

Final Plenary panel: Lessons Learned and the Paths Forward.

Lessons learned and future action to be taken - Track One: Language and Universal Primary Education findings:

- Evidence presented in Track 1 sessions clearly demonstrated that in the Asia-Pacific region children from most ethno-linguistic minority – and even some dominant – communities, whose first language is not used in education, are marginalized in terms of educational access, retention and achievement. One reason for this is that the learners' first language (or mother tongue or home language) is not used as a language of education. The result is that these children are not learning or their learning is being delayed.
- To respond considerable experience, practices and passion across the region is striving to change this situation – at the local, sub-national, and national levels – through changes in understanding, practice and policy, by civil society organisations and government institutions. A general consensus exists amongst Track 1 presenters that children who speak minority or non-dominant languages need opportunities to develop their first language first and through the use of it, become successful learners. In addition, these children need to learn the national language of a given country and in most cases also a third language such as a regional or international language, which in most cases is English. Consequently, mother tongue- (or first language-) based multilingual education (MLE) can be an important approach to address the education challenges due to language and contribute towards achieving the Millennium Development Goal 2 – Universal Primary Education (UPE).
- The exclusion of minority and other non-dominant languages from learning is not always a question of number of speakers of the language, but it is often more a question of respect and understanding. Non-dominant languages as languages of instruction are still a sensitive issue in many countries; as a result, restrictions are imposed upon how they can be used in education.
- Discussions in Track 1 recommended that restrictions be replaced with clear and pedagogically sound policies to identify the role of local languages in education, in order to ensure the successful learning of children who are speakers of non-dominant languages. Clear policies and actions would empower and demonstrate respect for ethno-linguistic minority peoples. Such a step creates a more cohesive society better enabling individual, community and national development.
- Successful learning and education is not only a language issue but it is also a cultural issue. Education needs to adapt to the context of children – where they come from, what languages they speak, as well as how they think and understand the world.
- Learning needs to begin at the beginning. Therefore, Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) should be the starting point for life-long learning using the child's first language as its foundation. Pre-primary education based on the learner's first language is essential for educational success in primary education.
- Orthography development, choice of scripts (in many parts of South and Mainland Southeast Asia), and decision-making in these processes are often sensitive and contested issues in terms of 1) writing local oral languages; and 2) using these languages as languages of literacy. The active involvement of the “owners” of non-dominant languages, i.e. members of ethno-linguistic communities, is essential for successful orthography development. Experience has also demonstrated that children can successfully learn more than one script.
- More research, experimentation and documentation are needed in order to find possible solutions to yet untackled challenges to multilingual education – for example – “multilingual schools and classrooms”, and the use of multiple scripts for writing a single language.
- Finally, Track 1 sessions presented sufficient evidence confirming the fact that unless the language of education issue is addressed, and the use of mother tongue-based multilingual education increases, the Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development goals will not be met in many countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

- Consequently, hundreds of thousands of children, especially rural girls, will not receive a quality education, and will not have learnt the basic knowledge and skills they need to be successful life-long learners.

Track Two: Language and Gender Equality delegates said the sessions had provided a forum to explore issues and identify ways to make policies more gender responsive by effectively integrating linguistic considerations into education. The group’s key findings were:

- There is a critical and urgent need to incorporate a “gender lens” in all work with ethno-linguistic communities.
- When implemented jointly, language and gender advocacy can strengthen and accelerate the achievements of the MDGs. “Speaking in one voice is important in both gender and language work.”
- It is imperative to advance the cause of the MDGs through evidence-based advocacy and communication in order to shed light on underlying linguistic, cultural and social variants in the achievement of gender equality.
- Resources such as gender tool kits and advocacy and policy briefs and other associated tools should be used to improve efforts to address gender disparities.
- A profound message was: “One size does not fit all!” It is critical that interested parties understand the context and customise the collective approach to language and gender in order to ensure ownership and join partnerships with all stakeholders, including children.

