

MESSAGE OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF UNESCO ON THE OCCASION OF THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

9 August 2003

At the second session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, held in New York from 12 to 23 May 2003, UNESCO reminded the almost 2,000 participants that its Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity is one of the most important international texts for indigenous peoples. The safeguarding of indigenous cultures, and of cultural diversity in general, has become an absolute imperative in the context of globalization, making it necessary for culture to take its place once again at the heart of development policies. This was also one of the key messages to emerge from the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development, in September 2002, and it was emphatically endorsed by such eminent indigenous persons as Ms Rigoberta Menchú Tum (Guatemala) and Ms Esther Camac (Costa Rica).

It was in this same spirit that the World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development was celebrated on 21 May 2003. The fragility of indigenous cultures is one of UNESCO's major preoccupations, and the recent approval by governmental experts of its preliminary draft international convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage, a key step towards adopting a new universal instrument, is a milestone in the recognition and safeguarding of these vulnerable cultures.

In connection with the implementation of the 1972 Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, many members of the World Heritage Committee wish to encourage the establishment of a network for the exchange of information on sacred sites and cultural landscapes whose protection requires close cooperation with indigenous peoples.

Taking into account the cultural and educational needs of indigenous peoples is a challenge to which we must continue to rise. In the field of education, mother-tongue education and encouragement for multilingualism should help provide indigenous communities with quality education. In the field of culture, programmes on endangered languages, interreligious dialogue – expanded to include other forms of spirituality, the revitalization of cultural resources, and a culture-specific approach to combating AIDS – are examples of practical actions of major interest to these peoples.

No effort must be spared to strengthen partnerships with indigenous institutions and communities so as to encourage more effective cooperation at every level. The recent nomination of Patricia Velázquez, a member of the wayuu indigenous community (Venezuela) and President of the Wayuu Taya Foundation, as UNESCO Artist for Peace, will give a particular resonance to the message we wish to address to the world in favour of safeguarding indigenous cultures, whose invaluable contribution to universal civilization must be acknowledged and enhanced.

I therefore invite all our institutional partners and all those active in civil society to mobilize to make 9 August, International Day of the World's Indigenous People, a resounding success.