



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
**Celebration of International Mother Language Day**  
**Joint Press release by UNICEF and UNESCO in Cambodia**

International Mother Language Day has been celebrated on 21 February each year since 2000. This year, UNESCO and UNICEF in Cambodia will jointly celebrate the Day, honouring the world's nearly 6,000 languages and promoting linguistic diversity and bilingual and multilingual education.

UNESCO and UNICEF promote bilingual and multilingual approaches in education so that children can learn in their mother-tongue – an important factor for enhancing inclusion and quality in education. Past research shows that mother-tongue-based bilingual and multilingual education has a positive impact on learning and learning outcomes for children and adults. UNESCO and UNICEF are supporting the Royal Government of Cambodia to develop a strategy for quality and inclusive basic education for all, provide culturally relevant learning materials in the languages of the learning community, and provide technical assistance to develop educational policies and practices.

Cambodia is a leader in the Southeast Asia region in using ethnic minority languages in community education, and in recent years has begun to use languages like Phnong, Kreung, Tampuan and Kwait in pre-primary and primary school programmes. Khmer is the official national language of Cambodia and spoken by more than 95 per cent of the population. Yet there are around 20 languages spoken in the country.

As an example of progress made, in August 2010 the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport approved a set of guidelines to implement bilingual education for non-Khmer speakers in Ratanakiri, Mondulakiri, Stung Treng, Preah Vihear and Kratie, the five provinces with the highest number of indigenous communities. As Richard Bridle, UNICEF's Representative in Cambodia, stated, "The aim is to ensure equitable access to education for highland children, many of whom have not had an opportunity to attend school, or who repeat classes, fail or drop out because they do not understand the teaching in Khmer".

Achieving Education for All requires a truly global commitment. Governments, civil society, development agencies and the media must work together to ensure that all children, no matter what their ethnic background and language, are able to realize his or her inalienable right to a quality education. "Mother language instruction is a powerful way to fight discrimination and reach out to marginalized populations," UNESCO Director-General, Irina Bokova emphasised in her message for the Mother Language Day. "By encouraging people to learn in their own language", UNESCO Representative in Cambodia, Anne Lemaistre added "we are creating opportunities and building bridges between the different ethnic groups in the country. In order to meet the Education for All goals by 2015, everybody needs to be included and also feel included."

Celebrating International Mother Language Day is an opportunity to promote and protect cultural and linguistic diversity. It is estimated that almost half of over 6,000 languages in use worldwide are in

danger of disappearing. Because language is so strongly linked to culture, losing a language also implies the disappearance of a culture's means of expression.

As part of its efforts to safeguard and raise awareness about Cambodia's cultural and linguistic diversity, the UNESCO Phnom Penh Office is supporting research publications on the Kingdom's Indigenous languages. A preliminary inventory of minority languages and the people who speak them has recently been published in Khmer and French. Three more publications on Kuay and Phnong languages will be released in 2011.

Working together with the Government of Cambodia, these collective efforts will accelerate the process of Education for All by 2015 as well as promote cultural and linguistic diversity in Cambodia.

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