

Language Use Optimization as a Strategy for Fostering Sustainable Development in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract: Many sub-Saharan African countries are increasingly becoming concerned about fostering sustainable national development. As many of these countries are strategizing on how to improve their economy and other measures of development, it is important to highlight the vital role of language as a tool for fostering sustainable development in society. This paper is an attempt to explore how the diverse linguistic resources of Africa could be deployed in this direction. The first section of the paper introduces and establishes its overall area of concern. It also provides an explanation of the link between ‘language’ and ‘sustainable development.’ Section two examines the language situation in Africa, based on a case study of Nigeria. It is indicated clearly that African societies are generally multilingual, and that there is a linguistic discrepancy: the language of governance is not the same as the language of the governed. In section three, it is argued that only when new ideas are communicated, when technology transfer is done, in the indigenous African languages that Africans can begin to witness increased participation in the development discourse. The major argument of the paper are summed up in section four where it is argued that since language is at the heart of the process of inclusive and sustainable development because, the teaching and use of African languages should be strengthened. This is because these languages serve as the vehicles for the promotion of literacy which is clearly the single most important indicator of a country’s journey into the top-tier economies of the world.

Keywords: Language, sustainable development, African languages, linguistic inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

One of the current major concerns in sub-Saharan Africa is the sustainability of development processes and outcomes. Sustainable development, as I will argue in this paper, may not be possible without attention to questions of language choice and literacy ability in Africa. As Nettle and Romaine [1] assert that “...the problem of sustainable development is more likely to be solved if indigenous systems of knowledge and languages are valued and brought into play.” This argument is corroborated by Adebite [2] who observes that the lack of development of African nations can be mainly linked to the lack of recognition and under-utilization of African languages and cultures. The dominant inference from the above assertions is that for accelerated and sustainable development of Africa, the diverse linguistic resources of the continent must be harnessed to foster such development. It however seems to consistently escaped the attention of many African governments, policy-makers and planners that language has the greatest potentials and capacity to enhance the development of human beings, as individuals or societies, hence their consistent neglect and silence about language when discussing matters of development [2].

There is no doubt that the goals of development set as targets of various policies in sub-Saharan African countries have not been achieved because of the myriads of socio-political and economic problems still facing them (i.e. the countries). Bodomo [3] notes that several decades of attempts at national development and prosperity since the attainment of independence still leave many African countries with mostly gloomy economic and political statistics. In almost all the attempts however, it is observed that the use of language as resource for development is grossly lacking.

This article attempts to explore how the diverse linguistic resources of Africa could be deployed to foster inclusive and sustainable development in the African continent. It begins with an explication of the concepts of ‘language’ and ‘sustainable development’ and their linkage. The discussion moves on to give a synopsis of the language situation in Nigeria as an example of the multilingual nature of Africa. Focusing on language as a resource, it examines in some details the various ways in which African languages could foster inclusive and sustainable development. The article then discusses the need to strengthen the teaching and use of African languages as vehicles for the promotion of literacy and wraps up with a call for

the promotion and preservation of African languages, which is seen as not just a moral case of sustaining diversity and cultural identity but also, a hugely important economic measure for rapid development.

Definition of Terms

The concept of language has as many definitions as there are uses to which it can be put [4]. For this article, we shall look at language as a tool for communicating values, beliefs, ideologies and the attendant knowledge systems that is packaged therein. It may also be seen as “a system of structured vocal symbols by means of which human beings make meaning, communicate and interact with each other in a given community” [5].

Sustainable development (hereafter, SD) on the other hand, has been seen from different perspectives. Buba [6] views SD as a process that has to do with continuity and positive change as well as the involvement of the citizenry in activities that will lead to the nourishing of a country’s economy. His argument is hinged on what other scholars have seen as a multidimensional process involving positive changes in the social structure and an improvement in the quality of life resulting in the reduction of inequalities. SD is also seen as concerned with harnessing the indigenous knowledge and initiative of the African people to enhance both current and future potentials to meet human need and aspiration (UN-NADAF document). Seen from this perspective, SD in the African context depends to a large extent on languages of the African people because such languages, Egbokhare [7] contends, hold the key to the heart of the people and consequently their knowledge and treasures.

