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**Input to United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
on the protection of the rights of the child
in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

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INTRODUCTION

My input considers Haiti as a “canary in the mine” case study regarding children’s rights and sustainable development, with a focus on the role of local languages in education—for ensuring equal opportunity, non-discrimination and optimal investment in children worldwide.

In providing state-of-the-art teacher training and pedagogical resources in Haitian Creole (“Kreyòl”) to faculty in Haiti, the *MIT-Haiti Initiative* (<https://haiti.mit.edu/>) is directly contributing to reaching the Millennium Development Goals in Haiti and setting up an example for the key role of local languages in sustainable development in other developing countries.

As the Director of the MIT-Haiti Initiative and as the representative of the *Linguistic Society of America* to the Science and Human Rights Coalition of the *American Association for the Advancement of the Sciences*, I’d like to share the key linguistic lessons that the MIT-Haiti Initiative can teach us about ensuring that children’s rights are protected in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In the particular case of Haiti, these concerns about children’s rights (and human rights and sustainable development, more generally) have become even more crucial now, after the devastation of Hurricane Matthew in Haiti—keeping in mind that this same Hurricane cost not one single life in neighboring Cuba. The key variable between Cuba and Haiti involves nation-wide preparedness or lack thereof (i.e., education for all in Cuba or for too few in Haiti).

LINGUISTIC APARTHEID AGAINST EDUCATION FOR ALL & AGAINST SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Let’s start with one basic socio-linguistic fact about Haiti: Virtually every Haitian in Haiti speaks Kreyòl as their native language whereas only a small minority speaks French (not more than 10% and perhaps as few as 3% if we only count those who speak *fluent* French, including at home). Therefore, the systematic use of Haiti’s national language (Kreyòl) *at all levels of education, administration, courts, etc.*, is indispensable for ensuring “equality and non-discrimination” among Haitian children, for providing the most sustainable and optimal foundations for investing in children (and adults!) and for developing Haiti’s human capacity for problem solving and for socio-economic development. Most importantly, in light of the painful lessons from the January 2010 earthquake and from Hurricane Matthew in October 2016, we need universal access to quality education in order to provide Haiti with the sort of human capacity and expertise that can prepare for, and outlast, natural and unnatural disasters.

Though my comments focus on Haiti, I hope that the lessons learnt from my work as a Haitian linguist and through the MIT-Haiti Initiative can serve to show why it’s so very important that systematic attention be paid, on the ground and at all levels of local and international organizations, to *actual* language-and-education practices, in addition to any official curricula and language policies

that exist on paper—and, too often, on paper *only*. Such attention to what’s happening in actual classrooms, in examinations, in courts, State offices, in the written media, etc., is indispensable for ensuring equal protection and non-discrimination and for providing the best possible investment in children’s future. Studies from UNESCO, as far back the early 1950s, have long proven the importance of local vernacular languages in education. Yet actual practices that *exclude* such vernacular languages still belie the pedagogical importance of these local languages—to the detriment of vast segments of the world’s population, especially children.

Why Haiti as a case study? Firstly, as a Haitian-born linguist at MIT, I know first-hand that my native country is a spectacular case of language barriers causing daily violations of human rights. These barriers are linked to structural bottlenecks to sustainable development. I’ve also witnessed first-hand Haiti’s high rate of inequality—one of the highest in the world. Haiti also stands out as one of the rare nations in which there’s one language spoken by all citizens, yet the school system, by and large, does not use that language as the main language of instruction and examination. This situation amounts to massive discrimination and violation of human rights (“linguistic apartheid”); it undermines the population’s mental health and sense of identity while blocking both academic progress and socio-economic development.

