

**THE 2ND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT, LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION AND
MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN ETHNOLINGUISTIC COMMUNITIES**

**Opening Remarks
by
Dr Chinnapat Bhumirat
Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education, Thailand**

Tuesday, 1 July 2008
4thFloor Conference Room, Twin Towers Hotel, Bangkok

Professor Napatawn Banchuin, Vice President of Mahidol University,

Dato' Dr Ahamad bin Sipon, Director of SEAMEO Secretariat,

Dr Frederick Boswell, Executive Director of SIL International,

Dr Sheldon Shaeffer, Director of UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education,

Dr Susan Malone, Conference Chair,

Distinguished Speakers and Conference Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of His Excellency Mr Somchai Wongsawat, Minister of Education, Thailand, it is my great privilege to be here today to share a few words with you at the opening of this Second International Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization and Multilingual Education in Ethnolinguistic Communities. The Minister has asked me to extend his apologies to you for not being here in person due to a prior engagement.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is timely that this Conference is being held in the middle of 2008 which the United Nations has declared the "International Year of Languages". By highlighting languages, the aim is to promote unity in diversity and global understanding. Without language there can be no understanding because without language there can be no communication. The International Year of Languages, therefore, promotes multilingualism as an essential part of education in a multilingual world, hence, the threefold focus of your Conference are Language Development, Language Revitalization, and Multilingual Education.

With rapid advances in technology and improvements in infrastructure, the nations of Southeast Asia are becoming more and more linked. In March of this year, the Prime Minister of Thailand dedicated a road connecting Thailand, Laos, and China. In May of this year, the Minister of Education traveled to Cambodia to dedicate a road and bridges built through Thai-Cambodian cooperation. Both these new roads will contribute to national economic development agendas, building opportunities for international trade. In terms of social development, both roads pass through areas where ethnic minorities live and these new routes can be expected to bring significant change to the diverse communities living in the vicinity.

It is essential that efforts are made to ensure that the inevitable change has a positive impact on the lives and livelihoods of these smaller ethnic groups. As access to affordable quality education, health care, and social development become a reality, the provision of these services must take into account the cultural needs of these communities and at the same time, opportunities must be found to preserve their unique languages and cultures. I am encouraged that many presentations at this Conference will be made by people who are themselves members of ethnic language communities who will be able to give their own perspective and raise their own concerns. It is only through dialogue that appropriate and sustainable solutions will be found.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The role of language in education is of global importance. Each nation needs to become more aware of the linguistic diversity within its own borders and to discover adequate means for providing all the nation's learners with a meaningful basic education. In the development of language policy and plans, governments and civil society must come together and must think creatively about how languages contribute to the achievement of national and international development goals.

Referring back to the Millennium Development Goals, the 2008 UNESCO publication entitled, "Language Matters", acknowledges that "...*linguistic factors have a strategic role in the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger.*" Choices and opportunities affecting quality of life, livelihoods and participation in social and public life are influenced by the language we use. Furthermore, language enables us to transmit knowledge, whether in a school setting or through programmes to communicate vital information, regarding, for example, HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases. There is also increasing understanding of the strategic importance of languages to "...*convey local and indigenous knowledge and know-how*" for environmental sustainability. Finally, the actual enjoyment of fundamental rights is affected by language. Appropriate language policies thus provide an essential medium for exercising those rights.

As we work toward achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and continuously monitor our progress, one thing is very clear: No single community, no single university, no single international agency, and no single Ministry of Education, can do all the work alone. Partnerships are vital. Therefore, I am glad that this particular Conference is being sponsored by seven organizations, working together to for relevant education worldwide. May you all experience great encouragement and vision as you meet, talk, share, think and plan over these next three days.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In closing, I would like to thank the Conference organizers for this opportunity to share these thoughts with you and wish you all a very productive exchange of ideas and experiences.

Thank you.
