

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

**Report
by
Dato' Dr Ahamad bin Sipon, Director, SEAMEO Secretariat**

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

Dr Chinnapat Bhumirat, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education, Thailand

Professor Napatawn Banchuin, Vice President of Mahidol University,

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,

Good morning. It is indeed a great honour and pleasure for the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization to co-host the Second International Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization and Multilingual Education in Ethno-linguistic Communities this year – the year 2008 which was proclaimed as the International Year of Languages by the United Nations.

Dozens of languages today have only one native speaker still living, and that person's death will mean the extinction of the language. It will no longer be spoken or known by anyone. According to the Endangered Language Fund, there are currently 6,000 languages spoken in the world and at least half are projected to disappear in this century.

Furthermore, many ethnic minority communities are not only losing their linguistic and cultural patrimony, they also lack access to education in their mother tongue. Among others, the most obvious concern is the geographical locations of these communities. This issue is not confined to single nation but is a cross-border issue manifested by the diverse cultural backgrounds and affiliations of our participants, invited speakers and presenters in this conference.

The SEAMEO is also concerned not only with the threat of losing linguistic heritage but also in helping those deprived due to lack of access in basic education and literacy in mother tongue. In response, we are presently engaged in a project called Mother Tongue as bridge language of instruction. We compile policies and successful case studies in the use of mother tongue in instruction in our 11 Member Countries in Southeast Asia. Consequently,

we will identify good functioning models which may be piloted in the region. The use of mother tongue helps us reach the un-reached in the farthest and difficult-to-reach communities in Southeast Asia. In this way, we provide education for all including the disadvantaged population. We strongly believe in the cause of this conference.

This conference signals the strong response to the call to unite and collaborate and make the most of Language Development, Language Revitalization and Multilingual Education to guarantee greater access, quality and equity in education, thus, help attain the Education For All goals by 2015, and even beyond.

Five years ago, the first conference was held anchoring on this same call. Significant impact has been documented but there's more work to be done. Therefore, this year's conference aims to attain the following:

- Raise awareness about the purposes and benefits of mother tongue-based multilingual education programmes,
- Share information about good practices in language development, language revitalization and MT-Based MLE in ethnolinguistic communities, especially from the people who are actively engaged in such programmes, and
- Develop and expand networks of individuals and organizations engaged in these efforts.

Year after year, multilingualism has gained significance. This second conference proves it further. I am very pleased to say that our engagement on language development, language revitalization and multilingual education bears fruit.

Today, I am glad to report that over 350 participants from 35 countries and five continents responded to our invitation to this conference.

Among the participants today are members of ethnic minority groups, government officials, academia and members of national and international NGOs involved in language development and education in ethnic minority communities.

This conference will present an image of the worldwide language and cultural situation. It will allow us to share our knowledge on good practices in language development, language revitalization and multilingual education and to take stock of all methods and strategies for teaching and learning including the use of information and communications technology. In addition, we will discuss strategies to preserve the intangible cultural heritage and use of the mother tongue in education. The conference is full-packed with exciting activities such as plenary and parallel sessions, work sessions and exhibitions.

In this globalized world where homogenization is reigning and needs are constantly changing, the implementation of multilingual policy remains a big challenge but not unfeasible. Also, it is our duty to continue our work and to redouble our efforts.

In this regard, we should continue to develop and expand networks of individuals and organisations engaged in these efforts around the world. We can create multi-disciplinary teams to work on different aspects on multilingualism, its implementation and benefits and make stakeholders aware of the educational, social and economic benefits of multilingualism. This conference is the perfect venue to start and or strengthen these networks.

I am glad to see so many people who are truly concerned about language and I thank and congratulate you all for having traveled from all parts of the world to join this in this very important event.

Also, I would like to congratulate and thank our fellow conference partners, UNICEF, UNESCO, SIL International, Save the Children UK, CARE International and Mahidol University for their hard work in ensuring the success of this conference. This achievement is the culmination of a long and fruitful collaboration of these organisations.

Finally, may I bring you back to my first point earlier – the extinction of a language means the extinction of a community and the loss of its unique cultural heritage. But we can do something to save it and bring it back for the world to know – use it to teach to write, to read and to compute numbers. In this way, a language will never disappear.

Anyway, I am sure that we all believe that mother tongue is a bridge for education; and multilingualism is a tool for building bridges between people.

Thank you and I wish you all a successful conference.
