



## General Assembly

Distr.  
GENERAL

A/HRC/9/NGO/6  
28 August 2008

ENGLISH, FRENCH AND  
SPANISH ONLY

---

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL  
Ninth session  
Agenda item 3

### **PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF ALL HUMAN RIGHTS, CIVIL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT**

**Written statement\* submitted by the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages  
(EBLUL), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 August 2008]

---

\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## **2008 : International Year of Languages**

### **Proposal for a Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights**

On 16 May 2007, the United Nations General Assembly decided in its plenary session unanimously to declare 2008 the International Year of Languages with its ultimate aim to promote the principle of “unity within diversity as a basis for international understanding”(GA/10592, 16 May 2007). On the occasion of the approval of this proclamation, France quoted the great writer Stendhal: “The primary instrument of the genius of a people is its language,” and added further: “The right to use one’s language, one’s capacity to communicate and therefore to understand and make oneself understood, the preservation of a heritage which easily goes back centuries or even millennia in antiquity, must be placed at the core of the mission of the United Nations.”

Language is without any doubt one of the most decisive elements in the configuration of the personality and human culture. Through language we communicate with each other, we express our ideas and opinions, we cultivate our interior world, our beliefs, feelings and hopes. Thus, each language is a privileged system of reference in a person’s personal and intimate life, and at the same time a means of communication to promote social relationships based on dialogue and living together and peace.

But it is worth noting that several extra-linguistic factors (historical, political, territorial, demographic, economic, socio-cultural, sociolinguistic and collective attitudes) generate problems which, subsequently, result in the marginalization, the degradation and the disappearance of numerous languages. According to UNESCO’s statement on the occasion of the International Day of Mother Tongues, 21 February 2008, 50 percent of the almost 6,700 languages spoken today in the world are at risk of disappearing very soon, and at least one language seems to disappear every 15 days.

Thus, the EBLUL (European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages), an international civil society organization dedicated to the promotion of linguistic rights, considers a *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights* a necessity. It would better solve linguistic problems and assure the respect and full development of all languages, establishing the principles for a just and equitable linguistic peace as a main factor of peaceful human cohabitation. It is therefore necessary that linguistic rights be addressed from a global rights perspective in order to apply specific adequate solutions in each case.

There are already numerous declarations, resolutions, and covenants of several international bodies, in particular the United Nations and UNESCO, for the defense of languages, cultures and intercultural relationships. There are also numerous civil society initiatives, such as the *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights* drafted in 1996 by NGOs and linguistic experts of all continents and later adopted by several public and private organizations. These are all initiatives which tend to fill existing lacuna in international public law specifically regarding linguistic rights and point to the urgency for creating a legal standard of universal character for reassessment of one of the fundamental human rights.

The timely proclamation by the United Nations of 2008 as “International Year of Languages” marks an exceptional opportunity to advance on the path of recognition of the human right to one’s own language. In this perspective, it would be of utmost importance, for the enhancement of peace and understanding among nations, that the United Nations state explicitly that all linguistic rights are an essential element of human rights. This is implied in the 1948 *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, which states in Article 2 that the rights and freedoms of each person must be exercised without any distinction or discrimination of any kind, including of language. Article 19 of

the same *Universal Declaration*, as well as Articles 19.2. and 27 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* further stress the right to use one's own language for the dissemination of thought and information.

It should be emphasized that lack of a regulation in international legislation in linguistic matters and the progress of globalization make it ever more important to address from the perspective of human rights the universal human right to one's own language, in order that world society have a reference at the global level that establishes the positive content of linguistic rights of persons and their respective communities.

Accordingly, the EBLUL requests the United Nations Human Rights Council to take measures in this respect: as a contribution from a high-level authority to the International Year of Languages 2008 and as a demonstration of understanding and support for one of the fundamental human rights underpinning human cohabitation and peace. Such a decision would draw attention to the fact that the dynamics of globalization endanger many languages, that instead of being an enriching patrimony of humanity, they are disappearing for lack of sufficient recognition and of respect for their speakers.

Such a proposal is in line with the words of the Director General of UNESCO expressed in occasion of the proclamation of 2008 as "International Year of Languages: "UNESCO invites governments, United Nations bodies and civil society organizations to increase their activities in favor of the respect, the promotion and the protection of languages, at every level of individual and collective life."

### **Recommendation**

For all the foregoing reasons, the EBLUL (European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages) exhorts the Human Rights Council to include on its agenda the question of linguistic rights with the ultimate aim of drafting for adoption by the General Assembly of the United Nations the *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights*, entrusting its Advisory Committee with a preliminary study in this respect.

-----