

## Opening Address

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To begin, I wish to thank the conference organizers for their invitation to open this first International Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization, and Multilingual Education. I want to take this opportunity to extend a warm welcome to all of the distinguished participants. May your time here be productive, memorable and enjoyable.

In many ways, this conference is another step toward the goal of providing quality basic education for all people, a goal that was first established by the world community here in Thailand—at Jomtien—in 1990. At Jomtien, we expressed with one voice that “Education for All” is unquestionably necessary to ensure that all citizens, including women and girls, the poor, the disabled, and people with AIDS, have equal access to development opportunities and resources. Since 1990, we have begun to see that these goals, though challenging, can indeed be achieved. Thirteen years later, this conference is emphasizing that “Education for All” must also include education for ethnic minority communities that affirms their cultural and linguistic heritage and provides them with quality life-long learning opportunities.

At this Conference you will look at the language situation in Asia and the Pacific and other parts of the world. You will discuss issues that must be considered in developing education programs that value each learner’s heritage language and culture—minority as well as majority. You will describe and analyze experiences in developing written forms for languages that have been unwritten until now. You will also discuss ways to revitalize languages that are in danger of vanishing completely.

Until very recently, most national educators have not dealt with these complicated issues of linguistic and cultural diversity in planning for education. The rich variety of ethnic languages and cultures found in each of the more than 30 nations represented at this conference is in danger of disappearing completely. Educators and policy makers need to address the language and education issues that, in many cases, have forced ethnic minority communities to sacrifice their heritage languages and cultures in order to succeed in the majority society.

You are gathered here to discuss and perhaps even argue about the necessity, possibility and urgency of meeting the language and education needs of ethnic minority language communities in Asia and the Pacific. We can assume that not everyone will agree with your conclusions. Some majority language educators and policy makers will need to be persuaded that, with respect to education in and for ethnic minority communities, what is *desirable* is actually *necessary*, what is *necessary* can actually *succeed*, and that a commitment to quality education for ethnic minority learners will not detract from, but actually support, their commitment to providing relevant lifelong education for all their citizens.

In that context, I encourage all of you to work together during this conference to articulate the language and educational needs and possibilities of minority peoples throughout Asia and the Pacific. In the document titled *Our Creative Diversity. Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development*, authored by former UN Secretary-General, Javier Perez de Cuéllar and others in 1996, the following reference to your task is stated quite clearly:

*One of the most sensitive issues is that of language, for a people's language is perhaps its most fundamental cultural attribute. Indeed the very nature of language is emblematic of the whole pluralist premise—every single language spoken in the world represents a unique way of viewing human experience and the world itself...(p. 59)*

*In a world in which, as has been remarked, 10,000 distinct societies live in roughly 200 states, the question of how to accommodate minorities is not of academic interest only but is a central challenge to any human politics. (p. 44).<sup>1</sup>*

Many of you are already familiar with the document, “Education in a Multilingual World<sup>2</sup>,” in which UNESCO re-states and amplifies arguments for mother tongue education as originally stated in 1953. Fifty years after that first document, experience and research have only added to the recognition that a strong educational foundation in a learner’s home language, together with a good “bridge” to the majority language, is the best way to ensure successful life-long learning. The challenge for each of you, and all of you together, is to share what you learn and discover here with educational policy-makers in your own countries.

Most certainly, you have a big task ahead. Wishing you all the best, I hereby officially open the first International Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization and Multilingual Education.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Küper, W. (2003). The necessity of introducing mother tongues in education systems of developing countries. In A. Ouane (Ed.), *Towards a multilingual culture of education*, pp. 159-180. Hamburg, Germany: UIE.

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO (2003). *Education in a Multilingual World. Position Paper*. Paris: UNESCO.