

The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014): Language Policies in Africa Revisited

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Abstract: The Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD 2005-2014) aims to achieve an improvement in the quality of life particularly for the most deprived and marginalised. This naturally calls for re-orientation of educational programmes and revisiting systems of education across the globe with a view to increase the development of knowledge, skills and values related to sustainability. Education for sustainable development is now everyone's business hence the need for voices from Africa to be heard. We are now ten years into the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development but very few African countries have managed to integrate ESD into their educational curricula. In this article we argue for the implementation of ESD through the official use of indigenous African languages as languages of instruction at all levels of the education system in Africa and also attempt to explore in the process, possibilities of establishing a language policy framework for the African continent. The article strongly advocates for a new language policy model for the continent of Africa that recognises linguistic and cultural diversity. In conclusion, the article urges African policy makers to embark on a linguistic revolution with a goal to change the prevailing language policies that favour minority dominant groups at the expense of the vast majority of the African population.

Keywords: education, sustainable development, indigenous language, official language, language policy, language of instruction

INTRODUCTION

On 20th of December 2002, the United Nations General Assembly, through its Resolution 57/254, declared a Decade for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) and designated UNESCO as the lead agency for the promotion of this decade. This naturally called for re-orientation of educational programmes and revisiting systems of education across the globe with a view to increase the development of knowledge, skills and values related to sustainability. Global initiatives such as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that centred on the reduction of poverty, Education for All (EFA) that focused on universal access to education, the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) that aimed to provide adults with education and the United Nations Decade for Sustainable Development (DESD) all share a common vision: education is the key to sustainable development.

However, sustainable development being referred to above, cannot be achieved without serious consideration of the role of language in the development process hence language and development become so interrelated that it is impossible to talk about development without mention of language. Language is essential for the transmission of all political,

commercial and professional communication, that is, the development of a whole country in terms of its economy or political culture hinges on communicative efficiency based on language[1](p-38). Development therefore cannot take place in a linguistic vacuum since it is a process that involves the whole society. The argument presented in this article points at the need for Africa to re-examine its current perspectives on development with a view to mould a model that places Africa at the centre. If Africa is to make strides in economic development, then its people must participate in the development process through the use of indigenous languages, failure of which the continent will be unable to relate its knowledge to the realities of African societies.

THE AFRICAN LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

Until recently, African languages have received very little attention in terms of being used as media of instruction in education. This is because these languages are accorded little value in the educational system and consequently the knowledge that children have of these languages is ignored[2]. The current educational policies have been coined along European lines reflecting a culture of 'apemanship and parrotry', from which self-respecting Africans should distance

themselves from. The present situation in most African countries, particularly Southern Africa, slows down development since the parties involved in the development process cannot interact effectively. Stripped of their languages, the people of Africa cannot reach their full cultural and intellectual self-actualisation.

The colonial experience brought with it what Roscoe[3] (p-1) calls ‘a cultural collision.’ The result of such a clash meant that Africans could no longer cling to their traditional past and this resulted in cultural and linguistic imperialism. Colonialism imposed a totally different approach to the use of language in African education and the conduct of official affairs. Its object was to replace the sovereignty of the mother tongue, with the language of colonial power [4] (p-27). When most of the African countries gained their independence between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, they were faced with many challenges in shaping their nationhood and stimulating national development. Most of them, according to Batibo [5] (p-12) took a short cut by adopting exoglossic language policies in which the ex-colonial language was adopted as the official language. Only a handful of countries adopted endoglossic policies by promoting one or several major indigenous languages to play certain national roles.

Four categories of countries emerged as a result of choice and implementation of the official language policy. Firstly, there is a category that consists of those countries in which all official and national functions are performed by an indigenous language. The ex-colonial language becomes a mere foreign language in the country. Countries in this category are very few Arab countries in North Africa namely Egypt and Libya. The second category comprises those countries in which an indigenous lingua franca has been promoted to serve as both official and national language. However, the ex-colonial language has remained the official language of some of the upper secondary domains such as tertiary education, science and technology and international communication. Batibo[6] (p-14) points out that, countries in this category are former socialist countries, like Tanzania, Somalia and Ethiopia. The language of the coloniser in these countries plays a minimal role, mainly as the second official language. Besides the former socialist

countries mentioned above, there are also Arab countries, which use Arabic as the dominant official or national language, but have retained the use of an ex-colonial language for some of the secondary domains. Such countries include Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia.

