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科学及文化组织

**Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,**

**Director-General of UNESCO,**

**on the occasion**

**of the International Day of the World's Indigenous People**

**9 August 2008**

The International Day of the World's Indigenous People 2008 is a fitting occasion to celebrate the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly last September, and to proclaim solidarity with the 350 million indigenous peoples around the world. It is also an appropriate moment to take stock of recent developments and to reflect on how to mainstream the principles of the Declaration in policies and programmes as part of the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People.

The 2007 Declaration acknowledges the significant place that indigenous cultures occupy in the world and their vital contribution to our rich cultural diversity, which constitutes, in the words of its preamble "the common heritage of humankind". By approving this landmark Declaration, the UN has taken a major step forward in the protection and promotion of indigenous peoples' rights in terms of culture, languages and education within the larger human rights framework and has sent a clear signal in this regard to the international community. It is now the responsibility of the United Nations, and in particular UNESCO in its capacity as the specialized agency of the UN for culture, science, education and communication, to ensure that this message is widely disseminated, understood and – most importantly – translated into concrete policies that will enable indigenous peoples to participate fully and equally in the national and international life.

Indeed, the new Declaration echoes the principles of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) and related Conventions -- notably the 1972 World Heritage Convention, 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. Each of these recognizes the pivotal role of indigenous peoples as custodians of cultural diversity and biodiversity. Yet, in seeking to promote and protect indigenous cultures, these standard setting instruments also recognize the vulnerability of many of those cultures, the material, environmental and spiritual conditions of indigenous peoples, their worldviews and their intimate relationship with the land and natural resources in our rapidly changing world.

While acknowledging those vulnerabilities, UNESCO appreciates the significant contribution of indigenous knowledge systems and world visions to sustainable development. UNESCO is expanding its cooperation with indigenous peoples in this area, especially through interdisciplinary programmes such as Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS), Cultural Mapping, Man and the Biosphere, or Linking Cultural and Biological Diversity, as well as through activities related to the Decade on Education for Sustainable Development. For example, the recent work on climate change carried out by the LINKS programme and the World Heritage Centre highlights the importance of the knowledge and adaptation strategies of indigenous peoples without overlooking their specific vulnerabilities.

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples also recognizes that languages are a fundamental issue for most indigenous communities, who together account for more than 5,000 languages in over 70 countries on six continents; that is, nearly 75 per cent of all languages believed to exist. UNESCO has long promoted the view that languages, like culture, are an important element of a people's identity and the primary means of human communication, knowledge and experience sharing. They are also among the principal factors of progress towards sustainable development, playing a vital role in social integration and economic progress.

As lead agency for the International Year of Languages (2008), UNESCO is highlighting the importance of linguistic diversity and multilingualism with a view to fostering the protection and promotion of all languages in all aspects of a society's life. It is also reaching out to indigenous and non-indigenous experts in this crucial area to assess the technical and legal aspects regarding the protection of indigenous and endangered languages and provide new insights and information for appropriate policy dialogue. A number of our standard-setting instruments, including the Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of

Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace (2003) and the UNESCO Position Paper on Education and Languages refer to the protection and promotion of indigenous languages.

UNESCO's Medium-Term Strategy 2008 - 2013 highlights the Organization's commitment to prioritize to the needs of the most vulnerable segments of society. Many indigenous peoples continue to face serious discrimination in terms of access to basic social services, including education and health care. A great number are marginalized and live in precarious and impoverished conditions, often due to forced displacement. UNESCO addresses these challenges through programmes on intercultural and mother-tongue based multilingual education, city-based initiatives to fight discrimination, xenophobia and racism, culturally sensitive HIV and AIDS programming, the promotion of pluralistic media, and research on ways to foster respect for indigenous peoples.

These examples reveal synergies between the principles of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and UNESCO programmes. These synergies will undoubtedly facilitate the Declaration's implementation. UNESCO hopes that this Declaration will serve as a platform for genuine dialogue between indigenous and non-indigenous partners, creating a clearer understanding of indigenous worldviews and cultures. We believe that it is only through intercultural dialogue between generations, cultures and civilizations, as well as between indigenous peoples, societies and States at large that indigenous cultures can fully flourish.

In this regard, UNESCO participated actively in the UN Task Team to elaborate the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) Guidelines on Indigenous People Issues, which will orient UN country teams in their efforts to mainstream the principles of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in development programmes. The Organization is therefore honoured to take up the chair of the UN Inter-Agency Support Group in the coming year and to welcome an official visit of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. These occasions will provide excellent opportunities to further assess and advance UN joint work on promoting indigenous peoples' quest for "development with culture and identity".

Koïchiro Matsuura