Most Haitian children do not speak French at home and in their communities. Yet when they arrive at school, they are made to learn *in* French, most often with teachers who themselves are not fluent in French. This situation parallels the case of some 200 million children worldwide that are made to “learn” in a language that they do not speak fluently. As it turns out, for Haitian children this is the worst possible way for them to actually learn French—or anything else. Well-documented demographic and sociolinguistic facts reveal that most children in Haiti have little, if any, opportunity to be immersed in French in any systematic way, either at home or at school. Yet, it’s too often the case that teachers, from Kindergarten onward, devalue the children’s Kreyòl as some corrupt version of French. They, thus, devalue the children’s identity and self-confidence, their connections to family and community, and their chances for academic and professional success. In addition, by using French to teach literacy to children who speak only Kreyòl, the schools have created generations after generations of children who cannot read fluently and who have been accustomed to being silenced from their first day in school. Since these children barely understand the language (French) that they are supposed to be reading in, they often adopt, as a crutch, the life-long habit of sounding out letters into phonetic strings that they recite without comprehending.

The successes of school systems in countries like Finland suggest that children are most successful at learning second languages, and most everything else, when they have strong academic foundations, including literacy, in their home and community languages. From this perspective, literacy and other foundational academic skills in Kreyòl for Haitian children is a necessary step for the learning of second languages such as French, English, Spanish, etc. This is exactly what we see in cases of successful Kreyòl-based education as in the Lekòl Kominotè Matènwa (LKM) in La Gonâve, which, thanks to funding from U.S. institutions such as the National Science Foundation and World Vision, has now become a model for other schools in that area. The children at LKM are more successful by a couple of orders of magnitude as compared to other schools in the area that still favor French-based education.

In his 1996 book *Yon lekòl tèt anba nan yon peyi tèt an ba* (“An upside-down school in an upside-down country”) written in Kreyòl, Prof. Yves Dejean makes two very important remarks that summarize our concerns here and that provide additional observations and scholarly references to buttress our argument. First, when we look at countries that have been independent for more than one hundred years, Haiti is one of the rare nations that can boast a national language (i.e., Kreyòl) that *all* citizens speak, yet the schools in that country do not use that national language as the main language of instruction and examination. Second, Dejean explains that this “upside-down” use of French in Haiti blocks the country’s development.

LOCAL LANGUAGES AS FOUNDATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE & DEVELOPMENT

Among the several documents that were published by the Haitian government after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, one of them stands out because of its goal of diminishing social inequality and promoting Haiti's cultural values and heritage through education. In the 2010–2015 Operational Plan of the Ministry of National Education and Professional Training, the government announced the goal of “balanced bilingualism” whereby the whole country would eventually become fluent in both French and Kreyòl.

Given abject poverty levels and other challenges to development in Haiti, how could the country go from being mostly monolingual (with at least 90% *speaking only Kreyòl*) to bilingual with *everyone speaking two languages fluently*? This seems like an insurmountable task. Unfortunately, despite multiple plans and documents promoting the use of Kreyòl in education, Haitian schools continue to impose, from Kindergarten onwards, French as *the* main language of instruction and examination, even when the children, given their environment, do not stand any chance of becoming fluent in French, and even when the teachers themselves do not speak French fluently. These policies have no chance to achieving any substantial degree of bilingualism among the general population.

Furthermore, in many places in Haiti, students taking official exams don't have access to the Kreyòl versions of these exams. In situations when they do have access to the exams in Kreyòl, many prefer to take the exam in French, because they have already memorized the corresponding materials in French. Typically students do not have access to a full range of books in Kreyòl, and especially not in science and mathematics at the more advanced levels. Very often, the only official exams that students take in Kreyòl are the exams *about* Kreyòl as an object of abstract study. So even when schools teach Kreyòl, the language is not considered as a worthy tool for accessible quality education. For all the other official exams, the majority of students take them in French, which leads to regurgitating materials from texts that bear little relevance to their everyday life and problems—texts that they have memorized *by heart* in French, texts that they barely comprehend.

