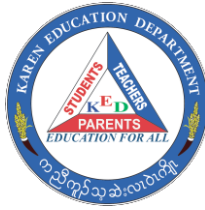


## Policy Briefing Paper

# Enhancing Learning and Development through Diversity: Mother Tongue-Based Multi-Lingual Education



## About Contributing Organizations

*This Policy Briefing Paper was developed in collaboration with the following organizations:*

Karenni Education Department (KnED)  
Karen Education Department (KED)  
Karen Teachers Working Group (KTWG)  
Karen Women's Organization (KWO)

*With Support From:*

Save the Children  
World Education  
Right to Play  
Jesuit Refugee Services  
Adventist Development and Relief Agency

## Policy Briefing Paper

### Enhancing Learning and Development through Diversity: Mother Tongue-Based Multi-Lingual Education.

#### Introduction

Myanmar has a rich linguistic diversity, with over one hundred languages spoken in the country and over one third of the population speaking a language other than Myanmar as their mother tongue<sup>i</sup>. As the Myanmar government embarks on its commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 “*Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning*”, a key issue is how to best address the needs of children from the country’s many different language groups. This short briefing paper outlines the need for mother tongue-based multi-lingual education (MTBMLE) in Myanmar with a particular focus on the Karen and Karenni populations.

#### The challenge

It is essential that the Myanmar education reform process adequately address the issue of language in learning so that all children have an equal opportunity to learn. Strong language development strategies are fundamental to children’s success, and without them children are more likely to struggle with exams, drop out of school, and ultimately be illiterate. While it is recognised that greater efforts are needed to boost the learning outcomes of children in poverty and disaster-affected areas, the central role of language in learning is often overlooked in education programme design and funding.<sup>ii</sup>

The need for children to learn in their native language has been long recognised,<sup>iii</sup> yet an estimated 200 million children worldwide<sup>iv</sup> lack access to education in a language they understand. This is especially problematic for displaced populations such as those in the Thai-Myanmar refugee camps, and in poor or rural or areas such as Karen and Karenni areas in Eastern Myanmar, where children speak one language most of their lives. It will be especially difficult for them to enter school and encounter an unfamiliar language.

International data demonstrates that children who speak a different language than the language of instruction in school perform significantly worse than children who speak the same language.<sup>v</sup> When children are instructed in a language they do not fully understand, they will use most of their attention to learn the new language and translate what is being spoken rather than absorbing the curriculum.<sup>vi</sup> Teachers may also spend a lot of time translating between national and local languages, significantly reducing the amount of curriculum covered. If children advance to upper primary school, they require a range of academic vocabulary to comprehend subjects including science, math and history. Children first need to develop a base of vocabulary, understanding, and skills in these areas in their mother tongue, which will then enable them to transition to study in a second language.

Moreover, in the crucial area of early literacy, it has been shown that children will become better readers if they first learn to read in their mother tongue, and then transfer these skills to reading in a second language<sup>vii</sup>. Failure to provide instruction in children’s native languages contributes to poor early grade literacy results in multilingual countries such as Myanmar. Reading

assessments of Karen and Karenni children living in Thailand indicate that those studying in their mother tongue are doing better than those studying in a second language,<sup>viii</sup> a finding replicated by research in the Irawaddy region<sup>ix</sup> of Myanmar.

Unless children first develop their mother tongue language through basic education, they will remain ‘trapped between two languages’ – poor first language development will only provide children with basic social communication at home, and make it difficult for children to learn the curriculum or improve second language proficiency necessary for educational success.<sup>x</sup> If children build a strong base of development in their mother tongue, it will allow them to advance in the curriculum and learn secondary languages more easily at school.

Language is also vital for community and school relations. If teachers do not speak the language of parents, it is difficult for them to communicate and collaborate, and the community will be less involved in the school and children’s education.

Finally, in many countries the exclusion of ethnic minority languages from the education system has contributed to the marginalization of ethnic groups and to continued tension. Thus, in countries engaged in a peace process, such as Myanmar, using mother tongue in schools and curriculum can make a positive contribution to reconciliation and the building of a harmonious society. Diversity should be celebrated and embraced if all students are to thrive.

