



Cambodia's Multilingual Education National Action Plan

Fact sheet

Background

Cambodia is home to an estimated 24 minority language groups. Indigenous ethnic minorities make up a significant proportion of the population in north-eastern provinces; 64 per cent of the population in Ratanak Kiri province is from an ethnic minority.

Children from ethnic minority communities in remote areas face many obstacles, including:

- Lack of nearby schools
- Instruction in a language they do not understand
- Curriculum materials in a language that does not reflect their context

These challenges often mean that children from ethnic minority communities quickly fall behind their Khmer classmates and have to repeat grades or eventually drop out of school altogether.

Multilingual education

Multilingual education makes real access to education possible for children from ethnic minorities. It allows children to start education in their home language, which then supports the learning of the national language.

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Multilingual education programs cover Early Childhood Education and primary education as these years are extremely crucial to an individual's intellectual, emotional, social and physical development.¹ Experts believe children develop vital cognitive skills and master content material most easily when they are taught in a familiar language.² Multilingual education focuses on helping students build a strong educational foundation in their first language before they progress to the new language.

Multilingual education in Cambodia

Multilingual education was used in non-formal literacy classes since the mid nineties. It was first used formally in 2003 when CARE opened community schools to pilot this way of teaching in classrooms in Cambodia. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport first introduced multilingual education in state schools in Ratanak Kiri in 2007-8. Organisations including CARE, UNICEF, Plan International and International Cooperation Cambodia have contributed to the development of multilingual education in Cambodia.

- Multilingual education is implemented in five provinces at pre-school level and four provinces at primary level.
- Five ethnic minority languages were used in schools in 2015: Brov, Tampuen, Kreung, Kavet and Phnong.
- About 1500 children attend multilingual education preschools and 4000 children currently attend multilingual education primary schools; a few hundred have already transitioned to secondary education and graduated.

¹ Abidogun, Babajide Gboyega & Adebule, Oluranti Idiat. 2013. "Contributions of mother tongue education in early childhood education." Paper presented at 1st Annual International Conference, AIIC, Portugal.

² Scott Lee, Ron Watt & Jack Frawley. 2014. "Effectiveness of bilingual education in Cambodia: a longitudinal comparative case study of ethnic minority children in bilingual and monolingual schools." Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education: 3.

³ Benson, C. J. 2002. "Real and Potential Benefits of Bilingual Programmes in Developing Countries." International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism 5 (6): 303-317.

⁴ Cummins, J. 2001. "Bilingual Children's Mother Tongue: Why is It Important for Education?" Sprogforum 19: 15-20.

Early Childhood Development	Early Childhood Development is taught in indigenous languages. In the final year, children are introduced to Khmer words.
Primary: Grades 1-3	Grades 1 to 3 at school sees a transitional phase, when students are slowly introduced to the national language of Khmer, while classes are mostly taught in their own language. By the end of Grade 3, the indigenous language is almost phased out.
Primary: Grades 4-6	Grades 4 to 6 are taught in Khmer, but teachers are equipped to support students who are having difficulties keeping up in their second language.
Lower Secondary: Grades 7-9	Students should be confident in Khmer, with lower secondary education taught in the national language and students fully integrated with Khmer students. Teachers are trained to provide extra support to students when needed and in how to work cross-culturally.
Upper Secondary: 10-12	Students are using Khmer at a high standard, and finishing school with a range of opportunities, literate in their own language and the national language.

Benefits of multilingual education in Cambodia

Multilingual education contributes towards the preservation and protection of languages while simultaneously facilitating the learning of the national language.

- A child's first language is the most efficient language for early literacy,³ leading to higher literacy rates for ethnic minority communities.
- Students who are taught effectively in their mother tongue and develop literacy in that language perform better in school overall.⁴
- Ethnic minority children become able to read, write and speak in the national and their home language.
- The loss of ethnic minority languages is prevented because children learn how to read and write in their home languages.
- Teachers from ethnic minority communities are trained and receive employment.

The Ministry's National Action Plan

The Multilingual Education National Action Plan acknowledges that all children from ethnic minorities have the right to access education in their mother tongue and that this is the best approach for students to succeed. It was officially approved by His Excellency Dr Hang Chuon Naron, Minister of Education, Youth and Sport in October 2015.

This National Action Plan sets out the commitment from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport to expand multilingual education to reach more students in Cambodia. By 2018 the Ministry aims to increase the number of multilingual education preschools by 88% and the number of multilingual education primary schools by 100%.

The National Action Plan sets out a number of strategies for achieving this:

- Providing additional training to ethnic minority teacher trainees on how to teach in two languages.
- Providing recognition to multilingual education community teachers who meet minimum standards so they can receive state school teacher status.
- Publishing teaching and learning materials in indigenous languages and ensuring all students have sufficient numbers of these.
- Transforming community multilingual education schools to become state schools which are managed by the MoEYS.

By taking these actions, the Ministry aims to improve the quality of education for ethnic minority students in Cambodia.