

# Indigenous Languages and the Question of Development in Postcolonial Africa: Focus on Nigeria

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**Abstract:** In recent years, many postcolonial territories in Africa are increasingly becoming concerned about fostering sustainable development. As many of these postcolonial nations are struggling to improve their economic and related developmental indicators, it is important to underscore the vital role of language as a catalyst for empowerment and sustainable development. This paper focuses on the relationship between language and sustainable development with a special focus on Nigeria. It examines in some detail the various ways in which the diverse linguistic resources of Africa could be harnessed to engineer and sustain such development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We argue that far from being an obstacle to Africa's development, multilingualism is a resource that can be harnessed in the service of the continent. And, in view of the vital link between multilingualism, language and development, we propose a model of unity in diversity, acknowledging the view of language as an economic resource with attributes comparable to other natural resources available and deployable by nations, such as Nigeria.

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

## 1. Introduction

A major area of current concern with respect to Africa as a whole is the sustainability of development processes and outcomes. Yet it seems that fundamental questions about the potency of language and literacy are ignored in the pursuit of sustainable development in Africa as a whole. Partly, this is as a result of the understandable focus on such econometric indicators as GDP, GNP, capital flows, oil receipts and related financial information. However, there is another critical variable relating directly to human capital development, which is the ability of an economic system to provide an appreciable level of 'quality of life' for all of its citizens (Sen, 1999). Thus, in addition to low inflation, a healthy foreign reserve and net flow of goods and services into a country, the level of participation, representation and inclusion of citizens in a functioning democracy is an essential element of sustainable development. Note, however, that the variables of quality of life and democracy are values that optimally thrive in highly literate societies. Hence, the important role played by open discussion in the language that is widely understood by all (Buba, 2006). Nettle and Romaine (2000:166) noted how "...the problem of sustainable development is more likely to be solved if indigenous systems of knowledge and languages are valued and brought into play." Adegbite (2004:13) pointed out that the lack of development of (African) countries, such as Nigeria, is partly attributable to the understated role of African languages and cultures in people's daily transactional discourses. And it is arguable whether any accelerated and sustainable development of Africa can be realised in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while we ignore these diverse linguistic resources of our nations. Surprisingly, it is a recurring problem that African governments, policy makers and

planners appear to fail to notice that languages, particularly our indigenous languages, possess the greatest potentials and capacity to enhance our development as individuals and societies (Bodomo 1996; Buba 2006). This is more evident when viewed in the context of literacy and the attendant rapid social and economic advancement that accompanies high literacy rate in a nation state (Collier, 2008).

This paper is an attempt to explore further how the diverse linguistic resources of Africa could be deployed to foster sustainable development in the continent, particularly in our focus country, Nigeria. We begin by unpacking the key concepts (i.e. 'language' and 'sustainable development'), as well as establishing their linkage. The discussion moves on to provide a synopsis of the language situation in Nigeria as an example of the multilingual nature of Africa. Focusing on language as a resource and a tool, it examines in some detail the various ways in which Nigerian languages could promote sustainable development (Everett, 2012). We then discuss the need to strengthen the teaching and use of African languages in the promotion of literacy (Buba, 2010; RTI, 2010). Finally, we conclude with a call for the conservation of all African languages, which we see not just as a moral issue about sustaining diversity and cultural identity, but also as a hugely important economic measure in the march for rapid development in an emerging developing country such as Nigeria (Sen, 1999; Bunza, 2006).

## **2. On Language and Sustainable Development**

In the context of this paper, we view language very much as a tool, in the sense of Everett (2012), for communicating values, beliefs, ideologies and the attendant knowledge systems that is packaged therein. Sustainable development (hereafter, SD) on the other hand, has been seen from different perspectives. Some see it as "a globally endorsed positive change that encourages ecological, sociocultural, political and economic dimensions but with context-bound implementation strategies" (Mavesera 2010:76). Buba (2006:i) 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 improvement in people's quality of life, which result in reducing inequalities and increasing participation in the discourses of (local) development (Sen, 1999). SD is also seen as concerned with harnessing the indigenous knowledge and initiatives of the African people to enhance both current and future potentials to meet human needs and aspiration. Seen from this perspective, then, SD in the African context is intertwined with languages of the African peoples, because such languages, as Egbokhare (2004:507) noted "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..." (see Brundtland Report, 1987: 2; Beder, 1996:18), then language is central to achieving such a goal, because as Crystal (2000) 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 sustainable development. Also, if SD may be described in terms of enhancing the well-being of citizen as well as improving national economic growth (Sen, 1999; Buba, 2006), then it requires the full participation of the target community. Development that is done to people has negligible impact and value on sustainability.