Track Three: Language, Health, Nutrition and Protection delegates reported the following findings:

- High cost is a dominant factor when language, health and nutrition programmes are implemented in linguistically and culturally appropriate ways. However; the ultimate cost of ignoring linguistic considerations “can be high as human life itself”.
- In a crisis situation, the risk of poor communication increases the risk of human life exponentially.
- Data on health is insufficient and lacking, even for dominant groups.
- Institutional inflexibility in crisis situations: There is a need for better cooperation and communication. Most interventions are technical and assume translations are sufficient for understanding.
- There is a need to be more resourceful in crisis and post-crisis interventions.
- A greater awareness of local perception of diseases is needed. Innovations/improvements include using school settings more creatively. Children can become partners for change by taking home their new-found health knowledge and spreading awareness with family/community members.

Track Four, Language and Sustainable Development reported the following key issues:

- Languages become barriers for many indigenous people in virtually every area of their daily lives, so they become disadvantaged in all spheres of their activities.
- Education in MT was felt to be strongly necessary, although not always fulfilled, especially in Africa.
- Respect and understanding for local people must be at the forefront, ahead of introducing new changes.

Panel of Four – Key Findings:

Dr. Clare O’ Leary:

- A key message is the conference has been a “Forum for Learning”. It is important that civil society, governments and communities work together. There has been a growth in this commitment, but many questions have been raised over the last three days about how far this commitment goes.
- There is a need to engage the donor community more intensively. I hope that we will see a “perfect storm” of practitioners, the donor community and interested parties coming together to make the collective effort more effective.
- The greater participation of community-based organisations is a healthy development that will help to develop better practices.
- More governments are convinced of the positive results and growth of commitments.
- There is greater harmony even with the great diversity of backgrounds. The question remains: How we can maximize contribution and role of language?

H.E Toya Nath Battarai:

- MLE is the fundamental right of every community, every person and every child to have an education in their home language.
- In the context of Nepal, how do we make best use of our opportunities after several years of struggle/conflict? The positive experience and achievements in Nepal can be a lesson for the global community.
- For countries undergoing political change (as in Nepal), language policy is one of the first areas of concern and discussion.
- The conference has been inclusive because participants brought different viewpoints, cultures and languages and delegates have been able to share their experiences for the common good.
- Representatives sent to parliament need greater support. Concept papers can be used as advocacy tools. The general public and the wider community need to be made more aware as parliament alone cannot solve all the problems.
- To make programmes fit differing contexts and societies: “Bring MLE to real life.”
- “If you are not following your own agenda, you are following someone else’s agenda. So make sure that you follow a system that is relevant to the context of the country you are working in.”

Dr. Suzanne Romaine:

- The eighth MDG is to cooperate and this conference has been a good example of this resolution as knowledge sharing has been achieved through the organization of this conference.
- I have mixed feelings about the likelihood of meeting the MDGs and EFA: Feel hopeful as: there are many problems, but these problems are interconnected; language is the missing link; a positive is that many people are doing good work on the assorted issues.
- Feel despair: There is a large body of evidence indicating the importance of language to SIL; there is a need to get the issues onto a bigger agenda; the message is not getting to the right people; different groups and organizations are scattered all over the world, so how do we address these communication problems?

Dr. Vilma Labrador:

- Philosophy of Education and Language: Our students are not in school just to pass tests. At the end of the day, we have to ask: Did we lift up the lives of our students because we taught them in school?
- Principle of language learning/curriculum development: beautiful words celebrate the diversity of our culture/people/language being taught in school. If we don’t recognize these

attributes, aliens can appear: the first alien can be the language being used in the school; the second alien can be the teacher.

- Practices: i. Need to be replicated, scaled-up, ii. There is no harm in copying as long as it is good for the people.
- “Passion and Commitment are paramount”. Someone said in our track session: “Don’t get tired. Keep the flame burning and act together to move development forward. Make oneself the strong bridge for raising the bar!”

