
SPEECH: Language and Inclusion Summit

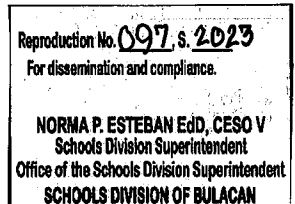
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Message
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MESSAGE OF SEN. LOREN LEGARDA
“Fostering Multilingualism for Inclusion
in Education and Society”
Language and Inclusion Summit
Department of Education
May 19, 2023

Languages are the most powerful instruments for preserving and developing our tangible and intangible heritage, that is from no less than the United Nations. Promoting our mother tongues encourages linguistic diversity, multilingual education, and cultural awareness, and inspires understanding, tolerance, and dialogue. These benefits are shown in study after study across the globe. It has been taught as early as biblical times in the story of the Tower of Babel but it is more effectively proven as a theory by the fact that our languages develop based on our different habitats and ecosystems.

Language and education have always been at the heart of my missions in life and are integrated into everything, including the environment. You cannot protect what you cannot name, hence the death of a mother tongue means the ability of that society in interacting with its habitat is hindered.

The Philippines has an array of diverse and unique sets of languages from our 17 regions. There are about 130 native languages in the country according to the Komisyon ng Wikang Filipino (KWF). However, we are currently standing on the brink of losing some of them and it is no wonder as we are also eroding the ecosystems from which they sprung forth. This is why we have initiatives that will revitalize and preserve environments and languages through policies and programs.

As a four-term Senator, I consistently highlight linguistic inclusivity to improve communication and foster deeper and more meaningful appreciation among cultures. I support multilingualism because people are diverse both culturally and linguistically.

Equally important is access to quality education and equal opportunities for every student, regardless of background or abilities. We should bridge the gaps and promote inclusivity in education that cater to special needs, Madrasah, indigenous peoples, and alternative learning. I authored and co-sponsored Republic Act No. 11106 or the Filipino Sign Language Act which mandates the use of the Filipino Sign Language as the medium of instruction in deaf education. Let us focus on addressing individual needs and providing tailored support to enable every student to reach their full potential.

I have supported the Department of Education's (DepEd) Mother Tongue-Based Multi-Lingual Education (MTB-MLE) Program wherein the first languages to which students are accustomed were used as a medium of instruction. In line with this, I am pleased to share that I have supported the publication of ten storybooks in Kiniray-a, under the Kug-ungan Kinaray-a project of the Sentro ng Wika at Kultura at the University of Antique. This was accomplished in collaboration with the Komisyon ng Wikang Filipino and the National Commission of Culture and the Arts. Copies of these storybooks are part of the Region VI exhibit of our event today.

Studies have shown that the use of the first language as the medium of instruction contributes to students' better performance in school. In 2016, the program covered 19 languages and I will name them just to emphasize that if you have not heard of some of them, it shows we can all learn a bit more about our diverse cultures— they are Ybanag, Sinugbuanong Binisaya, Hiligaynon, Waray, Bahasa Sug, Maguindanaoan, Maranao, Chavacano, Ivatan, Sambal, Akianon, Kinaray-a, Yakan, and Sinurigaonon and the familiar Tagalog, Kapampangan, Pangasinan, Iloko, Bikol.

In 2018, we proudly supported—in partnership with the KWF—the International Conference on Endangered Languages and published the Atlas ng Wika, a significant milestone in the mapping, validation, and archiving of the native languages of the country.

I am very proud to share that we also collaborated with KWF in providing funding for the installation of 130 language markers as tangible representations of our efforts to honor and preserve the roots of our languages all over the country. The first language marker was erected in Antique (for Kinaray-a). These markers emphasize as well that language is both oral and written. Our written form, Baybayin, and many other related permutations across the cultures of the land can be revived and used again. I have this writing on my office walls and all my correspondence and even ensured the funding and set up of a Baybayin exhibit at the National Museum. We are now seeing a glorious revival where this writing is more visible — it is in our passports, it was in our money and many signages of government agencies and private institutions have adopted it.

Our Cultural Mapping Bill, which was recently passed on Third Reading, is aimed at strengthening the preservation of our cultural heritage which includes our oral traditions, languages, and expressions. We aim to increase cultural

education programs and identify, record, and document our cultural property.

We have likewise emphasized the importance of accessible disaster-related information in the lives of Filipinos. Senate Bill No. (SBN) 834, the Language Accessibility Act, prioritizes localized messaging for disaster-related communications. Once, during the distribution of resilience tool kits for vulnerable sectors, I insisted that to be effective, these needed to be in the lingua franca appropriate to each site.

In relation to this, we also filed SBN 1116, or the "Local Studies Center Act," to document and safeguard our vast cultural and historical heritage that includes languages and dialects. This would entail the creation of research institutions in State Universities and Colleges (SUCs). Here is where I say I hope everyone here already understands the difference between dialects and languages. Some of those educated during my time still use the term dialect for anything other than Tagalog and it is not only wrong but a disservice to the speakers of those other distinct languages across the country.

As the author of RA 8978 which designated the Mt. Kitanglad Range, the natural habitat of the Philippine eagle, as a protected area, I ensured conservation efforts are effectively communicated to the local communities. I included specific provisions for the production of conservation materials in languages that are easily understood in the area.

We have launched the documentary "Usapang Wika" in partnership with the NCCA. Its ten episodes feature Ilokano, Cebuano, Hiligaynon and Kinaray-a, Waray, Pangasinan, Kapampangan, Tagalog, Bicolano, and Meranaw — the country's main languages, and highlight the history, literary works, and evolution of each. Stakeholders, such as the academe and the local governments, can localize, innovate and come up with programs to promote and preserve their linguistic heritage such as language tours that will ignite a

passion for language learning. Speak your native tongue proudly, even to tourists, make it part of their experience!

If we are all keenly aware of the value of our spoken and written languages and the multiple advantages of multilingualism, we can all take pride in them, prevent the loss of any indigenous language, enhance our capacity to protect our habitats, and give our visitors the experience of hearing and reading our diverse cultures. Let us place this in the mainstream and we will be ready for the challenges and opportunities of the globalized world we are in.

Thank you very much!

Isang luntiang Pilipinas sa ating lahat!