Countries that constitute the third category are those in which the ex-colonial language plays a major role, often as the main official language, but an indigenous language (or languages) has been designated as a national language or allocated certain secondary public functions. The role of the dominant indigenous language may range from being a national or semi-official language to a mere symbolic role. Indigenous languages play a more symbolic role in countries which have declared all or several of the indigenous languages as national or even as official languages without necessarily effectively using them in any formal domains apart from lower education and a few other domains. Examples of countries in this category are Zambia, Namibia, Central African Republic, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe [6].

Category number four is that of countries which due to the complexity of their language situations or colonial legacies have decided to make the ex-colonial language both official and national. Because of the colonial rule of assimilation used by the French and Portuguese, there is no dominant national language to assume the lingua franca role. In this case, no indigenous language is given the opportunity to play a national lingua franca role[7]. Countries which have adopted an ex-colonial language as official or national language include Angola, Benin, Cote d’Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea Bissau and Equatorial Guinea[6] (p-15). In these countries the ex-colonial languages are used in both primary and secondary domains.

One of the reasons why so many countries decided to adopt the ex-colonial languages as the only or main national media particularly in the official and technical areas was that colonial languages were by the time of independence highly developed and internationally used. Moreover, they were considered as neutral and therefore would not be associated with any ethnic resentment. A summary of the language policies among African countries is shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: A percentage summary of language policies in Africa

	Language category	Number of countries
1	Exclusive use of an indigenous language as official/national medium.	2 (3,6%)
2	Use of an indigenous language as official/national medium with limited use of an ex-colonial language.	8 (14,6%)
3	Use of an ex-colonial language as official/national medium with symbolic use of indigenous languages.	27 (49,1%)
4	Exclusive use of ex-colonial language as official/national medium.	18 (32,7%)
	TOTAL	55 (100%)

Source: [8] (p-18)

Figures in the above table, show that most African countries have adopted exoglossic language policies or have accorded minimal secondary functions to indigenous languages. It can also be noted from figures in the above table that the majority of countries in Africa (81,2%) rely heavily on ex-colonial languages for their official or national communication. Only a few countries, namely 10 (18,8%), use indigenous languages, either exclusively or dominantly in their national affairs. Such countries have traditionally been considered as model countries in using local media in formal domains. The net effect of the language policies in Africa is that they alienate the natives from their mother languages and cultural roots.

EDUCATION, LANGUAGE AND DEVELOPMENT

Development in Africa can not be achieved without serious considerations of the role of African languages in social, educational, economic and political processes [4,9,10]. It should be noted that development initiatives and projects couched in European languages for use by African masses have little chance of firm and meaningful implantation or acceptance. Such approaches, according to Prah [4](p-30) ignore indigenous thought-structures and reinforce neo-colonialism. He further argues that even the elite, which has facility in the usage of European languages, is not sufficiently well grounded in these languages to be able to technologically and scientifically create. The whole effort and discussion on African development through scientific and technological advancement must therefore be seen to have a possibility of take off, only if and when development on the basis of African culture is placed at the center.

This implies the elevation of African languages to a vehicular position in the exercise. African development cannot obviate African culture, the culture of the masses; rather it must sustain it and build on it. Scientific knowledge and practice must build on what has been formed within the culture of African people. Failure to do so reduces Africans to mere consumers of artifacts produced in the developed countries (ibid). Since the rural masses do not know European languages, obviously the best way of reaching them educationally for purposes of science and technological development is in their languages. Concepts and terminology in science should be constructed within indigenous languages and should engage the reality in which the rural population lives. Knowledge for the masses, must be knowledge which speaks to the masses in an idiom they know well, an idiom which is native to them which can only be their mother language.

Fafunwa[11](p-44) holds that one of the most important factors militating against the dissemination of

knowledge and skills, and therefore of rapid, social and economic well being of the majority of people in developing countries is the imposed medium of communication. He claims that there seems to be a correlation between underdevelopment and the use of a foreign language as the official language of a given country in Africa. Roy-Campbell et al. [12] point out that no society in the world has developed in a sustained and democratic fashion on the basis of a borrowed or colonial language. Ali Mazrui raises this very same concern when he asks as follows:

Can any country approximate first-rank economic development if it relies overwhelmingly on foreign languages for its discourse on development and transformation? Will Africa ever effectively 'take off' when it is so tightly held hostage to the languages of the former imperial masters? [13].