Furthermore, if the economic objective of SD is “to achieve economic growth by increasing productivity...” [8, 9], then language is pivotal to achieving such a goal because, as Crystal [10] observes, it is part of the resources people can draw upon in order to increase the value of their potential contribution to productivity, hence to inclusive and sustainable development. Also, if SD may be described in terms of ongoing enhanced human well-being as well as continued national economic growth [11, 6], then it requires the full participation of the target community. Development that is done to people may have little chances of sustainability.

The Role of Language in Sustainable Development

However sustainable development may be defined, one thing is certain, language is a constant or common denominator, as our definition above says, since no human activity can be envisaged without language [5]. Language is also the only road to thinking [12], which makes human living possible and also makes pooling together of individual capacities (of human beings) for social development become inevitable [13, 2]. As the key to the heart of the people

and consequently their knowledge and treasures [7], one could extrapolate from Whorf’s claim to assume that sociolinguistic structure influences people’s development of their society [2].

However, in development discourse, because the role of language is covert, we tend to ignore its potency in development programmes and strategies. If authors and implementers of development programmes and strategies are deficient in their expressive or understanding power of language, the programmes and strategies themselves would be poorly expressed and poorly understood [5]. Also, if the target community could not understand the rationale for a particular development programme because of language barrier they may not support or work to sustain it. This is because people tend to identify more with a system that allows the use of language they understand well, a language in which the generality of the nation’s populace have unimpeded and unconscious facility in all forms of communication. Opeibi [14] observes that development programmes and policies that are crafted and communicated in people’s languages may likely receive their support than when communicated in a language they do not understand well. It is however unfortunate that many development initiatives have been rolled out to African nations with plans and strategies for implementation written in English or French language [15]. This often makes it difficult for the ordinary people to understand, appreciate and participate in the development initiatives.

Development programmes would, therefore, be seriously flawed as they have been in many African nations, if language is not considered as a major component of them. It was this same point that the Dutch psychiatrist Hilbert Kuik aptly expressed and which has stayed largely ignored by African policy-makers and planners:

When people speak of developing countries, they immediately think of economic backwardness. To deal with that, projects are conceived and technicians and money sent. When the projects fail, blame is put on the social and cultural practices of the people...only rarely do people (from the donor countries) realize that the language barrier is the culprit which prevents new ideas from taking root...the fact that the inherited colonial official languages, French and English operate more as inhibiting than facilitating factors, is a point which in my estimation is poorly appreciated by both the local governmental authorities and the international agencies [16].

The observation of Hilbert Kuik above receives further justification in the submission of Laitin [17] who argues that the economic misfortunes of Africa are a result of Africa’s dependence on European

languages. Also, the foremost African scholar, Professor Ali Muzri remonstrates that African development is impossible without the use of African languages [18]. One might even go further to say that so long as African languages are not recognized properly and utilized effectively, all the billions of dollars that many African governments, organizations and donor agencies have (and still) spent on all areas of developing the continent will go down the drain because, according to Mazrui [18], “no country has ascended a first rank technologically and economic power by excessive dependence on foreign languages”.

The Language Situation in Africa

Although, current linguistic research has not yet provided us with a comprehensive picture of the language situation in Africa, the continent may be described as one with the world’s most linguistically diverse people. The absence of a comprehensive list of the languages spoken in the various African nations, the areas in which they are spoken and how many speakers there are for each language is certainly a major shortcoming for research in multilingualism and the subsequent language policies arising from such studies. This is because we cannot expect to know the various functions performed by various languages in our multilingual society prior to a detailed linguistic analysis of the languages and their relationships to each other [16]. Since it is impossible in this context to give a detailed study of the language situation in each African country we wish to do a case study of Nigeria, a West African country, a choice based, not just only on the fact that it is the African country the author knows best, but also on the fact that Nigeria is quite representative of the African linguistic situation in many ways.

