An International Conference on:  
Language, Education and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)  
November 9-11, 2010  
Twin Towers Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand  

Background:

With only five years left until the 2015 deadline to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, the state of development for the world’s ethnolinguistic minorities continues to lag behind, putting them at risk for even greater disparities that hinder efforts to overcome poverty, illiteracy and disease; as well as increasing the likelihood of conflict arising from exclusion. The vast majority of planning, monitoring and evaluation for the achievement of the MDGs and Education for All (EFA), however, makes minimal mention of ethnolinguistic minorities, even as they are disproportionately affected by many of the most pressing social challenges.

The global development community needs to have multisectoral approaches and coordination among various stakeholders to address this disparity, including: strategies that integrate local languages and cultures into the development process for greater access and quality; data collection indicators and methodology that specifically disaggregate development gains to track the progress of ethnolinguistic minorities relative to their majority counterparts; and mechanisms to enable greater participation and voice of ethnolinguistic minority communities in decision-making for development.

Since 2004, the Bangkok-based Multilingual Education (MLE) working group, comprised of partners from government, non-government and UN organizations, has worked collaboratively to raise awareness regarding persistent inequalities in the educational attainment of ethnolinguistic minorities and to promote good practices in increasing access and quality of education for these disadvantaged groups.

Recognizing that multilingual education is most relevant when strongly integrated with a broader framework of education, development and improved quality of life for ethnolinguistic minorities,

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1 A community, group or other social unit that defines itself by sharing the same language and culture
2 Taken from a Minority Rights International briefing paper on Indigenous Group and the MDGs
the MLE working group has selected the broad theme of “Language, Education and the Millennium Development Goals” for the 2010 conference. Throughout the conference, we would like to highlight the linkages and synergies between MLE and the MDGs.

Join with representatives of government and intergovernmental agencies, NGOs, academics and local civil society during a three-day forum to dialogue about: the state of development of ethnolinguistic minorities, the relevance of local languages in achieving education and development goals, and the development of programs and policies that better reach these underserved groups.

**Purpose:**

Languages are more than tools for communication; they help shape the identity of individuals and groups, as well as serving as a key element in social integration and cultural development. As such, languages are also strategically important for the attainment of the MDGs and EFA.

This conference provides a forum to enhance understanding, inspire meaningful action and increase access to education and development opportunities for ethnolinguistic communities through:

- Increasing understanding of the linkages between language and achieving the MDGs and EFA;
- Fostering connections among a broad set of actors to support activities that integrate language and education as crosscutting themes in achieving the MDGs and EFA;
- Informing policy makers and development partners on good practices to effectively incorporate language and education into strategies and policies to achieve the MDGs and EFA.

**Programme:**

**Plenary Sessions:**
The conference features two plenary sessions on the overarching theme of effective integration of language and education in achieving the MDGs and EFA. In addition, a special plenary session on language and Early Childhood Development will be organized, as a follow up to the World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education in Moscow (September 2010).

**Parallel Sessions with Thematic Tracks:**
The conference features four thematic tracks, which incorporate language and education as crosscutting themes. Each track will feature papers and presentations selected in advance from among the conference participants to represent a broad range of viewpoints and that highlight relevant local, national or comparative research and practice related to the conference theme. The thematic tracks will occur in parallel sessions throughout the conference. The four thematic tracks include:

1. **Language and Universal Primary Education (MDG 2)**
   This track is based on the idea that languages are dynamic because people and their culture constantly adapt in response to the world around them. Language-based development is a tool that can help build a communication bridge between local and global communities. Primary
education programs which 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, acquiring essential tools for life-long learning. The results are the growth of self esteem and a community that is better equipped to become literate in languages of wider communication.

2. Language and Gender Equality (MDG 3)

This track aims to raise awareness and enhance the knowledge on the critical linkages between language and gender, and the way in which language impacts the advancement of gender equality and women’s empowerment. Language can be a force to enhance or restrict individuals’ opportunities to development; as it interacts with an array of cultures and practices, the role language plays can be influenced by the sex of the user and the gender role expectations and relationship embedded in the community. For women and girls from ethno-linguistic communities, language differences can pose a serious barrier to accessing education and to fully participating in political, social and economic activities, hence restricting their opportunities to development. When traditional values and systems in some communities continue to place limited value on the rights and empowerment of women and girls, information and education in languages other than their mother tongue can limit their opportunities to basic social services, quality education and life-long learning as women and girls are less exposed to the society beyond their community. Limited access to education due to language barrier is of particular concern, as education offers one of the best means to overcoming deeply rooted gender biases and discrimination. Therefore, gender sensitive language policies and the use of mother-tongue teaching in education are not only crucial for ensuring access to education for all but also promoting gender equality and social equity. Track 2 provides a forum to explore these issues and identify ways to ensure language policies are gender sensitive, while effectively integrating linguistic and cultural considerations in policies and services to promote gender equality in education, political, social and economic participation.

3. Language, Health, Nutrition and Protection (MDGs 4,5,6)

The aim of this track is to promote enhanced knowledge and awareness of the critical linkages between language and health, nutrition, and protection. For ethnic minorities whose local language differs from the country’s official language, the impact on their health and well-being can be profound. Language differences can act as barriers that restrict individuals’ access to essential nutrition, health and protection services and also jeopardize their quality. More broadly, language differences can impinge upon their engagement in policy development processes and the extent to which they recognize the relevant policy provisions, resulting in limited demand for and utilization of services. Thus, policies, practices and messages that are attuned to linguistic and cultural needs of communities are critical levers to promoting positive health and well-being of disadvantaged ethnic minorities. Track 2 will provide a forum to identify gaps and challenges as well as potential pathways to effectively integrating linguistic and cultural considerations in policy and service provisions for improved nutrition, health and protection of individuals.
4. **Language and Sustainable Development (MDGs 1,7)**

The goal of this track is to provide understanding and in-depth analysis of the role and contribution of language in promoting and achieving sustainable development with focus on poverty reduction and environmental conservation strategies. Even within a country, a large number of languages are spoken and used for communication and social interaction, and also officially used and accepted. The communication process becomes further complicated when a country is ethnically diverse and crisscrossed by a variety of local languages/dialects, quite different from regional/state and national languages. Language as a communication and interaction tool may either facilitate or restrict access to resources to alleviate extreme poverty and mitigate environmental degradation. Interaction with the indigenous and local people through a common language strengthens participation in community-based programs on poverty and environment-focused development activities.