Language according to Chimhundu [14] is at the heart of a people's culture and it is imperative that cultural advancement of a people, economic and social development will not register significant gains without the use of indigenous languages. Dianna Mitchell echoes the same sentiments when she says 'a language is a people's greatest cultural inheritance and should be properly nurtured' [15](p- 8). On the other hand Williams and Snipper argue that language encompasses not only communication, but also heritage, culture and feelings. It is therefore important to note that maintaining a speaker's native language has an effective dimension, that of enhancing the speakers' self concepts and their pride in their cultural background and identity [16](p-14)

Chessa[9] (p-16) also observes that cognitive and affective development occur more effectively in a language that the learner knows very well. The author further argues that learning in general occurs more effectively if the required cognitive development has already taken place through the use of a first language as a language of learning. It is important to speak to people in their own languages because no meaningful change can occur without the full participation of the masses. Similarly, Bamgbose [17](p-50) points out that language is a powerful symbol of society, particularly if its potential is fully recognised and exploited. It can be a key contributing force towards nationhood and national development if properly managed. African indigenous languages can be used as vehicles of national development if put into proper use. Such languages need to be looked at not as stumbling blocks but as potential national resources. As with all other resources, they need to be allocated in areas where they can render the optimal utility[18-19]. In this way, each nation should look for the optimisation of the use of its national linguistic resource at the least possible cost.

The most proper way would be to regard the indigenous languages in a country as valuable resources; like minerals and wildlife, African languages too need to be developed and managed properly and optimally. They should therefore be developed and used with the aim of fully involving their speakers cognitively, in the advancement of the nation as a whole. To rob people of their language is to rob them of not only their confidence and dignity but also of their creativity[20]. This is so because indigenous knowledge can only be conveyed in the language of the people who possess such knowledge, thus people's lives can only be conveyed fully and vividly in their first language.

Bamgbose [17](p-62) asserts that the importance of education in the context of developing a country does not require any elaboration since education is the basis of mass participation. It is a means of upward social mobility, manpower training and development in its widest sense of the full realisation of human potential and utilisation of this potential and the nation's resources for the benefit of all. It is therefore inevitable that the question of language should arise, since it is mainly through language that knowledge is transmitted. The question of what language to use in education is a problematic one in any multilingual country, particularly one that has also been subjected to the inevitable imposition of a foreign official language arising from colonialism. Language may be used for three purposes in education namely; literacy, subject and medium of instruction. Literacy in this case is taken to refer to the introduction of a language to facilitate initial reading and writing in children or adults. A language may be taught as a subject without any implication of its further use as a medium of instruction. But for a language to serve as a medium of instruction at secondary and higher levels, it would have to be taught as a subject at the primary level.

According to Bamgbose [17](p-63), the size of the population speaking each language is also an important factor in the assignment of language roles. Other things being equal, a language spoken by ten million people is likely to have a greater role in education than one spoken by half a million people. This is because for such a language, a ready pool of pupils and potential teachers is easily available and materials can be provided on a more economical scale. This however should not be taken to mean that minority languages are to be ignored. It only means that the roles for major and minority language will be different. No matter how large the population of speakers of a language is, it is only when the language has been reduced to writing and materials made available in it that it can be used in education. The state of a language becomes therefore a major factor in the selection of a language to be used in education. A language with a long literary tradition has an advantage over one that

does not. In the absence of a written tradition, a decision to use a language in education will at the same time involve deliberate language planning activities including devising of an orthography, production of primers and other reading materials, training of teachers just to mention a few. As these take time, and also involve financial costs, quite often, such a language remains excluded from the educational process.

Another aspect to be considered in language development is the need to evolve adequate terminology for teaching school subjects. This will have to be done if African languages are to be used as media of instruction. Efforts should be made by all to ensure that a people's culture, which a language represents, is not ignored in the educational process. This means that at some point in the course of a child's education, he/she must have an opportunity of learning his/her language or learning in it. Bamgbose asserts that:

As this factor is often pitched against that of cost and need for technological development, it is sometimes suggested that a nation faces an unpleasant choice between the need for economic development and the desire for cultural survival [17](p-73).