Multilingualism in Nigeria

Nigeria is undoubtedly a multilingual country. Walters [19] describes it as one of the most linguistically diverse nation in Africa. There is however a controversy as to the exact number of indigenous languages in the country despite claims that abound in the literature which suggest a definite or approximate figure. Oladipo [20] suggest a figure of 450 languages spoken by the 180 million or so people that make up the population of Nigeria. Jowitt [21] had earlier postulates that the number could be within the range of 200 to 400 languages. The eminent Nigerian linguist, Bamgbose [22] claims a figure of 513 Nigerian languages.

Adeniyi and Bello [23] categorize the indigenous languages found in Nigeria into three groups. The first consists of those three languages, which are national in outlook. These are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. These major languages perform some recognize linguistic functions in the country. The second are those that are regional in outlook. They are about twelve. Some of these are Ijaw, Nupe, Edo, Efik, Fulfulde, and Itsekiri among others. The regions in

which they are located allocate each of these languages specific linguistic roles to play. The third constitutes those that are limited to the locality in which they are spoken, with very little or no role given to them by the society. They are consequently recognized, if at all, only by members to which they are first languages.

In addition to the above languages, there is Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE). It coexists with English and the indigenous languages. Mann [24] refers to it as “Anglo-Nigerian Pidgin”, and argues that it is an endogenous. It is one of the languages of wider communication especially in southern part of the country.

Apart from these languages, there are some other languages which are clearly non-indigenous to the country (e.g. English, French and Arabic). The dominant role of English in the socio-linguistic context of the country has tended to cast a shadow on the existence of other foreign languages. Though foreign to Nigeria, it is the most important language in the country; it has been used as an official language since the country was colonized by the British and still enjoys an overwhelming position as the official language of government and administration, the law, press, commerce and instruction in schools.

The above case study confirms that African societies are highly multilingual. Indigenous African languages are still vibrant and widely used by the vast majority of the population. Unfortunately, however, these indigenous languages--important means of communication in African societies - are not widely used in the formal educational systems and other important spheres of life.

African Languages, Good Governance and Sustainable Development

In Africa today, a huge communication gap exists in many countries in the continent. The language of governance is not the same as the language of governed. This linguistic situation is hindering the development of democracy in many sub-Saharan African countries because democratic principles advocate for the participation of every citizen or at least the majority of them in governance. Majority of people have been excluded from active political participation due to language barrier resulting from bad language policies in many African countries [25]. Language policies in many of these nations appear to create a situation that distanced the ruling elites from the masses and this is seriously frustrating moves to get local people involved in developmental projects. Prah puts things in perspective with the following:

The dilemma in Africa with regards to language and development is that...the elite which is entrusted with the leadership in the development endeavor is created in, and

trapped by the culture of western society, and favors the reproduction of entire western images in African development. The elite in effect sees Africa from outside, in the language, idiom, image, and experience of the outsider, in as far as the African mind is concerned. It is unable to relate its knowledge to the realities of African society. It is estranged from the culture of the masses, but realizes almost as an afterthought, that development as a simple replication of the western experience is 'mission impossible' [26].

What is clear from the above observation is that African ruling elites often do not optimize African languages as resources because they are often unconsciously caught in a colonial or neo-colonial mentality. There is, therefore, need to make them (i.e., African elites) realize that the problem of sustainable development in African is more likely to be solved if indigenous systems of knowledge and languages are valued and brought into play [1]. It is also important to understand that sustainable development ought to be preceded by the opportunity for all "stakeholders" including the end users to participate in the process of governance, because that is the source of improved quality of life for the people and the creation of a friendly environment in which social and economic activities take place [6].