### What is the solution?

Several countries including the Philippines and Ethiopia are introducing a form of teaching that provides 21<sup>st</sup>-century children with strong language and learning skills. MTBMLE uses learner-centred teaching techniques to expand children’s development of their first language, which is essential for the cognitive and linguistic development needed to learn educational curriculum and build skills in national and international languages. Through teaching new concepts in mother tongue, and then introducing second language related to these concepts, children’s understanding of second language grows to the extent that it can be increasingly used to deliver the curriculum alongside first language. An ideal MTBMLE program allows children to learn in their mother tongue for *at least six years*, with a gradual introduction and transition to a second language as children move through the grades. See Figure 1 as an example.

Primary Level	G6	L1 (Lol + subject)	L2 (Lol + subject)
	G5	L1 (Lol + subject)	L2 (Lol + subject)
	G4	L1 (Lol + subject)	L2 (Lol) + L2SL
	G3	L1 (Lol)	L2SL
	G2	L1 (Lol)	L2SL (oral + written)
	G1	L1 (Lol, literacy in L1)	L2SL (oral)
Pre-primary level	KG2	L1 (Lol)	L2SL (oral)
	KG1	L1 (Lol)	

MTBMLE teaching can be further strengthened through community-based strategies to help parents boost children’s first language development, and by making more reading materials available outside school in both first and second languages. Results show that children from MTBMLE programs in poor or remote areas are now achieving high levels of skill across the whole curriculum, in both national and foreign languages.<sup>xi</sup> MTBMLE develops highly

Figure 1: Recommended MTBMLE Cycle

skilled citizens, strengthens national language for minority children, brings schools and communities closer, and promotes cohesion in society. It is therefore a fundamental part of a peace-building education system, and is a key opportunity for Myanmar to demonstrate its commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and to the rights of indigenous language groups.

It should be recognised that MTBMLE is not always easy to establish, and requires investment in curriculum and teacher development at the initial stages. However, in the long-term, reductions in student drop-out and repetition mean that MTBMLE is more cost-effective, and the benefits too important to ignore.

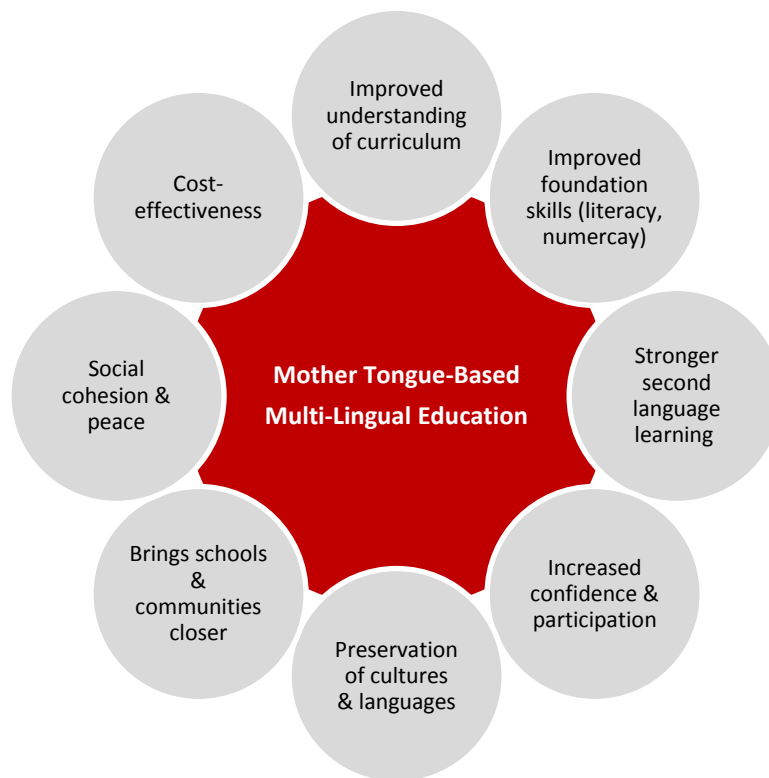


Figure 2: Benefits of MTBMLE

## Policy Recommendations

- **The government's education and language policy should promote and ensure the participation and learning of ethnic, indigenous, and minority language groups.** MTBMLE is proven to give all children the best chance to succeed in school. MTBMLE will not only enhance children's learning and understanding of the curriculum, it will give them the basis to learn better in other languages as they progress.