In too many Haitian classrooms, Kreyòl-speaking students are still punished and humiliated, and even expelled for speaking Kreyòl—outside of the few classes where they are taught about Kreyòl. Such punishment is in direct violation of the U.N. Convention on Children's Rights, which has been duly signed by the Haitian State though it has hardly been put in application. This is an issue that was recently taken up by the Haitian Creole Academy (*Akademi Kreyòl Ayisyen*) in a forum in Port-au-Prince in October 2016 on Haitian children's rights. Ironically, this forum was co-sponsored by Haiti's Ministry of Education, the Office for the Protection of Citizens, the Institute of Social Well-Being and the Faculty of Applied Linguistics of the State University of Haiti; all four of these institutions have yet to adopt, *in the actual practice in their own communications*, the use of Kreyòl as a co-official language, on a par with French. Consider, for example, the website of Haiti's State University, which includes the Faculty of Applied Linguistics and which is headed by a member of the Haitian Creole Academy. The website of that University is in French only! Ditto for the website of the Ministry of National Education—like that of most other State offices.

Meanwhile the punishment meted on children caught speaking Kreyòl often involves physical violence. Another common punishment for children caught speaking Kreyòl is called a “symbol.” This is a form of public punishment in which students are given a symbolic item such as a tag to affix on their shirts or hang on their necks if they are caught speaking Kreyòl at school. Teachers often ask students to keep lists of their peers who violate the no-Kreyòl policy. The student who is given the “symbol” and who can, then, catch another student speaking Kreyòl will pass the “symbol” to the next victim. Such forms of repression and public humiliation as punishment exist in many Haitian schools despite ongoing efforts to promote the use of Kreyòl as language of instruction. It must be noted that this practice of the “symbol” was inherited from the French who also used it in the 19th and 20th century in their efforts to eliminate regional languages such as Basque, Provençal, Breton, Occitan, etc.

This practice of punishing children because of their use of their mother tongue interferes with their skills, creativity and well-being, especially for those that come to school speaking only Kreyòl. Research shows that among ten children who enter the first grade, only one of them (10%) will finish

school. Interestingly, 10% is one of the percentages that have been reported for the proportion of Haitians in Haiti who speak French to various degrees, in addition to Kreyòl. The match between the reported percentage of bilingual students and those who finish school suggests that Haiti's school system plays a powerful role in producing and re-producing socio-economic inequalities through linguistic prejudices. In Haiti, the use of the former colonial language for "élite closure" and for geopolitical domination is one of the reasons for Haiti's underdevelopment, just as in many other countries in Asia and Africa in similar post-colonial situations—countries where schools impose a former colonial language as language of instruction instead of making productive use of the local languages spoken by the population. Studies sponsored by UNESCO have shown a substantial overlap across the set of undeveloped countries and the set of countries in which the languages spoken in students' homes are not the ones used as primary languages in their classrooms.

LOCAL LANGUAGES FOR ENHANCING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Thus emerges the transformative potential for the use of local vernacular languages in education worldwide. This observation takes me back to my role as Director of the MIT-Haiti Initiative. Indeed, the dire facts outlined above (namely, daily violations of best practice in education and of children's human rights) point to one key reason why STEM (alongside all other disciplines) should be taught in Kreyòl at all levels in Haiti, including university. According to the United Nations, every person on earth has the right to enjoy the benefits of science (see Article 15 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*). Access to science through local languages has been advocated, as a fundamental human right, in other post-colonial contexts such as in Africa. More generally the right to education in one's native language is another fundamental entitlement, enshrined in United Nations treaties such as the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child of the Right* (1989). The latter explicitly requires that member states ensure that education contributes to developing respect for the child's language and that the child enjoys the right to be educated in the native language.

Before the MIT-Haiti Initiative began, there were no Kreyòl-language online materials and digital learning tools for university-level science and mathematics. We have now started to provide such materials as online Open Education Resources. These resources will help to spread science and mathematics in Kreyòl to all as it is freely accessible online—or else on USB drives for remote areas that do not yet have Internet access. Since 2012, the Initiative has been providing teaching-training workshops in order to enhance highschool and university teachers' skills in active-learning pedagogy based on Kreyòl and on hands-on technology for education. The MIT-Haiti Initiative is collaborating with several partners in the United States and in Haiti, which are committed to the sort of curricular reform that will promote active learning with the help of digital tools in Kreyòl as well. For the first time in the history of Haiti, Kreyòl-language materials for science and mathematics have been developed for higher education. The quality of these materials has been tested, and they are ready to be spread throughout the country, with, hopefully, the much-awaited support of the Ministry of National Education. Yet the Haitian teachers in the Initiative are aware that their own preference for teaching in Kreyòl (the language in which they teach best) must be negotiated with the preference of Haitian society at large for French as a ticket for social-class mobility.

