Joint UNESCO and ITU Global Symposium on
Promoting the Multilingual Internet
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Transcript of Opening Speech
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Introduced by Houlin Zhao, Director of ITU TSB

"Thank you very much. I just would like to make some opening comments because we have a very full and very exciting program. But first of all, let me endorse the warm welcome. It is wonderful to see so many people here on such a really, really important topic and may I add my appreciation to the hard work that has gone on by the ITU and the others to bring us to fruition.

The importance of the Symposium, as you may guess from the very busy timetable over these two weeks in Geneva, is that this is a major follow-on from the World Summit on the Information Society. If I speak now from an UNESCO aspect, it also goes to the heart of a much wider mandate and the mission that UNESCO is advocating.

So why is multilingualism, in particular multilingualism in a new environment, the digital environment, such an important issue? Those of you who followed the World Summit will know that, when UNESCO went to the Summit, we were using language about the importance of building knowledge societies. These were societies that needed to be inclusive, needed to be plural, needed to be founded in human rights, had a key strategy of promoting universal access and quality education for all and, most importantly, recognized and celebrated cultural and linguistic diversity.

And why is that? In the lead up to the World Summit, we had a number of thematic meetings and there was an excellent meeting, if I dare say, that was hosted in Bamako, in Mali, with the participation of a number of partners and it brought together a lot of the experts from Africa and from around the world. A number of you, I think who are here, may have been at that meeting. And it brought together very diverse groups from those working on technical solutions to those looking at policy implications, the social implications, all kind together on the same place to look at this issue.

So for UNESCO, this Symposium is very much building on that Bamako WSIS thematic meeting. We do not want to duplicate that work, but build on top of it. And in terms of the significance of the issue, there were some very good statements that came out of that meeting, which summarize perhaps why we feel the need to dedicate this time and effort to the subject.

One of the speakers, the keener of speakers at Bamako meeting, commented that every language is an archive, a library and a repository of knowledge. Another statement that came out of that meeting was that multilingualism is a political imperative to democratize our societies, so that everybody can make a contribution. And certainly that is why, when UNESCO is advocating as its message the importance of building knowledge societies, we put cultural and linguistic diversity right in the heart of that mission statement.

Just by way of context for you, you need to know that the 190 nations unanimously endorsed a recommendation, an international instrument in 2005, called the recommendation on "*Multilingualism concerning the promotion and use of multilingualism and universal access to cyberspace*". It is an important document because it really provides the political commitment of the nations to do something about the subject and to try and make it a reality. And in the preamble, that document notes that linguistic diversity in the global information networks and universal access to

information on cyberspace are at the core of contemporary debates and can be a determining factor in the development of a knowledge-based society.

So we have the political instrument, we have a very good report that has been made available from the Bamako meeting that brought the different groups together, and we now need to build and look at the solutions as well as the policies that are needed to make a multilingual cyberspace possible, a reality.

There are a couple of other contextual pieces of information that, I think, are worth noting. The issue of multilingualism looking forwards now is going to become increasingly important. The debates over Internet Governance place multilingualism as one of the issues in that debate, and again the UNESCO perspective is that we need to do what it takes to ensure that more and more ordinary people, ordinary citizens, can participate online in the digital environment and can contribute and therefore, when we are taking about governance issues and structures, we need to be ensuring that the multilingualism debate and the need for multilingualism sits at the core of that.

Just to let you know that UNESCO is hosting, as a focal point, the consultation on the C8 Action Line on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity deliberately to follow on from this meeting on Friday, here in Geneva. So those of you who want to participate in the World Summit Action Plan follow-up of stakeholders, that meeting is taking place here in Geneva, this Friday.

Finally, language, especially in the digital environment, is a key resource for this decision making, a key resource and a key means of empowerment, social participation and human development. And we would say it is counterintuitive to expect nations and communities to produce in an optimal way if they can work in their own languages, if they are struggling constantly to play "catch up" in someone else's mother tongue. But language goes beyond that. It is more than about producing in optimal ways. It is more than the economical development perspective. It is more than just the fundamental empowerment. It is also a form of living heritage. It is a vehicle of our value systems and our cultural expression. It is about creativity, spontaneity and self-esteem. In other words, it is about identity. And the reason why we push this way of looking at multilingualism is because we believe that, if identity is acknowledged and respected, then we are more likely to increase our understanding of each other and we are more likely to build up a more tolerant society in which to live.

So let's now hope that building on a political instrument I mentioned, building on the Bamako meeting, that this Symposium will focus on what are the actual steps to put a language on the Internet. And that at the end of the three days something can emerge from this event, which is very much slanted towards a more technical meeting. There is a technical orientation in the program and we are hoping that it will complement the other work we have been doing from a policy perspective, and that at the end of these three days a much clearer idea will emerge about the actual steps, the actual solutions.

My colleague Claudio Menezes will be talking later in the program about some of the things UNESCO is doing and we are hoping very much that UNESCO can continue to provide a platform for pulling some of the different stakeholders together and for assisting in a practical way in facilitating some of these solutions to emerge.

So, I thank you again for being prepared to come and share your ideas. I thank again my colleagues from the ITU for this opportunity to collaborate on such an important event and I wish you all the best for a really, really rich, stimulating and hopefully very productive event, in terms of those steps, that I was talking about, at the end of the three days. Thank you."

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