The economic argument when used against mother-tongue education tends to ignore the important role of education in development. Education should be concerned with the liberation of the human potential for the welfare of the community. School systems in the Third World countries have served only to train tiny elites to run a bureaucracy and the modern sector of an economy while neglecting the training of human resources capable of stimulating production in areas essential to the welfare of the majority of the population. For this situation to change, grassroots education will be needed and the use of several indigenous languages in such education would seem to be inevitable. Language and education as can be seen, involve different roles such as medium of instruction, subject and initial literacy in the non-formal system and the processes of socialisation in the informal system.

LANGUAGE POLICY MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Africa needs a language policy framework for education that emphasises the use of the mother tongue and other indigenous languages at various levels of the education system, while allowing for a concurrent use of European languages for international purposes. In this section, the proposal made is the adoption of a language in education policy model that can be referred to as the Integrated Trilingual Policy (ITP). This new policy framework would make it possible to accommodate all of Africa's languages, and use them as media of instruction as well as essential tools of communication for development, irrespective of the number of speakers. The Model begins by recognising

the fact that the African society is broad and diverse. It also recognises the diversity and socio-linguistic peculiarities of each speech community in the continent, thus it does not attempt to specify a particular and specific mother tongue for use in education for all people at all times. What it does, is to address the general diglossic situation prevalent in the different African countries and to propose the promotion of the use of indigenous languages in all sectors of the social organisation including education.

The new policy model would require children to learn their immediate mother tongue first, then an African language with a wider reach, preferably a national or regional African language and then a foreign European language for international communication hence the 'trilingualism'. In this 'new' language policy model, an average citizen who has gone through basic education should be functionally competent in spoken and written discourse in at least three languages. Ideally, an African child should obtain competence in (i) the mother tongue for basic education (ii) a national/regional African language for wider regional communication and (iii) a foreign European/Asian language such as English, French, Chinese, Arabic or Portuguese for international communication. The 'trilingualism' will be different from community to community with differing mother tongues at the local district levels but more and more similar languages at national, regional and international levels.

Based on the model's principle of 'most appropriate language' it is also believed that the most appropriate language of the development discourse at the primary school level is the mother tongue. It is the most appropriate language to use at this level because the majority of participants in any discourse entity have communicative competence in it. This means that teaching in primary schools should be done using the mother tongue because primary school children are already orally competent in their mother tongue and will therefore learn linguistic abilities such as reading and writing faster.

Concepts in mathematics and science presented in the mother tongue would be more easily grasped than if they were taught in a foreign language. The use of the mother tongue here will enable the children, who are future leaders of the community, to completely grasp the belief and knowledge systems of the society and will enable pupils to achieve maximum participation, in terms of the ideas and information they receive and provide. They will be able to react to new ideas in the most intelligent way possible. The mother tongue is intimately tied to all levels of education and ought to be the most appropriate tool for achieving the development goals of the particular society. Any important goal of the educational system at this level should be to ensure that primary school graduates are

well grounded in the mother tongue and can use it to speak and write about any grade level theme, be it in religion, mathematics or science. Teachers for example coming into a district, who do not have competence in the local indigenous language should be given proficiency courses in the appropriate language so that they serve the locals more competently.

For effective development discourse to take place at the national level, the Integrated Trilingual Policy states once again that 'the most appropriate language' should be used as the medium of communication in educational and administrative institutions. This most appropriate language, which would, in most cases be a home language, should be the main language of instruction at the different education levels. At the level above the nation, which is the region, Scotton[21](p-70) says an indigenous regional *lingua franca*, does not only foster pride but builds bridges between its people, leading to mutual understanding and greater political and economic unity. Fishman [22](p-198) echoes the same view when he says:

A common indigenous language in the modern nation states is a powerful factor of unity. Cutting across tribal ethnic ties, it promotes a feeling of a single community. Additionally, it makes possible the expression and development of ideas, economic targets and cultural identity.

KiSwahili, Yoruba, Akan, Gde, Zulu, Tswana and Shona, just to mention but a few, are languages that are mutually intelligible in the greater part of Sub-Saharan Africa, thus they are capable of playing such a role.

JUSTIFICATION OF THE ITP MODEL

One of the earliest pronouncements on deciding the language of education was advanced as a recommendation in 1953 by the UNESCO Meeting of Experts, which took place in Paris, France, where it was stated that:

On educational grounds, we recommend that the use of the mother tongue be extended to as late a stage in education as possible. In particular, pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of mother tongue, because they understand it best and because to begin their social life in the mother tongue will make the break between home and the school as small as possible [23](p- 47-48).

