United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
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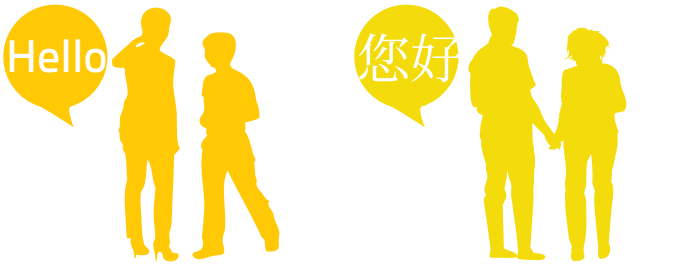
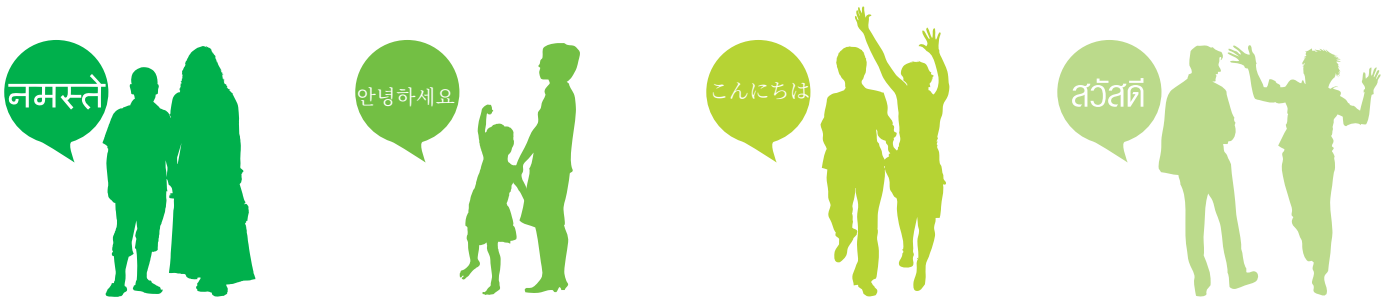
Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau
for Education





Why Language Matters
for the Millennium Development Goals

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This publication draws and expands upon ideas and presentations from the "International Conference on Language, Education and the Millennium Development Goals". More than 400 delegates from some 30 countries attended the conference, which was held in Bangkok, Thailand, in November 2010.

Special thanks are extended to all those who contributed to the development of the text of this booklet, including Vanessa Achilles, Joel Bacha, Carol Benson, Hameed A. Hakeem, Maki Hayashikawa, Kimmo Kosonen, Sena Lee, Jan Noorlander, Justine Sass, Sheldon Shaeffer and Catherine Young, as well as to the conference coordinator Kyungah Kristy Bang and to the conference participants whose presentations are the basis for many of the case studies in the booklet.

Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are a set of shared aspirations and efforts to make the world a more equitable and sustainable place. At the heart of the goals is the recognition that for this global initiative to be effective, all people need to be included.

Language is the key to inclusion. Language is at the center of human activity, self-expression and identity. Recognizing the primary importance that people place on their own language fosters the kind of true participation in development that achieves lasting results.

In 2010, this insight brought together hundreds of educators, development workers, linguists, government workers and civil society delegates at a conference in Bangkok.[1] Convinced that language is a vital tool for the achievement of the MDGs, they reported on the many ways in which initiatives that promote local languages are making a real difference to people's lives across Asia and beyond.

The conference showcased, in particular, impressive evidence for how early education in the mother tongue improves the lives of children and their communities. Participants also reported that recognizing the role of languages is highly significant for work on all of the MDGs, including tackling poverty, gender inequality, HIV and AIDS and maternal and child health.

As well as pointing to successes, the conference revealed many challenges and gaps in current understanding of the role of language in development and education. Thus, the Bangkok forum represented an early contribution to an emerging and exciting field that has the potential to contribute much more to the MDGs. It is hoped that the conference and this publication, which includes and expands upon many of its themes and findings, will help spur more thought and action on the challenging work ahead.

1 The conference "Language, Education and the Millennium Development Goals" was held in Bangkok, Thailand, from 9 to 11 November 2010. It was sponsored by the consortium of organizations that are represented in the Asia Multilingual Education Working Group (MLE WG).

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Goal 1: Eradicate Poverty and Hunger

Worldwide, joint efforts under the eight Millennium Development Goals are making an impact on levels of global poverty and hunger. Yet huge challenges remain.

Around a quarter of the world's population lives in extreme poverty.

Ethnic minority groups speaking minority languages are disproportionately represented among the world's poor and marginalized. As progress is made in lifting other groups out of poverty, minorities are in danger of being left even further behind.

Why language is important

People's languages are vitally important to them. Through language, people communicate, share meaning and experience their sense of individual and community identity. Loss of language and culture is frequently accompanied by large human and social costs, including poverty, poor health, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence and suicide.[2]

Recognizing the profound importance that people place on their languages is a core insight for tackling poverty and hunger. It is an important part of the move away from "top down" models of development that have been shown not to work, and towards participatory development models, which often do. Properly conducted participatory development brings improved outcomes both in the short- and long-term. According to one study, development initiatives that sought beneficiaries' involvement achieved 68 percent success, while those that did not achieved a success rate of just 10 percent.[3]

Genuine participation obviously relies on a two-way communication, which means engaging with the languages people actually speak. This requires consideration and planning at the levels of both policy and practice.

Policy and practice

Policy

Policy makers who understand the vital role of languages help to create better development planning. They are aware that focusing on languages has obvious beneficial results for communications and participation targets. They know that opportunities may be lost when the role of language is forgotten.

2 Romaine, S. 2010. "Language and the MDGs". International Conference on Language, Education and the MDGs, 9-11 November 2010, Bangkok, Thailand. SEAMEO. http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/doc/presentations/day1/SuzanneRomaine-keynote.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

3 Mitchell, P, 2009. Remarks (citing Dollar, D. and Pritchett, L. 1998. *Assessing Aid: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why.* World Bank Research Report. Oxford University Press). George Washington University Forum on Health Communication.

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In 2005, a key study looked at how national poverty reduction strategies deploy communications.[4] It recommended that poverty reduction plans should include a strong emphasis on engaging with local languages. The authors noted that, "Language … has a very influential role in fostering the process of an informed public dialog and debate".

Language is still rarely explicitly articulated in key international and national poverty reduction documents, or in communications planning. This means insufficient attention is given to the unique situations of ethnolinguistic minorities and the particular problems they face in being included in development processes.

Some countries are moving towards more recognition of the language issue at policy level, however. The recent poverty reduction strategy paper of Bangladesh, for example, recognizes the importance of mother tongue languages for minority peoples (Adivasi). There is still a long way to go in implementing that recognition, but an important step has been taken.[5]

4 Mozammel, M. and Odugbemi, S. (eds.). 2005. *With the Support of Multitudes, Using Strategic Communication to fight Poverty through PRSPs,* Jointly published by the Information and Communication for Development, United Kingdom Department for International Development, and the Development Communication Division, External Affairs, The World Bank. p. 26. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTDEVCOMMENG/Resources/withthesupportofmultitude-screen.pdf (Accessed 26 November 2011).

