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*De-Segregation Strategies, Cultural Autonomy and
Integration in the Quest for Social Cohesion*

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Bangladesh is culturally, ethnically, religiously and linguistically diversified country. There are more than 45 ethnic groups living in Bangladesh. The rich tapestry of minority ethnic groups makes up approximately 2 percent of the population of the country. Though these groups identify themselves as 'Adivasi' or 'indigenous', the terms 'ethnic minority', 'Adivasi', 'indigenous' and 'tribal' are used interchangeably within documents and literature in Bangladesh. In the PRSP document they are mentioned as 'Indigenous Peoples', and at the PEDPII documents as 'Tribal'.

The total population in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is about 1.3 million, among them 90% live in the rural areas. There are about 13 different indigenous groups in the region. Majority of the Indigenous Peoples are not literate in mother tongue, only 30.6% literate in Bangla, the national language.

As a whole, net enrolment rate in Bangladesh has been increased from 71.2% in 1990 to 86.6% in 2001, with gender parity. But in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, only 56.8% of the indigenous children from 6-10 years aged group enrolled in schools, and 60% of the enrolled children drop out in early primary (ADB, 2001). This is double national dropout rate; the children are turning away for not speaking Bangla and they are experiencing education in a totally unfamiliar language.

There are also other difficulties in achieving education by the local indigenous communities. Among others irrelevancy of curriculum with the local culture and social context, language barriers between teachers and students, recruitment or appointment of teachers from outside community, less numbers of schools and remoteness of communities are some of the most difficult obstacles to educational access faced by the CHT indigenous groups. The education system is managed on one fixed model, without considering the need to make changes to deliver the education rights of minorities. It is almost a deliberate attempt to exclude minority languages from official spheres. Willingness or interest of government and political parties in minority children's education is not strong.

Though the Government of Bangladesh is signatory to numerous international conventions and initiatives it has some favorable policies and programs to increase access to and quality of primary education and this has increased access, particularly for girls, but unfortunately as yet has not been so effective on quality. At the local level, most parents and community members are not empowered to participate in school affairs and the local institutions are not fully authorized to deal with the context specific education situation, especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region.

To cope with these difficulties, Zabarang Kalyan Samity with the support of the Save the Children has initiated one pilot program on education in three major languages to ensure inclusive quality education. The 'quality' means learning opportunity of children in their own language and contents of curriculum address their culture and daily life. Under this initiative, we are covering 60 pre-primary centres in the most remote villages in three major languages- Chakma, Marma and Tripura with ultimate ambition to bridge the process with the formal schooling process. We

have been implementing this program since 2006 with close cooperation of the local Government bodies and government line departments. From the inception of the project, the Hill District Council was closely involved in the entire process. Through the council the education line department officials are engaged in the project activities. The recent progress of the local government system on the mother tongue based multilingual education is- the Hill District Council is trying to recruit local level teachers, they have agreed to introduce mother tongue as language of instruction in the primary schools. UNDP has also initiated a program on mother tongue based primary education, where this project is adapted as best practice and the local government bodies are involved closely.

We follow the scientific bridging process, which is decided in consultation with the respective community representatives. Respective communities have participated at the entire process of curriculum development, selection of themes and contents of materials, material development, school site and teacher selection, orthography decision, language development process.

In the initial year, we build confidence of children in mother tongue, prepare them for literacy, introduce pre-reading, pre-writing and pre-math skills in mother tongue.

In the second year, they begin reading and writing in mother tongue, and continue oral mother tongue. In this stage they spend 90% time for mother tongue exercises and other 10% for introduction of national language (L2). In this stage they are provided with oral exercises in national language to prepare them for Bangla classes. In this way, use of national language in classroom will gradually increase and the students will become confident in using both mother tongue and national language in the classroom. Eventually, student will become a successful learner.

The initiative is contributing to achieve the Indigenous People's rights to education and has a positive impact in increasing confidence and participation of learners in the classroom, which result in the learning competency and retention of students. A parent says, *'mother tongue based pre-school brought a lot of changes to my child. He is now very attentive to his lesson'*.

Government has the commitment to provide mother tongue education to the Indigenous Peoples under its CHT Accord 1997, PEDPII and PRSP. But, due to centralized national curriculum system for all over the country, the system can not address the local specific context of the Indigenous Peoples. Political commitment from the government to translate the strategy and programmes into practice is essential to ensure Indigenous People's rights to education through mother tongue.

Recommendations: International community can support national governments to deliver on commitments to minority education through policy advocacy and sensitization initiatives, with particular focus on-

- transfer authority and resources for education delivery to the local government bodies;
- strengthen local capacity for locally relevant, participatory education which values minority cultures and languages
- Prioritise flexible delivery methods for all educational programmes to ensure quality inclusive education for Indigenous Peoples
- introduce mother tongue based multilingual education through the government system
- involve minority led institutions and other local actors in entire process of government

Thank you

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On behalf of Zabarang Kalyan Samity and
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