ADVOCATING FOR MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA

Cambodia is home to an estimated 23 minority language groups with indigenous ethnic minorities making up the majority for the population in Ratanak Kiri and Mondul Kiri Provinces. Educational outcomes for these provinces and specifically in ethnic minority communities are significantly lower than the national average.

Ethnic minority children in remote communities face many obstacles such as the lack of nearby schools, education in a language they do not understand, teacher shortages and high levels of absenteeism, and the use of a curriculum that is culturally irrelevant.

WHAT IS THE EDUCATION SITUATION FOR ETHNIC MINORITY CHILDREN WHO DO NOT SPEAK KHMER?

For ethnic minority children, school, if there is one within reach of their village, can be a frightening experience as most have little to no previous exposure to Khmer language or culture. Curriculum materials are in Khmer and ignore the student's own knowledge and experience.

As many ethnic minority children do not understand Khmer well, they quickly fall behind their Khmer classmates, have to repeat grades or eventually drop out of school altogether.

WHAT IS MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION?

Multilingual Education (MLE) provides opportunities for children to start their education in their home language, which then acts as a bridge to and facilitates the learning of the national language. It can be defined as the planned and systematic use of two languages in a program of instruction for children. Children learn best when they use what they already know (their knowledge and experience, their own language) to learn what is new (new facts, new concepts, new languages). Additionally, multilingual education contributes towards the preservation and protection of languages.

Multilingual education programs focus on helping students build a strong educational foundation in their first language and use this as a bridge to the new language.

HOW DO CHILDREN LEARN KHMER IN MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS?

The process of learning Khmer in multilingual education in Cambodia programs is progressive and currently takes three years in addition to some exposure in preschool. In the first year, children develop literacy skills in their home language and learn oral Khmer. The home language is the main language of instruction. In the following two grades, the amount of Khmer is gradually increased. By the fourth grade, students study all subjects in Khmer.

Children from ethnic minorities begin learning in their home language and slowly shift to using Khmer over three years.

WHAT ELEMENTS ARE REQUIRED TO SET UP EFFECTIVE MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS?

Successful MLE programs share the following characteristics:

- Communities participate and take responsibility for planning, implementing, evaluating and maintaining their programs.
- Government, NGOs, universities and other institutions and interested groups support programs.
- Adequate funding is made available for teacher salaries, training and material development.
- Communities recognize the benefits of multilingual education.
CARE'S ROLE IN ADVOCATING FOR MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA

CARE Cambodia has been actively advocating for multilingual education in Cambodia for over a decade. CARE has been successful in developing a sustainable model suitable for the Cambodian context with the support of partners such as UNICEF. This model has now in large part been taken ownership of by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, ensuring that future generations of ethnic minority children can access and succeed in school.

Starting from its pilot program in 2003 through to the technical support of the development of a national action plan on multilingual education in recent years, advocacy has played a central role in CARE’s approach.

CARE’s advocacy was deliberately aimed at bringing about policy change, following a four-stage process.

1. **Identify issue or problem**
2. **Gather evidence**
3. **Build consensus**
4. **Influence policy**

CARE’s advocacy work on MLE in Cambodia is on-going, currently shifting from the role of an implementer to focus on an advisory role, but its long history of engagement provide numerous lessons:

- Keep government officials informed in the early stages and move towards deeper, genuine involvement as the results of the project become available, allowing them to observe first-hand, engage with the issues and observe the results. This can transform opponents into supporters.
- Be a supportive, responsive partner in order to built strong, trusting relationships with government.
- Learn to work with and within the communication protocols of various government departments and understand their structures and functioning.
- Train staff at all levels on responsive advocacy strategies and develop creative approaches to working with government.
- Build the capacity of government to be able to take ownership.
- Find champions within the government who can advocate for acceptance and understanding at high levels.
- Underpin advocacy efforts with a strong evidence base, involving renowned institutions, applying rigour to results and produce research that can be held up to scrutiny by international experts.
- Work with strategically positioned partners and through a broad-based network to maximise advocacy throughsupportive coalitions.
- Be involved in important forums that set standards and best practices and invite high level government officials to participate.
- Develop a strategic advocacy plan while remaining responsive to the reality on the ground.

The full document *Advocating for Multilingual Education in Cambodia Experiences and Strategies* is available on the CARE Cambodia website at www.care-cambodia.org/research.

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