



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS

ROUND TABLE FOR THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

THEO VAN WIJK BUILDING, UNISA

21 February 2019

- Programme Director and Deputy Executive Dean of the Unisa College of Human Sciences, Dr Britta Zawada
- Founder and leader of Puku Children Literature Foundation and distinguished author, Mrs Elinor Sisulu and members of your foundation.
- Representatives of UNESCO led by Mr Carlton Mukwevho who is the Secretary General of SA NATCOM of UNESCO in South Africa.
- Presenters in your various capacities

- I also recognize our literally giant, Dr Mongane Wally Serote
- Distinguished audience, ladies and gentlemen

As we mark 2019 which has been most appropriately declared by the United Nations as the International Year of Indigenous Languages, I welcome you in a warm spirit of African Ubuntu. As we gather here at Unisa on the International Mother Language Day Unisa extends its hand of partnership in not only symbolically celebrating this day, but more importantly, to critically and constructively reflect on the importance of indigenous languages in order to come up with strategies of protecting, promoting and preserving these marginalized and increasingly threatened languages. As a country we are reaching an important milestone of twenty five years since the advent of our democracy and that should also be used as a point of assessing our performance in developing our indigenous languages which suffered marginalization under both colonial and apartheid systems.

Our global icon and the founding president of democratic South Africa, the late President Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, fully understood the importance of mother tongue in the process of nation building where diversity had to be celebrated whilst building a united society. In his usual simple and yet deeply penetrating philosophical manner he once declared that “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his

heart.” This observation is the most apt description of a person’s relationship to his/her language.

More importantly, mother tongue or indigenous languages are not merely basic instructional tools but deep reservoirs of people’s heritage and history as well as their collective identity and psyche. Their worldview and interpretation of the environment around is interpreted through their languages. Marginalization or destruction of mother tongue languages denies people meaningful participation in the political, social, and economic world thus ultimately robbing them of their global cultural or linguistic citizenship. When a language dies, as many have and some are still dying, a cultural genocide is taking place in both literal and figurative manner.

It is for this reason that great scholars and literary giants such as Ngugi wa Thiongo have campaigned for the use and promotion of indigenous languages as a weapon of decolonization of the African or indigenous people’s mind. It is for the very same reason that African intellectual giants and liberation icon such as Amilcar Cabral placed preservation of African culture and history as the most important counter-hegemonic resource. During the years of anti-colonial independence struggles indigenous languages, music and culture in general was used

as a counterforce to imposed western modernity. Ironically most of that was lost when many countries obtained their independence as the African political and business elite begun to assimilate to their colonial metropolises. This is well documented in most literature including the Ali and Alamin Mazrui classic, “The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the African Experience.”

The current wave of globalization has only accelerated imposition of westernization with English monolingualism being the most dominant feature. The 4th Industrial Revolution of the 21st century has aggressively reinforced this process further alienating people from their indigenous languages, heritage and histories. In this round table discussion and networking we ought to come up with practical steps for reversing this trend and reaffirming our indigenous languages while taking advantage of customizing the currently available technological tools of digital communication.

One of the reasons people across the world are rising against the current form of globalization is because of the aggressive marginalization and erosion of their identities as western values and languages are imposed. This point is well-articulated in Francis

Fukuyama's book, "Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition."

I am glad that President Ramaphosa has been emphasizing the issue of reading and learning at elementary levels of our education but our intervention should be to use that policy environment to advance African Children learning in their languages for more effective cognitive development. Studies in Australia have shown that indigenous aborigines significantly improved their cognitive development and grasp of subjects such as science and maths when using their own languages than when English is used as a medium of instruction. Our partnership with Puku Children Literature Foundation is to work with practitioners who are already active in the field to enhance our research and policy development work in developing African languages to academic and research levels as we witnessed this with the development of Afrikaans almost a century ago. This is one of central pillars of Unisa's transformation programme and this partnership with Puku and UNESCO will prove vital to us and the sector of higher education at large. There can be no African Renaissance or the Africa Rising Narrative if Africans are linguistically alienated from their own heritage.

Again I wish you all the best in this round table and networking session and make an undertaking that this is not an end or a once-off event but beginning of a journey of mutually reinforcing partnership for the common purpose of promoting, preserving and protecting our languages.

I thank you