Developing pro-MLE language policies in Cambodia and Thailand: the role of civil society and academia

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Education systems in multilingual nations, such as Cambodia and Thailand, have traditionally ignored non-dominant languages (NDL) in favor of the official languages. Over recent decades these countries have begun experimenting with the use of NDLs in multilingual education (MLE). This paper compares the development of language policies in Cambodia and Thailand, and attempts to: (1) analyse the reasons for the countries’ progress towards language policies that support MLE, and (2) discuss the role of civil society and academic actors in policy development.

The paper argues that the following determinants have contributed to pro-MLE policy formation in Cambodia and Thailand: (1) long-term commitment of actors on “the side” (local and international academics as well as local and international NGOs) to awareness raising, advocacy, and corpus planning of NDLs; (2) fruitful partnership between local communities and actors on the side; (3) persistent advocacy by the actors on the side on the importance of L1-based education; and (4) strong community participation at the local level. In addition, three more factors apply to Cambodia: (1) the existence of “benevolent” Cambodian leaders, (2) sustainable transfer of responsibility from external to local actors, and (3) a relatively small minority population.

The paper also discusses the encountered challenges including: (1) limited understanding among many government officials of L1-based education; (2) lack of political will and technical resources; (3) political sensitivities regarding many NDL communities due to increasing nationalism; (4) government agencies’ different understanding of ethnolinguistic classification from academics; and (5) security concerns with some NDL communities in border areas.