

# Why Languages Matter

Meeting Millennium Development Goals through local languages





“Languages are indeed essential to the identity of groups and individuals and to their peaceful coexistence. They constitute a strategic factor of progress towards sustainable development and a harmonious relationship between the global and the local context. They are of utmost importance in achieving the six goals of Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals on which the United Nations agreed in 2000.”

Koichiro Matsuura  
Director General, UNESCO

# Millennium Development Goals

In 2000 these goals were officially adopted by 189 United Nations member states with the agreement to achieve them by 2015.

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- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Achieve universal primary education
- Promote gender equality and empower women
- Reduce child mortality
- Improve maternal health
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Ensure environmental sustainability
- Develop a global partnership for development



# Why Languages Matter

Meeting Millennium Development Goals through local languages

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) focus the work of advocates, aid workers, governments and NGOs as they partner with local communities. Language-based development plays a significant role in giving communities the tools to work out steps to meet these goals.

Many of the poorest people speak mother tongues that are not national or international languages. Poverty, lack of access to primary education, inequality and disease are daily challenges for them.

- Can the development of minority languages become key to helping people create their own way of successfully meeting the challenges in their lives?
- Can writing systems for mother tongues and multilingual education become tools for people to build a better present and a better future?
- Are the long-term results worth the investment of money and time?

The answer to each of these questions is yes!

Throughout the world, communities are discovering that by using their languages in new arenas of their lives, they can begin discovering solutions to the challenges stated in the MDGs. SIL International assists in strengthening language communities worldwide.

Illustrated on these pages are some practical examples of how languages matter.

Language-based development is a series of ongoing planned actions that a language community takes to ensure that their language continues to serve their changing social, cultural, political, economic and spiritual needs and goals.





## Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger

Azanga, the local literacy supervisor for the North Ngbandi language group of the Democratic Republic of Congo, was encouraged to see that his years of hard work brought far-reaching benefits. Kamba, chief of the Monzomboli village, became the first in his community to attend adult literacy classes in his mother tongue. After he read in one of the literacy primers that soybeans are rich in protein, he encouraged everyone in his village to plant them. He later learned from another booklet about the components of a proper diet, and again encouraged his community to eat from each food group daily so they could improve their health through nutrition.

Sokpè, a farmer in Togo, worked hard for years struggling to provide for his family. While attending the Ifè adult literacy class in his village, Kotsadjo, he read an Ifè primer on the topic of managing finances and resources. Sokpè was impressed by the story of a farmer who learned the skill of weaving, which enabled him to supplement farm income. Sokpè put these management ideas into practice and began breeding chickens and goats in addition to his farming. The income from his breeding business raised his annual income and helped pay his children's school fees.

