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IMPACT BRIEF

Education for Ethnic Minority Children in Cambodia

August 2017

Since 2003, CARE has been working with communities and the government to ensure ethnic minority children start learning at school in their mother tongue before learning Khmer, the national language. This approach trialled by CARE in the North East part of Cambodia, Ratanak Kiri, has since been adopted as national policy by the Government of Cambodia and replicated across the country.

The Context

Ethnic minorities make up the majority of the population in Cambodia's northeast provinces Ratanak Kiri and Mondul Kiri, at 64% and 58% respectively. Many of the region's ethnic minority children cannot understand their teachers, who speak Khmer. This means they are less likely to go to school and if do, they are more likely to dropout. Ratanak Kiri and Mondul Kiri has some of the lowest primary school completion rates in the country and the situation for secondary school completion is worse. In Ratanak Kiri, lower secondary completion is 29% compared to 54% nationally. Ethnic minority students are disadvantaged because of their minority background. This compounded because of cultural expectations around gender roles and what girls can and cannot do.

CARE's approach

Supported by the Governments of Australia, the United States of America, the European Union and many private donors, CARE has worked in partnership with the Government of Cambodia to increase the number of ethnic minority students who can obtain a primary and secondary education. This has been achieved by providing students' access to multi-lingual education, where children start their education in their mother tongue, which then acts as a bridge to and facilitates the learning of the national language, Khmer. The process of learning Khmer in multi-lingual education in Cambodia is progressive and takes three years. In the first year, children develop literacy skills in their home language and learn oral Khmer. In the following two grades, the amount of Khmer is gradually increased. By the fourth grade, students study all subjects in Khmer.

"[Multi-lingual education] is very important for children who can't speak Khmer, like here in my village, to learn to read and write. It's easier for children to learn through the language spoken in the community. It's also important for the children because it keeps the language and culture alive,"

Multi-lingual education teacher, Ting Sain

CARE's multi-lingual education work includes support for:

Government of Cambodia:

- CARE's **collaboration and long standing relationship with the Cambodian Government** was a significant contributor to the successful rollout of multi-lingual education. CARE aligned with Government education priorities (such as the 2009 *Child Friendly Schools Policy*, which states that all children should have access to schooling and schools should be inclusive). We supported Government staff to learn more about why multi-lingual education for ethnic minority children is so important.

Teachers and schools:

- CARE's multi-lingual education program **supported teachers to provide high quality education that was sensitive to the needs of girls and ethnic minority students**. CARE provided teachers with curriculum and reading guides, teacher training, and ongoing monitoring and coaching.
- CARE developed **textbooks and teaching materials** to support students to learn in their home language. These textbooks and reading books in ethnic minority languages support the bilingual curriculum in Grades 1-3, which fits within the national education curriculum. Additional support was also provided by developing social issue books (such as on early marriage) to form the basis of an improved government 'life skills' curriculum.
- **CARE-trained School Support Committees** (comprised of village elders, local authority representatives and students' parents) made household visits to the families of children who have dropped out of school. They ask the parents why their child is not attending school anymore and explain the value of an education. School Support Committees also monitor the performance of the school directors and teachers.

Students:

- **Scholarships were provided to ethnic minority students** to attend secondary school with boarding facilities. The scholarships helped students stay in school, giving them an opportunity to improve their lives with the benefits a full education can bring.
- CARE **supported the growth of girls' leadership** by establishing peer counselling, youth leadership and sports activities to improve student self-esteem and leadership skills that will help students both prosper in school and serve them well throughout their lives.
- **Safe, child-friendly latrines and handwashing stations** were installed in schools so girls could continue to attend school, even when they were menstruating.

"This scholarship has helped me a lot. The scholarship has improved my learning results. The scholarship does not only support me with food but also my learning materials and uniform."

Channy, secondary school student

What have we achieved?

A ten-year longitudinal study¹ conducted from 2009 assessed the effectiveness of multi-lingual education in Ratanak Kiri. It is amongst the first studies on multi-lingual education in the South-East Asian region and the first on the impact of multi-lingual education for ethnic minorities in Cambodia.

Increased student enrolment rates: In 2008-09 the enrolment rate for number of students in multi-lingual education schools was 447 for boys and 356 for girls. This has increased to 2,917 for boys and 2,683 for girls in 2016-17; a six-fold increase in enrolments.

“Not only are more students in school, but they’re learning at the same level or higher than students in mainstream schools... students from minority groups who had attended multilingual education schools performed better in mathematics than their peers who had only studied in one language. ...Those from multilingual education schools were achieving the same levels in literacy tests as Khmer peers, despite these tests being in their second language.”

(CARE International, citing Benson & Wong, 2017)

Increased literacy for girls:

Girls’ literacy scores increased quicker than boys’ scores. Girls who undertook multi-lingual education achieved about a 58% literacy increase in reading assessment scores, even though their scores were lower to start with than non-

multi-lingual education students.

Community members trained as teachers: Since CARE’s multi-lingual education work began, there have been 380 community teachers, including 137 women, trained throughout Cambodia. 126 of these teachers have been added to the Government payroll, making the multi-lingual education program sustainable. As a result of women being present as teachers, girls are able to aspire for a similar life and have positive female role models in their communities.

Multi-lingual Education has now been formalised by the Government of Cambodia:

CARE’s advocacy work on multi-lingual education in Cambodia is shifting from the role of the implementer to focus on an advisory role. CARE’s model for multi-lingual education has been adopted under the Government’s *Multilingual Education National Action Plan*. This Plan aims to expand multi-lingual education across the country so that by 2018 over 10,000 children will have access.

¹ Carol Benson & Kevin M. Wong (2017): *Effectiveness of policy development and implementation of L1-based multilingual education in Cambodia*, [International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism](#)