Moderator Dr. Cliff Meyer’s summary:

- We need real engagement of what the challenges are: What is working? what is not working? It is important to find champions. These champions are not necessarily in education. Sometimes they are in popular media and culture. They could be singer-songwriters, artists, or football players who become champions that “break down the dams that were holding back, not only the progress in education, but also in the MDGs”.
- Regarding the implementation costs of differing programmes, there are many cost-effective ways to implement programmes. In the past in Asia, five or six years ago, when we had this first conference, the evidence base was thin. But now we are discussing things and the challenge of how to sell it. Another issue is how do we get (our evidence) into the right hands? In the present context, we have more champions, policy, budgets, the perceptions, both nationally and locally.
- We have to convince parents that education in their own language is good for their children.
- We need to involve other partners, such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and other organizations who are interested in what we are doing and aware of what we are doing, but we don’t yet have them as “sit at the table partners.”
- For those in education, there is a “fast-track” initiative. This is a global mechanism for supporting education programmes in developing countries. As this is being reformed, the notion of reducing disparities and addressing equity is becoming higher, but there is still a need for a greater push. All partners need to keep-up the collective good work and camaraderie.
- As a final point, there is a commitment here in Bangkok through our regional working group on minority languages. This working group now has a life of its own. It is a permanent standing committee bringing together partners. It is building a collaborative base on which to do follow-up on many of the points that were raised. There is a commitment here in Bangkok to continue working and to see our efforts bear fruit.

Discussion and Questions

Q. My question concerns the sustainability development of native English teachers in non-native English speaking countries. How can they understand and promote the culture of the countries they are teaching in, where English has never been spoken as a first language?

A. This question wasn’t addressed.

Q. How do we strengthen even more this link politically, financially, conceptually between the importance of promoting mother tongue/bilingual education and starting early, not only in pre-school, but in the family, the promotion of mother tongue cognitive stimulation of children?

A. This question wasn’t addressed.

Floor comment: I am interested in your comment that you (panellist) as an English teacher are advocating MTE, and an additional point I am interested in the fear we have in the Philippines that

when we begin teaching science and mathematics in the native languages we are going to lose the English advantage and a degree of English proficiency.

Panellist's reply: The Philippines is well known for being an English speaking nation, because we have been using English as a medium of instruction for a long time. But look at the economic condition of our country. Did English save us from poverty? Learning is understanding! If you understand all the principals, it is so easy to transfer the thought to another language. That is why I push for the policy of the mother tongue. The principal of education is to start where you are. Start from the language you have and it is so easy to learn English after you start from the mother tongue.

Floor comment: We need to strengthen and widen our partnerships. It was interesting that someone mentioned: what is happening with the donor engagement? I was previously with the World Bank and I shared some information with someone at the World Bank about the conference before coming here, and his comment was 'this looks really interesting', but because of his prior commitments could not attend this conference but he said it would be interesting to see the outcomes of this conference. So I would like the conference organizers to share the points with the World Bank and other partners. I would also like to make the point that us practitioners need to be more practical and not just go to education partners, but we need to go beyond education managers and start talking to the planning people, the finance people. They are the ones that make the decisions eventually and this is what matters. We have to know how to interest the finance and planning people.

Floor comment: UNESCO is in charge of education. I have a feeling that they are doing a great job recommending and saying "we have to do this. We have to do that." However the Africa Steering Group for the MDGs is too elitist. I want to believe that we have to do more. [Change] is not in the books. It is not in scientific discourse. We want to see practical things done and for this to happen, we need to reach people who can make things happen. The people who go to the meetings, the people who drive the big cars, take the big decisions without consulting people at the grass-roots level. If the people who make the decisions talk to the people on the ground, they can adjust; they do a more successful job.

Q. How do we do South-South cooperation?

This question wasn't addressed

Panellists comment: Speaking as an academic at heart, I want to ask those of you in academic institutions to keep working on the academic research and documentation. Of the kind I have heard increasingly spoken of at this conference. It does make a big difference. I would also like to challenge you to think about what kind of research speaks to those we want to advocate among. I think some of us in academia speak to ourselves. But if we want good research to make change we have to think about who we are communicating to. That really needs to change in terms of research. We have to ensure that we have good research documentation that speaks in the language of the donor communities.

Extracts from Dr. Festo Kavishe's (Deputy Regional Director of UNICEF-EAPRO) closing speech:

"Two decades after its wide ratification, the Convention on the Rights of the Child has shown that when children's rights are ensured, countries benefit. When children are healthy, enjoy quality education and are protected from harm, their living standards, and that of their families, increase. Investment in children should thus remain a priority of socio-economic development.