5 Durnian, T. 2007. *Mother Language First.* Save the Children, Bangladesh.

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Practice

Around the world, at any given time, countless initiatives tackling poverty and hunger are engaging with people in the local languages with which they are most familiar. However, most of this language engagement happens at an informal level. Project experiences using local languages, including successes and failures, are as yet rarely documented.

Initiatives that have placed a strong emphasis on articulating language as a central aspect of their development-related goals often report very positive results. In South-East Asia, for example, two small-scale projects have prioritized language within a context of community strengthening and tackling poverty and exclusion, as described below.

Thailand: Sharing language and culture helps mountain peoples[6]

Indigenous and ethnic minorities suffer from significant poverty and marginalization in many countries. The Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand (IMPECT) organization, based in the province of Chiang Mai, has led a variety of initiatives to strengthen local ethnic minority communities. Among these are initiatives in which ethnic communities have articulated and documented in their local languages key information on their beliefs and customs. The information has been shared with Thai education officials at the district, provincial and national levels. One reported result of such sharing is greater flexibility in local education curricula, with more emphasis placed on indigenous culture, knowledge and language. This contribution to community strengthening is an important element in the work of local minority groups as they seek sustainable solutions to the challenges they face in terms of cultural survival, development and livelihoods.

Bangladesh: Strengthening local languages bolsters communities[7]

A project working to improve the situation of the Kol and Koda minority people in Bangladesh found that the communities were losing engagement with their mother tongue but were also not proficient in the dominant language, Bangla. This placed them at multiple disadvantages. Thus, a joint project of SIL Bangladesh and Food for the Hungry placed importance on strengthening the mother tongue, while also focusing on enabling the communities to take ownership of the development process through participation. The project has engaged with a wide range of local ideas about language and language choices, while maintaining an emphasis on the importance of the mother tongue. To strengthen the local languages, the initiative has worked on developing local writing systems. It continues to work in the local languages to develop community institutions to bolster self-reliance, savings, skills development and advocacy for rights.

6 Asian Development Bank. 2001. *Health and Education Needs of Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion,* Manila, ADB. http://www.adb.org/Documents/Studies/Health_Education_GMS/default.asp. (Accessed 10 June 2011).

7 Tudu, C. and Saleh Uddin, MD. 2010. "Uncovering the Silent Resources for Sustainable Development". International Conference on Language, Education and the MDGs, 9-11 November 2010, Bangkok, Thailand. SEAMEO. http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/doc/presentations/day2/CorneliusTudu-Md.Uddin-ppt.pdf, (Accessed 10 June 2011).

Language and development: Some tools and approaches

Various tools and methods focusing on languages have been shown to contribute to the success of development initiatives. These include:

Program planning/early stage: Awareness of language issues from the beginning pays off

- **Conducting linguistic surveys:** In linguistically diverse areas, effective communications for development planning includes conducting a "language audit" or a sociolinguistic survey of the partner population. Such research reveals which languages people speak in different domains of life and the level of comfort speakers have in different situations. It can also reveal gaps in mutual understanding of key concepts and ideas that need to be addressed for smooth communication. The involvement of community members in the surveys can also be the start of the participatory process.

- **Strengthening participation of local actors in research:** Language research has primarily been the domain of "outsiders", such as linguists and ethnographers. Yet experts have pointed out that for a deep understanding of the meaning and application of various oral forms in a given community (e.g. idioms, proverbs, myths, legends, songs and poetry), high-level inclusion of different local actors in language research and analysis is often necessary. Local actors understand and can share insights into the politics, economic activities, social organization and cultural values of a locality,[8] all of which are important for achieving strong partnerships and the desired results.

- **Including a focus on intercultural communications:** Staff working in linguistically and culturally diverse settings, who are aware of key ideas around intercultural communications and cultural competence, are better equipped to foster participatory development.[9] Skills involved in the work of bridging different cultures include knowing the language, listening, finding ways to match and align key concepts where appropriate, and communicating respectfully and effectively.

8 Kitula, K. 2000, "Language in Development Research in 21st Century Africa". *African Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 3, No. 3. http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v3/v3i3a3.pdf (Accessed 10 June, 2011).

9 Policy and practice around "cultural competence" have been developed mainly within the field of health, but its key principles are also useful for work in other fields.

Implementation stage: acting on awareness of language issues

- **Sharing information through printed materials:** Project information and key messages produced in local languages help ensure that minority people are informed and are enabled to enter into discussions, ask questions and make suggestions.
- **Employing creative channels of information:** Communication vehicles such as radio, video and theater allow important health and other development messages to reach illiterate populations. Local radio produced in local languages has been shown to be a powerful – and growing – means of disseminating information and garnering participation, discussion and debate among audiences.
- **Identifying the right sources for sending information:** When people are receiving and reviewing new information, they must be able to identify with the information source. Generally, the more similar the source is to the audience in terms of language, values, personality and social characteristics, the more likely it is that the audience will perceive the source as trustworthy and heed the message.[10] Including local language speakers in key project positions supports this process.

Monitoring stage: Language as a measure of impact

- **Language as a measure of effectiveness:** Including language indicators can help measure the value of development initiatives. For example, one development organization now includes "linguistic impact" in its assessments of the effectiveness of local radio stations in the United Kingdom.[11]

10 Colle, R. D. 2007. *Advocacy and Interventions, Readings in Communications and Development,* Ithaca, New York: The Internet-First University Press. p. 180, (citing Rogers 1973).

11 Department for International Development. 2005. "Monitoring and Evaluating Information and Communication for Development (C4D) Programmes Guidelines", United Kingdom. http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/35/2/46388330.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

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Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education

Education is one of the most important ways for people to move out of poverty, and a strong basic education is the first step. Children who receive a good educational foundation at pre-primary and primary school levels are in a much better position when they go on to navigate life's challenges as adults.

Significant progress is being made on MDG 2. Yet data indicates that an estimated 67 million of the world's children are still not enrolled in primary education. Many children who do enrol in school later drop out. Children from ethnolinguistic minorities—and especially girls—are disproportionately represented among those who are not receiving any, or adequate, education.

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Why language is important

Many children struggle at school when they are forced to learn in languages that are not their mother tongue. School systems that do not use learners' own languages or respect their cultures make it extremely difficult for children to stay in school and learn. For individuals, communities and even whole ethnic minority groups, this contributes to perpetuating cycles of marginalization and discrimination. For countries, excluding large portions of the population from their right to good quality education can delay economic growth and perpetuate conflict and political instability.

A growing body of research worldwide demonstrates that instruction in the mother tongue, beginning in the first years of school and continuing for as long as possible, helps girls and boys in numerous ways. Teaching children for a recommended six to eight years in their mother tongue – as well as gradually introducing national or other dominant languages (sometimes called Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education) – has the following outcomes:[12]

12 For more information, see Pinnock, H. and Vijayakumar, G. 2009. *Language and Education, The Missing Link, How the language used in schools threatens the achievement of Education for All.* Save the Children and the CfBT Education Trust.