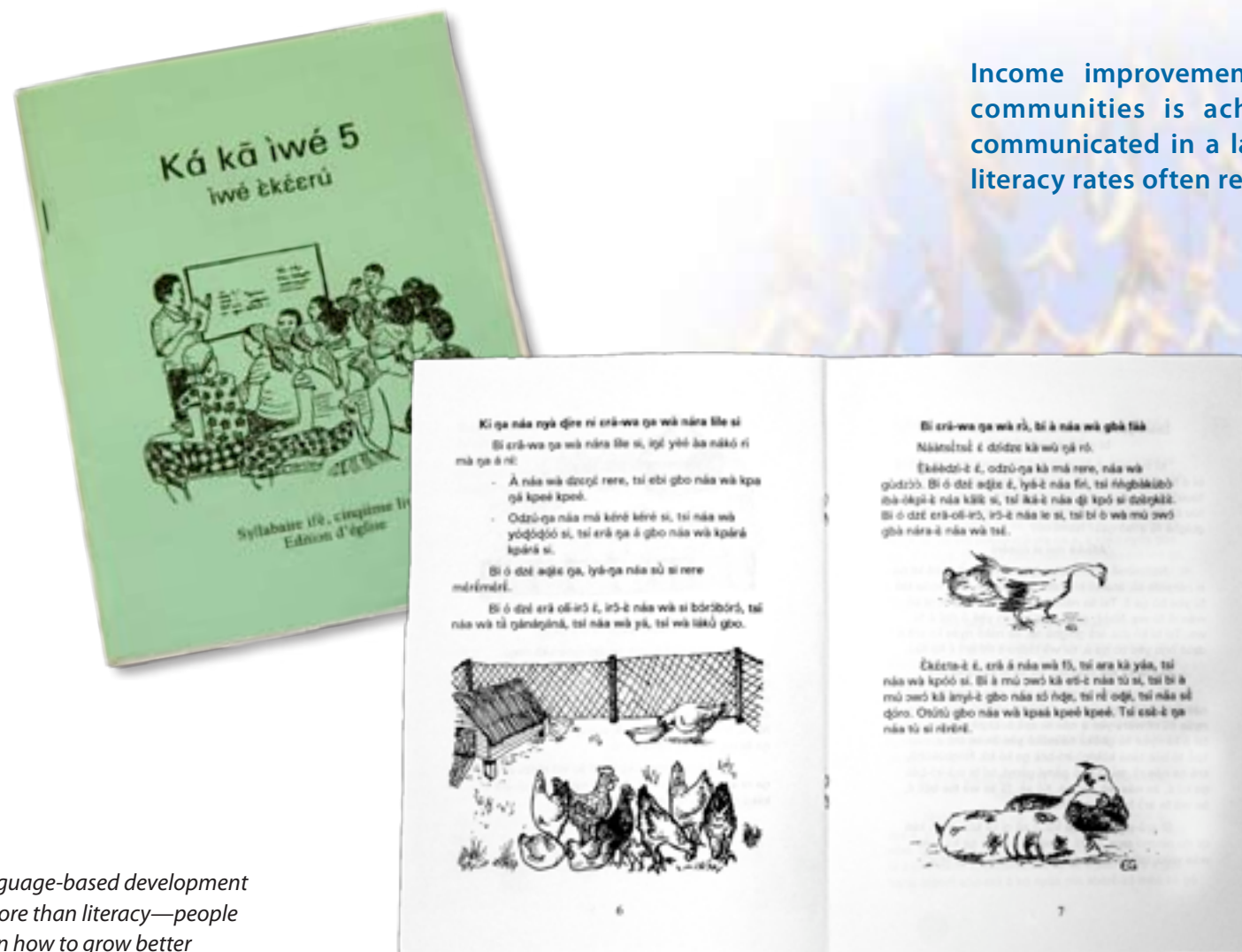
*"In order to reduce poverty, the adult education program should be mediated in languages that enable the learners to be confident to participate in the discussions and activities of their education and economy."*

Mompoloki Bagwasi,  
*The role of language in adult education and poverty reduction in Botswana.*  
University of Botswana

Income improvement and hunger relief within ethnolinguistic communities is achieved when life-changing information is communicated in a language that people understand well. Higher literacy rates often result in higher per capita incomes.



*Language-based development is more than literacy—people learn how to grow better crops, such as soybeans, and how to improve their diets.*



*Culturally-appropriate education enables community members to manage their development activities and resulting income and enjoy an improved quality of life.*





# Achieve Universal Primary Education



Yousif and his family attend a mother-tongue mobile education program designed to be compatible with the seasonal migration of their flocks.

Like his nomadic father and grandfather before him, Yousif was a shepherd in the mountainous terrain of West Asia. And like his ancestors, the continual travels limited his access to primary education. Nomadic peoples are often illiterate because those wanting education for their children must either sell their flocks and settle in poor urban areas or send their boys away from home to attend school.

But Yousif and others in his family began attending an innovative mobile schooling program. Adults and children started reading and writing in their mother tongue and transferred their literacy skills to the national language and then to basic English. Evening classes were held only during the summer and winter grazing seasons due to seasonal migration. One season, when Yousif’s family was unable to migrate, he enrolled in a government school; the teachers were amazed that a nomadic child could read with such fluency. Even though Yousif had completed only the two-year mobile program, he was promoted to grade four.

Victor, a bilingual primary school teacher in the village of Santa Maria Ocotán, Mexico, wanted to study the effect of mother-tongue education in his first grade class. He taught his students all of their subjects in Tepehuan, although most of the teaching materials were in Spanish. Another first grade teacher used only Spanish. At the end of the year, the test scores on the standardized government tests for the students taught in their mother tongue surpassed those for the students taught only in Spanish, even though the tests were in Spanish.



Students’ high learning competency scores in Spanish, when taught in Tepehuan, were compiled for a research project at the Pedagogical University of Durango, Mexico.

Primary education programs that begin in the mother tongue help students gain literacy and numeracy skills more quickly. When taught in their local language, students readily transfer literacy skills to official languages of education, acquiring essential tools for life-long learning. The results are the growth of self esteem and a community that is better equipped to become literate in languages of wider communication.



Learning to read occurs most easily in the language the learner speaks best.

