

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

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Bangladesh has some 45 different indigenous groups, with a major concentration of these in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The language of education is Bangla, the national language. 60% of children from indigenous groups drop out of primary education and the language barrier was identified as one of the prime causes. Most indigenous languages do not have a written form (exceptions include Chakma, Marma, Garo, Tripura, Bawm).

Challenges in education of indigenous students

Challenges include the difficulty for children in accessing education, both physically and culturally. Other issues include the language barrier, the low quality of teachers; inconsistency between the education system and local cultural practices; and high levels of poverty.

The SC Chittagong hill tracts program: SC started in three languages; Chakma (which has its own script), Tripura (adapts Roman script) and Marma (uses Burmese script). The program worked with children for two years in pre-primary with transition to primary schools in grade 1. There is bridging at the pre-primary level before children enter formal primary education. A culturally appropriate curriculum in line with national curriculum was developed, along with materials

Overview of the program: 2 yrs pre-primary with transition to primary schools in grade 1. Bridging starts at pre-primary stage before children enter formal primary education. The program developed a culturally appropriate curriculum in line with national curriculum and standard. It reached decisions working closely with local communities about orthography, script, etc. and developed local language teaching and learning materials. Also a national Multilingual Education (MLE) forum was formed to bring the issue to policy-makers. At the national policy level it has been decided to introduce pre-primary education in the mother tongue.

Lessons learned: The short duration of the bridging process (6 months) from pre-primary to primary is not enough for children's confidence. Common understanding on MLE among all the actors is still required. There are still debates and a requirement for consensus on orthography and scripts. Central government is more active than local government on MLE.

Though there is now evidence for MLE in pre-primary, which is a crucial tool for policy advocacy, but there are no examples of successful MLE in primary schools.

Key recommendations: More awareness-building/knowledge-sharing initiatives for the different level of stakeholders is needed. Scripts and orthography issues need to be resolved through effective and meaningful participation of respective language speakers. Expert accompaniment is needed for upcoming government initiatives. There needs to be a clear action plan for implementing government commitment on MLE. Full implementation of the Chittagong Hills Tract Peace Accord is necessary.

Current actors in the field: *NGOs:* Ashroy, Zabarang, GK, CIPRAD, BRAC, Caritas and many others. *UN/International Agencies:* UNDP, Save the Children, SIL. *Government:* Hill District Councils, Department of Primary Education, Ministry of Education, National Curriculum and Textbook Board.