SIL International Executive Director, Dr. Michel Kenmogne
Speech at the launch of International Year of Indigenous Languages, Parish, Jan. 2019

Though I speak about five languages quite fluently, I still feel very deeply, I still see that my worldview and my real values have been shaped by my Ghomálá’ language. That is why the celebrations of this International Year of Indigenous Languages are very important for me.

As the leader of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, SIL International, I happen to be leading an organization that has been at the forefront of the fight for the preservation of indigenous languages for the past 85 years around the world. And we have been working as an organization to document indigenous languages, to help produce writing systems for them, to advocate for policies that allow them to fight. We also work alongside indigenous communities as they grapple with the reality of multilingualism and effective language use in today’s globalizing world. We are currently serving among 1,650 indigenous communities around the world, and we have been developing scripts and developing all kinds of language software that allow us to describe and to document the languages of the world.

So celebrating the International Year of Indigenous Languages really brings me hope not only to me but to my 4,500 colleagues who are spread around the world as we all fight for a sustainable future for indigenous languages. Why is it so critical? Today, we have about 75% of the world’s population speaking only 8% of the languages that exist. And this 8% of the world represent about 580 languages. And these 580 languages are pretty much stable, protected by the institutions and infrastructure that enable them to be used through education, literature production and so on. So these 8% of the languages of the world are pretty much safe. But conversely, 25% of the world’s population speaks 92% of the remaining languages of the world. And this 25% of the world’s population is about 1.8 billion people speaking a bit more than 6,000 languages. When we talk about languages, it’s not only about signs and symbols, it’s really about real people—1.8 billion people. And that is why this celebration is important for us to consider as a coalition of organizations and governments represented here.

And today, the global community has identified the loss of biodiversity as a major problem that endangers the quality of human life. I want to submit to us today that the global catastrophe that threatens humanity is a cultural catastrophe, as we continue to lose linguistic diversity of the world, because as the cultures and the languages of the world continue to be impoverished, what is going to happen is that the quality of human life will be endangered as well, as language is tied with our emotions, and our identities and all the sectors of life: social issues, political issues, economic issues—everything has a connection with language, and thereby we will not as a global community address the key issues that plague our world today if we do not start with the languages and the indigenous languages of the world. It is my desire and my hope that as a global community, we will use the opportunity of this International Year of Indigenous Languages to come together as a . . . concerted group in order to see that we bring a synergy and we work together to see that there is a future, so that this generation will be known as the one that did something for the languages of the world to be preserved so that a linguistic tapestry and a cultural diversity can be preserved for a world where it is worth living.