"Despite the broader socioeconomic progress made, many of world's ethno-linguistic minorities lag behind, facing greater risks of illiteracy, impoverishment, and conflict. While the MDGs have been instrumental in articulating the agenda for mobilization of critical resources, we must now accelerate

our effort to reach the poorest and the most vulnerable children and families. Without equitable results, we can neither claim nor sustain progress towards human development aspired by the Human Rights Declaration and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

“The challenges and tasks we face in this effort are complex and impossible to achieve for any one of us to achieve alone. I am thus inspired to see the tremendous strength of our collective scholarship and collaboration, represented by the wide range of partners and advocates from various capacities in government, international organizations, civil society, and academia from around world.

“The past three days have proved to be an extremely rich and stimulating time of inquiry and dialogue, demonstrating the tireless commitment and efforts you are making to promote the importance of linguistic diversity and multilingualism and the appreciation of its integral role in development.

“Linguistic diversity: a means and an end for progress towards MDGs

“Languages shape our identity. In an increasingly rootless world, threatened by the globalization of communication and promotion of the use of a single, dominant language, it is our own language that often gives us the sense of belonging and community. Appreciation and understanding of the importance of linguistic diversity are essential to safeguarding and extending the cultural identity and heritage.

“However, it is also the inextricable role of language in the educational, social and economic fabric of our societies that the acquisition of national and languages has become the central concern of education systems, as we seek to break down the barriers that continue to marginalize the millions of ethno-linguistic minorities from the most fundamental rights and services.

“Language differences can determine genuine opportunities and barriers to learning and development, to gender equality, to accessing health and protection, HIV/AIDS services and to rising out of extreme poverty. For children, in particular, barriers to learning in their own language, especially in the early years, can have irreversible impacts on their future potential.

“Furthermore, it is evident that access to and quality of: care and development; health, protection and other basic services must be understood from the broader social, cultural and economic processes that are inextricably linked to affect the lives of ethno-linguistic minorities. Realities of their ways of life and their heritage are invaluable and must be respected, if we are to achieve meaningful progress in development.

“Over the years, we have built a solid knowledge basis to identify and implement strategies that makes positive difference for children and families of ethno-linguistic minorities. But many questions and tasks remain for us to tackle in our respective capacities as policymakers, researchers and scholars, and development partners.

“We need to continue efforts in: building rigorous evidence in identifying effective mother-tongue based interventions for solid early childhood care and development; in developing strategies to manage competing priorities and demands among local, national and international languages; and in implementing effective activities to improve access to basic information and services in health, nutrition, protection and sustainable environment.

“Translating theory and evidence into strategic, effective advocacy will be key to addressing the deep-rooted biases and ideological, political differences that continue to prevail and hinder formulation and implementation of critical policies.

“As the impact of the economic crisis continues to reverberate throughout regions and nations, we need to prioritize and intensify investments that benefit the most vulnerable and mitigate the widening disparities, long term socioeconomic and human costs which will be too costly for any one nation. Policies and strategies across sectors, from central to local levels, must reflect these intentions.

“In doing so, let us ensure political will and development processes that fosters tolerance and mutual respect for the dignity and human rights for all. When the rights of children, families and communities remain central motivations, it unleashes the doors to understanding why linguistic diversity and multilingualism is sensible and right in practice.

“Ultimately, we need to promote societies where differing languages do not separate peoples, but instead, unites us with equitable development that celebrates the cultures and heritage that enrich our lives.

“UNICEF and the partners remain your closest allies in this effort.

Words of gratitude:

All participants from around the world who have demonstrated commitment and leadership;

Speakers who have shared great knowledge, insight and experiences;

“Conference sponsoring organizations, including UNESCO, Save the Children, SIL International, SEAMEO, CARE, Asia Institute of Technology, the Royal Thai Institute, and the Asia Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education;

“Special thanks are due to Mahidol University and the numerous volunteers and supporters for their tireless efforts behind the scenes in making the conference a success.”

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