Challenges of inclusive MLE for ethnic minority children in Bangladesh

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Bangladesh is one of the emerging nations in the world – a country in which 98 percent of the people speak the national language, Bangla. There are also 45 or more ethnic minority groups which form linguistic minorities in the country, speaking more than 30 different languages which makes them ethnolinguistically different from the majority of the Bangla-speaking population. This language barrier has been identified as one of the prime causes of the high school dropout rate of ethnic minority children. The country’s educational policies have, until recently, ignored language issues in relation to the ethnolinguistic minorities. An insufficiency of the education system was found in local cultural and livelihood practices. The National Education Policy 2010 adopted a first-language-based education policy for the ethnic minorities in the country.

Considering the current language policy and planning context of Bangladesh, this paper outlines case studies of multilingual education (MLE) projects operated by two large NGOs in Bangladesh and examines major challenges to the implementation of inclusive MLE for linguistic minorities in the country. It also proposes ways to overcome these challenges, aiming at ensuring inclusive education to meet the SDGs and EFA. The study found that community participation in the development of MLE is very important in order to strengthen the autonomy of communities, to ensure the relevancy of education materials in the local context and to establish a strong foundation for future sustainability.