This recommendation reinforced the practice of early mother-tongue education in several countries and was used to support its introduction where it did not formerly exist. Similarly the Heads of State and Government, at the 22nd ordinary session of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) held from 28 to 30 July 1986 in Addis Ababa, recognised that the

cultural advancement of the African people and the acceleration of their economic and social development would not be possible without harnessing in a practical manner, indigenous African languages, in that advancement and development. The Heads of State and Government were also convinced that the use of African languages as the official languages of the State has advantages over the use of non-indigenous languages in democratising the process of formal education and involvement of the African populations in the political, cultural and economic affairs of their countries and that mass literacy campaigns cannot succeed without the use of indigenous African languages. No nation in history, the leaders argued, has managed to develop while it despises its own languages and cultures. Since language is the carrier of a nation's culture, structures that will give advantage to the indigenous languages should be put in place to enable their use in every sphere of public life.

Zimbabwe hosted the Intergovernmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa, from 17 to 21 March 1997 to highlight the importance and use of African languages so as to ensure active participation of the African population in the activities of national life and in particular in the planning and management of development projects [24] (p-9). At the same conference, the government of Zimbabwe pronounced its position with regard to the use of indigenous languages in education through the then Minister of Sport, Recreation and Culture, Dr. W. P. M. Mangwende who said:

There is no doubt that the advancement of a nation depends on effective communication. It has been proved that the mother tongue is the true basis for effective communication. Indeed, it is within language that values, beliefs and ideology of the people are embedded...Our national languages must be developed to the point where they can be used in science and technology [24](p-11).

Research carried out in various parts of the world has also proved that children all over the world learn better if taught in their mother languages[4,6,9,25]. Subjects such as Maths, Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Geography to mention a few are very difficult mainly due to the failure by learners to understand concepts because they are explained in English which is a foreign language to most African school children. A strong positive justification in the use of the mother tongue in the early years of primary education, is that by the time a child enrolls in a primary school at the age of six, he/she would have developed a capacity to use one language or the other, in most cases his home language/mother tongue, or the language of the immediate community. Learning through such a language will provide a smooth transition from the world of the home to the world of the school. Initial literacy should, therefore, be

conducted in a language that the child already knows and depending on other factors such as state of development of the language, size of speakers and teacher availability, this language should continue to be used as a medium of instruction for as long as possible in primary education.

Use of indigenous languages as media of instruction in education shows recognition of linguistic and cultural plurality. If the mother tongue is used as a medium with minority languages taught as subjects, this will create cultural harmony and co-existence. Languages of wider communication, if they are used as media, will help to promote international understanding and solidarity. The attraction of this sort of scheme is that it widens the scope of the cultural component of a language education to include not just the native culture, which supporters of mother-tongue education tend to focus on, but cultures associated with all the languages used in the educational system.

CONCLUSION

Development in Africa will not be forthcoming until the education system starts using indigenous languages as languages of instruction from the beginning to the end of the education process. The argument is that the whole of African education from primary to tertiary level should be conducted in local languages, home languages or mother tongues[26]. This is the way that 'all societies in the world that have managed to develop, or achieve developmental momentum have done or are doing it' [27](p-36). Greek students, for example, study up to university level in Greek. The French, Albanians, Spaniards, Portuguese, Danes, Poles, Koreans, Germans, Chinese, Indonesians, Malaysians and Japanese all manage their education from the beginning to the end in their own languages. Somehow when it comes to Africa, the logic breaks down and all sorts of reasons are found why in the case of Africa this should be different.

It is the contention of this paper that African nations can only regain their dignity, cultural identity and a place among the league of developed nations through making education accessible to more people. But Africa and its people cannot achieve this unless the education system is African oriented. If Africa is to make strides in economic development, its people must participate using indigenous languages in the development of science and technology and be involved in the formulation of new ideas. The fact that all science courses in African schools are taught in foreign languages means that no scientific ideas can be formulated on the African continent under the current schooling systems. This in turn means that there will be no growth in scientific vocabulary and no corresponding growth of original scientific ideas in Africa. Africans will continue to be scientifically and technically illiterate because they shall continue to be

taught in languages that are not their own. This however does not imply abolishing English, French, Portuguese and others or belittling their role in education and technology. Precisely, they are foreign languages, which deserve to be put in their proper places in the educational systems of African countries. What is certain, however, is the fact that they cannot be the first choice for media of instruction in sustainable educational systems of Africa.

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