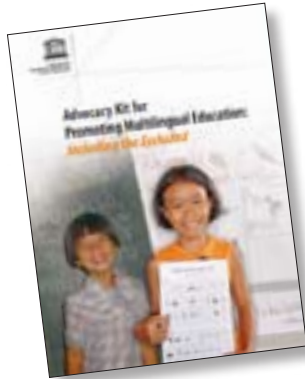


“Fifty percent of the world’s out-of-school children live in communities where the language of schooling is rarely, if ever, used at home. This underscores the biggest challenge to achieving Education for All (EFA): A legacy of non-productive practices that lead to low levels of learning and high levels of dropout and repetition.”

“In Their Own Language... Education for All”, World Bank Education Note, p. 1, June 2005



## Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women



Fah (pictured on left) is on the cover of the Advocacy Kit for Promoting Multilingual Education: Including the Excluded, a collaborative publication of five booklets by UNESCO-Bangkok and SIL.

[www2.unescobkk.org/elib/publications/110/](http://www2.unescobkk.org/elib/publications/110/)

Raised in Huay Chompuu village in Northern Thailand, Fah is the youngest of five children. She grew up speaking her mother tongue, Bisu, and Northern Thai, as well as listening to the Central Thai language on television. When Fah started school, however, she struggled with reading and writing Central Thai.

Then Fah attended a literacy class in her village and learned to read and write Bisu using a Thai-based script. Her Central Thai reading and writing skills improved dramatically, her confidence rose and her grades at school improved. Her sister, a teacher, is convinced that it was the mother-tongue literacy class that made the difference.

Margarita knows the impact of losing her mother tongue and her cultural identity. Growing up in a small Andean town in central Peru, she first learned to speak the Quechua of her parents and grandparents. But when she started attending school, her family insisted she speak only Spanish, even at home. With difficulty, she learned enough Spanish to complete five years of school before she had to quit to care for her siblings and the family's sheep. Undaunted, Margarita studied at night to finish her primary education and beyond, ultimately earning a university degree in psychology. Using that knowledge and her skills, Margarita founded a volunteer organization that provides social, psychological and educational help to hundreds of displaced and sometimes abused Quechua women and children—using the language they understand best.

Margarita's students grasp literacy concepts when interacting with Quechua alphabet and word charts, even when used in Spanish-taught classrooms.



Nearly two-thirds of the world's 875 million illiterate people are women. In ethnolinguistic communities, boys are often encouraged to interact with others in languages of wider communication. Girls, however, are typically expected to stay close to home where the local language is often the only language used. Research shows that girls and women who are educated in languages familiar to them stay in school longer and achieve better results than those who do not get mother-tongue instruction.

Multilingual education, beginning in the mother tongue, improves opportunities for educational access and achievement for girls and women.



"The learner's mother tongue holds the key to making schooling more inclusive for all disadvantaged groups, especially for girls and women."

Carol Benson,  
*Girls, educational equity and mother tongue*, p.1,  
2005, UNESCO-Bangkok



## Reduce Child Mortality

Basile has noticed an improvement in the overall health of people in his Waama community in Benin since the advent of literacy classes in his mother tongue. People used to have long-term illnesses, and many children died in infancy. But when people learned to read in Waama, they gained access to basic health information in their own language. Mothers learned the importance of going to health centers for prenatal check-ups and seeking treatment for illnesses. Many Waama lives are being saved because crucial health and wellness knowledge is now available in their mother tongue.

The mortality rate for children under five years of age is reduced when information about disease prevention and treatment is presented in local languages. Conversely, poor understanding can lead to dangerous or even fatal misinformation. Ethnolinguistic communities can combat diarrhea, malaria and other common illnesses when they have the resources and capability to obtain essential health knowledge.

*“One additional year of education for the female population can avert six deaths per thousand in child mortality rates.”*

John Peasbody, et al.  
*Policy and Health: Implications for Development in Asia*, 1997, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press

*“Educating girls for six years or more drastically and consistently improves their prenatal care, postnatal care and childbirth survival rates.”*

UNICEF  
[www.unicef.org/mdg/maternal.html](http://www.unicef.org/mdg/maternal.html)

## Improve Maternal Health

The Soumraye people of Chad conduct a three-year literacy program in 37 villages. During the first two years, students learn the Soumraye alphabet and gain basic literacy skills. In the third year, they concentrate on various reading materials that include booklets about clean water, planting trees, HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, treating and preventing intestinal and respiratory illnesses and medicinal use of local plants. One mother who finished the three-year literacy cycle said, “I am learning a lot through the health booklets in Soumraye, and I have successfully used local plants to treat some symptoms such as coughing and diarrhea.”

