Nonformal education MTB-MLE initiatives help achieve SDGs in the Cambodian highlands

By Anne Thomas

The indigenous peoples of northeastern Cambodia face rapid changes as the market economy and modernization challenge their traditional way of life. Two decades ago, the majority of indigenous community members could not read or write, or speak the national language. Few had numeracy skills. Local language writing systems were still being developed. To address the instructional needs for children, youth, and adults, nonformal education (NFE) initiatives starting in the mother tongue and bridging to the national language were developed with the local communities. Semiliterate community members were trained to become NFE instructors.

This case study traces the development and implementation of NFE initiatives using a mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) strategy over the past two decades, from project development to present day. It documents challenges, obstacles, lessons learned, best practices, achievements, and impact. The NFE MTB-MLE approach has shown to be key to building community capacity and achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs). Male and female community members of all ages gain basic skills and access further training. They strengthen their communities by becoming active participants in the development process.

Many villagers trained through the projects now hold posts including village leaders, health volunteers, and community teachers. Men and women are active participants of village-based committees for development, education, health, and natural resource management. NFE initiatives using the MTB-MLE approach have expanded to five ethnic languages in three provinces of northeastern Cambodia. Neighboring countries have been coming on exchange visits to learn from Cambodia’s experience of using the NFE MTB-MLE approach towards achieving the SDGs.