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INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY

Cambodia recognised as role model in Asia-Pacific region for mother tongue-based bilingual education

International Mother Language Day is celebrated on 21 February each year since 2000 to raise awareness of the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity and of multilingual education. This year, UNESCO and UNICEF in Cambodia are jointly marking the Day, honouring the world's nearly 6,000 languages and promoting linguistic diversity and bilingual and multilingual education.

Phnom Penh, 21 February 2012 – Today, as the world commemorates International Mother Language Day, Cambodia is recognized as a role model in the Asia-Pacific region for its mother tongue based bilingual education programme, which has enabled children and adult from minority populations, who do not speak the national language at home, to access quality basic education as well as to promote inclusion and social and gender equality.

The acknowledgement comes in a 2011 UNICEF-supported external evaluation of the state of bilingual education in Cambodia which calls for the creation of a Centre for Cambodian Languages within existing academic structures to coordinate linguistic processes, promote the development of minority languages and document existing written materials in each language.

In Cambodia, Khmer is the official national language spoken by a 96.3 per cent of the total population (Population Census 2008), but around 20 languages are spoken in the country.

Cambodia has successfully expanded a relatively small-scale pilot programmes in three provinces to a widespread bilingual education approach for non-native Khmer speakers in state schools and communities in the five north-eastern provinces which have the highest number of indigenous communities: Ratanakiri, Mondulakiri, Stung Treng, Preah Vihear and Kratie.

The Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth has approved standardised writing systems (orthographies) for five languages - Kreung, Tampuan, Brao, Kavet and Phnong. In August

2010, a set of bilingual education guidelines on Implementation of Education for Indigenous Children in Highland Provinces was adopted by the Ministry. Building on these significant achievements, in 2011 the Ministry organized a workshop on bilingual education to propose recommendations for further actions and developed several teaching learning materials including Bilingual Education Picture Dictionary in Brao language with UNESCO support.

The global theme for 2012 International Mother Language Day is “Mother tongue instruction and inclusive education”. UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova said, “Excluded population groups, such as indigenous peoples, are often those whose mother tongues are ignored by education systems. Allowing them to learn from a very early age in their mother tongue, and then in national, official or other languages, promotes equality and social inclusion.”

Together, UNESCO and UNICEF in collaboration with national and international non-governmental organizations are supporting the Royal Government of Cambodia to promote bilingual and multilingual approaches as a means of improving educational quality by building upon the knowledge and experiences of learners in their language of the home and community.

According to UNESCO Representative to Cambodia, Anne Lemaistre noted that, “Language is an essential component to encourage mutual understanding and to ensure cultural diversity and sustainability. Mother tongue based bilingual and multilingual education has a positive impact on learning outcomes for children and adults. Having strong literacy and basic education in mother tongue will help learners to build a solid foundation and help them to build a good bridge in multilingual context in the Cambodian society.”

Richard Bridle, UNICEF Representative to Cambodia underlines the importance of education in mother tongue. He says “We cannot hope to realise the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All (EFA) Goals unless we ensure that every child has access to equitable and quality education, and that includes children from minority communities and those who are hardest-to-reach. Language ‘barriers’ cannot be used as an excuse for failure”.

In the coming years, UNESCO and UNICEF will continue to work with the government to support the bilingual and multilingual education programme by developing manuals in indigenous languages. The UNESCO Phnom Penh Office is also supporting the broadcast of indigenous language radio programme in four different languages in the province of Ratanakiri, and has recently released two publications on Kuay language and Phnong cultures in English, French and Khmer.

For more information contact:

Jamie Lee, UNESCO, Communication and Information Focal Point

Phone: (+855) 023 426 726, ext. 115 Email:

hj.lee@unesco.org

Denise Shepherd-Johnson, Chief of Communication, UNICEF Cambodia, Phone: (+855) 023

426 214, ext. 648 Email: dshepherdjohnson@unicef.org