A mother is better able to care for herself and her family when she is literate in her mother tongue and has access to health information in a language she understands well. Language-based development facilitates the introduction of new concepts and the accurate translation of new terminology.



*Health education is ineffective when language barriers prevent access to essential information.*



*Soumraye literacy primers cover a variety of topics on practical living.*





## Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Other Diseases

In a culture where information is often relayed through songs, dance and plays, the people of Papua New Guinea (PNG) are receiving life-saving education in a culturally relevant medium. A DVD titled *Get AIDS—Get Trouble* dramatizes how HIV/AIDS affects the family when one member contracts the disease. Produced and performed in one of PNG's trade languages, Melanesian Pidgin, the DVD has been translated into several local languages.

PNG is vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. Low literacy rates and lack of access to reliable media sources mean that many face this new sickness with misconceptions. A booklet that accompanies the DVD clearly describes causes, preventative measures, consequences and the care needed for victims. The booklet has now been translated and printed in more than 30 PNG languages. Funding from the National AIDS Council of PNG has helped to cover printing and distribution costs.

People in ethnolinguistic communities are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases due in part to the lack of essential information in the mother tongue. Reading materials in local languages that discuss hygiene, nutrition, and the prevention and treatment of diseases have proven to be effective in improving general health and life expectancy. The availability of culturally-relevant information dispels misconceptions surrounding HIV/AIDS.



*Nukna people celebrate the new HIV/AIDS storybook.*

*"Illiteracy does not directly contribute to the spread of the human-immunodeficiency virus (HIV). However, as illiterate women and men have no access to written information, they remain unaware of many... issues affecting them that are increasingly being communicated through printed materials."*

*Making the Connections: Why Literacy Matters for HIV Prevention, 2007, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning*

*"Language, knowledge and the environment have been intimately related throughout human history. This relationship is still apparent, especially in indigenous, minority and local societies that maintain close material and spiritual ties with their environments. Over generations, these peoples have accumulated a wealth of wisdom about their environments and its functions, management and sustainable use."*