- **Children receive a good foundation:** When taught first in their own languages, children learn better, are more self-confident and are well equipped to transfer their literacy and numeracy skills to additional languages.
- **Children perform better:** Evidence from linguistically diverse countries worldwide shows that children taught first in their most familiar language are more likely to thrive and excel in school.
- **Fewer children repeat grades:** Studies have found that children who start formal education in a second or foreign language are more likely to repeat school years.
- **Fewer children drop out of school:** Children who start formal education in a second or foreign language are much more likely to experience frustration and failure, resulting in higher dropout rates for these children. Worldwide, some 50 percent of out-of-school children use a language at home that is not the language used in school.[13]
- **Children have more family support:** When children learn in their mother tongue, parents and families can be involved and support their education. When children are learning in a second or foreign language, families are often excluded from the process.
- **Cycles of exclusion are broken:** By including families and drawing on local cultural heritage, mother tongue-based education contributes to communities' social and cultural well-being and fosters inclusiveness within the wider society.

13 World Bank. 2005. "Education Notes". July. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/Education-Notes/EdNotes_Lang_of_Instruct.pdf (Accessed 12 November 2011)

Policy and practice

Policy

National education policies that prioritize learning in the mother tongue within a strategy to improve educational quality and access are in the political and economic interests of countries with high levels of linguistic diversity.[14]

Sometimes governments fear that mother tongue-based education may have negative socio-political effects. And sometimes parents fear that mother tongue-based education may exclude their child from learning the dominant languages in their country, which are often pathways to jobs and wider opportunities.

A wide body of research suggests that in both cases the opposite is true. Fostering mother tongue-based education helps to reduce alienation and conflict. It better equips children to learn national and international languages, and improves overall performance. Finland, for example, is a leader in mother tongue-based education and also in academic excellence of secondary school children.[15]

In the Asia-Pacific region, in 2009 the Philippines adopted a policy to institutionalize mother tongue-based multilingual education in all public and private schools, from pre-school to high school. Announcing the new policy, the Department of Education stated, "The lessons and findings of various local initiatives and international studies in basic education have validated the superiority of the use of the learner's mother tongue or first language in improving learning outcomes and promoting Education for All."[16]

Development partners can support governments by promoting the use of appropriate languages as a central pillar in achieving education quality and inclusion. They can, for example, allocate a percentage of pooled education funds and basic education budgets to the development of

14 Pinnock, H. and Vijayakumar, G., op. cit.

15 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. 2010. "Slow and Steady Reform for Consistently High Results Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education", in *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers: Lessons from PISA for the United States*. OECD Publishing. www.oecd.org/dataoecd/34/44/46581035.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

16 Department of Education, the Philippines, DepEd Order No 74, 2009. "Institutionalizing Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (MLE)". http://www.deped.gov.ph/cpanel/uploads/issuanceImg/DO%20No.%2074,%20s.%202009.pdf (Accessed 16 January 2012).

mother tongue-based multilingual teaching and learning systems. In addition, they can work to ensure that coverage of primary education in the mother tongue is highlighted as an indicator of education quality.[17]

Practice

There are many examples of successful mother tongue-based multilingual education programmes being implemented around the world. In the Asia-Pacific region, for example, programmes have been implemented or are being planned in Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, the Solomon Islands, Thailand and Viet Nam, to name a few.

Many mother tongue-based education initiatives in developing and middle-income countries are, as yet, on a small scale. "Scaling up" such initiatives will be vital as countries strive to achieve MDG 2.

Examples of regional projects showing success include those described on the next page.

Southern Thailand: Local language education fosters community empowerment and supports conflict reduction[18]

Language and identity are key issues in three provinces of Thailand's deep south, where there has been ongoing political unrest. The local language and mother tongue of 83 percent of the million-plus population is Pattani Malay. However, the language has not been officially accepted or used in the education system. Ethnic language and culture are thus declining, and local communities have low self-confidence. There is chronic underachievement at school. A pilot programme introducing bilingual education is showing early success. Children in mother tongue-based programmes scored 35 percent higher on Thai language exams than children in traditional Thai-only classrooms.[19]

17 Pinnock, H. and Vijayakumar, G., op. cit.

18 For more information, see Premsrirat, S. 2010. "The Role of MTB MLE in ECD and Education: Experiences and Challenges in Southern Thailand". International Conference on Language, Education and the MDGs, 9-11 November 2010, Bangkok, Thailand. SEAMEO. http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/doc/presentations/day1/SuwalaiPremsrirat-ppt.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011)

19 Vejjajiva, A. 2010. "Opening Speech", International Conference on Language, Education and the MDGs, 9-11 November 2010, Bangkok, Thailand. SEAMEO. http://media.thaigov.go.th/pageconfig/viewcontent/viewcontent1e.asp?pageid=472&directory=1942&contents=51070 (Accessed 10 June 2011).

Bangladesh: Children benefit from mother tongue education[20]

Bangladesh has some 45 indigenous groups, 12 of which live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The official language of school instruction in Bangladesh is the national language, Bangla. Statistics indicate that around 60 percent of children from indigenous groups drop out of primary education.[21] Working closely with local communities, and in a context of debate about appropriate approaches to education, language choices, writing systems and other matters, Save the Children started a culturally sensitive education programme for primary school children in three ethnic languages: Chakma, Tippera and Marma. The project confirmed that learning in the mother tongue supported the children in their education. There was enthusiastic involvement from the local community. Lessons learned within the initiative indicated that six months is too short a "bridging period" between using the child's first language and Bangla as a medium of instruction. A longer time span is necessary for children to feel confident in both languages.

In another initiative focusing on pre-school children, Save the Children and partner Zabayang Kalyan Samity found that children learning in the mother tongue significantly outperformed counterparts who were not taught in the mother tongue, in communications, language and literacy.[22]

20 Tripura, MB and Rahman, M. 2010. "Mulilingual Education in Bangladesh: Promoting Quality Education for Primary School Children". International Conference on Language, Education and the MDGs, 9-11 November 2010, Bangkok, Thailand. SEAMEO. http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/doc/presentations/day2/MathuraBikashTripura-MatiurRahman-ppt.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

21 Asian Development Bank. 2001. "Education in the CHT". TA 3328-BAN (Final Report #8), Dhaka, ADB.

22 Pearce, E., Vijayakumar, G. and Nahar , M. 2010. "Getting ready for school in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: A comparative analysis of mother-tongue-and national-language-based preschools in Adivasi communities". International Conference on Language, Education and the MDGs, 9-11 November 2010, Bangkok, Thailand. SEAMEO. http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/doc/presentations/day2/ElizabethPearce-GowriVijayakumar-MeherunNahar-sn.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

Nepal: Reading in the local language boosts child literacy[23]

When Save the Children conducted literacy assessments in Nepal in 2008, it found that 42 percent of Grade 3 children in partner schools in Kailili could not read a single word. Most of those who were struggling to read were children whose mother tongue was not the language of instruction. This prompted intensive efforts to boost local language reading interventions through the development of a Literacy Boost programme. Begun in 2009, Literacy Boost's design included local language materials development and provision, reading-focused instruction for classroom teachers, and community level reading activities run by local volunteers who could speak Tharu, the local mother tongue. Later testing showed that children in schools running the Literacy Boost programme performed much better in terms of fluency and accuracy than children in comparison schools. Save the Children has since expanded Literacy Boost to more parts of Nepal, including Bajura in the Far Western Region and Kapilvastu in the Western Region.

