



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

# Executive Board

Hundred and seventy-sixth session

# 176 EX/59

PARIS, 12 April 2007  
Original: Spanish

Item 59 of the provisional agenda

## PREPARATION OF A CONVENTION FOR THE PROTECTION OF INDIGENOUS AND ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

### SUMMARY

This item has been included in the provisional agenda of the 176th session of the Executive Board at the request of Venezuela.

An explanatory note together with a proposed decision are set out below.

Decision proposed: paragraph 6.

## EXPLANATORY NOTE

1. Practically throughout the whole world, indigenous languages have been affected by displacement and have died out in many cases. The continuous processes of colonization, evangelization, involuntary population displacement from ancestral territories and the expansion of dominant cultures that have occurred in the course of history have in one way or another contributed to the gradual loss of the cultural patterns and language systems of indigenous communities in the various continents. Asia, Africa, America, Oceania and Europe have, to a large extent, seen their ancestral languages and variants of those languages grow weak and die out. For example, languages indigenous to the Americas were spoken from Canada to the southernmost tip of South America; they expressed a wide-ranging *sui generis* vision of the world and a cultural, mythical and social universe. However, following conquest by Europe and the consequent loss of ancestral customs, belief systems, cosmogonies, scientific knowledge and social and linguistic structures, many languages, duly classified by region, have been dying out at an increasingly high rate or are endangered. In other words, in over 500 years, languages and ethnic groups have disappeared from the physical and linguistic map of the world.

2. The situation is so alarming that:

- more than 50% of the 6,000 languages existing in the world are in danger of dying out;
- 3,000 indigenous languages spoken in the world are endangered;
- 96% of the 6,000 languages used in the world are spoken only by 4% of the world's population;
- 90% of the world's languages are not represented on the Internet;
- on average, one language dies out every two weeks;
- 80% of African languages, for instance, do not have an established system of writing.

3. On the strength of this overview, it can be asserted that when the world's indigenous and vernacular languages disappear, it is not only important, millennia-old systems of communication that are dying out, but also cultural and axiological systems that express a world view and the identity and specific characteristics of traditional peoples and constitute a fundamental part of the memory of the Earth – in other words, the planet's priceless linguistic heritage. All languages embody social and human practices through words and gestures, and through written and other signs. Languages convey thought, traditions, knowledge and technology, and their preservation amounts to the conservation of this priceless intangible heritage. To do otherwise would be to accelerate every more sharply its extermination, including the boundless realm of their vision of the world.

4. Studies by linguists, anthropologists and other experts have confirmed that this significant drop in the number of languages is due, among other things, to the cultural, political, religious and economic expansion of dominant countries whose languages prevail over others through hegemony and imposition. The construction of the nation-state has been another key factor, as have, of course, the lack of appropriate legal systems and the failure of some governments to adopt inclusive policies to preserve and defend languages.

5. The protection of indigenous and vernacular languages and the safeguarding of endangered languages require political will on the part of States and international bodies, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, which should draw up a strong convention that would be a legal and cultural instrument enabling the immediate development of intergovernmental strategies to secure recognition for the rights of all of the world's indigenous peoples. It would be a convention to conserve the ethno-linguistic memory of humanity that would also take into account the active and dynamic cooperation of the communities and peoples concerned in conserving and developing their ancestral heritage, while bearing in mind that traditional languages and cultures are perfectly able to express and reformulate in many ways, and with an eye to the future, the contemporary reality that includes the changes currently experienced by humanity.

### Proposed draft decision

6. In view of the foregoing, the Executive Board may wish to adopt a draft decision along the following lines.

The Executive Board,

1. Considering that indigenous and vernacular languages as a whole are increasingly affected by the adverse consequences of globalization,
2. Expressing concern at the continuous displacement and extinction that often threaten many languages, year after year, throughout the world,
3. Stressing that indigenous and vernacular languages are vehicles of peoples' cultural identity and ancestral knowledge, and constitute a vast irreplaceable heritage,
4. Further stressing that whenever there is a veiled threat of displacement or extinction of the linguistic and cultural heritage, indigenous communities and other peoples, at various levels, have responded actively and have voiced their criticism in international forums with strong statements in support of their cultural and linguistic heritage with a view to its perpetuation,
5. Recalling that the Organization, in fulfilling its basic purpose of protecting creativity and cultural diversity throughout the world, has undertaken to promote linguistic diversity and multilingualism through international standard-setting instruments such as the 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 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, and by implementing an intersectoral strategy for the programmatic integration of indigenous languages into the Organization's five sectors,
6. Considering that, as the political will of States and the implementation of regional initiatives to safeguard and revitalize languages and promote multilingualism do not suffice at the world level to guarantee the preservation and intergenerational transmission of indigenous and vernacular languages, it is necessary to implement in the very near future an international standard-setting instrument, in the form of a convention containing specific practices and rules to protect those languages and the ethno-linguistic diversity of the world as the intangible heritage of humanity,
7. Requests the Director-General to conduct a preliminary study of the technical and legal aspects of the drafting of an international convention for the protection of indigenous and endangered languages and to submit it to the Executive Board for examination at its 177th session in September 2007;
8. Further requests the Director-General to include in the provisional agenda of the 34th session of the General Conference, in 2007, the international regulation on the protection of indigenous and vernacular languages and endangered languages by drawing up an international convention for adoption by the General Conference;
9. Invites the Director-General to carry out an exhaustive study of the aspects that are the subject of such proposals, convening to that end the first intergovernmental meeting of experts, which would be attended by indigenous representatives from the various continents and would produce a comprehensive report for submission to the General Conference at its 2007 session.