

Biological diversity and cultural diversity or the components of life on Earth

Address by Dr Ahmed Djoghlaif, Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity

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I would like to congratulate the Canadian Commission for UNESCO on its fiftieth anniversary at the service of the ideals of peace and justice through multilateral cooperation in the key areas of culture, science and education. The celebration of this important event could not have found a better theme than the one that was chosen for the occasion: “Linking Networks, Sharing Ideas”. This theme is particularly relevant to that of my address today: biological diversity and cultural diversity.

Federico Fellini said: “Every language sees the world differently” and the world-famous linguist David Crystal liked to say that “the world is a mosaic of visions and each vision is captured in a language. Every time a language is lost, a vision of the world disappears”. According to UNESCO, approximately 600 languages have disappeared in the last century and they continue to disappear at a rate of one language every two weeks. There are currently 6,700 languages, 40% of which are threatened with extinction and more than 90% of which are likely to disappear before the end of this century. There is therefore a danger that 90% of the visions of this world will disappear.

A language is not only a technical means of communication between human beings. It is also a vehicle for expressing emotions and transferring cultural, social, ethical and spiritual values. Uniting communities, it is an integral part of their identity heritage and their distinctive integrity. A language is also and above all a treasure of ancestral knowledge and a real living encyclopaedia of traditional knowledge, passed down, orally in the majority of cases, from one generation to another. Through the centuries, the peoples of the world, the indigenous populations in particular, have accumulated traditional knowledge of irreplaceable value that is disappearing as ancient tongues become extinct. This is particularly true, as in most traditional cultures, knowledge is transferred orally, being neither written nor recorded.

This has led some to say that every time a language disappears, it is as though a bomb had dropped on a museum. I would like to add that every time a language disappears, it is as though a bomb had dropped on nature, its people and its cultures. Linguistic erosion is accompanied by an erosion of biodiversity and is often a reflection thereof. The anthropologist Earl Shorris said in 2000: “There are 9 different Maya words for the colour blue in the Porrua Spanish-Maya dictionary, but only 3 Spanish translations, leaving six butterflies that can only be seen by the Mayas, which proves that when a language dies, six butterflies disappear from the Earth’s consciousness.” Since the beginning of time, human beings have used more than 7,000 species of

plants to meet their needs. Today, only 150 plants are used and most of us only use 12 species. Thus, 95% of the 8,000 species of apple to be found in the United States of America until the last century have disappeared.

There is an inherent link between linguistic and cultural diversity and biological diversity. Milan Kundera said that “culture is the memory of the people, the collective consciousness of historic continuity, the way of thinking and living”. Linguistic erosion is therefore a corrosive element of collective memory and of the identity and integrity of human communities; it is also a manifestation of the loss of biological diversity. Languages, such as we know them today, are the result of an age-old evolution. They first appeared in Africa more than 150,000 years ago and spread around the world. Language is an integral part of the cultural and civilization heritage of the peoples of the world. Biological diversity is also the result of millions of years of evolution of life on earth. It represents all forms of life on earth. Ecosystems provide the essential needs of life, protection from natural disasters and diseases and constitute the very foundation of human culture. Ecosystems and life on earth, including its cultural, spiritual and ethical dimension, are therefore co-substantial.

However, the “Millennium Ecosystem Assessment”, a study carried out by 1,395 experts from 95 countries, has shown that, since their appearance on earth, human beings have never destroyed the foundations of their life as much as during the last fifty years. The pressures exerted on the planet’s natural functions by human activity have reached such a level that the ability of ecosystems to meet the needs of future generations is now seriously, and perhaps irretrievably, compromised. Changes in the earth’s natural functions caused by human activity have never been as destructive as during the past fifty years, leading to an unequalled extinction of biodiversity.

The extinction rate of animal and plant species is 30% higher than the natural rate. It is now a thousand times higher than it was a hundred years ago. During the last 500 years, species became extinct at the rate of 1,000 species per annum. Today, between 15,000 and 50,000 species disappear each year. Twenty per cent of known birds are already extinct; 41% of mammals are in decline and 28% are directly threatened.

Up to a recent past, 47% of the earth’s surface was covered in forest. Since then, it has completely vanished in 25 countries and only 10% remains in 29 others. Ten million hectares of forests continue to disappear each year, the equivalent of an area four times larger than Belgium. It is a well-established fact that tropical forests are the richest ecosystems in terms of biodiversity. Although they only represent 7% of the world’s surface, tropical forests currently house 50 to 70% of identified living species. They are also the richest areas in cultural biodiversity, with 1,400 to 2,500 different indigenous populations representing 54% of the world’s ecoregions and 36% of the total number of ethno-linguistic groups.

A recent WWF study identified 900 ecoregions in the world, 200 of which are considered to be of strategic importance for the protection of biological diversity. The study demonstrates in great detail the correlation between the biodiversity distribution map and that of linguistic and therefore cultural diversity. Languages are one of the essential characteristics of the cultural and artistic diversity of the people of the world. Six out of nine of the countries representing 60% of the number of recorded languages are also biodiversity hot spots. Ten out of the twelve richest countries in biodiversity are among the 25 richest countries in endemic languages. Indonesia, for example, has the second highest number of indigenous languages, the highest number of

indigenous birds and the fourth highest number of vertebrates. This country of a hundred thousand islands also has the seventh highest number of plants identified in the world.

The 200 ecoregions identified by WWF comprise 4,635 ethno-linguistic groups representing 67% of the 6,867 ethno-linguistic groups classed as indigenous populations. Representing around 300 million people or less than 5% of the world population, indigenous communities are the holders and guardians of an invaluable biological and cultural wealth as well as exceptional ancestral knowledge.

