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REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL ON THE PROPOSAL FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A CYBER NETWORK FOR LEARNING LANGUAGES

SUMMARY

At its 180th session, the Executive Board examined the proposal for the establishment of a cyber network for learning languages, included in the agenda of the Board at the request of the People's Republic of China, and requested the Director-General to submit to the 182nd session of the Board, a report on the results of the work of the experts on the feasibility of establishing such a network (180 EX/Decision 61). The International Expert Group Meeting, convened with the support of China, took place in Beijing on 26 and 27 March 2009, to set the framework for the feasibility study.

This report presents the conclusions of the expert meeting and the findings and recommendations contained in the feasibility study, as well as the comments and observations by the Director-General on this proposal, including on the financial and administrative implications:

Financial and administrative implication: See paragraphs 19-22.

Action expected of the Executive Board: Decision in paragraph 23.

Background

1. Languages and the promotion of multilingualism lie at the very core of UNESCO's mission and objectives. Languages are the vehicle for understanding between cultures and for dialogue among civilizations. Language learning helps develop effective citizenship, ability to participate in social and public life, access to knowledge and high quality of education.

2. In 1999, UNESCO's General Conference adopted the term "multilingual education" (30 C/Resolution 12) which refers to the use of at least three languages in education. Indeed, language competences acquired through school and in lifelong learning settings are conducive to effectively sharing knowledge, promoting intercultural understanding and ultimately building peace among peoples. The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) and online platforms for learning languages can accelerate and facilitate the enhancement of language competences of learners of all age groups and give wider and more affordable access to language learning resources worldwide.

3. UNESCO, in line with the principles underlying United Nations instruments addressing language issues, has adopted numerous standard-setting instruments in this field:

- Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960)
Article 1 makes it clear that "discrimination" includes any "distinction, excluding, limitation or preference" based, *inter alia*, on language.
- Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education (1976)
Article 22: "With regard to ethnic minorities, adult education activities should enable them to (...) educate themselves and their children in their mother tongues, develop their own cultures and learn languages other than their mother tongues." (19 C/Resolution 22)
- Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001)
Article 5 notes the right of everybody to express themselves and disseminate their work "in the language of their choice and particularly in their mother tongue".
- Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace (2003)
"(...) Member States should formulate appropriate national policies on the crucial issue of language survival in cyberspace, designed to promote the teaching of languages, including mother tongues, in cyberspace." (32 C/Resolution 41)
- Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)
"Oral traditions and expressions, including languages as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage" are included in the domain of the convention in part (2) of the definition (Article 2).
- Convention on Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005)
Linguistic diversity is seen as fundamental to cultural diversity (para. 12). Paragraph 14 refers specifically to the importance of freedom of expression and diversity in the media to allow them to flourish.

4. It is against this background that China proposed to harness the power of ICT to advance the learning of languages by establishing a "cyber network for learning languages" (CNLL) under UNESCO's auspices (180 EX/16).

Objectives and activity areas

5. If established, the CNLL would provide an online multilingual platform for: (a) elaborating policies on learning languages at the international, regional and national levels and to facilitate

international cooperation and exchanges on learning languages; (b) facilitating literacy and post-literacy activities by government and civil society through cyberspace, improving competence in mother tongues and other languages; and (c) providing learners worldwide with open and accessible resources for learning languages and, through them, new cultures.

6. The possible activities in that area are as follows:

- (a) creating an online platform for the effective dissemination and use of language learning resources under UNESCO's auspices, including modules for language teaching and learning, terminology control, machine-based translations, etc.;
- (b) establishing a community of practice to formulate proposals for standards and norms for language learning in cyberspace, including for rating systems for online language learning tools; developing language learning resources, tools and systems; and encouraging the use of norms, including Unicode, for making language learning products available online;
- (c) setting up an international network-based research group on language learning to formulate norms and guidelines on the content and quality of language teaching material.

Summary of the conclusions of the Expert Meeting

7. In accordance with the decision adopted by the Executive Board at its 180th session, the Director-General was requested to convene a meeting of experts in the first quarter of 2009 to study the feasibility of establishing a cyber network for learning languages and to elaborate a detailed work plan, including budgetary implications and addressing the long-term sustainability of the possible establishment of the network. The experts were also tasked with making recommendations as to the role and functions of the UNESCO Secretariat in the possible establishment and operations of the network.

8. A first meeting of international experts was organized by the Government of China in Beijing, in March 2009. A second expert group, with limited participation, continued the work, meeting in Shanghai, China, at the end of May 2009. The feasibility study was completed in early June 2009 and was reviewed and summarized by the Secretariat for this presentation to the Executive Board.