African Languages, Poverty Reduction and Sustainable Development

The relationship between language and poverty reduction is obvious. We cannot talk of economic empowerment, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, poverty alleviation or reduction without a discourse on language. This is because language offers an individual greater possibility of self expression. It provides a tool for exploring and analyzing conceptual processes. Also, by acquiring the speech habits of the community, an individual becomes a full member of that society contributing his or her response to the common stock in such a manner that they will be easily recognized and stimulate reactions from others, which the person can understand. Moreover, it gives access to the experiences of others, depending on the adequacy of response to experiences and that of others.

Uju [27] observes that inability to express oneself closes all avenues of individual and collective effective language use as a requirement in the global economy. Madhubuti [28] takes the argument further by positing that "...without language, one cannot express the indigenous self and therefore there is nothing to express other than the selves of others in their languages." It could therefore be posited that the languages that people are able to communicate in are critical for personal as well as sustainable national development. It is a fact that individuals who cannot

communicate properly cannot handle opportunities that come their way hence the more reasons Africa should adopt language policies that enhance economic participation by all.

The use of exogenous languages in almost all spheres of life in Africa poses a difficulty for economic empowerment and by inference, poverty reduction because many serious business and other important economic activities are conducted in an exogenous language. This excludes a large proportion of Africans from participation in many of these businesses or economic activities. It was also observed that the use of a foreign language(s) in education as in other spheres of national life has had an adverse effect on our creativity, innovative or entrepreneurial skills and originality in thought and action.

Giving premium to language as a tool for educational development as well as poverty reduction requires that our language education policy should be tilted towards the functional adoption of bilingual education which accords equal status to the indigenous languages and English. Each and every language deserves to be respected and developed. It could therefore be posited that lack of access to basic education through mother tongue leads to diminished individual and national capabilities, thereby furthering cycles of poverty.

African Languages, Productivity and Sustainable Development

It is altruism to posit that work commitments, norms and values necessary for creating a conducive workplace can best be established in an environment where the workers are able and capable of expressing themselves fluently. Uju [27] remarks that, "an individual with lots of potential should be able to speak out so that society could give him or her listening ears." Since a majority of the local workers are not quite conversant with foreign languages, indigenous languages could help in fostering work commitments.

Language is also an important factor in the workplace, for instance, in the distribution of information and in the productive utilization of workers' skills and knowledge and finally in effective delivery of services to the public. Mavesera [29] observes that where workers are limited by language proficiency certain information is omitted as they struggle to get the correct vocabulary to express themselves. She also argues that some of the workplace hazards could be minimized or eliminated if African languages are used for information dissemination in the workplace. Sustainable development calls for a safe environment ascertained by clear communication, for the present and future generations. African governments and other employers of labour need to consider a cost-benefit-analysis of the language used in the workplace. Commenting on this issue Coulmas observes that

“language training for industry and commerce can be a considerable burden for a company, but those who hesitate to make the necessary financial outlays have to ask themselves which is more costly, language training or losses and foregone gains brought about by lack of language proficiency” [30].

African Languages, Technology Transfer and Sustainable Development

Language is an important educational tool for transmitting science and technology. It has been observed that a crucial impediment to rapid socio-economic development, including knowledge and skill dissemination is the imposition of foreign languages as the medium of instruction and communication in Africa [31]. The presence and dominance of foreign languages through which education is carried out has severely hampered the development of the numerous languages and dialects of Africa. Thus, our indigenous languages are under-developed in competence, vocabulary, structures and so on. When we compare this to what obtains in the “developed” nations, where normal, daily routines, including research and development, are carried out in their own indigenous languages - it is absurd that foreign languages continue to subtend as a language of official transaction in many African countries. All the innovations and technological breakthroughs of Russia, Japan, China, England, Germany, France, United States and so on, are codified and encoded in their own national languages.