*Terralingua  
www.terralingua.org*

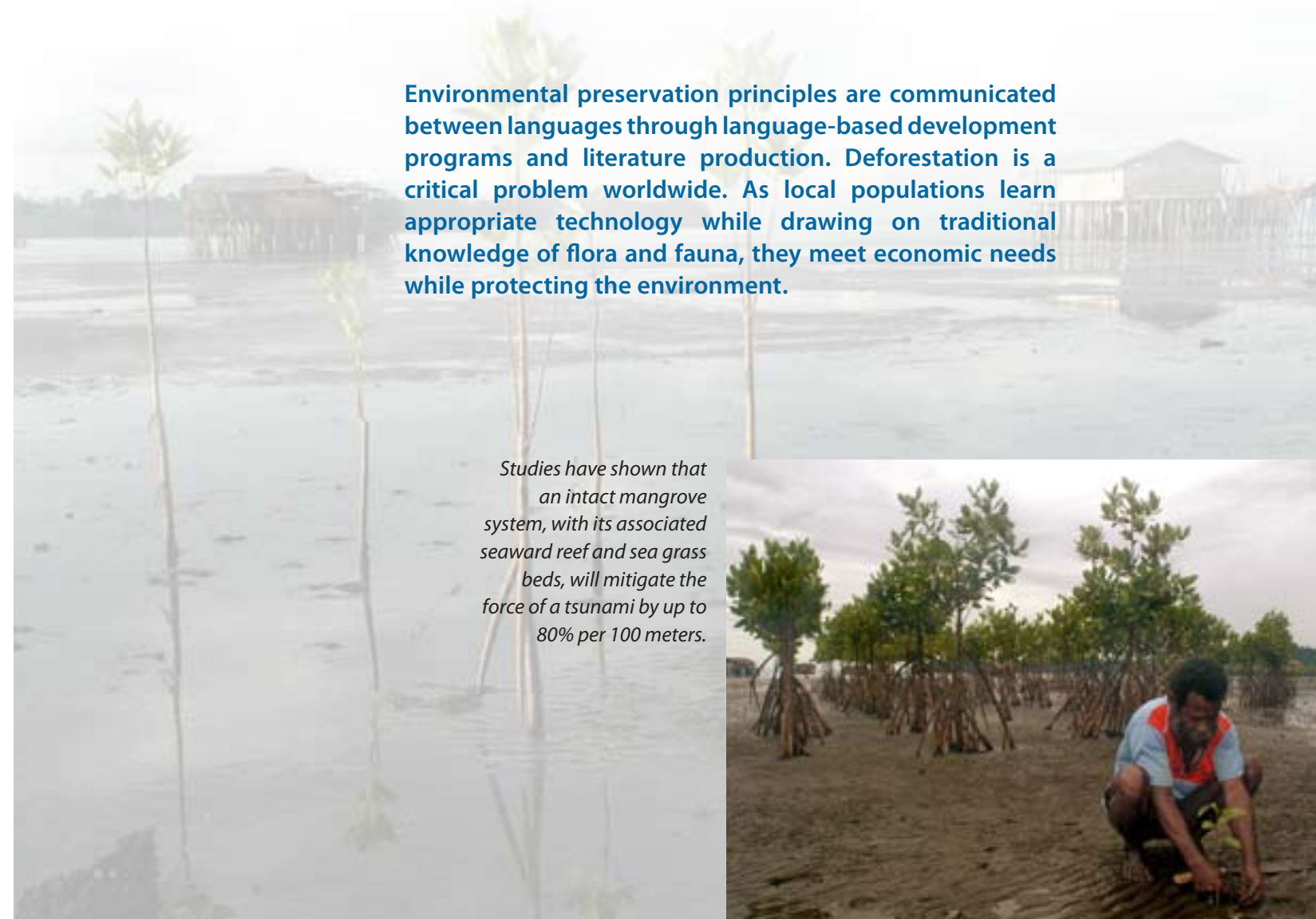
## Ensure Environmental Sustainability

Agus had wondered why ocean tides were now destroying coastal areas of his Ambai village in Papua, Indonesia, that had survived intact for generations. Then, during a mother-tongue-based development program, he and the community learned that clearing the mangrove areas had resulted in soil erosion. Mangrove ecosystems—among the most productive and biologically complex ecosystems—support a wealth of life while providing a natural breakwater between land and sea.

Armed with this information in his own language, Agus began the daunting process of replanting the mangroves in his community. Recently, a group of Indonesian government officials visited the island to examine the Ambai development program. Their visit opened a dialog about the funding needed to establish a multi-year mangrove revitalization project.

Environmental preservation principles are communicated between languages through language-based development programs and literature production. Deforestation is a critical problem worldwide. As local populations learn appropriate technology while drawing on traditional knowledge of flora and fauna, they meet economic needs while protecting the environment.

*Studies have shown that an intact mangrove system, with its associated seaward reef and sea grass beds, will mitigate the force of a tsunami by up to 80% per 100 meters.*



