

**The International Conference on “National Language Policy:
Language Diversity for National Unity”**

4-5 July 2008

Bangkok Thailand

Opening Remarks by UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office

_____, _____, _____, Distinguished Guests,

It is with great honor that I participate on behalf of UNICEF in this International Conference on “National Language Policy: Language Diversity for National Unity”. Following a rich debate at the preceding International Conference on Language Development, Revitalization and Multilingual Education, this is an excellent occasion to deepen the discussions on how countries can embrace cultural and language diversity as an important element to strengthen peace and harmony, share experiences and innovations on how to turn policies into practice, and plan for the future together. UNICEF would like to thank The Royal Institute of Thailand and the Government of Thailand for hosting this conference.

Looking from an education perspective, teaching and learning in many countries of the world takes place in multilingual contexts. Our region is no exception. Indeed, there are approximately 1,500 languages spoken in Southeast Asia alone and there is solid research evidence in support of mother tongue [or first language] instruction as a means to improving educational quality and learning outcomes. The ability to communicate effectively in one’s mother tongue is a foundation for the smooth transition to other languages and lifelong learning. Learning, therefore, should take place first of all in the mother tongue and then, if different, in the country’s official or national language, as well as in one or more foreign languages. The importance of using mother-tongue in education

applies from the very beginning to Early Childhood Education at home in early years and through Early Childhood Education programmes, which contributes to smooth transitions to primary school as well as to the subsequent education levels. Multilingual education ensures the educational rights of all, and is an essential component of inter-cultural understanding and increased awareness of the positive value of cultural diversity and peace-building. This notion and the educational rights of all are assured in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: the Article 28 ensures the right to education on the basis of equal opportunity and the Article 29 states that “education needs to address the development of the child to his or her fullest potential and promote respect for human rights, the child’s own culture and the natural environment and to promote values of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality and friendship.” Moreover, supporting this foundation for lifelong learning for all human capital of a country ultimately contributes to more equitable development and poverty alleviation.

The region has been making steady progress in increasing access to basic education with narrowing gender gaps. At the same time, challenges remain in providing quality education to all, especially to the disadvantaged populations, including girls, the extreme poor, ethnic minorities, migrants, and children without proper registration and documentation. In Thailand, despite the impressive development over the past thirty years, and especially the efforts to provide educational opportunities for all children, there remains children of marginalized groups who are not attending school for a variety of reasons, language included. Ensuring quality learning opportunities for ethnic minorities and Burmese migrants in Thailand, children of sea gypsies (such as “Moken” and “Morgan” communities) and other underprivileged children

not only serves them but would also deepen understanding among different ethnicities and cultures and ultimately contribute to building a peaceful society without conflict.

From a pedagogical point of view, learning from the “Mother Tongue-First Bilingual Education” program for Melayu-speaking children in Thailand’s four southern border provinces, as well as basic education programmes for under privileged children in southern Thailand provinces, Mae Hong Son and Chiangmai gives profound reasons for supporting mother-tongue use in the classroom. It creates a child friendly atmosphere in school to ensure universal access to educational opportunities, provides confidence in learning and encourages participation of these children.

The concept of the Child Friendly School, which is being adopted in many countries globally, including Thailand, as a national strategy to improve basic education quality, promotes a holistic approach to learning and supports the creation of an optimum learning environment to ensure that all children learn well and achieve their full potential. This includes the use of language based on the children’s background and level of understanding and support for teachers from minority groups. Thailand launched the Child-Friendly School initiative in 1998 with 23 schools in 6 provinces. By the end of 2007 this had been expanded to more than 1,300 schools across the country. UNICEF in Thailand increasingly focuses its support on border provinces and districts where the situation of children falls far behind the rest of the country and where large numbers of children are either not in school or enrolling in school at older ages. These are mostly districts with large numbers of very poor families, ethnic minorities or migrant families from neighboring countries. With

commitments of the Ministry of Education, local and international NGOs, as well as various universities, including Chulalongkorn University, Mahidol University, and Khon Kean University, the Child Friendly School approach will remain a major strategy for ensuring education for all children in Thailand.

This conference explores ways in which ensuring language and cultural diversity can contribute to enhancing national unity. We hope that various discussions on national language policy will seek for creative and truly equitable ways of supporting multilingualism to narrow the gaps between the haves and have-nots in terms of access to quality education, knowledge, information, social services, working opportunities, and social and political participation. One way of ensuring this is through participation. The process of developing such policies and strategies must involve groups such as minority communities and migrant populations, and ensure that their voices are reflected. UNICEF is committed to reducing educational and other social disparities, serving the needs of all children, and eager to collaborate with governments and other partners in research, strategy development and programs in support of mother tongue and multilingual education – as well as other measures that help advance access to quality education by all. Thank you.