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23 Shrestha, D.N., Pinto, C. and Ochoa, C.S. 2010. "Language and Early Grades Literacy Acquisition in Nepal". International Conference on Language, Education and the MDGs, 9-11 November 2010, Bangkok, Thailand. SEAMEO. http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/doc/presentations/day1/DeerghaN.Shrestha-CeciliaOchoa-ppt.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

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Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women

Women and girls are disproportionately represented amongst the world's most marginalized people. In developing regions overall, despite improvements since 1990, many millions of girls are still not in school. Nearly two-thirds of the world's 796 million illiterate people are women, and a high proportion of these are from ethnolinguistic minority communities.

Women from minority groups are often particularly excluded from opportunities to improve their situations. They suffer the "compound" impact of discrimination based on gender and discrimination based on ethnic, religious or linguistic diversity.

Investing in women and girls has been described as a "breakthrough strategy" for achieving all the MDGs. That is because research has found that improving women's control over resources, their level of decision-making power in the family and household, and their degree of control over their own physical security can help "free up bottlenecks" that hamper further progress across all the MDG targets.[24]

24 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010. "Investing in Women and Girls: The Breakthrough Strategy for Achieving all the MDGs". http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/45/55/45704694.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

Why language is important

The ability to access education and information in their own languages is vital for the empowerment of women.

Education for girls: Research into bilingual education in Africa and Latin America has found that girls who learn first in familiar languages stay in school longer and are more likely to be identified as good students. They do better on achievement tests and repeat grades less often than girls who do not get instruction in their mother tongue.[25]

Education for women: Improving adult women's immediate situations is vital to achieving development goals. There are many examples of how boosting women's literacy in their own language, in combination with livelihood initiatives, improves their economic position, enhances their decision-making role at home and in the community, and impacts favorably on the way families bring up their children. Providing women with information and support in their own language on how to protect themselves and girls from violence, domestic abuse and other forms of maltreatment can also have a great impact on helping women improve their lives.

Research has also shed useful light on how language is at the center of culture and belief systems that contain elements that can both empower and disempower women. Ethnographic work with the participation of local communities can help raise awareness of the aspects of local languages that impact on women's situations, helping literacy and lifelong learning programmes achieve greater success. By revealing areas of discrimination and bias that hold women back, for example, such research can provide a fruitful basis for discussion and debate that helps women find their own solutions to the challenges they face.

25 Benson, C. 2005. *Girls, Educational Equity and Mother Tongue Based Teaching.* Bangkok, UNESCO. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001420/142049e.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

Policy and practice

Policy

National education policies: Girls are helped by national education policies that recognize the need for mother tongue-based multilingual education. Educators have shown that mother tongue-based education helps girls perform better, feel more confident and stay in school longer. They believe that the positive impact of mother tongue-based education may be even stronger for girls than for boys and have called for more research to add to the evidence for this.

Educators also point out that teachers who use the language of the home are more easily able to foster good relationships with pupils' families. Such relationships often enhance girls' attendance at school and help mitigate against a range of factors that may result in girls leaving the school system early.

National literacy programmes: Women's lives can be improved rapidly by literacy programmes focusing on local languages, preferably in combination with other participatory initiatives that enhance livelihoods.

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Effective literacy initiatives need to be rooted in understanding and knowledge of the local language, and local beliefs, culture, power relationships and problem-solving systems. Language investigation, for example, can reveal important barriers and opportunities for women.

Practice

As awareness grows that empowering women is one of the fastest ways to improve overall conditions for families and communities, more attention is also being paid to the importance of local languages as part of the process.

India: Women build on local languages to create a "bridge" to wider opportunities[26]

A programme facilitated by the organization URMUL Seemant Samiti, working with women embroiderers in the Thar desert of India, began by holding discussions in the local language around ways in which women could gain more control of markets for their beautiful embroidery. Their society was one in which women did not normally speak about business-related concepts. After first gaining confidence and knowledge in communicating about such concepts in their local language, the women decided they needed to become more skilled in the language, needs and practices of buyers. They then learned enough of the second language so they could negotiate for improved payments.

The combination of first building capacity in the mother language and then moving on to a "bridge" language brought tangible income benefits, which had the additional effect of improving the health, nutrition and housing of the women and their families.

26 Ojha, J. K. 2010. "Moving from Silence to Speech: Role of Language in Women's Empowerment in an Indian Desert". International Conference on Language, Education and the MDGs, 9-11 November 2010, Bangkok, Thailand. SEAMEO. http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/doc/presentations/day1/JayaKritikaOjha-sn.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

Uganda and Bangladesh: Working in local languages, women deploy information and communications technology

The new information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be important aids to the empowerment of women, including those who are illiterate, if they are used appropriately in local contexts and use local languages. The use of mobile phones, for example, has empowered many women and improved their livelihoods in local situations. In Uganda, as part of a project called the Women's Information Resource Electronic Service (WIRES), women engage in small-scale enterprise using telephones to contact suppliers or clients.[27] In Bangladesh, women earn an income through the Village Pay Phone programme of the Grameen Bank.

Computers and the Internet also open up many possibilities for women, but for their benefits to be enjoyed by all, including rural women and those from ethnolinguistic minority communities, localizing content and languages is essential. In some areas, this work is bearing fruit in community learning centers used by women. Computer interfaces have been developed using icons, graphics and sound recordings for the illiterate and neo-literate.

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27 For more information see Colle, R. D. op. cit.

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Goals 4 and 5: Reduce Child Mortality and Improve Maternal Health

Much work remains to be done in terms of improving the health and life prospects of vulnerable women and children. An estimated 10.5 million children under the age of five die every year. The vast majority of the children die needlessly, from preventable causes. Many succumb to pneumonia, diarrhea, malaria, measles and AIDS. Malnutrition is the underlying cause of around half of the deaths.

Every minute, a woman dies from complications in childbirth. Of the more than half a million women who die from complications in childbirth each year, most come from developing countries.[28] Most of these deaths are preventable, being mainly due to insufficient care during pregnancy and delivery.

28 UNICEF on MDG 5. See www.unicef.org/mdg/maternal.html (Accessed on 10 June 2011)

Why language is important

Many lives can be saved through women receiving better information on, for example, nutrition, the important role of breastfeeding for child health, and how to prevent and treat infections, diarrhea and malaria. Women need to receive health information in a language that is familiar to them and in ways that engage with their cultural context.