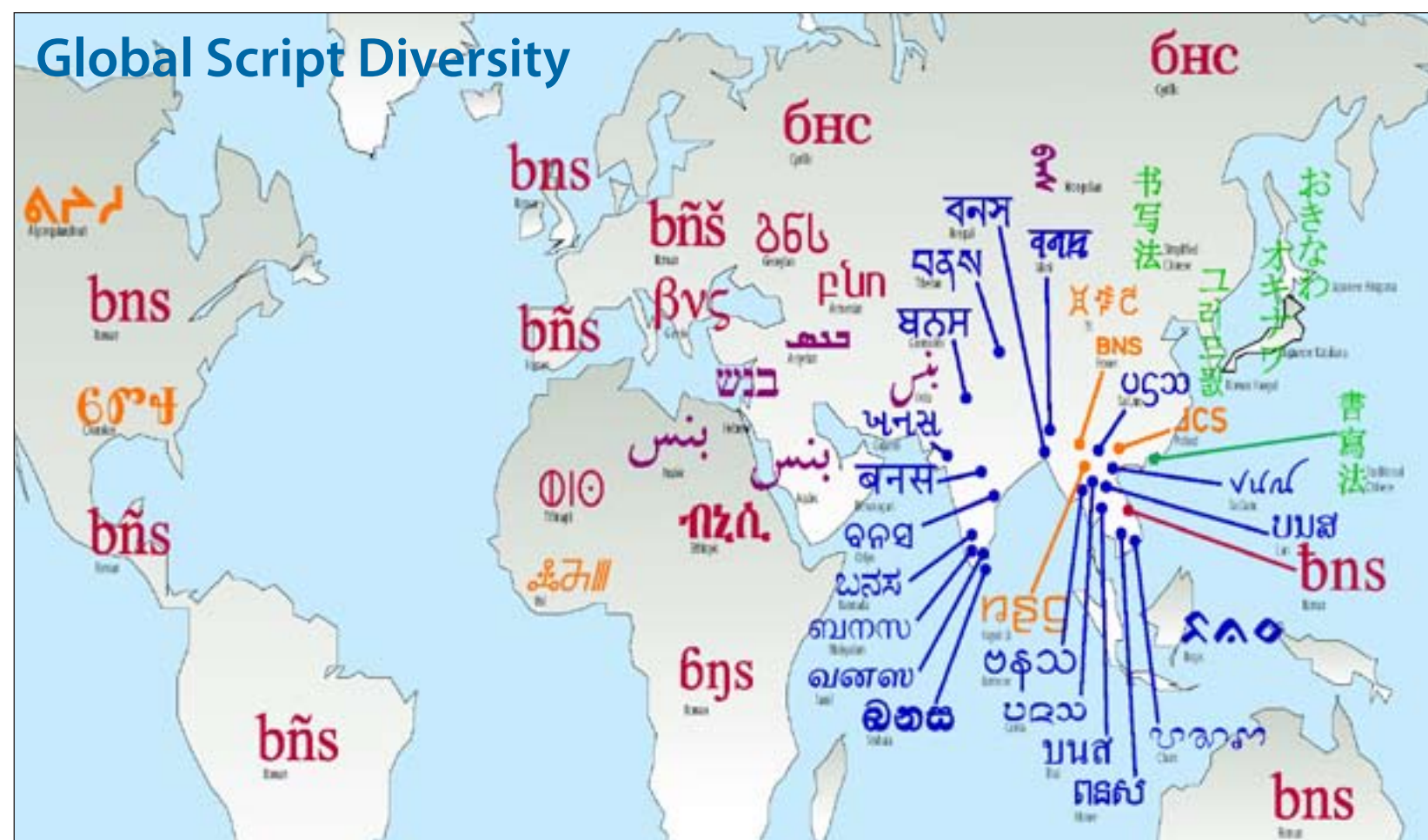


## Develop a Global Partnership for Development

Through a dynamic partnership of various groups around the world, speakers of several closely-related languages of Vietnam now have a font that is usable on computers and the Internet. The new typeface reflects the traditional hand-written Tai Viet script that is used informally in several languages spoken in the northwest provinces of Vietnam and surrounding areas. The fonts originally created 20 years ago for this script are incompatible with current computer systems. Participants at a UNESCO-sponsored workshop in Vietnam in 2006 developed a standardized encoding for the script with input from ethnolinguistic communities in Vietnam and immigrant populations in other countries. Funding came in part from the Script Encoding Initiative of the University of California at Berkeley, and the Unicode Consortium accepted the resulting encoding proposal.

<http://scripts.sil.org/TaiHeritage>

*Multilingual capabilities  
open doors to expanded  
communications and  
information access that  
implement new technologies.*



<http://scripts.sil.org>

*In cooperation with partners, the development of computer-adapted non-Roman fonts grants access to the benefits of new technology, which allows information and communications to be more widely available.*

Global partnerships among ethnolinguistic communities and national and international societies require communication and mutual understanding. Mother-tongue revitalization ensures that a language continues to serve the changing goals of its speakers and provides a bridge for the community to meet its broader multilingual goals by acquiring a language of wider communication. Language-based development facilitates the broader exchange of traditional knowledge as well as making the benefits of global information and communications technologies available.

**"In addition to building ICT\* infrastructure, there should be adequate emphasis on developing human capacity and creating ICT applications and digital content in local language, where appropriate, so as to ensure a comprehensive approach to building a global Information Society."**

*Tunis Commitment, World  
Summit on the Information  
Society*

\*Information and Communications Technology





## Language Facts

- There are 6,912 languages in use today.
- Approximately 100 scripts are used in the world.
- Hundreds of languages still need a writing system, with one-third needing a non-Roman or complex script.
- Thousands of languages are endangered when parents no longer teach their language to their children and speakers stop using it in everyday matters.
- There are more than 200 known signed languages for the Deaf. The grammars and vocabularies are unrelated to local spoken languages.



*The purpose of SIL is to build capacity for sustainable language-based development through research, translation, training and materials development for ethnolinguistic minority communities. SIL recognizes that genuine multilingualism promotes unity in diversity and international understanding.*

*As a nongovernmental organization, SIL has special consultative status with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations. SIL is a founding member of Maaya, the World Network for Linguistic Diversity.*

