Make languages count for sustainable development

Silver Jubilee Celebration of International Mother Language Day

20 – 21 February 2025
UNESCO Headquarters
Paris, France

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Introduction

Languages are essential for both education and sustainable development, shaping the way people learn, communicate, and engage with society. The world is increasingly aware of its rich cultural, linguistic and biological diversity and their interlinkages. There is growing recognition of the need to protect and preserve this diversity in the face of its gradual decline.

UNESCO estimates that there are 8,324 languages, spoken or signed. Out of these, around 7,000 languages are still in use. However, linguistic diversity is under threat, with many languages disappearing at an accelerated pace in our rapidly changing world.

Language is the primary medium through which knowledge is transferred. Education plays a key role in sharing and maintaining the world's diversity, where languages, cultures and environments mutually and sustainably support one another.

There is still much to be done to ensure that all learners have the right to education in the language they best speak and understand.

Nearly 37% of learners in low- and middle-income countries are not taught in the language that they best speak and understand. This figure rises to up to 90% of learners in some countries. Many education systems encounter political, logistical and resource-based obstacles.

UNESCO believes everyone has the right to learn in their own language and that it is an important means to improving learning, learning outcomes and socio-emotional development. Multilingual education based on mother tongue(s) is an essential tool for improving access and learning to quality education, particularly for population groups that speak non-dominant, minority and indigenous languages. When students learn in their mother tongue, comprehension, engagement and critical thinking are enhanced.

The effectiveness of multilingual education depends on the context, policies and implementation strategies. Multilingual education approaches can boost classroom participation, improve retention rates, and foster greater family and community involvement in education. They are also crucial in mitigating the challenges faced by migrant and refugee learners, promoting a sense of safety and resilience.

In a world where cross-cultural communication is essential for tackling global challenges, multilingualism is a valuable asset. It offers individuals greater opportunities for personal growth, professional advancement, and meaningful participation in a globalized society.

Multilingual education approach is not only a key component of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, but it also contributes to other SDGs. This includes SDG 5 on gender equality, SDG 13 on climate action, and SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities.

Silver Jubilee celebration of International Mother Language Day

UNESCO will celebrate the Silver Jubilee of the International Mother Language in line with the UNESCO Executive Board decision 219 EX/38 which reaffirms the importance of linguistic diversity and multilingualism in promoting human dignity, peaceful co-existence and mutual understanding.

The year 2025 marks the 25th anniversary of International Mother Language Day, first proclaimed by UNESCO and later adopted by the UN General Assembly. Celebrated annually on February 21, this milestone highlights a quarter-century of dedicated efforts to preserve linguistic diversity and promote the use of mother tongues. It serves as a significant opportunity to reflect on achievements, renew commitments, and emphasize the critical role of language preservation in safeguarding cultural heritage, improving education outcomes and creating more peaceful, sustainable societies.

As we approach 2030, the Silver Jubilee will highlight the urgency of accelerating progress on linguistic diversity and multilingualism to achieve a more sustainable, equitable and inclusive world by 2030. It will also contribute to the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032) for which UNESCO is leading global efforts.

The theme of the Silver Jubilee '*Make languages count for sustainable development'* underlines the crucial role of languages in implementing the SDGs and shaping the post-SDG agenda. Languages are essential for communication, inclusion, education, and empowerment – all key for achieving the SDGs.

Throughout 2025 and beyond, UNESCO will harness its convening power and leadership in education to advocate for multilingual educational policies and practices.

Goal and objectives

The event seeks to renew commitment towards supporting linguistic diversity and multilingualism as a key contribution to the attainment of all SDGs. Specifically, it aims to:

- Review progress in policies and practices for developing multilingual societies and educational systems.
- Showcase educational policies and practices that have improved access to quality multilingual education.
- Further advocate for inclusive language policies and practices that respect language communities.

Expected outcomes

The following expected outcomes reflect the key objectives of the celebration and the broader vision to promote multilingualism as a foundation for a more inclusive and equitable future:

- Fostered dialogue and cooperation on language diversity and multilingual education.
- Enhanced awareness of the potential of multilingual education in a globalized and digitalized world.
- Renewed commitment towards linguistic diversity and multilingualism, with specific attention to the preservation, teaching and transmission of Indigenous languages.

Participants

Around 500 participants are expected to attend the event including: ministers of education and other government officials; Ambassadors and representatives of the Permanent Delegations to UNESCO; education practitioners and educators; researchers and experts; bilateral, multilateral and other development partners; private sector stakeholders; representatives of youth organizations; representatives of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations supporting multilingual education, cultural and linguistic diversity and inclusion in education.

Format

The event will provide a platform for debate and sharing of experiences and innovative policies and programmes and will consist of one day for technical dialogues (20 February) and a High-Level event (21 February).

An exhibition 'Languages count!' will illustrate the richness of languages across the globe, while a cultural event will close the Silver Jubilee celebration.

Plenary sessions will be streamed for online viewing. Interpretation will be provided in the six UN official languages for the High-level event and in English, French and Spanish for the technical dialogues.

Contacts

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Provisional Agenda Thursday 20 February 2025: Technical dialogue to advance multilingual education (Room 2)	
9:30 – 10:00	Registration & Welcoming coffee
10:00 – 10:30	**Opening Session**
10:45 – 11:45	**Setting the scene** Insights from 25 years of research, promising policies and proven practices on multilingualism and linguistic diversity Q&A and Discussion
11:45 – 11:50	***Video***
11:50 – 13:00	**Multilingualism and linguistic diversity across UNESCO's programmes** Q&A and Discussion
13:00 – 14:30	*Lunch Break*
14:30 – 15:30	**Multilingual education and the rights of Indigenous peoples: A 25-year reflection on progress and challenges** Q&A and Discussion
15:30 – 17:30	**Multilingual education to ensure a better future in a fast-evolving world** • Multilingual education for literacy and peace • Multilingual education in emergency situations • Multilingual education and the use of technology

Provisional Agenda **Friday 21 February 2025: Silver Jubilee Celebration - High-level policy dialogue** **(Room 1)**	
9:30 – 10:00	Welcoming coffee
10:00 – 10:30	**Official opening**
10:30 – 11:00	Interlude
11 :00 – 12 :00	**Inaugural session** ***Fireside Chat*** *Multilingualism: The key to unlocking the world*
12:00 – 13:00	**Looking forward: strategic actions for multilingual education** *Launch of the UNESCO MLE Guide and discussion on transformative and strategic actions to advance MLE*
13:00 – 14:30	*Lunch Break*
14:30 – 15:45	**Moderated High-level Roundtable 1** *How multilingual education is building inclusive societies and supporting lifelong learning*
15:45– 17:00	**Moderated High-level Roundtable 2** *Five years to 2030: How language and multilingualism contribute to achieving* SDGs
17:00– 17:30	**Key highlights and official closing**
19:00 – 21:00	**Cultural event**