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| Message from Ms Audrey Azoulay,  Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of International Mother Language Day  "Fostering multilingualism for inclusion in education and society" **21 February 2021** |

Every 21 February, International Mother Language Day honours linguistic diversity and multilingualism, this priceless heritage of humanity.

This year, it is celebrated at a time when the world is going through an unprecedented crisis.

The crisis has consequences at a time when educational inequalities are widening everywhere - too many of the 1.5 billion learners deprived of their classrooms at the peak of the pandemic were left without accessible distance learning solutions.

Moreover, cultural diversity in its entirety is threatened by the cancellation of festivals and ceremonies, and the economic fragility of creators and the media.

Fostering the use of the mother tongue means, precisely, at the same time fostering access to education for all, as well as the dissemination of cultures in all their diversity.

The theme of the Day this year, "Fostering multilingualism for inclusion in education and society", thus encourages us to support multilingualism and the use of mother tongues, both at school and in everyday life.

This is essential, because when 40% of the world's inhabitants do not have access to education in the language they speak or understand best, it hinders their learning, as well as their access to heritage and cultural expressions.

This year, special attention is being paid to multilingual education from early childhood, so that for children, their mother tongue is always an asset.

In education, as in all parts of our society, multilingualism is a factor in equality, and UNESCO is committed to promoting it everywhere. For example, the Organization promotes linguistic diversity on the Internet to improve universal access to information and knowledge.

In the same spirit, and in the context of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032), for which UNESCO is the lead agency, action plans are being implemented to place multilingualism at the heart of societies, particularly indigenous societies.

This Day, like the Decade, therefore sets us a challenge: to ensure that the diversity of languages is preserved as a common heritage.

For when a language dies, a way of seeing, feeling and thinking the world disappears, and all of cultural diversity is irretrievably diminished.

On this International Day, UNESCO therefore calls for the celebration of the world in all its diversity, and support for multilingualism in everyday life.