

# **The Importance of Mother Tongue in Early Childhood Development**

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# *Provocations*

- How many languages are spoken in Asia?  
How many in your country?
- What percentage of these languages are “in trouble” or “dying”?
- What is the status of non-dominant/minority languages in your country?
- How many of the non-dominant languages are used in early childhood development (ECD) programmes and more formal education?
- If not, why not?



# *Provocations*

**We know that the most disadvantaged children (over 250 million under 5) benefit the most from ECD programmes:**

- girls, children of migrants, and children affected by conflict, disaster, and abuse
- children living in extreme poverty and in rural and remote areas
- children in poor health, malnourished, and with disabilities and delays
- **children of linguistic/ethnic minorities**

**So why do these children participate in ECD programmes the least?**



# *Provocations*

**We know that learning first in one's mother tongue (MT) leads to better outcomes in the future** – for individuals, cultures, and nations.

**So why is mother tongue used so little in many ECD programmes** and in the early grades of primary school?

And why are so many children forced to learn:

- in a language they poorly understand?
- in an environment which neglects and even represses their cultural identity and the language which “carries” it?



# ***Early Childhood Development***

As an **outcome**, ECD defines a child's status as being “physically healthy, mentally alert, emotionally sound, socially competent and **ready to learn**”. (UNICEF)

As a **process**, ECD covers the age period of -9 to 8 years and important **periods of transition** from:

- pregnancy (and even before) to infancy,
- from home into ECD programmes and then into primary school,
- and on to successful early learning and psycho-social development.

**Readiness to learn and difficult transitions are made easier if they are made in mother tongue.**



# ***ECD: Why Do It?***

- **Neuroscience:** The most rapid period of brain development occurs in the first years of life.
- **Economics:** Returns on investment in ECD accumulate and help prevent later inequality.
- **Poverty reduction:** Quality ECD for children helps reduce inter-generational poverty.
- **Health:** ECD programmes lower health costs for young children and their mothers.
- **Education:** Good quality ECD results in:
  - cost-savings and increased efficiency in education systems
  - children ready for school with pre-literacy skills and socio-emotional competencies



# ***ECD: Why Do It?***

- **Culture: ECD programmes, if embedded in local culture and delivered in mother tongue, can have a strong impact on:**
  - **a child's cultural identity and self-esteem**
  - **the inter-generational transmission of knowledge**
  - **the participation of ethnic/linguistic groups in national development**
  - **loyalty to governments which value minority languages and cultures**



# ***Mother Tongue-Based Education***

- How many languages are spoken in Asia?  
2296
- What percentage of these languages are in trouble or dying? 38%
- How many non-dominant languages are used in formal education? perhaps only 10-15%
- And in community learning centres and ECD programmes? No one knows...





# Linguistic Diversity in Asia

*“In trouble” – parents speak the language but do not use it with their children*

*“Dying” – parents do not use the language*

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**South Asia – 659**  
(157 in trouble or dying)  
-- **24%**

**Southeast Asia – 1247**  
(523 in trouble or dying)  
– **42%**

Country	Languages
• Malaysia	136 (81% in trouble or dying)
• Cambodia	27 (57%)
• China	298 (53%)
• Nepal	120 (52%)
• Indonesia	707 (46%)
• Vietnam	108 (39%)
• Thailand	72 (35%)
• Bangladesh	41 (22%)
• Myanmar	117 (18%)
• India	447 (15%)
• Philippines	183 (13%)



# *Why Should We Care?*

**When a language dies, the world loses a piece of knowledge**, of human thought, and of world-view – and these can never be replaced.

**Languages in danger must be maintained, revitalised and further developed:**

- they are needed to sustain cultural and linguistic **diversity**
- they express **identity**, “hold” history, and transmit culture
- they contribute to the sum of human and **cultural knowledge**
- they are essential for human and social development and for the fulfillment of **human rights**



# ***MT in Education: Why Do It?***

- **A language can survive and thrive only if it has a strong presence in the ECD programmes and the education system.**
- But most education systems don't welcome, or are even hostile to, minority linguistic communities and their cultures.
- **People only learn to “read” once. Learners must begin learning from where they “are” (the “known”) – in their home language -- and NOT in a language they do not know.**
- **Mother tongues should be the basis of ECD programmes and for early primary school before the second language is mastered.**



# ***Why Do It: Using MT in ECD...***

- enhances **the relevance and effectiveness of ECD programmes** and early grade education
- produces **better learning and psycho-social outcomes** and greater internal efficiency
- promotes **participation of parents and other caregivers** in a child's education
- enables learners to gain **fluency and confidence** in mother tongue
- produces **materials in home languages**
- inserts **local knowledge** into the classroom
- contributes to **the maintenance of mother tongues** and the strengthening of often  
◀ **endangered cultures**



# ***What To Do?***

## **At the national level:**

- develop **national ECD policies** which promote the use of MT
- develop **national language policies** which promote and strengthen mother tongues in ECD programmes
- **promote high-level advocacy** and identify “champions” for ECD and MT
- **collect more evidence** through longitudinal research on the positive impacts of using MT in ECD programmes



# ***What To Do?***

## **At the local level:**

- **establish accessible and affordable MT-based ECD programmes/pre-schools**
- **establish programmes to ease the transition from pre-school into primary school via MT**
  - pre-school and early grade textbooks and other learning materials in MT
  - smaller classes in the early grades with better teachers able to teach in MT



## ***MTB MLE in ECD: Why Do It?***

**For both cultural and educational reasons, and as a child's right, early care and education and initial learning should be provided in a child's mother tongue.**

**If your ECD programme – or your nation's ECD policy – does not support mother tongue, why not?**

**And what can be done to ensure this support is provided?**

