

Voice from the Field

Ensuring Equitable Evaluations through Indigenous Representation

By Tyler Henry, *Evaluation Intern, UNICEF Cambodia*

As part of its country programme, in alignment with the Royal Government of Cambodia’s education strategic plan, UNICEF supports and implements numerous projects and programmes aimed at improving the education outcomes for children from Indigenous communities. It is through these projects that UNICEF Cambodia hopes to ensure that all children to receive an education as expressed in Principle 7 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Children and while working towards the inclusive and quality education for every child planned for in Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals. UNICEF Cambodia also seeks to fulfil Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by ensuring that Indigenous children “have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination” and that Indigenous people have the right to “provide education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.”

UNICEF recently commissioned an independent evaluation of the Royal Government of Cambodia’s Multilingual Education National Action Plan (MENAP) that will provide crucial findings and recommendations to better inform the creation of a second MENAP due to be completed in March 2019. The evaluation seeks to receive as much feedback from Indigenous communities as possible to produce better findings. However, without representation from leaders from Indigenous groups, how can an evaluation produce equitably-sourced findings?



Photo: Pleuk Phearom (center) assists the independent evaluation team in the interview of a school director in Mondulkiri Province. Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2018/Tyler Henry

Ms. Pleuk Phearom plays a large role in bridging this equity gap. Ms. Phearom is serving in the MENAP evaluation reference group, providing suggestions to ensure that the evaluation remains equitable and focused on delivering findings and recommendations that improve the education of children in her community. Ms. Phearom is also helping the evaluation team to collect data on multilingual education in Mondulkiri Province.

Throughout Mondulkiri Province, Ms. Phearom works tirelessly to protect the rights of the Bunong community and improve the futures of Bunong children. She hopes that

children from Indigenous communities won’t succumb to the pressures of negative outside influences and that these children will continue pursuing educations that encourage them to build upon their Indigenous traditions and values.

Ms. Phearom and Mr. Theang Savoeun (International Cooperation Cambodia) were recruited to serve on the MENAP evaluation reference group as two representatives from Cambodia's Indigenous communities. An essential function of any equitable evaluation, this reference group provides suggestions and guidance for support during the evaluation. By providing their insights as members of the Bunong and Tampuan communities during reference group meetings, Ms. Phearom and Mr. Savoeun are helping ensure that the MENAP evaluation remains equitable by respecting the rights of both children and Indigenous peoples. Ms. Phearom and Mr. Savoeun's participation in the reference group also represents a rare opportunity for national-level ministry officials and MLE implementing partners to engage in constructive dialogue on the impacts of their education policies and actions at the community-level. Once the findings of the evaluation are finalized, Ms. Phearom and Mr. Savoeun will inform the evaluation team on how best to report these findings to the numerous Indigenous community networks throughout Cambodia's north-eastern provinces.



Photo: Pleuk Phearom facilitates data collection on multilingual education in Monduliri Province. Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2018/Tyler Henry

UNICEF supports the education of children from Cambodia's Indigenous groups by providing support for the training of multilingual education teachers. UNICEF also offered technical expertise during the development and implementation of the MENAP beginning in 2015. UNICEF furnished scholarship funds for students from Indigenous communities to assist them in continuing their secondary education.

With her culturally-based facilitation skills and her extensive network of connections within the Bunong community, Ms. Phearom was selected by evaluators Dr. Jessica Ball and Ms. Mariam Smith to help conduct data collection at multilingual education schools in Bunong communities.

I had the pleasure of observing Ms. Phearom conduct several focus group discussions with parents of students in multilingual schools. She ensured that all participants in these discussions had an equal voice in discussing the changes brought about by the introduction of multilingual education in their respective communities, thus contributing to a more equitable evaluation.

After a long day of interviews, coordinating logistics and remotely handling her many duties as the President of the Monduliri Indigenous Group Network, Ms. Phearom could have easily been too tired to speak about her role in this evaluation. However, as she fundamentally believes that Indigenous people's voices should be heard, Ms. Phearom saw this interview with me as an opportunity to further advocate for the youth of her community. She explained that, "Assisting in this evaluation has taught me that there needs to be increased awareness amongst Indigenous communities on the benefits of multilingual education."

While the evaluation team analyses the data and drafts the findings and recommendations to inform the revised MENAP, Ms. Phearom will return to the Monduliri Indigenous Group Network and herself evaluate an action plan for promoting multilingual education amongst the Bunong people. The network, comprised of leaders from Indigenous communities throughout Monduliri Province, advocates on behalf of Indigenous peoples in sectors as varied as land rights, education and cultural preservation.

By collaborating in this evaluation, Ms. Phearom is providing an opportunity for UNICEF, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and Indigenous communities to work together to strengthen multilingual education in the north-eastern provinces and inclusive quality education in Cambodia—for every child. Please click [here](#) to find out more.