9. The proposal of establishing the CNLL was fully supported by the expert group. Such a network would be an online platform or a "network of networks", under the auspices of UNESCO, to enhance the learning of all languages, with particular attention to the learning of endangered languages and minority languages.

10. The development of the CNLL could be based on the existing online UNESCO Open Training Platform (OTP), which contains a Language section. The model proposed for the development of such a platform, or network of networks, would be distributed and open:

- "Distributed" in terms of structure, functioning and management of the CNLL (e.g. a specific part of the OTP can be localized and managed by, for example, a community multimedia centre that would use the resources on the OTP to train people on local languages while using radio);
- "Open" regarding languages included, although particular attention will be paid to endangered languages and minority languages, in terms of audiences and communities to be served, and in terms of technologies to be used (e.g. TV, mobile, or radio through community centres, etc.) to reach out to different types of audiences.

11. Five options for the expansion of the OTP Language section, ranging from the least resourced options to the fully resourced ones, are proposed with a view to enhancing the learning of endangered languages and minority languages:

- Option 1:
Adding existing online language resources to the OTP Language section including audio, video, dictionaries and other terminology resources as well as policy guidelines and best practices to promote the learning of endangered languages and minority languages;
- Option 2:
Investigating the existing resources in the OTP Language section and presenting them in a structured way (e.g. by language to highlight existence of resources for endangered languages and minority languages, by type or purpose of resources, etc.);
- Option 3:
Looking for gaps in the ICT-enhanced language learning practices available around the world and creating models and frameworks based on the OTP to promote the learning of endangered languages and minority languages;
- Option 4:
Filling those gaps through collaboration with governments and universities to develop new functions and resources based on the OTP to enhance the learning of endangered languages and minority languages;
- Option 5:
Taking the lead and engaging relevant stakeholders worldwide to support the learning of endangered languages and minority languages.

12. The OTP was intended originally as a resource centre by providing access to language teaching and learning resources, and does not therefore meet pedagogical requirements for learning. Thus, in order to turn the OTP into the CNLL, further services would need to be provided, such as the possibility to contact language teachers or networks with language experts and researchers, and access to information on available automatic translation tools, on language proficiency standards or on cultures of language communities.

13. Consequently, the experts unanimously recommended building upon UNESCO's existing Open Training Platform to establish an online network for the dissemination and use of language learning resources. The initial design and planning of such a platform under UNESCO's auspices will require, however, considerable additional financial human resources beyond current budget and staffing.

Feasibility

14. In the feasibility study, the CNLL is understood as a collaborative network for advancing the learning of languages and promoting intercultural awareness. In this network the learning of languages and intercultural awareness is ICT-enhanced or potentially ICT-enhanced. The learning of languages and intercultural awareness is seen in the broader scope of human communication and interaction, also comprising aspects of e-Inclusion/e-Accessibility. These guiding principles apply to all languages, particularly taking into account the needs of underprivileged language communities (including endangered languages). The general aim of the CNLL is to promote "Learning Languages for All".

15. The feasibility study also highlights the positive impact of effectively reducing language barriers and promoting cultural expression and exchanges by establishing an online network for learning languages that will facilitate sharing knowledge about languages and promoting learning of languages and culture using ICT applications.

16. As concerns the implementation of this initiative, the study points out that a steering committee should be established to oversee the detailed planning of the project and to set a range of activities in motion in liaison with UNESCO. Over and above the task of overseeing the establishment of the CNLL during a fixed period of time, this committee would need to continue to assist all relevant authorities, in collaboration with UNESCO, in determining relevant policies and practices of the CNLL.

17. With regard to funding the initiative, the feasibility study indicates that, depending on the decisions pertaining to the implementation of the CNLL, the financial implications, which could be considerable, would differ. Major cost factors through an incremental process are: initial planning, research and development costs; implementation and operational costs; ongoing research and development to sustain and extend the CNLL; programming, projects, maintenance and support activities, etc.

18. Several concrete recommendations, which could serve as a basis for the future development of this initiative, have also been made (reproduced *in extenso* in this document).

Comments by the Director-General, including on financial and administrative implications

19. The Director-General agrees with the overall objectives and priorities proposed by the group of international experts in their feasibility study on the implementation of a CNLL. The suggested activities included in the recommendations correspond to the expectations of UNESCO's stakeholders and partners and reflect several important aspects contained in the Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace, adopted in 2003 by the General Conference.

20. The Director-General expresses concern, however, with regard to the human and technical resources needed for the implementation of this initiative. He agrees with the group of experts, who noted that "the current UNESCO staff resources to manage the OTP are clearly not sufficient to manage the entire CNLL". Due to time constraints, the expert meetings and feasibility study did not provide a budget estimate. The Director-General estimates, however, that if the initial planning and consultation phase of one year was implemented in UNESCO Headquarters, it would cost approximately \$380,000 to be sought from extrabudgetary funding sources.