## **2.1 The Language Situation in Africa**

Some of the most multilingual and multi-ethnic societies in the world are located in Africa.

Nigeria (400+) and the Cameroon (250+) are in the top 10 most diverse nations in the world. In addition to the hundreds of indigenous languages, most of which have not been reduced to writing, there are a handful of 'super-languages', serving either as official languages of government, education, science & technology and the economy, e.g. English, French & Arabic, or as languages of wider social interaction within and across African speech communities, e.g. Amharic, Swahili, Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba, Krio & Pidgin and speakers for these languages number into tens of millions (Crystal, 2000). There are other 'state-wide' languages, such as Nupe, Gbagyi, Kanuri, Ijaw, etc, all in our focus country, Nigeria, the population of which is also counted in the millions. At the other end of the written language spectrum are smaller languages with a fairly large currency in big towns and at local authority level. These include Igede, Edo, Bini, C'lela and Ikwerre. And it is this complex picture of plurality and diversity that appears to entrench a language-deficit perspective on African countries such as Nigeria. The argument is that in this very intricate societal layering lies conflicts and confrontations, which are inimical to any kind of developmental initiative or strategy, let alone sustainable development as a cornerstone of public policy (Brann 1993). However, this needs not be the case, as we shall show elsewhere.

The issue of what to do with the numerous languages in Africa and Nigeria in particular, need not cause endless debates, so long as there is the political will to properly utilize the benefits that the nation can derive from appropriating the abundant linguistic resources for sustainable national development. Countries with similar language problems like Tanzania, South Africa, Malaysia, Singapore, Canada, did not only succeed in addressing the issue successfully, but have also invested in their languages.

The emergence of South Africa as a science and technological giant of Africa, for example, might not be unconnected to, among other things, an effective language policy. Buba (2006:8) reports that "it is in recognition of the need for indigenous languages to be part of the rapidly expanding technological environment that eleven (11) indigenous languages (representing 98% of the population) were adopted as official languages". He further reports that South Africa's government sees the language policy framework as fundamental to the management of "... diverse language resources and the achievement of government's goal to promote democracy, justice, equity and national unity" (see the South African Constitution, Section 6, Act No. 108 of 1996).

Another noteworthy nation is Tanzania which has achieved a considerably high degree of democratization through deliberate language choice and language policy (Mazrui, 2005). This has resulted in the replacement of English with Swahili as the sole language of parliamentary business, which has enabled Tanzanians to have greater chance of participating in political and legislative matters. Ordinary Tanzanians could now compete for parliamentary seats, as they could use their Swahili oratorical skills effectively to seek the votes of the electorate.

Thus the extent to which a multilingual society can enjoy the gains of language diversity will depend largely on its language policy, among other factors. The fact is that linguistic diversity need not always be a serious disadvantage (Elugbe, 1985; Bamgbose, 1991). Undoubtedly, the Nigerian linguistic situation may look peculiar, but it is not unique. It is true that Nigeria is faced with linguistic and other diversities but, in the midst of these diversities often lies our strength.

### **3. Language and Sustainable Development in Africa**

The most important resource of every nation is its citizens. This explains why institutional paradigms of development in Africa (UN-NADAF document, 1996) seem to put indigenous African peoples at the center of the development process. As a result, issues such as participation, representation and inclusion of citizens in development processes and outcomes are seen as an essential element of sustainable development in Africa. Thus, this is where the language factor weighs in heavily on issues of development thinking in Africa. Bodomo (1996:3) argues that if development involves the appropriate transformation of the socio-cultural, political and economic systems of a society (UN-NADAF document, 1996) and if language is seen as a repository and a tool for the expression and communication of these very socio-cultural, political, economic and belief systems of the society, then it goes without saying that a successful conceptualization and implementation of this societal transformation can only be achieved through the use of people's indigenous languages because, these are the languages that hold the key to the heart of the people and consequently their knowledge and treasures (Egbokhare 2004, Adegbite 2004).

