

International Mother Language Day
21 February 2017, 6.30-8.30PM
Conference Room 4

Statement of Ms. Catherine Pollard
Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management
Secretariat-wide Coordinator for Multilingualism

Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

1. In my dual capacity as Head of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management as well as Secretariat-wide Coordinator for Multilingualism, it is my pleasure to be participating again this year in the celebrations for International Mother Language Day.
2. Let me start by commending the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh for its leadership, over the years, in raising awareness within the international community about the critical role that languages play in our daily lives.
3. As Coordinator for Multilingualism for about a year now, I have come to realize how paradoxical the status of languages is worldwide. While languages are the most powerful communication tools, at the same time they are also suffering from gradual erosion.
4. Languages are at the centre of everything we do, everything we say, even what we think and how we think of it. American linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf even supported the view that “*Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about*”, inferring that languages influence our perceptions of reality.
5. What makes language so fundamental to who we are, as human beings, is also the unequivocal fact that languages are the very foundation of the cumulative knowledge of succeeding generations. In other words, languages are at the heart of every culture.
6. And yet, while they are such powerful levers, languages are also astoundingly vulnerable, due in part to their intangible nature. The list of endangered languages is reaching unprecedented heights.

7. The UN is not immune to such erosion, despite its strong and long-standing commitment to multilingualism, which can be traced back to the Charter of the United Nations itself. In fact, the General Assembly has repeatedly warned against growing disparities in the use of the six official languages of the UN. This is why since 2000, a senior official has been continuously serving as Secretariat-wide Coordinator for Multilingualism, upon the request of the General Assembly, and I hope that, collectively, we can overturn this erosion. Let us not forget that the United Nations is nearly as diverse linguistically as the peoples it serves. Its 193 Member States and its 44,000 staff speak so many languages that we can hardly take stock of them all.

8. I see my job as Coordinator in ensuring that such language diversity in the United Nations is inventoried, valued, supported, and rewarded, and, most importantly, that it benefits the Organization and its noble purposes.

9. I also take great pride in leading the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, which is a fundamental enabler of intercultural dialogue, a bridge-builder among constituents, and a cornerstone of our multilateral system.

10. So please allow me to conclude by expressing my sincere gratitude to His Excellency Masud Bin Momen of Bangladesh for the honour that was bestowed upon me and the language staff of my Department, by inviting us to participate in this event. I am delighted to have this opportunity to demonstrate our Department's many – and sometimes unnoticed – talents.

11. I thank you, Excellency, and I wish us all a happy International Mother Language Day.