Research in South-East Asia found that many ethnic minority people identified language as a major constraint to accessing health services. For many highland minorities, the national language was in effect a "foreign language". The research concluded that, "In the health sector, patients and providers need to be able to communicate … A health provider who does not speak the same language as the patient may have difficulties in diagnosing and curing a health problem, or in sharing health information. And without communication, it is difficult for patients to develop a sense of trust. This has negative effects on the health-seeking behavior of the ethnic minority population."[29]

Better health outcomes are also achieved by improving genuine educational opportunities for ethnic minority girls and women. The impacts of literate, educated mothers on their communities in terms of better health have been well-documented.

Policy and practice

Policy

Recognizing the importance of language in national health policies and strategies is vital to ensure that all people, including marginalized women, are reached. Researchers have provided many examples of health successes as a result of focused engagement with local languages. For example, in a province of Lao PDR, there was much greater participation and enthusiasm among Hmong and Khmu ethnic populations, and a reduction in malaria and diarrhea, after a local primary health care provider worked with local ethnic groups to produce videos, story boards and other health education materials in the local languages.[30]

29 Asian Development Bank. 2001. Health and Education Needs of Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion. Manila, ADB. http://www.adb.org/Documents/Studies/Health_Education_GMS/default.asp (Accessed 10 June 2011).

30 *Ibid*, p. 25

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TV, radio, songs, video and community theater have all been used effectively to introduce health messages to hard to reach populations and where there is a lack of literacy. In Bangladesh, for example, UNICEF supported popular community theater in local languages in remote ethnic areas to highlight "how hand washing helps to prevent diarrhea" and "how covering the mouth when coughing or sneezing helps prevent the spread of respiratory diseases".

Other important approaches include recognizing the role of training indigenous health workers who speak to women in their own languages, and promoting intercultural approaches to health care.

Practice

Below are some examples of projects that use local languages to improve maternal and child health.

The Philippines: Local language discussions are a route to better health[31]

Muslim Mindanao is linguistically and ethnically diverse and has one of the highest reported instances of child and maternal mortality in the Philippines. One project recognized the importance of local language and culture for community participation and engagement with potential solutions. It initiated an approach called "'Tumpukan Na!'" (community discussion sessions) that incorporated and built on community traditions to hold lively talk sessions on health topics such as vitamin A supplements, immunization, breastfeeding and maternal care. The discussions elicited levels of community understanding around specific health issues and, importantly, identified key local words and concepts on health matters. The result was increased uptake by the local community of existing health services and more proactive demands from the community for services.

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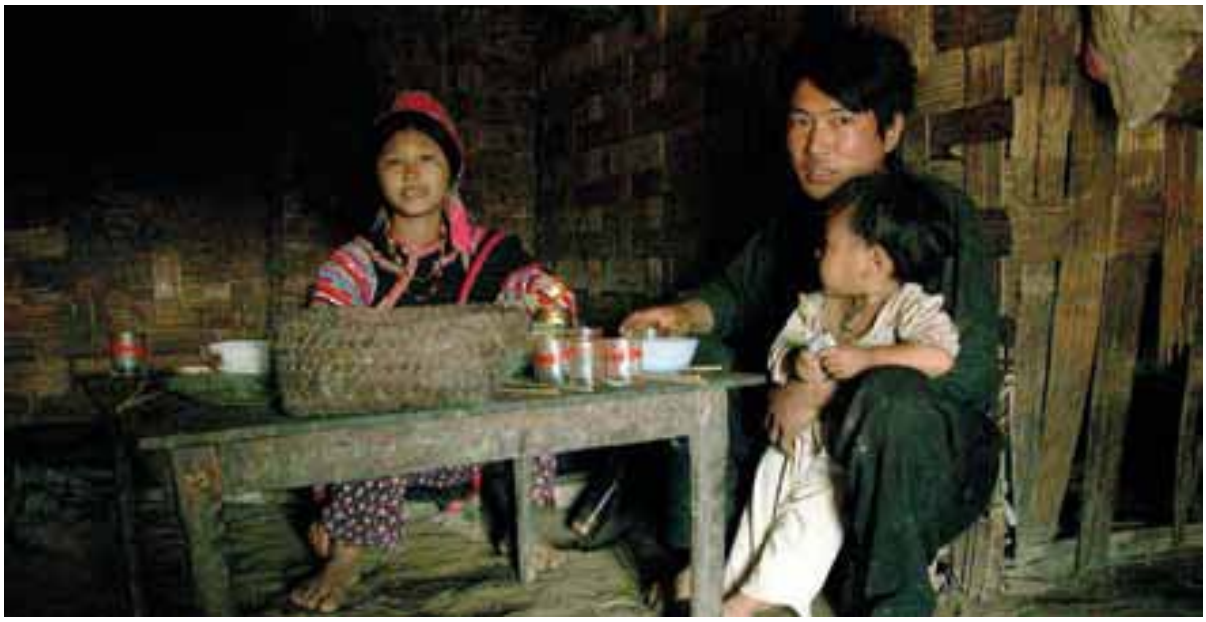
31 Alcantara, Jr. LA. 2010. "Improving Acceptability, Access and Coverage of Key Health Services in ARMM 'Through Tumpukan Na!". International Conference on Language, Education and the MDGs, 9-11 November 2010, Bangkok, Thailand. SEAMEO. Conference presentation. http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/doc/presentations/day3/LeonardoA.AlcantaraMD-ppt.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

Viet Nam: When midwives and patients share a language, there are better results[32]

Research shows that one of the most important interventions for safe motherhood is to make sure that a trained health provider with midwifery skills is present at every birth. In Viet Nam, five to seven women die every day due to complications in pregnancy or childbirth. The highest numbers of deaths are in remote and mountainous ethnic minority areas, partly due to a shortage of skilled birth attendants and healthcare workers. Also, cultural barriers in those areas keep many women from using reproductive health services.

To address this issue, the government and international development partners are supporting an initiative to train local women to become village-based midwives. The new midwives' understanding of the language, culture, and belief systems of their patients is key to gaining trust and encouraging women to receive appropriate health services. "Women are satisfied with my work," said Te, a newly trained midwife. "They trust me for several reasons: I was born and grew up in this village. Therefore they know me…and we belong to the same ethnic minority group and speak the same language." That trust makes it easier for Te to approach women to provide a variety of health services and has contributed to overcoming certain traditions (including forest births) that have made mothers slow to access maternal health services in the past.



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32 United Nations Population Fund. UNFPA, 2010. "Reaching Out to Minorities in Viet Nam with Midwives who Speak their Language". Feature Story, 17 September. http://vietnam.unfpa.org/public/cache/offonce/pid/6629;jsessionid=F17687E17634C84823C3C4FD16EE6D75 (Accessed 10 June 2011).

