Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education Pilot Program for Timor-Leste

A Brief Progress Report on Activities Conducted

January – May 2012

“I am so happy that from now on we can freely use mother tongue in our daily teaching, not like before when using mother tongue was done in a clandestine way” – Teacher, Oecusse

“In this village we think mother tongue-based teaching is necessary as it facilitates and bridges our children to the official languages” - Village Chief, Lautem

1. Background of the Program

The Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education pilot program is a Ministry of Education initiative aimed at improving learning outcomes at the pre-school and early grade of primary schooling levels. In February 2011, the National Education Commission's “Language in Education Working Group” launched its “Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education –MTB-MLE - Policy for Timor-Leste”. The policy had been commissioned some 12 months earlier by the Minister of Education, acknowledging the need for a comprehensive “language in education” policy, clearly rooted in Timor-Leste’s educational and linguistic reality and in international best practice. The policy states that a student’s mother tongue should be used as a medium of instruction in pre-primary education and in the first 4 years of primary schooling, thus enabling children to acquire the fundamental skills of reading and writing in the language they know best. This solid foundation in pre- and early literacy skills allows children to transition to the second, third and fourth languages with greater facility and speed. The National Strategic Plan 2011-2030 references the policy’s recommendations on Pages 18 and 27 (Social Capital/Pre-School Education/Social Inclusion). The policy’s Implementation Plan recommends an MTB-MLE pilot program.

In December 2011, the Ministry of Education convened a meeting of senior education officials in Dili at which it was decided that a pilot MTB-MLE program in three districts – Lautem, Manatuto and Oecusse – would be implemented by the Timor-Leste National Commission for UNESCO, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and a range of partner organizations, including CARE Timor-Leste, Child Fund, Mary MacKillop Institute and the Alola Foundation. Two pre-schools and two primary schools per district were subsequently identified with input from District Education Directors to participate in the MLE pilot program. Consequently, a total of 12 schools are now participating in pilot program activities, including teacher training, community education, writing workshop and classroom implementation.
2. Details of Activities Performed

2.1 Activity One: MLE Training of Trainers

➢ **Phase One TOT:** The first round of MLE training of trainers was conducted in Dili from 5-6 December 2011 and was attended by 14 trainers and 10 other participants representing some 15 organizations. This first-ever MLE training was aimed at enhancing the understanding of the trainers of the MLE principles and benefits and introducing basic MLE teaching methodologies to the trainers. The training was done in a participatory manner in which every training participant contributed their ideas on how to deliver teaching in the mother tongues in all pilot schools. A teacher training manual was developed and introduced to the trainers during the training and a number of inputs, feedback and recommendations were received from training participants for further development of the manual.

➢ **Phase Two TOT:** The second round of MLE teacher training took place in Dili from 7-8 March 2012 and 15 trainers were present. While the phase two of training of trainers initiated to refresh and deepen the trainers’ comprehension of the principles and benefits of MLE, it focused more on demonstrating MLE teaching methodologies, following recommendations from the trainers from the first training. This training was successful in the sense that every participant contributed their ideas based on their experiences in the discussion on how to teach students in the language they are most familiar with.

2.2 Activity Two: Teacher Training and Community Education in Lautem

➢ **Teacher Training:** The completion of the two phases of the training of trainers enabled the first round of teacher training to take place from 14-16 March 2012 in Lautem district. The training targeted all 4 pilot schools and a total of 10 teachers and 6 teaching assistants. Pre-school and grade one teachers were the main target for this training, however teachers of grade 1 to 4...
were also interested in attending the training. A teacher training team comprised of 5 trainers facilitated the training in Lautem. It was observed that teachers were very much open to and supportive of MTB-MLE principles and practice and showed great enthusiasm towards the approaches to initial learning in their mother tongue (in this case Fataluku).

**Community Education:** Another activity performed was awareness-raising targeting teachers, school principals, parents and local community leaders and members at the pilot schools to raise their awareness on the importance of Mother Tongue-based instruction. The activity, which was led by the socialization team, was conducted successfully in each pilot school site and nearly 200 people came to the meeting. Local leaders and the district education director participated in the activity and expressed their keen interest in supporting the pilot program. “We understand that this initiative has been under political attack at the national level, but we the community in this village would like to declare that we support our children to start learning in our mother tongue as it will bridge them to the learning of the official languages” said one of the village chiefs. Some parents expressed their concerns over the implementation of the mother tongue pilot instruction based on fears that it would hinder their children’s ability to acquire the official languages of Tetum and Portuguese. The socialization team clarified to parents the benefits of learning in mother tongue, one of which is to assist children to better acquire the official languages.
2.3 Activity Three: Teacher Training and Community Education in Manatuto

- **Teacher Training:** Phase one teacher training was also held in Manatuto from 23-27 April 2012 targeting four pre-schools and 2 primary grade one teachers in the four pilot schools. Teachers of grade 2 to 4 were also present as they were anxious to have an early exposure to the new MLE teaching methodologies ahead of expansion of the program to higher grades in the years to come. Consequently, around 15 teachers and 6 teaching assistants participated in the trainings.

- **Community Education:** Another activity performed in Manatuto was community-based advocacy, targeting mainly school principals, teachers, local leaders and parents at the pilot sites. Local leaders and the community were largely in favour of mother tongue-based teaching, although some parents in the more urban environment of Obrato, located within a few kilometers from the district capital, expressed their concern that, for some of the students, Tetum rather than Galolen, is the dominant home language.
2.4 Activity Four: Teacher Training and Community Education in Oecusse

- **Teacher Training:** Phase one of teacher training was held in Oecusse from 30 April to 4 May 2012. The training was attended by 20 teachers of two preschools and two primary schools (grades 1 to 4) in all pilot schools. Teachers welcomed the training as a way of strengthening their ability to more effectively use students’ mother tongues in the classroom. Furthermore, most of the teachers viewed the MTB-MLE policy and pilot as providing them with the “legal blessing” for using children’s first language in the teaching and learning process. “Now we feel we are not using mother tongue to teach our children in a clandestine way” said one of the teachers, referring to the fact that they have been using mother tongue in their teaching in a secretive and unsupported way to date.

- **Community Education:** Community members, local leaders, parents and teachers in the pilot sites participated in the socialization despite the fact it was a market day where most people were supposed to be at the market. When asked why they came for the meeting and did not go to the market, they said they cared about their children’s education, and were anxious to know how the program would meet their children’s learning needs.
3. Challenges and Opportunities

The main challenge uncovered during the first round of teacher training related to the level of education of the teachers. Most teachers are high school graduates and have limited experience of teaching using modern, child-centred methodologies. Thus, ongoing intensive training is needed. These teachers sometimes find it difficult to absorb knowledge and experience from formal teacher training sessions unless they are provided regularly and are linked to classroom realities and to the precise socio-linguistic backgrounds of both teachers and students in each pilot site. Also, some of the newly-recruited teaching assistants have little or no experience of teaching in a classroom environment. However, they showed keen interest in deepening their understanding of MTB-MLE principles and practice. Most parents, teachers and community local leaders in the three districts were enthusiastic about the program and this should be viewed as an important opportunity in moving forward with implementing MTB-MLE inside the classroom.