

17 December 2008

**Statement of Mr. Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann,  
President of the 63rd Session of the General Assembly,  
at the Global Seminar on Linguistic Diversity, Globalization and Development**

*Delivered by H.E. Jose Felipe Mendes Moraes Cabral, Permanent Representative of the Mission of Portugal to the United Nations*

Excellencies,  
Colleagues and Friends,

I am pleased to join you on behalf of the President of the General Assembly, Father Miguel d'Escoto, and to present his remarks at the opening of this Global Seminar on Linguistic Diversity, Globalization and Development. His text follows:

This Global Seminar is a fitting event to close the dynamic programme of educational initiatives and outreach activities in promotion of the International Year of Languages celebrated over the past twelve months. As you know the International Year was an initiative of the United Nations General Assembly to raise awareness of the vulnerability of the diversity of languages spoken by people around the world.

It is now better known that over half of the 7000 languages in the world are threatened with imminent extinction. We are all grateful to UNESCO for taking the lead in raising peoples' awareness of this unfolding cultural catastrophe and for advocating ways to protect this essential part of every culture, in particular the fragile cultures of indigenous peoples. This campaign has enabled thousands of groups, including indigenous people, NGOs, educators, social scientists, governments and cultural institutions to participate in the defense of linguistic diversity. This work continues here today.

I am grateful that this seminar is focusing on the broader context within which our defense of language is taking place. The threats to our global linguistic diversity reflect profound problems that go hand-in-hand with the process of globalization that characterizes our era. They also highlight the flawed nature of the development process that countries both North and South have promoted over recent decades.

The advocacy, educational and cultural work that has been inspired and supported by the International Year is essential to raising awareness and finding ways to address the slow death of so many languages. It is no coincidence that we are witnessing the slow death of our oceans and forests as well. We recognize that language is a profoundly important element of our extended human family and essential to the expression and transfer of our cultural identities, our histories and our values from generation to generation. Like our oceans, they are part of the rich fabric of life on this planet.

For this reason, we must also continue to take steps to ensure that globalization and development are processes that, rather than undermining and destroying our local cultures and indigenous communities and their languages, actually help to strengthen the diversity of our precious cultural heritage.

Globalization that is driven by a culture of greed and domination, that does not recognize the importance of environmental health and biodiversity, cannot be expected to respect or value linguistic diversity. It does lead, as we see with each passing day, to bankruptcy and devastation. It leaves us with a dominant culture whose values of aggression, acquisition, hyper-consumerism and intolerance threaten to become the norm. This cannot be.

The new United Nations development agenda that has been articulated over the past 15 years places a premium on people-centred, inclusive and local development. Only when people have a say in the change taking place around them can this change be sustained and beneficial. People have the right to their cultural identities, their histories and religions – all of which are extensions of language. These are fundamental human rights and we must work hard to ensure that they are ingrained in our daily lives.

The same is true at the international level. The United Nations should reflect the wonderful diversity of human kind and embody the aspirations of our peoples to work together to solve our shared problems. This requires a clarity of vision and the participation of all nations in our work. The defense of the diversity of our languages can be seen as part of the broader struggle to eradicate poverty. The loss of each language impoverishes our human culture. The loss of each language tears at the fabric of our true wealth and diversity.

I firmly believe that we have reached a point in our human odyssey when our survival depends on a broad, inclusive involvement of all peoples, of all cultures and all languages. For this reason I place so much emphasis on the revitalization of the General Assembly, the most representative body of the international community. We have an enormous responsibility to promote solidarity among all peoples; to meet the expectations that they have entrusted in the United Nations.

To succeed, we must go inside ourselves – as individuals and as nations -- and draw on the deep reservoirs of courage to realize these expectations. To succeed, all voices must be heard – a chorus of voices in myriad, wonderful languages from every corner of the Earth.

Thank you.