The transfer and transmission of science and technology is one of the ways of ascertaining the realization of the human potential. In the transfer process, we often ignore the fact that science and technology are cultural phenomena [31]. They (i.e. science and technology) can therefore be seen as the superstructure of this culture while language is the base. This is precisely why the transfer of science and technology in Africa often achieves peripheral results. Bamgbose [22] aptly submits that “unless there is technology culture, the seed of transferred technology will fall on barren ground and it will not germinate”. It could be posited therefore that it is only when new ideas are communicated, when technology transfer is done, in the indigenous African languages that Africans can begin to witness increased participation in the development discourse. Moreover, if science, technology and economic development are to be linked together for the benefit of a country’s development, then the community - not only the elite - must participate in the developmental debate. This debate cannot be properly carried out in a foreign language, because the use of an exogenous language has had an adverse effect on our creativity, innovative skills and originality in thought and action.

We must challenge the myth that our indigenous languages are not competent and appropriate for scientific and technological purposes. What we need

to do, as Obafemi [31] suggests, is to establish Indigenous Languages Technology Centres where indigenous language laboratories, through which the findings and outcomes of our technological and scientific research, can be codified into indigenous language concepts, will be created. Terminologies, modes of expression and vocabularies (in lexical and structural terms) can be in the indigenous languages, chosen from among the languages in the context in which the inventions and findings have been carried out.

African Languages, Education and Sustainable Development

The restriction of the role of the mother tongues as medium of instruction to the lower level of education in many sub-Saharan African countries could be seen as basically a perpetuation of the colonial spirit by the ruling elite. Ayandele [32] reports that colonial officials in several documents over a century ago had expressed the view that indigenous languages of Africa were inadequate for education beyond the first three years of education or schooling. None use of African languages as media of educational instruction ultimately positions the African people as more of receivers than contributors of knowledge. This calls for recognition of African languages as transmitters of modern knowledge and technology.

The elaboration of indigenous languages and assignment of higher roles to mother tongues in education in African nations will have a positive impact on sustainable national development. It will help improve the quality of education, reduce illiteracy, increase public awareness on development programmes and thus encourage mass participation in public affairs [33]. The process will undoubtedly require huge costs in the graphization, standardization and modernization of languages, materials development and teacher-training but the reward, as Elugbe [34] envisions, will also be great. According to Chumbow [33], “what good cause can be achieved without a cost?” Whatever other arguments that have been raised against the use of African languages in education are either seen as obstacles that can be surmounted or mere rationalizations that fail to stand the test of validity when examined closely. For this reason, language policies in Africa need not to have set a low target for indigenous languages in education.

Furthermore, expanding the use and teaching of African languages may also serve as vehicles for the promotion of literacy which is clearly the single most important indicator of a country’s journey into the top-tier economies of the world. This is because literacy is seen as “essential for eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy” [35]. As the “juicer” of development, literacy mixes the three major factors of

development- people, policies and programmes and make them interact to foster sustainable development. It is capable of transforming the lives of people, allowing them to make informed choices and empowering individuals to become agents of change.

CONCLUSION

It has been established in the above discussion that language is at the heart of the process of inclusive and sustainable development because, language use and choice is central in determining the extent to which individuals and communities make meaningful contribution to national development, hence to inclusive and sustainable development. In view of the pivotal role of language to development, the paper proposes a situation whereby there is unity in diversity acknowledging the Marxist view of viewing languages as economic resources with attributes comparable to minerals, water and land. It is also the recommendation of this article that empowerment of the African languages should not translate into exclusion of exogenous languages such as English and French. Such a situation would exclude us as Africans from the global village and could bring about reverse discrimination, which is a bad practice and against the principles of sustainable development. Rather than been viewed as hindrance to Africa's development, multilingualism should be seen as capable of enhancing linguistic inclusiveness which promotes and upholds the principles of sustainable development. Linguistic inclusiveness would complement political inclusion and facilitate socio-economic empowerment favourable for the eradication of poverty, ethnic and gender inequalities and inequities culminating in inclusive and sustainable development.

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