

Speaking as a representative from the Azerbaijani Turkic populations in Iran:

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

This year I would like to point out one of the key shortcomings of the international community and institutions regarding their commitment to the realization of mother language education and mother language literacy.

UNICEF guideline, A Human Rights Based Approach to Education for All, sadly states: “There is no explicit obligation on States to ensure that all children can be taught in their first language, and States are entitled to determine the language of education. In many countries, policies of unilingualism are adopted as a strategy towards integration and nation building”. And this a fact. Where are we? Where do we stand? Mother languages and their communities are brutally and in silence being assimilated and are in severe degradation for the sake of flourishing monopolized languages and in the presence of universal standards that lack basic mother language safeguarding.

Most of the world population still praises Millennium Development Goals to Education and subsequent international efforts initiated and practiced. However, let me tell you that sadly none of the 18 indicators under Education for All (EFA) index, neither any of 53 indicators under Educational Development Index (EDI), not any of indicators set out for World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) refer explicitly to the mother language education and literacy.

As a matter of fact, the key universal educational goals such as early childhood education, free and compulsory education, adult literacy, enrollment rates, and so on can be achieved and reported upon successfully with a solely dominant language with full assimilation of mother languages of many discriminated lingual and ethnic populations at large. This is because the world and distinguished international bodies may not care about my mother language and especially literacy in my own mother language, but they just care about literacy statistics, even though reporting countries apply assimilatory and discriminatory language policies and practices towards minorities.

“Inclusive Education” is interpreted and understood as taking any group under education, by any formal language of the country. Mother language education is not incorporated in inclusive education indicators.

I remember working for UNESCO cluster office in Tehran while I was seeing the government of Iran happily helping to gather and submit data for EFA reporting mechanisms. Sadly, I realized that mother language education was not incorporated in EFA reporting. Again, I remember during my military service in Iran, I was literacy teacher for illiterate adult soldiers who all spoke my mother tongue, Azerbaijani Turkic, and I was teaching Farsi, the only official language in Iran, and yet it was so difficult. I asked myself why these illiterate soldiers could be taught in their mother language, and did I participated in assimilatory and discriminatory practices of the government?

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

Mother language education has not been incorporated into the EFA or EDI or WIDE indicators, all of which make solid grounds for world database on education and reports and data that are obtained from governments. In the lack of such essential ingredients, how can governments be obliged to mother language education of minorities?! Can not we say that this is a big shortcoming and maybe a big shame!!

I strongly recommend that responsible intergovernmental bodies such as UNESCO and UNICEF go beyond very soft documents towards incorporating Mother Language Education (MLE) indicators into their reporting requirements from governments. The present reporting mechanisms just neglect mother language education obligations of the States and therefore, indirectly encourages discriminatory and assimilatory policies and practices of many governments. It is time now to act and not to wait. We are gladly ready to help you in this regard.

There is no safeguards for the protection, preservation and development of mother languages in Iran, no language academy for them, no NGOs or civil society who can freely take care of discriminated mother languages in Iran. On the contrary, mother language activists and researchers are arrested and imprisoned over their cultural activities. These efforts are regarded as acts against national security.

At the end we urge the Islamic Republic of Iran to release, without any conditions, all of those language and civil rights activists from Azerbaijani Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Balochis and others who have been arrested and detained in the current month together with the protesters during mass protests that occurred after the rise in fuel prices.

Thank you
Amir Makouei