

# Education and Ethnic Minorities in Viet Nam

## *UNICEF's support to mitigate inequity in primary education*

Presentation at the Minorities Forum 27 November, 2012, Geneva  
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Article 4.5 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities states that: "*States should consider appropriate measures so that persons belonging to minorities may participate fully in the economic progress and development of their country.*"

Viet Nam is a country with around 86 million inhabitants and 54 ethnic groups. The majority Kinh and Hoa ethnic groups account for about 86 per cent of the total. The other 52 ethnic groups have population sizes ranging from a few hundred to around 1 million people and account for about 14 per cent of the total population<sup>1</sup>. These ethnic minority (EM) groups mainly live in scattered settlement patterns especially in the Northern Uplands and Central Highlands regions. Ethnic minority groups each have their own language, and traditional culture and religious beliefs, which form the basis of their identity.

Albeit the country's fast socio-economic development that has earned the country the Middle Income Status, opportunities to benefit from these achievements have not been equally distributed among different ethnic groups. In 2008, half of EM households were living under the poverty line while the rate of the Kinh majority was less than 9 per cent. In the same year, 62% of EM children were from families living under the monetary poverty line and were deprived from a minimum in at least two of the domains of education, health, shelter, water and sanitation, labour, and social inclusion, three times higher than the rate among Kinh/Hoa children.

Perceptions towards EM as well as outright stigma and discrimination are also drivers of inequity and exclusion of EM. The issue of prejudice and perception was prominently highlighted in the report of the UN Independent expert on minority issues<sup>2</sup>.

### **Education**

Viet Nam has made significant strides in education; however, significant disparities between the majority and ethnic minorities still exist. For example, the literacy rate among Mong ethnic minorities aged 15 and above among was only 38%, while the national average was 94%. Similarly, only 73% of Mong and 86% of Khmer ethnic minority primary school aged children are enrolled in primary school, while the rate for the Kinh majority is as high as 97%.

<sup>1</sup> Census 2009 - cf. Annex 1 for an overview of available Census data on EM groups in the focus provinces of the 2012-2016 Government of Viet Nam - UNICEF Country Programme

<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council (2011). *Report of the Independent Expert on minority issues*, Gay McDougall. Mission to Viet Nam (5-15 July 2010). A/HRC/16/45/Add.2

One immediate cause which serves to explain this disparity is the fact that ethnic minority children do not have, or have very limited access to education in their *mother tongues*. The official language in school is Vietnamese and only few teachers can communicate in local ethnic minority languages. Consequently, many ethnic minority children struggle to understand their teachers and cannot participate in active learning. This contributes to their poor school performance, school dropout and limited opportunities throughout their lives.

The right to be taught in your own *mother tongue* is clearly stated in the UN Declaration on Minorities in article 4.3<sup>3</sup>. This was highlighted in the report on Vietnam of the UN Independent Expert on minority issues in 2010.<sup>4</sup> In Viet Nam, the Constitution enshrines the rights of ethnic minorities to use and protect their own languages and scripts, "*ethnic minorities have the right to use their own languages and scripts, maintain and develop their traditions, practices, custom and culture*" (Article 5).

### **Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education (MTBBE)**

Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education has been internationally proven to improve ethnic minorities' education attainment, as it helps increase access, improve learning outcomes, reduce repetition and dropout rates, preserve minority languages and local culture, and assist the States to realise the human rights.

As part of our support to the Government of Viet Nam to ensure quality, inclusive and equitable education for all, UNICEF has been supporting the Ministry of Education and Training to implement the mother tongue-based bilingual education programme through Action Research since 2008 in three provinces with three different ethnic minorities, namely: Mong, Jrai and Khmer. The programme is now in its fourth year of implementation.

The objective of the initiative is to implement a valid and feasible design of bilingual education in ethnic minority languages in pre-schools and primary schools. It also aims at developing policies and practises, including legal frameworks, which will promote the use and development of ethnic minority languages as a means for improving access, quality and equity of education and social services.

The approach in Viet Nam is that mother tongue is used as language of instruction and Vietnamese is taught as a subject in pre-school and primary grade 1 and 2. In grade 3-5 Vietnamese is introduced along with mother tongues as a language of instruction. And from grade 5 and onwards students would have developed bilingual skills and are comfortable to read, write and speak both their mother tongue and Vietnamese.

Curricula and materials have been developed in the local languages based on the national curriculum, and regular training for teachers and education managers in this approach has been carried out.

The initiative shows very positive results so far. Students in MTBBE classes have outperformed students in non-MTBBE classes in every area assessed. Not only are the learning results very

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3. "States should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue"

4. UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council (2011). *Report of the Independent Expert on minority issues*, Gay McDougall. Mission to Viet Nam (5-15 July 2010). A/HRC/16/45/Add.2

encouraging, but also students' regular attendance has improved. The teachers also express a higher level of confidence and satisfaction in their teaching and in their relationship with the children.

For the parents and the communities, there is great satisfaction to see the development of children's literacy in their mother tongue; an opportunity that they themselves never had, as well as the promotion of local culture and heritage as expressed through the use of their mother tongue.

UNICEF and the Ministry of Education and Training are now looking at possibilities to expand the programme at the same time as we continue to enrol new cohorts in the three areas where the programme is already on going. The next step is to expand the programme in more communities within the same three ethnic groups. We hope to be able to replicate the programme in other ethnic minority groups and expand the programme to many more provinces and languages.

High level officials from the Ethnic Council in the National Assembly and the Committee for Ethnic Minorities have visited the MTBBE programme and have expressed appreciation of the programme and are willing to support an expansion.

I would like to present our key messages:

- The ethnic diversity of Vietnam is a treasure to be cherished and an opportunity for strengthening the quality of education for all Vietnamese
- Initial literacy in mother tongue both enhances this diversity by further promoting ethnic languages and cultures and strengthens mastery of Vietnamese by ethnic minority learners
- Greater mastery of Vietnamese will increase the social, economic, and political contributions of ethnic minorities to Vietnam
- Innovations in the use of mother tongue in education will make Vietnam a leader in the region in progressive language policies

We strongly believe that giving EM children the possibility to learn in their own language and for them to be able to read and write their own mother tongue will provide them with more opportunities in life and will also give them a stronger cultural identity. This will enable them to participate more fully in economic progress and development as stated in the article 4.5 of the Declaration.