

Multi-lingual Education and Empowerment of Indigenous Communities in the Cambodian Highlands

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SUMMARY

A multi-lingual education (MLE) program has been empowering the ethnic minority Kavet people of the northeast highlands of Cambodia, despite initial skepticism from the local authorities. The Cambodian government gave approval in 2003 for the vernacular writing system for the indigenous peoples.

When we started out there we had no trained teachers and there was no educational program for people in Ratanakiri, which means “The Jewel in the Mountains”. When we started out in 1996, only 20% of the males and 2% of the females were literate. These were backward and primitive people, just out of a civil war.

Initially it was very difficult. They are widely scattered people and we spent four days walking from village to village, eventually meeting up with the headman we needed to meet.

We started the first bilingual pilot project after obtaining an agreement with the government.

The model piloted in Ratanakiri first develops literacy skills in the vernacular, before progressing to the national language, Khmer. Students learn to read first in their mother tongue, and transfer these skills to the national language. By the end of the approximately three year basic literacy programme, they can read and write both languages. The communities are highly motivated to become literate as well as produce materials in their own languages. They said, “literacy is empowerment”.

We worked in six villages and dealt with 2,000 people. We worked at empowering the community by providing a packet of lessons and teaching teachers. The teachers were from the community and the classroom was wherever it needed to be, under a tree, under a house (on stilts). We brought in solar panels. We were “the best show in town”.

We made sure to get all the leaders involved, either as teachers or advisors. Everybody wanted to learn to read. We had challenges in that we had no money and no funding. Twenty students would often share one song book. There are no primary schools in the Kavet area.

In 2009, we ran a Kavet writers workshop. We encouraged the people to write their own songs, stories and histories. In the end they ended up reading their own stories in print.

We had the first children to graduate from primary school and one student has gone on to study nursing.

When it came to the women, there was strong participation. What we found was that community ownership was key.

The people are highly motivated to break the tradition of illiteracy as well as produce materials in their own languages. The strong community support and a bilingual approach have helped project implementation.

The success of the approach was quickly seen by local education officials and NGO staff, demonstrated by the large numbers of girls attending classes regularly and completing the literacy modules. The Khmer-language only literacy classes had been full of male students, however the female learners usually dropped out by mid-year as they could not understand the language of instruction.

Cambodia still faces many challenges to achieving Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education For All (EFA) goals. However, communities participating in MLE are better equipped to maintain their cultural identity and natural resources in the face of modernisation.

We are happy to say that nationwide, there are many organizations working for minorities.

DISCUSSIONS

Question: What is the next step for the Kavet community? Will they go on to multilingual education? Where will they be in 10-15 years time?

Answer: The community is open and the program responds to the needs of the community. What we find is that some NGOs can't adjust. When you work with a community you have to be flexible

This program was for the short term with the aim to help all people to become literate. We want to develop this program in both provinces and to include other people. We want to help all pockets of people, and to develop a sustainable pool of people who can get government or NGO jobs. We need to develop the people in the long term, so that we can see minority nurses, doctors and teachers. We would like to see the government take over the programs.

Question: With the Kavet nurse, what curriculum was followed? Did she have to integrate local beliefs?

Answer: The northeastern training program was very thorough and effective. She started with practicum. What she says is she can talk to the patients in their own language. The patients like talking to me, she said. She was really excited and this gave her more confidence.

Question: Will you be able to help more women?

Answer: Yes. We are providing scholarships. We have a list of students. This is escalating and expanding.