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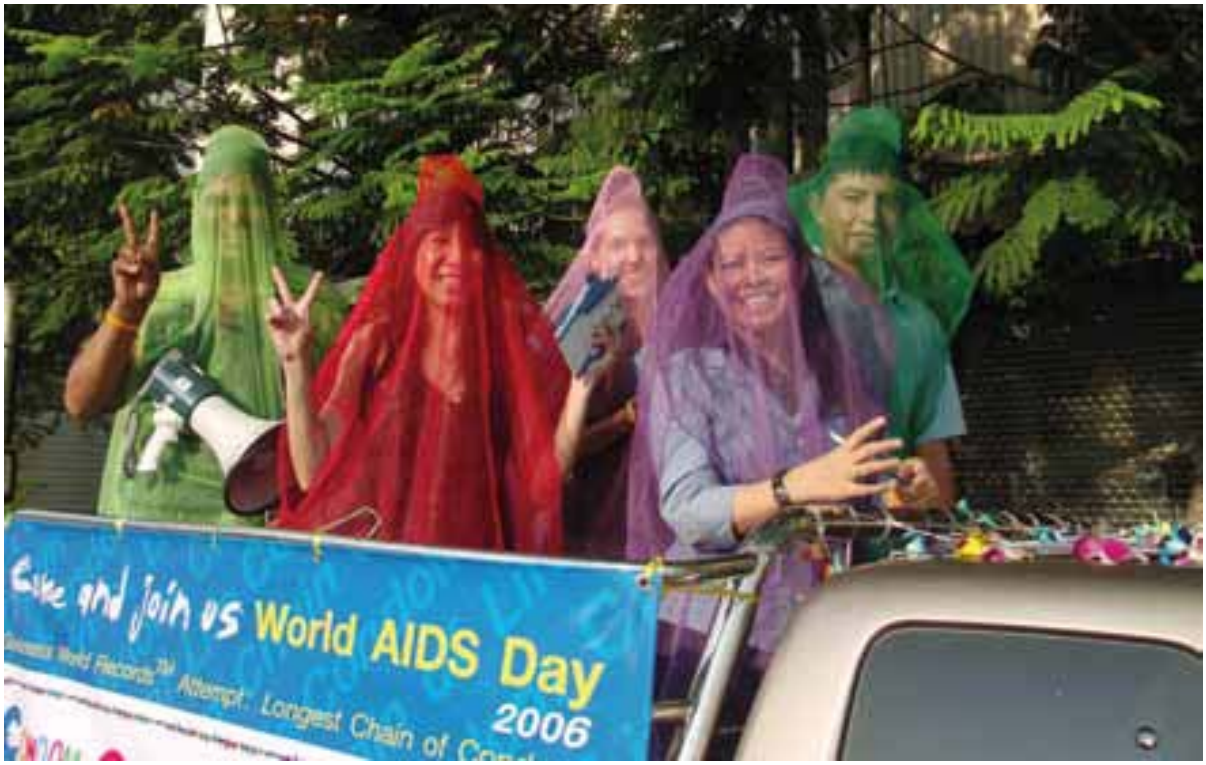
Goal 6: Combat HIV and AIDS, Malaria and Other Diseases

Tackling preventable disease is an essential part of improving the lives and prospects of millions of people. At the end of 2010, an estimated 34 million people were living with HIV and AIDS worldwide, half of them women.[33] In 2008, there were 247 million cases of malaria and nearly one million deaths – mostly among children living in Africa, where the disease accounts for 20 percent of all childhood deaths.[34] Malaria is also a significant cause of death in South-East Asia and other regions.

33 AVERT. 2010. "Global HIV and AIDS estimates, end of 2009". http://www.avert.org/worldstats.htm (Accessed 10 June 2011).

34 World Health Organisation. 2011. "Malaria". Fact Sheet No. 94, October. www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs094/en (Accessed 10 June 2011).



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Why language is important

People in ethnolinguistic minority communities are especially vulnerable to HIV and AIDS, malaria and other health challenges due in part to the lack of essential information provided in their own languages, in a culturally sensitive manner and by people they trust.

The complexity of, and the stigma often associated with, HIV and AIDS makes the way we communicate about the issues particularly important. Educational campaigns on HIV can help dispel fear and stigma and encourage people to access services and treatment. But – developed and presented inappropriately – they can further marginalize and stigmatize vulnerable communities and create further obstacles to information and services.

Moreover, people in ethnolinguistic minority communities can be especially vulnerable to HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases due in part to the lack of essential information provided in their own languages, in a culturally sensitive manner and by people they trust. Programmes must be tailored to the cultural specificities of a community to be most relevant and effective. This is perhaps most important in the context of

HIV and AIDS, where understandings of health, relationships, individual and social choices, and behaviors are strongly influenced by culture.[35]

Policy and practice

Policy

National policies on HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases, must consider how the language used can influence health outcomes. For example, AIDS is often referred to as a 'deadly, incurable disease', but this may create fear and increase stigma and discrimination. With advances in anti-retroviral treatment, HIV has also been referred to as a 'manageable, chronic illness, much like hypertension or diabetes' – but this may lead people to believe that it is not as serious as they thought.[36] Communication strategies to improve health outcomes have to define messages that are understandable, relevant to the target audience, based on available evidence, appropriate to the local culture, and in local languages.

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35 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. UNESCO, 2010. "UNESCO's Short Guide to the Essential Characteristics of Effective HIV Prevention". http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=48359&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (Accessed 18 January 2012).

36 Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS. UNAIDS, 2011. "UNAIDS Terminology Guidelines". http://www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/documents/unaidspublication/2011/JC2118_terminology-guidelines_en.pdf (Accessed 18 January 2012).

Research shows that messages are most readily trusted and accepted when the source of the information is familiar and known to the recipient. Messages perceived as coming entirely from the "outside", with no local connection, are more likely to fail.[37] Local participation in the production as well as the reception of messages is vital. This means working with and listening to communities in their own languages, to find the most appropriate and acceptable ways to introduce health messages, and to ensure that all members of the community, including women and girls, are reached. Finally, the medium can often be just as important as the message. Radio, video, community-based discussions and community theater in local languages can be strong tools to access and communicate with ethnolinguistic minority and other marginalized communities.

Practice

On the next page are some examples of projects that use local languages to combat HIV and AIDS, and malaria.

Greater Mekong: Soap operas focus on HIV and AIDS and health messages[38]

The Greater Mekong region is highly ethnically and linguistically diverse. In order to reach remote populations that have little information on HIV and AIDS but are vulnerable to the spread of the virus, several radio soap operas were produced in over a dozen of different ethnic languages in Cambodia, China (Yunnan and Sichuan provinces), Lao PDR and Thailand. The programmes were developed following the UNESCO 12-step methodology for the production of research-based culturally and linguistically appropriate materials. Local researchers, authors and actors worked together to develop popular radio dramas which presented key HIV and AIDS and health messages in an attractive format. After listening to the soap opera, the knowledge of the audience regarding HIV and AIDS transmission and protection increased sharply. The projects demonstrated the crucial importance of research and testing to avoid misunderstandings and ensure the messages are effective, relevant and popular with audiences.

37 Vincent, R. 2001. *Beyond Circles in Square Boxes: Lessons Learned from Health Communication Impact Evaluations*. London, HealthLink. http://www.healthlink.org.uk/PDFs/circles.pdf (Accessed 18 January 2012).

