



Why Languages Matter

Meeting Millennium Development Goals through local languages

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) focus the work of advocates, aid workers, governments and NGOs as they partner with local communities. Language-based development plays a significant role in giving communities tools for meeting these goals.

Many of the poorest people speak mother tongues that are neither national nor international languages. Poverty, lack of access to primary education, inequality and disease are daily challenges for them.

- Can the development of minority languages become key to helping people create their own way of successfully meeting the challenges in their lives?
- Can writing systems for mother-tongue languages and multilingual education become tools for people to build a better present and a better future?
- Are the long-term results worth the investment of money and time?

The answer to each of these questions is yes!

Around the world, communities are discovering that by using their own language in new arenas of their lives, they are developing solutions to the challenges stated in the MDGs. Through language-based development SIL International assists in strengthening ethnolinguistic communities worldwide.



Language-based development is a series of ongoing planned actions that a language community takes to ensure that their language continues to serve their changing social, cultural, political, economic and spiritual needs and goals.



Quechua alphabet and word charts help students grasp literacy concepts even when used in Spanish-taught classrooms.

SIL International believes that local language-based development is essential to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

The purpose of SIL is to build capacity for sustainable language-based development through research, translation, training and materials development for ethnolinguistic minority communities. SIL recognizes that multilingualism promotes unity in diversity and international understanding.

As a nongovernmental organization, SIL has special consultative status with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations. SIL is a founding member of Maaya, the World Network for Linguistic Diversity.



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Harnessing the power of language as a tool for development



Millennium Development Goals



Eight goals were adopted by 189 United Nations member states to be achieved by 2015. As expressed below, SIL views local language-based development as essential in reaching these goals.

1 Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger

Income improvement and hunger relief within ethnolinguistic communities is achieved when life-changing information is communicated in a language that people understand well. Higher literacy rates often result in higher per capita incomes.

2 Achieve Universal Primary Education

Primary education programs that begin in the mother tongue help students gain literacy and numeracy skills more quickly. When taught in their local language, students readily transfer literacy skills to official languages of education, acquiring essential tools for life-long learning. The results are the growth of self esteem and a community that is better equipped to become literate in languages of wider communication.



Learning to read occurs most easily in the language the learner speaks best.

3 Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women

Nearly two-thirds of the world's 875 million illiterate people are women. In ethnolinguistic communities, boys are often encouraged to interact with others in languages of wider communication. Girls, however, are typically expected to stay close to home where the local language is often the only language used. Research shows that girls and women who are educated in languages familiar to them stay in school longer and perform better academically than those who do not get mother-tongue instruction.

4 Reduce Child Mortality

The mortality rate for children under five years of age is reduced when information about disease prevention and treatment is presented in local languages. Conversely, poor understanding can lead to dangerous or even fatal misinformation. Ethnolinguistic communities can combat diarrhea, malaria and other common illnesses when they have the resources and capability to obtain essential health knowledge.

5 Improve Maternal Health

A mother is better able to care for herself and her family when she is literate in her mother tongue and has access to health information in a language she understands well. Language-based development facilitates the introduction of new concepts and the accurate translation of new terminology.

6 Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Other Diseases

People in ethnolinguistic communities are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases due in part to the lack of essential information in the mother tongue. Reading materials in local languages that discuss hygiene, nutrition, and the prevention and treatment of diseases have proven to be effective in improving general health and life expectancy. The availability of culturally-relevant information dispels misconceptions surrounding HIV/AIDS.

7 Ensure Environmental Sustainability

Environmental preservation principles are communicated through literature in language-based development programs. As local populations learn appropriate technology while drawing on traditional knowledge of flora and fauna, they meet economic needs while protecting the environment.



During a mother-tongue-based development project, the people of Ambai village in Papua, Indonesia, learned that clearing the mangrove areas had resulted in soil erosion.

8 Develop a Global Partnership for Development

Global partnerships among ethnolinguistic minority communities and national and international societies require communication and mutual understanding. Mother-tongue revitalization ensures that a language continues to serve the changing goals of its speakers. It provides a bridge for the community to meet its broader multilingual goals by acquiring a language of wider communication. Language-based development facilitates the broader exchange of traditional knowledge and makes the benefits of global information and communications technologies available.