

**Multilingual Education in Bangladesh:  
Promoting Quality Primary Education for Indigenous Children.**

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Having an unfamiliar language as a medium of instruction seriously affected the attendance rates of schoolchildren in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh. Since children do not speak Bangla – the official language and medium in education system – the drop-out rate in primary education became 60 per cent, twice the national rate. To remedy the worsening situation, the government took significant policy decisions to introduce primary education in the mother tongue of indigenous children, but to date, policy remains largely unimplemented. Some NGOs have piloted the mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTBMLE) in the CHT region. They began on three-language modules and now have eight languages, supported by GOB-UNDP and the EC.

The positive results show that a child-friendly approach to language ensures children enjoy and understand their education, eventually learning the national language successfully. The learning process and interaction through the first language works best with the family providing inspiration, a process that is continued by teachers in the classroom. With this approach, children receive a strong foundation for intellectual and social growth.

The need for MTBMLE is increasingly recognized at the grassroots and policy level. The community has a strong presence in all project activities, especially in the development of orthography and learning materials in local languages. The government recognized primary education in the mother tongue of indigenous people in its recent National Education Policy 2009, and a national forum on MLE has been established to support MTBMLE initiatives through technical and policy support from government line ministries.