

LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

BY [SHARON LING](#)

THE STAR

AT A conference in Kuching this week, Unicef Malaysia representative Marianne Clark-Hattingh shared a heartwarming story about education's positive impact on a child, along with her family and community.

Clark-Hattingh spoke of an 11-year-old girl named Bintou in the west African country of Benin, who was pulled out of school in fifth grade by her parents to help with household chores, including looking after three younger siblings, while her eight-year-old brother was allowed to remain in school.

A week later, a Unicef-trained peer educator visited the family to find out why Bintou was no longer at school and tried to persuade her parents to let her resume her education.

"But like many parents from poor families around, they were not willing to let Bintou go back as as there was no one else who could help her mother with the childcare and chores," Clark-Hattingh related.

"So the peer educator had an idea. What if they started a community-based early childhood centre? The idea grew, everyone was willing to contribute a little, whether in kind or in money, the community elders found a space for the centre, and Unicef trained three members of the community to run it.

"Bintou's little brother and two younger sisters were among the first 10 children to attend the centre and Bintou was allowed to go back to school."

When Clark-Hattingh left Benin two years later, there were 15 children at the centre, all being taught in their mother tongue. Six of the first attendees, including Bintou's sisters, were in primary school and Bintou herself was in seventh grade.

"Bintou's story illustrates that giving a child the opportunity to start education as early as possible can change their lives forever, as well as that of their entire family, and positively impact the community," Clark-Hattingh said.

She then highlighted the sobering statistic that about 30% of all indigenous children in Malaysian primary schools will not reach secondary education – a “staggering” number, she said, compared to the national average of only 4%.

“To reverse this, we must seek to understand why and address the causes. I am willing to wager that those who benefitted from mother-tongue early education are not prominent among those 30%.”

Hence, she said the second Malaysian Indigenous Peoples’ Conference on Education (MIPCE) was “critical” to chart the way forward on ways to enhance educational opportunities for indigenous children.

“Together we can build a conducive environment where every child feels comfortable to learn in his or her own language, by putting forth indigenous language policy recommendations.

“How do we achieve this? By designing measures that are specific to local contexts and sensitive to the needs and requirements of these children. There is then continuity between the culture, identity and roots of indigenous children and the modern lives they aspire to lead.”

Clark-Hattingh cited Article 13 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which states that they have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures.

To be effective and sustainable, she said, efforts to promote and revitalise indigenous languages must be owned by the indigenous peoples themselves.

At the same time, she urged conference participants to help ensure that no indigenous child would be left out of the mainstream of national education development.

“We are here because we share the same core belief: every child, in every indigenous community, has the right to quality education,” she added.

MIPCE was jointly organised by the State Planning Unit, Chief Minister’s Department, Dayak Bidayuh National Association, Unicef Malaysia, Sarawak Native Customs Council, Kadazandusun Language Foundation, SIL Malaysia, Pacos Trust, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and Sarawak Convention

Bureau. It was attended by over 280 participants from various ethnic communities nationwide.

The conference aimed to provide a platform for experts and practitioners to share experiences, ideas and aspirations and to provide policy recommendations for the future direction of indigenous education in Malaysia.

According to the organisers, the deliberations will result in a series of resolutions on what indigenous education could look like in Malaysia.

“One of the main thrusts is to continually address policy issues pertaining to the role of indigenous languages in the Malaysian education system. It is strongly believed that languages students already speak and the culture they already practise should be viewed as assets to be used, not problems to be avoided.

“Identifying the basis for further development of a clear policy and action plan, including advocacy and community awareness, and capacity-building initiatives at national or sub-regional level will be key in this effort,” they said.

With so many key stakeholders involved in MIPCE, it will hopefully result in concrete steps towards meeting the education needs of indigenous children, which in turn, will positively impact their communities, as illustrated by the story of Bintou.