projects implemented under the MDG-F Achievement Fund - have underscored that culture can be a powerful driver for development, with community-wide social, economic and environmental impacts

UNESCO's work on promoting the role of culture is underpinned by its standard-setting instruments: a series of conventions, recommendations and declarations, including the renowned World Heritage Convention -- which is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year-- the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Firmly grounded in a human-rights based approach, these Conventions establish a range of governmental and international funding and cooperation mechanisms, as well as monitoring and evaluation tools. They promote capacity building programmes and other initiatives for the safeguard of culture (including natural heritage) and its integration in national and local development strategies.

I would like to conclude with a few remarks on the Intangible Heritage Convention,

Languages and heritage are closely interconnected. This connection is particularly strong with intangible heritage -- also known as living heritage -- which is defined as the practices, representations, expressions, oral traditions as well as the knowledge and skills that communities, groups and individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.

Languages are a principal means of transmitting intangible cultural heritage. Different languages shape how stories, poems and songs are told, as well as affecting their content. The death of a language inevitably leads to the permanent loss of oral traditions and expressions. However, it is these oral expressions themselves and their performance in public that best help to safeguard a language rather than dictionaries, grammars and

databases. Languages live in songs and stories, riddles and rhymes and so the protection of languages and the transmission of oral traditions and expressions go hand and hand.

Geographical names are an important element of linguistic heritage and oral traditions and 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. For example, in many indigenous cultures, place names are related to hunting and associated travel. Some 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 referred to biological terms such as those for flora and fish, providing information indicating the location of resources such as food sources or wood. The oral narratives associated with each place name are often crucial to understanding the meaning of the name. Place names and the related oral traditions can together provide reliable baseline information in terms of bio geographical knowledge.

Finally, I would like to remind you that many elements of intangible cultural heritage have become endangered, due to the effects of globalization, standardization policies, rural exodus and other complex factors. This is yet one of the many challenges addressed by UNESCO in its ongoing efforts to mobilize the international community to ensure a sustainable future for all.

I thank you for your attention and hope that these remarks might serve to enrich your debates.