Nature conservation is at the heart of the cultures and values of traditional societies. Indigenous communities have an umbilical relationship with nature, which is considered to be a whole, with mankind as its central nucleus. As such, the Earth is the “spiritual mother” who not only gives life and therefore food, but also provides the cultural and spiritual identity of its occupants. Because it has been handed down by our ancestors like a sacred legacy, it must be protected in order to bequeath it to future generations, as a gift blessed by the gods. Based on this principle, all creation is sacred and nature is divine and should be respected and revered. Indigenous populations such as the Koguis – which literally means ‘inhabitants of the Earth’ – believe that human beings do not own the earth, but that is the earth, considered to be a gift from god, that owns them and looks after them.

The sacred nature of the Earth and its benefits is central to almost all religions in the world. There is an inherent relation between religion and the environment. The humanist and pacifist Theodore Monod argued in his written works that “we must learn to respect life in all its forms: none of these grasses, none of these flowers, none of these animals should be destroyed without a reason, for they too are all creatures of God”. Through the ages and civilizations, religion has always played a central role in protecting the environment. This was demonstrated, with ample evidence, at the Symposium on “Religions and the Environment” held in Tehran, Iran, in June 2001, to the organization of which I had the remarkable honour of contributing as representative of the United Nations Environment Programme.

Since time immemorial, sacred natural sites have been a valuable instrument of environmental conservation. The respect for gifts from nature deemed to be sacred and therefore subject to social access restrictions and regulations has greatly contributed to the protection of areas that are particularly rich in biodiversity. Sacred sites are seen to unite nature, culture and spiritual and ethical values. A study of 10 sacred sites in Timor revealed the existence of 189 plant species although only 46 had been identified in neighbouring areas. Sacred sites encompass a variety of ecosystems and landscapes. For some communities in Japan, Madagascar, Mongolia, Sri Lanka and elsewhere, mountains are considered sacred. Mount Fuji is a perfect example. For others, rivers, lakes, forests or mangroves are sacred elements. Such is the case of the Kaya forests in Kenya, the rivers in Zagne in south-west Côte d’Ivoire, the sacred mangroves in Ghana, the Atacama desert in Chile, the sacred Agathyaekuramnekae region in Sikkim in India or the Huascarán site in Peru.

For this reason, the Convention on Biological Diversity pays particular attention to the relation between biological diversity and cultural diversity, with special emphasis on indigenous and local communities. In its preamble, this “convention on life on Earth” recognizes “the close and traditional dependence of many indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles on biological resources and the desirability of sharing equitably benefits arising from the use of traditional knowledge, innovations and practices”.

Article 10 provides that the 190 contracting Parties shall “protect and encourage customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices that are compatible with conservation or sustainable use requirements”. Article 8 (j) requires these same Parties “to preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and promote the involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of such knowledge, innovations and practices”. Therefore, when the Convention came into force on 29 December 1993, the contracting Parties paid particular attention to preserving and maintaining the heritage of indigenous populations. At the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties in Nassau, Bahamas, in December 1994, a dedicated post was created in the Secretariat for the implementation of Article 8 (j). Later on, the Conference of the Parties established a working group on Article 8 (j), which has now been raised to the status of subsidiary body and has held four meetings. The recently adopted United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples upholds in many of its provisions, Article 31 in particular, the umbilical relation that unites the protection of traditional knowledge and the preservation of the cultural identity and integrity of indigenous peoples.

The link between biological and cultural diversity is also enshrined in many important texts adopted by UNESCO. In adopting the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity in 2001, member countries reaffirmed their conviction that cultural diversity is one of the roots of development and that it is “as necessary to the human species as biodiversity is to nature”. The principle of the complementarity of economic and cultural aspects of development is one of the guiding principles of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, the first anniversary of the signing of which we celebrate today, through this seminar. Principle 5 of this unique convention recognizes that “since culture is one of the mainsprings of development, the cultural aspects of development are as important as its economic aspects, which individuals and peoples have the fundamental right to participate in and enjoy”. The principle of sustainable development is also a guiding principle of this convention, which recognizes that “Cultural diversity is a rich asset for individuals and societies. The protection, promotion and maintenance of cultural diversity are an essential requirement for sustainable development for the benefit of present and future generations”. In adopting this convention, Member States have raised cultural diversity to the status of “common heritage of humanity”, as in ratifying the Convention on Biological Diversity they have recognized that “the conservation of biological diversity is a common concern of humankind”.

Whilst in the eighties mechanical economic growth was considered to be the new name of peace, today, peace has a different name, that of sustainable development, which hinges on the economy, the environment, culture and social issues. Indeed, there could be no sustainable development without the protection of biodiversity, just as there could be no protection of biodiversity without the preservation of the cultural heritage of the peoples of the world, indigenous populations and local communities in particular.

I therefore have the pleasure of announcing that a protocol of agreement between the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity and UNESCO is under preparation, dealing with key areas of cooperation in fields of education and public awareness, particularly among young people.

On adopting its constitution at the end of the Second World War, the founding fathers of UNESCO were keen to recall that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of

men that the defences of peace must be constructed". Today, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions remind us that "since the impoverishment of biological and cultural diversity begins in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of sustainable development must be raised".

The love of peace and justice as well as a staunch attachment to the ideals of multilateral cooperation at the service of sustainable development are an integral part of the traditions of the Canadian people and are constant components of the foreign policy of this great nation. These same ideals have guided Canada since 1996 as host country to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

I look forward to being able to count soon, following the signing of the Protocol of Agreement with UNESCO, on the unique experience of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, so that we may work together to establish in the minds of today's men and women the defences of cultural and biological diversity.

Thank you for your kind attention.