



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
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pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

Organización  
de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Educación,  
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Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
вопросам образования,  
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

**Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,  
Director-General of UNESCO,  
on the occasion of the approval of the United Nations Declaration  
on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the UN General Assembly  
at its 62<sup>nd</sup> Session**

UNESCO welcomes the General Assembly's approval of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a milestone for indigenous peoples and all those who are committed to the protection and promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue. The Declaration acknowledges the significant place that indigenous cultures occupy in the world's cultural landscape and their vital contribution to our rich cultural diversity, which constitutes, as the text's preamble reminds us, "the common heritage of humankind".

UNESCO expresses its gratitude and esteem to the representatives of indigenous communities, governments, civil society organizations and UN partner agencies that worked hard to make this historic document a reality. The adoption of the text sends out a clear message to the international community regarding the rights of indigenous peoples.

It is henceforth the responsibility of the United Nations, and notably UNESCO in its capacity as a specialized agency for culture, science, education and communication, to ensure that this message is widely disseminated and well understood throughout and beyond the second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (2005-2014).

Indeed, the newly adopted Declaration echoes the principles of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) and the related UNESCO Conventions, notably the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, all of which recognize the pivotal role of

indigenous peoples as custodians of cultural diversity and biodiversity, embodied in the cultural and natural heritage.

At present, there are an estimated 350 million indigenous peoples in the world, representing approximately 5 per cent of the total world population. Indigenous peoples account for more than 5,000 languages in over 70 countries on six continents; that is, nearly 75 per cent of all languages believed to exist. Each of these languages serves to transmit cultural systems and express worldviews, identities and specific characteristics of entire communities. They also convey irreplaceable traditions, knowledge, and know-how. However, indigenous languages and cultures, the material, environmental and spiritual conditions of indigenous peoples, together with their worldviews and intimate relationship with the land and natural resources, are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of globalization.

UNESCO is pleased to note that this Declaration sets promising international standards for the protection and promotion of the rights of indigenous peoples within the larger human rights framework and, more specifically, highlights their rights related to culture, identity, language and education. With regard to the latter, the Declaration addresses the two-fold challenge that frames UNESCO's work: first, to support and promote the maintenance, use and survival of indigenous cultures, languages, knowledge, traditions and identity; and second, to provide knowledge and skills that enable indigenous peoples to participate fully and equally in the national and international community. Accordingly, the Declaration emphasizes the rights of indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions and to pursue their development in keeping with their own needs and aspirations and as citizens of their country. These issues are central to UNESCO's mandate, and the Declaration will undoubtedly provide the foremost reference point in designing and implementing programmes with and for indigenous peoples.

UNESCO hopes that this Declaration will serve as a platform for genuine dialogue between indigenous and non-indigenous partners, creating a better understanding of indigenous worldviews and cultures which, in order to flourish, must be expressed and shared through intercultural dialogue between generations, cultures and civilizations, as well as between indigenous peoples, societies and States at large. The principles of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue are the main

guarantees of a common sustainable future. Moreover, these fundamental principles must be channelled into policies for sustainable development, especially if the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is to benefit indigenous peoples.

The adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples thus marks a significant landmark in the process of promoting mutual understanding and development, "understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence" (Art. 3, UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2001).

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Matsuura', with a stylized flourish above the name.

Koïchiro Matsuura