

Address by Dr. Gwang-Jo Kim
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**on the Occasion of the International conference on “*Language, Education*
and the Millennium Development Goals”**
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Your Excellency, Mr. Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva,
Professor Napatawn Banchuin, Vice President of Mahidol University,
Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

1. I am pleased to welcome you to the international conference on ***“Language, Education and the Millennium Development Goals”***. This conference is co-sponsored by UNESCO Bangkok and a host of other organizations¹: the Asia Multilingual Education Working Group, **RILCA, SIL** International, **UNICEF, SEAMEO, CARE**, Save the Children, Royal Thai Institute, ASEAN Regional Centre of Excellence on MDGs, and the **ASPABAE. Indeed a very distinguished group!**

2. Nelson Mandela once said, and I quote: ***“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart”***.

3. That sums up very well the reason we are here today – that languages are important, that languages do matter. They are not just tools for communication; they help shape the identity of individuals and communities, and serve as a key element in social integration and cultural development. As such, languages are strategically important for the

¹ **RILCA** = Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia; **SEAMEO** = Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization; **ASPABAE** = Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education.

achievement of national and international development goals, including the MDGs and EFA goals.

4. Despite aggregate gains in achieving the MDGs worldwide, the sad reality is that development for the world's ethno-linguistic minorities continues to lag behind, putting them at risk for greater disparities. This, in turn, will hinder efforts to reduce poverty, improve the quality of education, provide equitable health services, and promote peace.
5. Throughout the world, communities are discovering that using their languages in various aspects of their lives can help them identify solutions to challenges related to the MDGs. For example, in ethno-linguistic communities where life-changing information is communicated in a language they understand, income improvement and hunger relief are achieved.
6. And it is now widely recognized that higher literacy rates often result in higher per capita incomes. Primary education programs that begin in the mother tongue help students gain literacy and numeracy skills more quickly; when taught in their local language, students readily transfer literacy skills to official languages of education, thereby acquiring essential tools for lifelong learning.
7. In regard to health issues and mortality rate: for children under five years of age, mortality rate is reduced when information about disease prevention and treatment is understood, while the opposite can lead to dangerous or even fatal consequences. Ethno-linguistic communities can combat diarrhea, malaria and other common illnesses when they have the

resources and capability to obtain essential health knowledge. Likewise, a mother is better able to care for herself and her family when she is literate – in her mother tongue – and has access to health information in a language she fully understands.

8. Sufficient evidence exists to prove the importance of mother tongue in language in helping achieve the MDGs: from environmental preservation principles linked with traditional knowledge of flora and fauna, to enhancement of global partnerships among ethno-linguistic communities, national and international societies through communication and mutual understanding, and to broader exchange of traditional knowledge using available information and communication technologies.
9. Given UNESCO's broad mandate, our activities are interdisciplinary in nature and cover UNESCO's five main programme areas: education, natural and human sciences, culture, and communication and information. Our interventions take various forms: capacity building, research and analysis, raising awareness, developing networks, and disseminating information.
10. In regard to languages and multilingualism, for example, our work is spread over the main programmes – promoting universal access to information and wider access to ICTs using a greater number of languages, monitoring languages policy, language endangerment and translation flows. We also advocate and support bilingual education, especially the use of mother-tongues, at all levels of the education system and in both formal and non-formal settings, enhance communication and collaboration between scientific researchers and institutions across

linguistic divides, language, migrations and urbanisation and other social issues such as exclusion and poverty.

11. This conference draws upon the strength of all sponsoring organizations. It brings together high-level representatives from government and inter-governmental agencies, NGOs, the academia, as well civil society organizations to raise awareness on the subject, discuss and agree on concrete actions.
12. Over the next three days, there will be dialogues on the state of development of ethno-linguistic minorities and the relevance of local languages in achieving education and development goals. More importantly, participants will discuss ways to develop programs and policy frameworks to better reach these underserved groups.
13. From my end, I am hoping that this conference will provide a forum to enhance understanding, inspire concrete actions, and increase access to education and development opportunities for ethno-linguistic communities with the ultimate goal of achieving the MDGs and EFA goals by
 - a. increasing understanding of the linkages between language and achievement of the goals,
 - b. fostering connections among a broad set of actors to support activities that integrate language and education as crosscutting themes, and

- c. informing policy-makers and development partners on best practices to effectively incorporate language and education into strategies and policies.

14. I would like to conclude by thanking our distinguished guests most sincerely, and wishing all participants a very productive conference.

Kob-Kun mak krub!