

Education and Language
Minorities and the Right to Education
UN Forum on Minorities

**Merci Madame la Présidente. Mesdames et
messieurs, dober dien, Buenos dias, Salaam
aalekum, Ni hao!**

**I am using all these languages just to confuse the
interpreters.**

**Meine Damen und Herren, first, I'll make three
observations about the general issue of language
and education. Then I will deal with the
recommendations themselves.**

**Numéro 1: Language is power, and education is a
tool of empowerment. I'll focus on minorities, and
not indigenous peoples or migrants, although there**

is in fact a lot of overlapping and much of what I will say may also be relevant to these other groups.

[slide 2]

But let me explain three reasons why minorities must be educated in their own language preferably in public schools to the degree that is reasonably possible and it is also desired.

First, for pedagogical reasons: education in your own language for most minorities means that minority children will stay in school longer, and will have a better chance of acquiring a higher degree of fluency in the official or majority language, especially after at least 8 years of education in their language,

Slide 3

This chart shows from a recent study in South Africa the dramatic consequences if you stop education in

the mother tongue before grade 8: on average, those educated in their own language to the 6th grade level did almost twice as well as those not educated in their own language, and in most cases this was English or Afrikaans.

Some research in Latin America with indigenous peoples and in Australia in bilingual schools for Aborigines show similar results, though of course there is a great deal of debate and diversity in the data. But by and large, Aborigines taught in bilingual schools stayed in school longer – and paradoxically learned English better than other Aborigines that went to English only schools.

[slide 4]

Secondly, for diversity reasons. In 2008, the International Year of Languages, it seems that most of the world's languages may disappear in the next 100 years – and we will be poorer for it.

Our human diversity – in the rainbow colours of our skins, in the melodies of our languages, in the spirit of our religions, all of that is part of the beauty and richness of the human condition, but these as you can see here, are threatened.

[slide 5]

The UN , UNESCO and the Council of Europe among many others have committed themselves in various ways to the protection and even promotion of our human diversity and of languages generally, and yet we have not said much about that really, and insufficiently so in the recommendations in my opinion.

Third, and related to what I have just said, une langue qu'on enseigne pas est une langue qu'on tue, you kill a language if you do not teach it. Education of, but especially in a language, is one important step in trying to prevent this tragedy.

[slide 6]

It is true that like all of us, languages die all the time. But just as murdering a person is not natural – and is a crime – the disappearance of many languages in different countries is not natural. Languages are weakened to the point of death by state policies, state policies which wrongly are based on the ideology that a state needs a single, exclusive official language to preserve or promote national unity. Somehow, the Swiss, Canadians, Indians, South Africans and many others do not seem to have learnt that lesson.

[slide 7]

Numéro 2: As for the recommendations, I want to reiterate that the recommendations need stylistically to be written in clearer, simpler but also more direct form.

If we are talking about the right to education, and especially the application of equality and

non-discrimination, then states have obligations, and individuals have a right.

[slide 8]

When you use the word should, governments have no obligation – it is essentially at their discretion. The recommendations must in my opinion not go backward: we must have recommendations that clearly sets out obligations, that in certain conditions states must or shall provide as far as is possible an appropriate level of education in the language of a minority where they are in substantial numbers.

This is what you already find in a number of documents that you have identified here.

[slide 9]

And that brings me to a difficulty to the more specific recommendation dealing with language and education: it is too timid and leaves the right to

education and language at the discretion of governments.

I am sorry, but this has 2 shoulds in one sentence and it doesn't mean much: first it is not a right at all. There is no obligation, as we use the word should. Secondly, if you are only given enough education to learn your language, let's say one hour a week, 50 minutes a week, 30 minutes a week, that's all you need to comply? So if the Government of Switzerland, God forbid, abolished all education in French or Italian or Romansh, except for 30 minutes a day it would conform to these recommendations? That would be wrong pedagogically, that would be wrong morally, and that would be wrong legally because it would be in the context of Switzerland, discriminatory.

[slide 10]

I have no time left, but let me make this final comment: when we talk about the use of a minority

language in education, we are to a large degree applying the right to equality without discrimination in education. Without going through the legal arguments – and the issue is still very unsettled – it would seem that not to use a minority language at the appropriate and proportionate level of education where you have sufficiently large minority populations is a form of discrimination.

[slides 11, 12, 13]

The next overheads describe a number of cases that confirm more or less directly this analysis – including even one from the United States which is interesting though often misunderstood.

Senoras y caballeros my time has come. So for the lovely sound of your hammer coming down in the background, Madame la présidente, and for the pleasure of the five minutes spent together with all of you, let me say thank you.

[slide 14]

**Merci, Danke Schön, grazie mille, spasiba bolshoi,
muchas gracias, xie xie, dakuyem, shoukran,
Köszönöm**