



Working with the least-served people

*“We are especially encouraged to see literacy classes in the villages where there are no government schools, which are the only places for Jarai children to learn. Finally, these children have places to go to study!” This is a quote from one ICC team member who is working with Jarai language development in the ICC-iBCDE project (identity **B**ased **C**ommunity **D**evelopment and **E**ducation) based in Ratanakiri province. A significant number of Jarai indigenous people live in Ratanakiri province in the rural areas towards the Vietnamese border. The indigenous people find themselves marginalised and isolated from the majority of Khmer society.*

The ICC-iBCDE team has, through study, research and networking with the Jarai people, learnt that this particular indigenous group is suffering in terms of e.g. economics, agriculture, health care and education. However, language is the main problem which needs to be addressed urgently, otherwise the Jarai language will disappear step by step. This is due to the fact that the Jarai people only speak their language, it is passed on verbally from generation to generation, and has become mixed with other languages over time. With no writing system for the Jarai people in Cambodia, the language is very vulnerable and will likely disappear if a writing system is not developed. With the loss of the language, the Jarai culture and identity will likely also disappear over time.

Since 2016, ICC-iBCDE team has worked intentionally on the development of a Jarai writing system. This is done by working closely with the Jarai people and by collaboration with local authorities in Ratanakiri, the Ministry of Education and other NGOs, who have an interest in the Jarai indigenous people. One main result to date is, that the ICC-iBCDE team has produced a Jarai primer for beginners, and trained volunteer teachers how to use the primer in literacy classes. Also, the ICC-iBCDE team has made promotional materials and curriculum, specifically targeted to children by including songs, dances and games in the literacy classes. The volunteer teachers are encouraged by the ICC-iBCDE team to reflect on how they can help beginners to learn to read in the Jarai language. Furthermore, the team is collecting Jarai words, in order to make a Jarai dictionary.

However, a focus only on language development for the Jarai indigenous people is not enough in order to respond to their needs and rights. Therefore, the ICC-iBCDE team is also producing video and audio recordings in the Jarai language, which are used to promote the importance of education, basic healthcare, agriculture techniques, anti-drug abuse, and other useful topics. In addition, the ICC-iBCDE team has, via dialogue and reflection, built up the capacity and unity among the Jarai people in their own communities.

The Jarai indigenous people still have needs and rights to be met, and the ICC-iBCDE team continues to develop the Jarai language, and makes opportunities for Jarai children to learn how to read and write. Language development is the core foundation for any improvement of the Jarai people now, and in the future.