

**Contribution
to the
ITU and UNESCO Global Symposium on Promoting the
Multilingual Internet**

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In response to the call for contributions issued by ITU and UNESCO in preparation for the above-mentioned symposium, Terralingua (an international NGO devoted to the integrated protection, maintenance and restoration of the world's biological, cultural, and linguistic diversity--www.terralingua.org), would like to submit the following considerations:

1. Linguistic diversity is one of the manifestations of the diversity of life on earth, along with cultural and biological diversity. In the course of human history, the diversity of languages has evolved in response to a vast array of social and ecological conditions, as a powerful tool not only for communication, but also for the intergenerational transmission of worldviews, values, beliefs, knowledge, and practices. The world's languages thus encompass an invaluable pool of resources for human adaptation, creativity, and innovation. Each language provides its speakers with a sense of continuity with the past and options for the future.

Further, it has been said that the web of languages that envelops the globe represents a "logosphere" in a way analogous to how the web of plant and animal life around the globe constitutes the biosphere.

Both webs are vital to human survival. And, because much of the knowledge and practices conveyed by languages (especially in indigenous and traditional communities living in close contact with the local environment) are related to use and management of plants and animals, it can also be said that languages are vital to the survival of biodiversity. The current crisis of extinction of many of the world's languages thus opens gaps in the web of life itself, in addition to representing a loss in the heritage of humanity.

2. For all these reasons, efforts to support linguistic diversity must occur at all levels, from local communities to international organizations, and from oral traditions to the printed page to the internet. The global electronic web represented by the internet must reflect to the fullest possible extent the global web of languages represented by the logosphere. Bridging the "digital divide" cannot be accomplished simply by putting computers in classrooms or libraries or community

centers, if the language or languages that users can access are not the language or languages that they speak as mother tongues.

It is well known that full-fledged multilingual education is the key for educational success in indigenous, minority, and immigrant communities (as well as majority ones). As computers are today the most powerful source of information and knowledge and an increasingly common tool in education (as well as in work environments) throughout the world, the internet, computer programs, and other electronic resources must also move rapidly toward full-fledged multilingualism.

In the case of multilingual education, the argument is often heard that providing such education is too costly and unfeasible in most cases. Similar arguments might be put forth about making the internet multilingual. These arguments are flawed. They do not take into account the high costs of individual and social disruption and dislocation that often arise when people, both children and adults, are forced to function poorly in a language not their own instead of being provided all the means they need to be or become fully functional multilinguals. These arguments are also flawed as they do not compute the incalculable loss of creativity that occurs if people are not able to develop and deploy their full intellectual and artistic potential in the language or languages they best express themselves in, because they are directly or indirectly forced into assimilation to other languages.

Therefore, Terralingua urges ITU and UNESCO to work unstintingly to promote and achieve the fullest possible extent of multilingualism on the internet and in all contexts--from families to schools to workplaces to media to government--in which the use of multilingual internet and other electronic tools can help preserve and enhance the wealth of human creativity and expression.