38 For more information see Achilles, V. 2010. "Same But Different, 'Talking HIV' in the Highlands". International Conference on Language, Education and the MDGs, 9-11 November 2010, Bangkok, Thailand. SEAMEO. http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/doc/presentations/day3/VanessaAchilles-ppt.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

South-East Asia: Working in local languages helps fight malaria[39]

Though the use of specially-treated bed nets has been shown to be the most effective known barrier against malaria, many remote and vulnerable communities worldwide have been reluctant to use the nets, often because they traditionally did not connect mosquitoes with the disease.

One group of researchers worked closely with small communities of highland Akha and Lahu people in the Mekong region to understand local traditions and beliefs and how these related to bed net use. They realized that innovations such as bed nets would only work if they fit in with, and were a part of, the community's systems of values and meanings, most of which find their strongest expression in stories and especially in ceremonies.

Over long periods of trust building, discussion, and story-telling and the holding of eventually a large local community ceremony around bed nets, the use of the nets increased. The incidence of malaria was reported to have been reduced by around 50 percent.

39 Herda, E. A. and Dzuber, V. 2010. "Tradition and New Ways of Learning Among Akha and Lahu: Reinterpreting Malaria Prevention". International Conference on Language, Education and the MDGs, 9-11 November 2010, Bangkok, Thailand. SEAMEO. http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/doc/presentations/day1/EllenHerda-Dr.ValerieDzubur-ppt.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

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Goal 7: Ensure Sustainable Development

At its simplest, sustainable development refers to using and managing the world's resources in ways that meet current human needs without compromising the ability of future generations to also meet their needs.

Many regions of the world that are rich in natural resources and biodiversity are also areas of the greatest cultural and linguistic diversity.[40] Indonesia, for example, has more than 700 languages and is one of world's leading biodiversity "hotspots". Brazil, with 200 languages, is another leader in terms of plants, mammals, reptiles, birds, fish and the ecosystems that support them.

The fates of thousands of ethnolinguistic minorities, their languages, and some of the world's richest environments are deeply intertwined.

40 Romaine, S. 2010. "Language and the MDGs", International Conference on Language, Education and the MDGs, 9-11 November 2010, Bangkok, Thailand, SEAMEO. http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/doc/presentations/day1/SuzanneRomaine-keynote.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

Why language is important

Sustainable development needs the participation of all groups, especially ethnolinguistic minorities who depend on healthy ecosystems for their survival and future.[41] Yet minorities' distance from the world's centers and languages of decision-making and power makes them vulnerable to exclusion and marginalization.

Language has an important part to play in minorities' participation in the development process. Researchers who focused on the importance of language for sustainable development in communities in Ivory Coast, Namibia and Indonesia have pointed out that failure to engage with the minority languages only increases minority peoples' exclusion. They highlight the positive aspects of "communicative sustainability" over the negative results of "communicative dependency" and conclude that local languages are a key resource.[42]

They are a resource for:

- understanding and analyzing local actors, their analyses and viewpoints, and the "human factor" in determining action and inaction, and
- for influencing social cohesion and social inclusion or exclusion.

And they are a resource as:

- the default site for negotiating, implementing and monitoring local development,
- a clearing place for relating and integrating expert and local knowledge and reshaping the roles of and relationships between experts and actors,
- a source of strengthening a sense of ownership conducive to ecological responsibility and conservation, and
- as an object of development in their own right, including their creative potential in oral and written mode.

41 *Ibid.*

42 Lagsus. 2008. "Language, Gender and Sustainability (2003-2007) – Final Report". http://www.lagsus.de/pdf/LAGSUS%20Final%20report%202003-2007.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

Participation in sustainable development starts with people discussing matters in their own languages, within their own cultural, social and community structures. From there, they can move on to wider engagement on issues that are generally conducted in the languages of development and power.

Education is also vitally important for minorities' participation in the development process. Children who receive a strong educational foundation in their mother tongue are in the best position to move forward with confidence, to learn other languages, and to make a contribution to their societies' future. Strengthening early education helps to equip young people and communities with sufficient knowledge, capacity and self-confidence to engage in decision-making about development and to protect their rights. For adults, literacy and lifelong education programmes can increase inclusion in development and decision-making processes. Finally, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), promoted in local languages, supports stakeholders of all kinds to learn about and take action on sustainability issues.

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Policy and practice

Policy

Local languages are a crucial element in policy and planning for participatory sustainable development (see also MDG1).

National education policies that strengthen mother tongues in early education are essential to strengthen local communities and increase their inclusion. Research shows that education helps in many other ways too; it can, for example, improve agricultural productivity, enhance the status of women, reduce population growth rates, enhance environmental protection, and generally raise the standard of living.[43] In addition, promoting ESD within education systems can help people engage in the search for sustainable solutions at the community and wider levels.

Practice

Below are some examples of how a focus on local languages can help bring about development that is sustainable.

Language documentation strengthens communities[44]

Language documentation is often an important first step for strengthening local communities and their engagement in development issues. Through language documentation, local communities, often working with ethnographers, uncover and record endangered cultural, environmental and other forms of local knowledge.

The process bolsters the self-esteem of people in marginalized groups, enhances people's awareness of their shared historical knowledge systems, and places them in a stronger position to participate in decision-making and negotiations on the issues that have an impact on them.

43 McKeon, R. 2002. *Education for Sustainable Development Toolkit. Version 2.* http://www.esdtoolkit.org/ (Accessed 10 July 2011).

44 Atindogbé, G. 2010. "Documentary Linguistics As A Means to Achieve the MDGs". International Conference on Language, Education and the MDGs, 9-11 November 2010, Bangkok, Thailand, SEAMEO.http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/doc/presentations/day1/GratienG.Atindogbe-ppt.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

Mindanao, the Philippines: Local language is a springboard to sustainable solutions[45]

The Apu Palamguwan Cultural Education Center works in the local mother tongue for sustainable development among the Bukidnon Pulangiyan people in Mindanao. Community schools strengthen the mother tongue in primary education, and there is literacy education for adults in the mother tongue, in combination with education for sustainable livelihoods, and cultural celebration.

Working in the local language, the community has engaged with broader opportunities around education and human development, and continues to draw from its traditional values and concepts. The concept of "Culture-Based Education" (CBE) has a powerful resonance within the community. A strong sense of cultural identity is essential in building the community's sense of belonging in the broader society and with the national language. CBE maintains that using the mother tongue is important not just because it helps children learn, but because it is where the people's wisdom, values and meanings can be found. Much of the learning draws on experiences with water, land and all life in the community, giving an integrated basis for understanding science and adapting to ecological and climate change. Studying one's own culture is also a pathway to understanding other things, including mainstream knowledge such as math and other languages.

