

International Mother Language Day
21 February 2024, 4 p.m., CR-4

**Remarks by Movses Abelian,
Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management
and UN Coordinator for Multilingualism**

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to join you today, in my capacity as UN Coordinator for Multilingualism, to celebrate International Mother Language Day. I would like to express my appreciation to the Permanent Missions of Austria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Romania, and South Africa for co-hosting this event. I also extend my congratulations to the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh and H.E. Ambassador Muhammad Abdul Muhith for their tireless efforts in upholding this tradition each year.

There is a proverb which says: “However many languages you know, that much of a human you are”. And indeed, we are reminded today of the profound significance of language in shaping our identities, cultures and societies, from one generation to another and throughout our lifetime.

This journey begins with our mother tongue and extends to the other languages which we learn, absorb, discover and use along the way.

The theme of this year’s observance, “*Multilingual education is a pillar of intergenerational learning*”, underscores the vital role that language plays in education and its potential to unlock opportunities for individuals throughout their lives.

As the renowned Canadian psycholinguist Frank Smith said, “One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way.” In other words, multilingual education empowers learners with the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.

This is particularly true in an international organization such as the United Nations, where multilingualism and multilateralism are but two sides of the same coin.

Linguistic diversity is inherent to our Organization, both internally, among our staff – where over 200 distinct mother tongues were reported in our 2022 staff survey on multilingualism – and externally, given the immense diversity of our Member States, audiences and operational environments.

In this regard, I am pleased to inform you that linguistic diversity is at the core of the first United Nations Strategic Framework on Multilingualism, which has been cleared and approved by the Secretary-General and will be issued next month in the six official UN languages.

The Framework recalls the importance of client-orientation in our interactions with our constituencies, particularly in the field. For the United Nations to achieve its goals across its three pillars, and to resonate with the minds and hearts of people, it must communicate, whenever possible, in a language or languages they understand.

The Framework also encourages staff members to use and develop their language skills to advance operational goals. Multilingual education and training are fundamental before and after staff members join the Organization in order to nurture a diverse workforce.

Before concluding, I would be remiss not to mention language professionals who make up the biggest proportion of staff in the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. In this vein, the crucial role of multilingual education cannot be overstated.

All our language professionals are recruited to work in their mother or main tongue. The interpreters are with us today. I would like to take the opportunity to express my gratitude to them for making our task easier, day in day out. I would also like to thank the voluntary interpreters who experienced for one day the life of an interpreter. Equally, I would like to express my gratitude to our translators who are translating the official documents of the United Nations, translating over 250 million words in the six official languages each year.

Finding such language professionals is often a challenge, particularly for certain language combinations and in a context of growing demand for services and technological changes that might impact the pool of language professionals the Secretariat requires to deliver on its multilingualism mandates.

Consequently, DGACM is actively engaging with partner universities and other training institutions to promote multilingualism and language careers at the United Nations, with a view to ensuring adequate capacity to deliver high-quality language services now and in the future.

With that, I wish everyone a happy International Mother Language Day. Thank you.

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