In order to truly succeed, the MIT-Haiti Initiative must continue working together and working more intensely with the following entities in order to help reach the ambitious objective of Quality Education For All: the Ministry of National Education, schools and universities (especially institutions in which students are still penalized for speaking Kreyòl), government offices, courts, telecommunication companies, funding agencies and NGOs engaged in education, etc. These institutions, though they still show ambivalence vis-à-vis the use of Kreyòl as a truly official language, can help us change the old prejudices that exclude Kreyòl from serious matters like STEM disciplines, State examinations, administration, justice, etc. Yet none of these institutions can do what every Haitian citizen can, and must, do, given the right incentives—namely, commit themselves to reading and writing in their native Kreyòl in order to, eventually, erase the prejudices of the past that consider Kreyòl as an inferior language that is not worth the effort to learn to read or write.

We conclude by returning to the premise of promoting children's rights and democratizing education by making it available to all without barriers worldwide. Specifically we wish to call out the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, along with all other local and international organizations engaged in education projects across the globe. It is only when international organizations like the U.N., alongside their Member States, pay detailed and concrete attention to linguistic diversity and to local languages that we will be able to protect children's rights worldwide and realistically envisage a world where access to quality education is truly democratic. *Therefore, for any project that receives support from such institutions, the latter should consider, as litmus test, whether such project systematically integrate children's native languages as an indispensable tool for inclusion and for education and development for all.* One fairly straightforward way to apply this litmus test is simply to check whether the project's documentation and pedagogical materials and curricula (website, social media, communiqués, syllabi, textbooks, examinations, etc.) are delivered in the corresponding local languages. Such litmus test can also provide longitudinal data to measure related progress on the part of relevant education projects vis-à-vis the use of local languages. Such progress can be measured in terms of the (hopefully, increasing) amount of materials made available to faculty and students in their native languages. Such utilization of native languages is a *precondition* for the respect of children's rights and for optimal investment in their future.

In the particular case of Haiti, it is easy to show that the vast majority of such documents are still written exclusively in French, thus excluding, in effect, the majority of the population. Thus arise daily violations of children's rights and human rights, amounting to a deeply entrenched "linguistic apartheid" that undermines any effort at education for all and sustainable development.

In a recent address on the role of culture in sustainable development, Irina Bokova, director of UNESCO, stressed the importance of learning in one's native language: "Culturally sensitive curricula can improve literacy, the quality of education and ultimately education outcomes. (It is)... particularly relevant when students are taught in their mother tongue" (May 5, 2014). We argue that this is also particularly relevant when thinking about children's rights, anti-discrimination, quality education and equal opportunity for all. Indeed, local languages have the potential to dramatically enlarge the pool of students with access to high-quality resources in their native languages. This sort of linguistic equity is a pre-condition to equal protection and non-discrimination among the world's children.¹

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MIT Linguistics | <http://linguistics.mit.edu/>

MIT-Haiti Initiative | <https://haiti.mit.edu>

Akademi Kreyòl Ayisyen | <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100005268250604&fref=ts>

¹ For further information about the rationale and prospects of the MIT-Haiti Initiative and larger issues of equity in education and development, please visit these links:

<http://1.usa.gov/1JUdvyt>

<http://videohall.com/p/519> ,

<http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2013/mit-haiti-initiative-0417.html> ,

<http://tech.mit.edu/V133/N20/haiti.html> ,

<http://edutechdebate.org/cultural-heritage-and-role-of-education/mit-haiti-initiative-uses-haitian-creole-to-make-learning-truly-active-constructive-and-interactive/>

<http://nyti.ms/1ohUIOf>

<http://newsoffice.mit.edu/2015/3-questions-michel-degraff-haiti-teaching-kreyol-0720>

<http://bostonreview.net/forum/what-education/michel-degraff-michel-degraff-responds-danielle-allen> ,

<http://web.mit.edu/fnl/volume/291/miller.html>