

## **The best start: Supporting minority language speaking children in their early years of education in Myanmar**

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Myanmar is divided into Divisions (mainly central areas and predominantly Bamar-speaking) and States (home to mainly ethnic groups with their own languages).

Save the Children (SC) in Myanmar's Education/ECCD (Early Childhood Care and Development) program works in 13 townships over three Divisions (Sagaing, Magwe and Ayerawaddy) and two States; Kayin, and Shan (north and south). It is planned that the program will eventually reach 230,000 children between the ages of 0-8 years with ECCD-related services and engagement with grades 1 and 2 of primary school. A total of 50% of the children are and will be from ethno-linguistic communities.

Myanmar is ethnically and linguistically extremely diverse. Most children in the ECCD programs in the States are not exposed to the second language (Myanmar) at home. National policy is that schools are conducted in the Myanmar language. Therefore the second language needs to be taught so that children are equipped with a minimum level to start school.

SC's Children's Language Policy sets the country context alongside accepted theory around language acquisition and teaching medium. It recognises that although learning is more effective in the early years of primary education if in the mother tongue, the reality for many children from diverse ethnolinguistic communities in Myanmar is that they will be taught in the L2.

The program aims to equip children with adequate Myanmar language so that their learning is not impaired when they go to primary school.

SC's Early Learning and Transition to Primary School Program focuses on the following: Yrs 0-3, Parental Education; Yrs 3-5, Centre-based ECD; Yrs 6-8, Transition to School and support to Grades 1 and 2.

Bringing the policy to life means: a) Employing ECCD staff who speak/understand the ethnic language(s); b) Peer learning: "pairing-up" children who can speak some Myanmar language to work with those with none; c) Starting all activities in the ethnic language and, over time, introducing Myanmar; d) undertaking learning activities bilingually and in stages; e) telling illustrated stories first in the ethnic language and then introducing some key Myanmar language.

The project also supports parenting programmes to continue the development of L1 at home and through community and other games and activities.

A mid-term evaluation found impressive evidence of improved learning and development outcomes for young children that have benefited from the ECCD intervention. These include improvements in health, cognitive, language, physical, social, and 'learning skills' (from PE and ECCD centres). Physical development gains have been particularly marked for ethnic children in the States.

The evaluation found that as a result of ECCD there were; significant and highly significant gains in receptive vocabulary (in the mother tongue)—this was highly significant gains in the States, where the starting point is lower; significant and highly significant gains in visual-motor perceptual skills; increased average weight and height, especially for ethnic children in States.

**Conclusions:** Programming must be relevant to the context. An approach which combines community and national level policy combines credibility and evidence with the potential for wider scale up; use creativity.