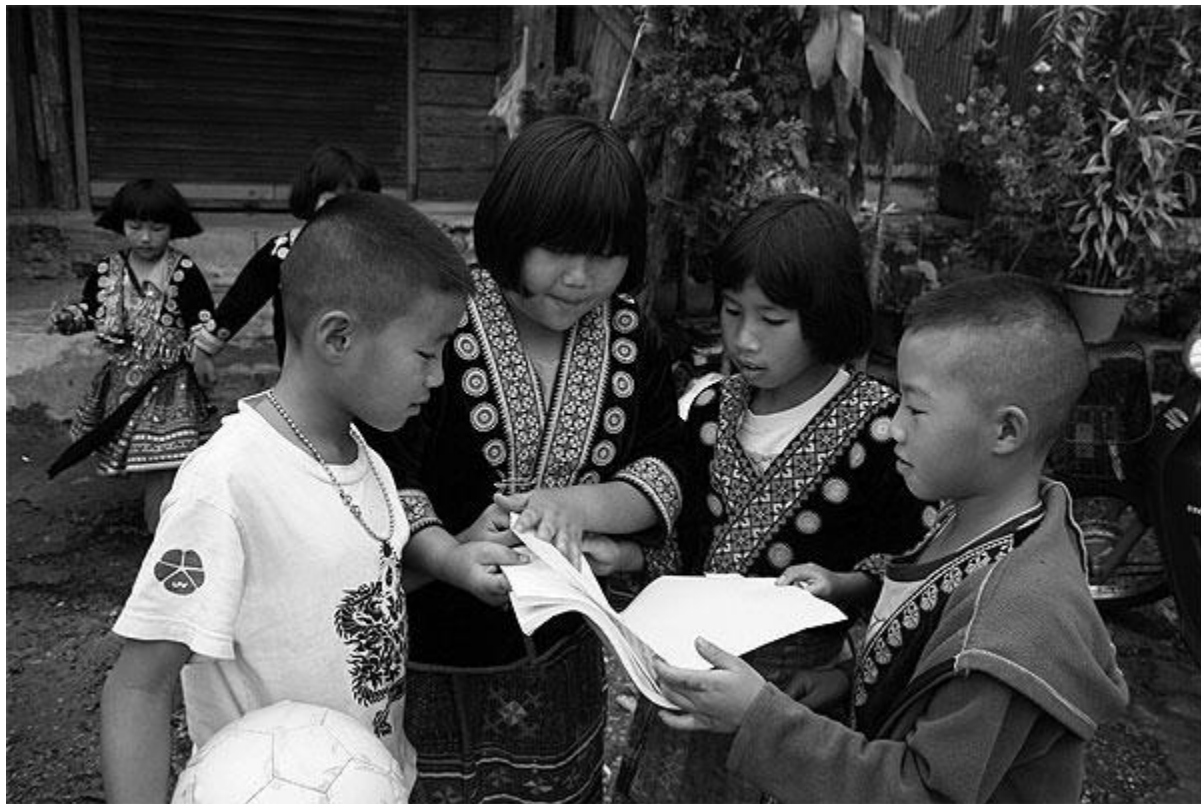


## Preserving language diversity

### Forum links languages to a better world

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The power of language to save and improve lives was a key theme at a recent Bangkok conference on language, education and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).



Students in a small hill tribe village in Chiang Mai gather round to read a story that has been donated to their school. NATTAKARN LIMPHAIBOOL

Four hundred delegates from six continents, including teachers, government officials and advocates, discussed best practices to effectively incorporate language and education into strategies and policies to achieve the MDGs and Education for All (EFA).

As nations achieve different levels of progress towards the collective MDGs and EFA, ahead of the 2015 deadline, minorities remain at risk of being left behind.

The Asia-Pacific region is home to hundreds of diverse and unique ethno-linguistic groups. Not all of these groups are able to take advantage of development and poverty reduction opportunities.