- **The peace process in Myanmar should recognise MTBMLE as a key contribution towards harmony and cohesion**, as valuing diverse ethnic cultures and languages will help all communities to be part of a new Myanmar. Similarly, to ensure the process is inclusive and representative, **ethnic and minority language groups should participate in the development and implementation of the language and education policy at all stages.**
- **The government should pay particular attention to the language needs of those in rural areas and from low-resource contexts** such as refugee camps or those living in remote areas of Myanmar as they experience less exposure to other languages in their community, and the support for language development (especially academic language) outside school is often weak.
- **Policy should ensure that children receive both curriculum and instruction in their mother tongue.** Where textbooks are not available in mother tongue, efforts should be made to develop them, and in the meantime teaching aids and supplementary reading materials should be made available in mother tongue.
- The government should **explore with local stakeholders the best evidence-based models for MTBMLE** in the Myanmar context. The evidence suggests that for MTBMLE to be effective<sup>xii</sup>, policy should aim for **children to mainly receive curriculum and instruction in mother tongue for at least six years**, with the gradual introduction and phasing in of a second language.
- **Language should be a central consideration of Myanmar's teacher recruitment and development policies.** MTBMLE can only work effectively if teachers are recruited who speak the same language as their students. In the Karen and Karenni context, there is a significant advancement on this front as thousands of Karen and Karenni teachers have already gained significant teaching experience and training in community and refugee education systems.
- The government should **invest in local MTBMLE curriculum.** In the case of the **Karen and Karenni groups**, as with other ethnic education systems, there is already significant progress in local curriculum development in the refugee camps and community schooling systems, which provides a good starting point for moving forward. Local MTBMLE curriculum will not only enhance linguistic development, but will also ensure that local cultures and traditions are reflected in school.
- **In multi-lingual contexts** where many languages are spoken in one school, the government should support programs to **provide additional support to minority language learners** who are not studying in their mother tongue, for example: Teachers can learn some of the students' language, bilingual teaching assistants from the local community can be used, culturally appropriate teaching aids can be provided, minority language learners can be provided with additional support outside of school through community activities such as reading clubs or peer study programs.

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<sup>i</sup> Goddard, Cliff (2005), *The Languages Of East And Southeast Asia: An Introduction*

<sup>ii</sup> Benson, C. & Wong, K. M. (2015). Development discourse on language of instruction and literacy: Sound policy and Ubuntu or lip service? *Reconsidering Development*, 4(1), 1-16

<sup>iii</sup> UNESCO. (1951) "The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education: The Report of the UNESCO Meeting of Specialists," in *Readings in the Sociology of Language*, J.A. Fishman (ed.) The Hague: Mouton Press.

<sup>iv</sup> Dutcher, N. (2004) *Expanding educational opportunity in linguistically diverse societies*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

<sup>v</sup> Martin, M.O., Mullis, I.V.S. and Foy, P. (with Olson, J.F., Erberber, E., Preuschoff, C. and Galia, J.) (2008) *Students' Backgrounds and Attitudes Towards Science*, Chapter 4. Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS & PIRLS. International Study Center, Boston College.

<sup>vi</sup> See Cummins, 2001: "*The biggest predictor of success in a second language is the level of development in the mother tongue*"

<sup>vii</sup> UNESCO (2008) *Improving the Quality of Mother Tongue-based Literacy and Learning*

<sup>viii</sup> See Save the Children and World Education (2015) *Pathways to a Better Future: A Review of Education for Migrant Children in Thailand, Reading Assessment*, and Save the Children (2014) *Early Grade Reading Assessment in the Thai-Burma refugee camps*.

<sup>ix</sup> Naw Khu Shee (2012) *Assessing the impact of using the national language instead of the learners' mother tongue in primary education in Myanmar*

<sup>xi</sup> Dumatog, R. and Dekker, D. (2003) *First language education in Lubuagan, Northern Philippines*. Manila: SIL International, available at: [http://www.sil.org/asia/ldc/parallel\\_papers/dumatog\\_and\\_dekker.pdf](http://www.sil.org/asia/ldc/parallel_papers/dumatog_and_dekker.pdf)

<sup>xii</sup> Heugh, K. (2005) *Mother tongue education is best*, HSRC Review Vol 3 No. 3, September 2005