21. The Director-General welcomes the support provided by the Government of China and its willingness to further contribute to this project. He considers that the expected contribution in human and financial resources for the design and operational phases of the CNLL would have to be achieved through fundraising and voluntary contributions by Member States and the private sector. While the initiative would fall under the auspices of UNESCO, the direct project management and future maintenance of the CNLL would require dedicated and specialist resources.

22. The Director-General therefore considers that the Executive Board should take into consideration in its deliberations the financial and other resource implications of the proposed cyber network for learning languages.

Action expected of the Executive Board

23. The Executive Board may wish to adopt the following decision:

The Executive Board,

1. Recalling 180 EX/Decision 61,
2. Having examined the report by the Director-General on the proposal for the establishment of a cyber network for learning languages (182 EX/18),

3. Considering that this proposal is in line with the purpose and content of the relevant paragraphs of the Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education (19 C/Resolution 22) and the Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace (32 C/Resolution 42),
4. Taking note of the conclusions and recommendations of the meetings of experts, convened in March and May 2009 to study the feasibility of establishing a cyber network for learning languages,
5. Expressing appreciation to the People's Republic of China for having covered the local costs of the above meetings of experts, including board and lodging and the travel costs of the experts from the developing countries,
6. Confirms its strong commitment to the goal of promoting languages in cyberspace and teaching and learning languages using information and communication technologies (ICT) and the Internet;
7. Expresses appreciation to the experts who have contributed to the preparation of the feasibility study with its findings and recommendations;
8. Recognizes the potential of the proposed initiative to contribute to the enhancement of learning languages by means of a collaborative online platform under UNESCO's auspices;
9. Invites the Director-General to take appropriate measures in order to facilitate, together with all concerned stakeholders, the fundraising process for the initial design and planning of such a platform, both from Member States and from private sector donors;
10. Encourages all Member States to contribute to this initiative.

ANNEX

FEASIBILITY STUDY ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A CYBER NETWORK FOR LEARNING LANGUAGES (CNLL)

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

A Cyber Network for Learning Languages should be designed, developed and implemented as a matter of urgency, according to the following five stages in line with UNESCO's five major roles:

1. Identification (clearing house);
2. Structuring (laboratory of ideas);
3. Omissions and priorities (laboratory of ideas and capacity-builder);
4. Extension (capacity-builder, catalyst of international cooperation);
5. Leadership (standard-setter, catalyst of international cooperation).

Recommendation 2

The CNLL is a major endeavour which requires an appropriate level of resourcing both in terms of human and technical resources. If the existing "language" component of the Open Training Platform (OTP) is to meet these expectations, the necessary substantial additions and extension would be required according to the specifications set out in this document.

Recommendation 3

An overall governance strategy should be formulated, taking into account the following:

1. Leading role of UNESCO;
2. Stakeholders;
3. Potential organizations, groups, networks focusing on language issues, in accordance with the special moral obligation of UNESCO to respond to the specific needs of underprivileged groups with respect to universal access to cyberspace.

Recommendation 4

A set of surveys should be prepared to gather information about and to assess the status of stakeholders in terms of their role as:

1. Users across all groups of stakeholders;
2. Providers of content and services;
3. Supporters, promoters and multipliers;
4. Language communities;
5. Existing and potential developers.

Recommendation 5

Sets of guidelines should be prepared in order to guarantee interoperability across:

1. Policy formulation and implementation;
2. Content according to content categories;
3. Quality control and digital rights management;
4. Qualification and competencies of experts to assist the CNLL implementation at local level.

In addition guidelines for supportive functions or activities (e.g. for promoters) would be useful.

Recommendation 6

Major cost factors can be minimized through a systematic forward planning of the CNLL, which will not only save costs in the short term, but also improve efficiency and effectiveness in the long term. Many of the individual tasks, projects and activities necessary to implement and extend the CNLL can be financed through adjustment of resources within existing budgets of different sectors.

Recommendation 7

The Steering Committee is strongly recommended to design and implement a promotion strategy for securing and increasing the visibility of the CNLL, comprising:

- The organization of conferences, workshops, seminars, and participation in congresses and expositions, etc.;
- An award scheme for best products, services, practices under various categories;
- A sponsorship scheme.

Recommendation 8

Given the urgency of the needs for implementing the CNLL, pre-implementation investigations and planning should start as soon as possible – possibly by the middle of 2010. The planning of the technical development then could start already in 2011. Two years, 2012-2013, are realistic for the full-fledged implementation of the CNLL.