People from ethno-linguistic minority groups are often hindered in their efforts to overcome poverty, illiteracy and disease, frequently while facing increasing risks of conflict arising from exclusion.

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva made a commitment in his opening speech that his administration would protect diversity and give children from ethnic groups the right to use their mother tongue.

He said his government had worked hard to protect and promote cultural diversities, as shown at schools where the curriculum included the study of local languages.

He also promised to appoint a cabinet-level committee to ensure the recently-approved Royal Institute of Thailand's National Language Policy to ensure the right of ethnic children to have their mother tongue included in a school curriculum is put into practice in education, as well as in health care, commerce and human security.

Mr Abhisit said education department officials had cooperated on programmes to encourage mother tongue-based multilingual education, especially in border areas in the South.

Students in pilot schools in southern provinces have learned to read and write in their native Pattani Malay, which serves as a bridge to Thai, the national language.

He said: "The children are doing very well. In fact, they are seldom absent; they participate enthusiastically; their self-confidence is growing; and their Thai-language abilities are already 35 percent higher than those of similar students in monolingual Thai control schools. In addition to improved language abilities, we've also seen increased performance in science, mathematics and other subjects."

Mr Abhisit said minority groups are culturally enriching to a country. "Our nation is home to 70 unique ethno-linguistic groups - a wealth of diversity that I personally consider to be one of our national treasures."

Dr Gwang-Jo Kim, director of Unesco Bangkok, said languages are not just tools for communication, but that they also help to shape the identity of individuals and communities, as well as serve as a key element in social integration and cultural development.

"As such, languages are strategically important for the achievement of national and international development goals," he said.

The conference featured four thematic tracks. The Language and Universal Primary Education track was based on the idea that languages are dynamic because people and their culture constantly adapt to a changing world and language-based development can help build a communication bridge between local and global communities.

The Language and Gender Equality track focused on knowledge of the critical linkages between language and gender and the way in which language impacts the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment. The Health, Nutrition and Protection track promoted awareness of the critical linkages between languages and protection.

The Language and Sustainable Development track provided in-depth analysis of the role of language in promoting and achieving sustainable development with a focus on poverty reduction and environmental conservation.

Language as a communication tool may either facilitate or restrict access to resources to alleviate extreme poverty, mitigate environmental degradation and ensure sustainable development.

Languages also save lives. For children under five years of age, the mortality rate is reduced when information on health and nutrition, disease prevention and treatment is understood, while the inability to communicate can lead to fatal consequences.

Ethno-linguistic communities can combat malaria and other illnesses when they have the resources and capability to obtain essential health knowledge.

Likewise, a mother is better able to care for herself and her family when she is literate, in her mother tongue, and has access to health information in a language she fully understands.

Despite progress made in knowledge-sharing sessions at the conference, keynote speaker Professor Suzanne Romaine of Oxford University painted a sobering picture of the EFA challenges facing the global community.

Data from a 2010 Millennium Development Goals Report in her presentation revealed that around 69 million children of primary school age are not in school, with the worst shortfalls in Africa and South Asia.

Enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa continues to be at the bottom among all regions, despite having increased by 18 percent (from 58 percent to 76 percent) between 1999 and 2008.

Almost half of the out-of-school children (31 million) are in sub-Saharan Africa and over a quarter (18 million) in Southern Asia.

Professor Romaine also highlighted an impending global language extinction, with linguists predicting that as many as 60 to 90 percent of the world's languages may disappear within the next 100 years. Again, language preservation is the key. Without it, the goal of EFA translates into education for some, rather than for all.

"We can achieve a genuine bottom-up participatory process of sustainable development only by bringing in new voices speaking in many languages. Language will cease to matter only when we assume that languages matter," Professor Romaine said.

The conference was jointly organised by Unesco, Unicef, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (Seameo), SIL International, the Royal Institute of Thailand, Mahidol University's Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Save the Children, Care, and the Asia South Pacific Association For Basic and Adult Education (Aspbae).

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