

International Mother Language Day
21 February 2018, 5-7.30 p.m.
Conference Room 4

Statement of Ms. Catherine Pollard
Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management
Secretariat-wide Coordinator for Multilingualism
on behalf of the Secretary-General, António Guterres

Excellencies,
Madam Under-Secretary-General,
Distinguished guests,

1. It is my privilege to speak on behalf of the Secretary-General and in two capacities: as Head of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, a department that provides many practical tools for multilateral diplomacy, and as Secretariat-wide Coordinator for Multilingualism.
2. As we celebrate International Mother Language Day, we honour humanity's language diversity and its intangible cultural heritage. This day gives us the opportunity to gain insight into the impact of our daily actions, as part of an international organization, on the rich multigenerational legacy that languages are.
3. Last year, just a few weeks after taking office, the Secretary-General shared his thoughts on the critical question of multilingualism in international organizations. His views are particularly relevant today. He saw the growing dominance in world affairs of one single language as resulting in impoverishment on multiple levels.
4. First, many languages are being left behind by globalization, or have even succumbed to it. Never should we forget that a language simply disappears every two weeks. Lost along with it, never to be enjoyed by successive generations, are all the culture, traditions, knowledge and beliefs that it used to convey.
5. Not only are cultures and civilizations lost, but also opportunities for people to see the world through other lenses and to be enriched by different perspectives.

6. In addition, the growing trend towards monolingualism results in another, often overlooked, impoverishment: that of English itself, a concern that has yet to gain prominence as an object of research in the linguistic community and therefore remains a relatively undocumented topic.
7. Nevertheless, this situation is all too real and gives the illusion that cross-cultural communication can wrest itself free of a reliance on language professionals or language mediation.
8. In my work as Coordinator for Multilingualism, I see the same dynamics as are at play on the global stage. My role is to raise awareness of the rich language diversity that is at the core of the Organization and also of the world that the United Nations was created to save from the scourge of war.
9. Let us ask ourselves some frank questions: how can we effectively maintain international peace and security in an environment that we do not understand and where we cannot be understood?
10. How can we possibly adopt an inclusive approach to sustainable development by reaching out to local stakeholders but without addressing language differences?
11. How can human rights ever be protected, promoted and defended if no dialogue is possible with victims of violations in the languages that they speak?
12. As the Organization undergoes reform to remain fit for purpose and to become more nimble and flexible, these are but a few of the important questions that must be asked.
13. I am proud that our efforts will support the reform processes and help to bring about an organizational change towards greater integration of multilingualism into our internal mechanisms.
14. Before concluding, I should like to thank the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh for organizing this event, an event that contributes to the promotion of multilingualism at the United Nations, not just as an end in itself, but truly as a means of strengthening the Organization in its work.
15. This year, we will mark the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which there are, to date, more than 500 translations available, making it one of the most translated pieces ever published.

16. I would like to thank all the staff from my department for coming forward to celebrate multilingualism through readings, in many languages, of the Declaration, which will take place during the cultural segment of this event and serve as a symbol of the place of multilingualism in achieving the goals of the Organization.

17. I want to especially thank the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh for giving us the opportunity to highlight these unique aspects and talents of the Department's staff.

18. I wish you all a very happy International Mother Language Day.