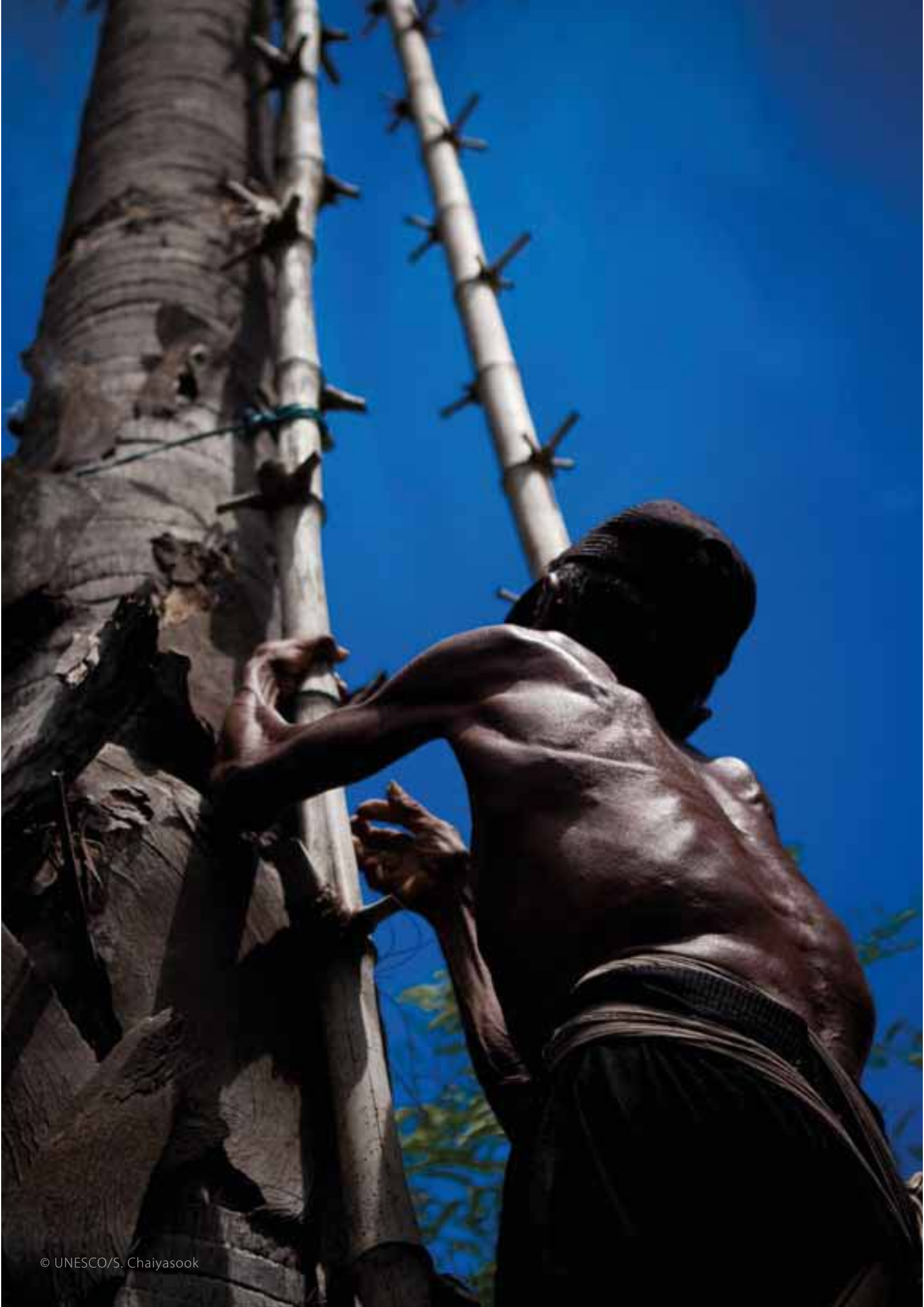
Mongolia: Minority language focus helps build human security

Mongolia is developing rapidly but ethnolinguistic minorities remain highly disadvantaged. Recognizing this, the Mongolian Government and several United Nations agencies[46] launched a project in 2009 to bolster the long-term human security and self-sustainability of vulnerable rural and ethnolinguistic minority communities, including nomadic communities.

The importance of local languages is a key theme running through a range of initiatives to improve minorities' access to education, health information and skills training. There is support for local language radio and television to provide key economic, health, educational and other information. Minority languages are being given increased recognition and support in child education, in non-formal adult education, and in skills training and identifying business opportunities. The project is intended to strengthen Mongolia's current and future policy and practice in support of all the MDGs, especially MDG 7, and it is hoped that its focus on local languages will provide useful learning for policy makers.

45 Walpole, P. 2010. "Learning Sustainable Solutions. Bukidnon Pulangiyan Community Experience of Integrating Mother Tongue Education for Sustainablility of Culture and Land". International Conference on Language, Education and the MDGs, 9-11 November 2010, Bangkok, Thailand, SEAMEO. http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/doc/presentations/day3/PedroWalpole-ppt.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011)

46 The UN Trust Fund for Human Security Project, Mongolia, is a joint project of the Mongolian Government and several UN agencies, including UNESCO, WHO, UNDP and UNICEF.



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Goal 8: Foster Global Partnerships for Development

Partnerships to harness the strengths of nations, institutions and civil society around the world are vital to enhance policies and practices towards realizing the MDGs. The private sector also plays an integral role, as a critical driver of innovation and investments in essential services such as health care, education and clean water and sanitation.

In particular, partnerships to broaden access to new technologies are crucial to bridge the gaps in equitable development for all. Information and communication technology (ICT) can assist in accelerating development across all the MDGs. Mobile telephones and the Internet facilitate improved efficiencies and capacities across many fields, including health, education and poverty reduction. However, it is important to bridge the "digital divide" that currently prevents many nations and people from having sufficient access to many new technologies.

Why language is important

ICT can be a powerful tool for sharing knowledge and information in pursuit of development goals, and partnerships between public and private sectors must be strengthened to ensure equitable access to and relevance and quality of ICT for all minorities. Developing and providing materials and software in local languages fosters participation and inclusion of minorities.

In education, various countries are recognizing that ICT can facilitate learning among traditionally excluded populations such as girls and women, ethnic minorities and persons with disabilities. As a result, pilot, internet-based education initiatives are enhancing access to education for those groups.[47]

Policy and Practice

Policy

National ICT policies that support increased access, improved governance and infrastructural supports, and the localization of materials and software help pave the way for greater inclusion for all groups, including rural and minority populations, in health, education and livelihood development.

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47 United Nations Global Alliance for ICT and Development. 2009. White Paper: "Information & Communications Technology for Education in Development". http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/gaid/unpan034975.pdf (Accessed 10 June 2011).

Practice

Below is an example of a project that utilizes ICT and local languages.

South Africa: Health messages reach population via mobile phone

Project Masiluleke (Project M) in South Africa sends out important health information in phone text messages in local languages. South Africa has 11 officially recognized languages, and in order to reach as many people as possible, the project has acknowledged that it is crucial for people to be addressed in a language they understand.

Since October 2008, Project M has sent out more than 1 billion short message service (SMS) text messages to the general public on HIV and AIDS, resulting in a huge volume of calls to the national AIDS hotline. The project has reported a greater increase in calls when messages are received in vernacular languages such as Zulu, compared with when they are sent in English.

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Notes

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