

Safeguarding Linguistic Diversity for an Inclusive Future

Language is more than a tool for communication; it embodies cultural identity, preserves history, and transmits intellectual heritage across generations. Recognizing its vital role in social cohesion and sustainable development, UNESCO declared February 21 as International Mother Language Day in 1999. This observance honors the 1952 protests in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where students advocating for Bengali as an official language lost their lives. Their sacrifice underlined the deep connection between linguistic rights and broader human rights, sparking global discussions on the necessity of safeguarding linguistic diversity.

Despite its significance, linguistic diversity faces an alarming decline. UNESCO reports that approximately 40% of the world's languages are at risk of extinction due to globalization, urbanization, and state-imposed linguistic homogenization. The loss of a language is not merely a disappearance of words but an erosion of unique knowledge systems, traditions, and cultural identities. The observance of International Mother Language Day serves as a call to action, urging societies to protect and promote endangered languages through inclusive multilingual education and advocacy efforts.

Mother-tongue-based multilingual education has been widely recognized as an effective approach to enhancing literacy, cognitive development, and academic performance. Research shows that children educated in their native language demonstrate stronger critical thinking skills, greater self-confidence, and better overall learning outcomes. In contrast, linguistic barriers disproportionately impact indigenous populations, refugees, and ethnic minorities by limiting their access to quality education, employment, and social participation. Ensuring that children receive education in a language they understand enhances their ability to integrate into society and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

Linguistic rights are integral to global policy frameworks, particularly the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Goal 4 emphasizes the need for inclusive and equitable access to quality education, which includes the protection of linguistic plurality. Governments, educational institutions, and civil society organizations have a shared responsibility to implement policies that safeguard linguistic diversity, integrate multilingual curricula, and invest in digital tools for language preservation. Advances in technology, including artificial intelligence and digital media, provide innovative opportunities for documenting and stimulating endangered languages, ensuring that linguistic heritage continues to thrive in the modern world.

International Mother Language Day is more than a symbolic event; it is a global imperative for action. Recognizing the link between language, identity, and human rights requires a sustained commitment to multilingual education and institutional support for linguistic protection. The Theory of Change (TOC) project, co-funded by the European Union's Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund, demonstrates this commitment by supporting migrant children's language learning and social integration. By providing specialized training for children, parents, educators,

and youth workers, the TOC project fosters linguistic inclusion within host communities, reinforcing the values promoted by International Mother Language Day.

Through innovative pedagogical strategies, including rhetoric games and debates, the TOC project strengthens language acquisition, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding. These methods not only enhance educational outcomes but also foster dialogue between diverse communities, promoting cohesion and mutual respect. Structured multilingual education is a powerful tool for social empowerment, demonstrating the transformative role of language in building inclusive and resilient societies.

As efforts to protect and promote linguistic diversity continue, initiatives like the TOC project reinforce the fundamental principles of International Mother Language Day. Sustained investment in language preservation, multilingual education, and cultural inclusion is essential in ensuring that languages remain a vibrant part of human heritage. Strengthening these efforts can contribute to a more just, inclusive, and linguistically diverse global society, where every language is valued and every voice is heard.