Validation of our indigenous systems of knowledge is vital to Africa's development because, it can help us to utilize and improve upon our health (and related therapeutic) practices, craft and traditional industries, agriculture, and so on. Generations to come will also be able to learn about indigenous tools for agricultural development, smithing, mining and drugs development and administration (Bunza, 2006). Africa's development can therefore be sustained if we do not neglect our indigenous languages and cultures. In a personal communication, the District Head of Gummi in Gummi Local Government, Zamfara State, Alhaji Abubakar Bala Gamo, noted that "...when we just take what is from outside assuming that it must be better, it leaves us worse off. Western knowledge should reinforce and build upon traditional knowledge, not replace it". Unfortunately, this vital message of African Renaissance seems to fall on deaf ears, as we downplay and undermine our languages and cultures in preference for what is perceived as a 'global

culture'. Olarewaju (1999:7) is probably correct when he asserted that "no matter the premium we place on English language it will always remain foreign as it is not ours...."

Our inclination towards this exogenous language seems to be one of the major factors responsible for the present linguistic predicament of many younger ones (especially those in urban areas) who appear to be neither proficient in the indigenous language(s) nor in the foreign ones as observed by an education specialist working with the Universal Basic Education Commission in Sokoto. He noted that "many parents prefer to take their children to English only schools and rarely spend time teaching the local language to them". Williams (1971:6) noted that "language deficiency is at the root of the poverty cycle because, it underlines educational disadvantage and from there the vicious poverty cycle is completed and perpetuated." It also seems to act as a barrier to acquisition of functional skills that would guarantee gainful self-employment, eradication of poverty and re-orientation of our values.

Furthermore, Africa's economic dependency may be linked to, among other things, our inability to utilize local languages to tap the indigenous knowledge base of the Africans. African people may be able to participate in serious businesses and other important economic activities or financial transactions if our indigenous languages are used in such processes. Some of the people interviewed in Sokoto (Sokoto State, Nigeria) as part of the qualitative interviews related to our research lamented that they are finding it difficult to use Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) and related benefits from the current "cashless/cashlite" microeconomic policies of Nigeria simply because they are not literate in English and no provision has so far been made for the use of our indigenous languages in the implementation of such policies. Active participation of this significant percentage of the population of Nigeria in these essential economic activities could certainly contribute immensely to the development of our economy. Bringing financial inclusion to the citizens is necessary for the development of a country's economy because, as Ansre (1976:3) noted "...the greater the number of those who benefit from it, the better" for the nation. Hence, there is the need to get rid of factors such as 'language barrier' which restrict people from active participation in national economic activities.

Sustainable development also "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" (Buba 2006:5). However, the entrenchment of an exogenous language in governance process has created a situation in which majority of citizens have been excluded from active political participation due to language barrier resulting from bad language policies in many African countries (Bamgbose 2005, Buba 2006). In Nigeria, for example, due to English language requirement, many citizens can only vote but cannot be voted for. This practice appears undemocratic and not ideal for sustainable national development. It has also created a situation that distanced the ruling elites from the larger populace, and this is seriously frustrating initiatives to get local people involved in developmental projects. Unsurprisingly,

people tend to identify more with development programmes and policies that are crafted and communicated in their local languages than when such activities are communicated in a foreign language. The language(s) that the majority of Nigerians understand well is certainly not English. According to Brann (1993: 639-656), more than two-third of Nigerians can speak and understand Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Even in the first author's cursory survey, over many years, of language use among students taking a course on multilingualism, only once did he encounter a student who could not speak one of these three 'national' languages of Nigeria! Yet many development initiatives have been rolled out in Nigeria with plans and strategies for implementation written in English alone. This often makes it difficult for ordinary people to understand, appreciate and participate in such development processes and outcomes.

In addition, the use of an exogenous language in education has become a formidable and impenetrable barrier to access to knowledge and information to a greater part of the Nigerian society by ostracizing the language of environment, thereby disengaging them from the business of education, as highlighted by one of the interviewees, who works for an educational NGO in Sokoto. He noted the rate at which students fail public examinations mainly as a result of deficiency arising from the language of teaching and learning. For example, a 2010 report from the National Examination Council (NECO) shows that only 1.8% of the total number of candidates that sat for the Senior Secondary Certificate Examination passed the required five credits including English and Mathematics (*Dailytrust newspaper*, March 17, 2010) - a staggering 98.2% failure rate! This unacceptable level of failure may be blamed on several factors of which the students' poor mastery of the language of instruction is a strong candidate (see NECO Chief Examiner's Report, 2010). Thus, no matter how well a student understands an idea, a concept or a process, if he or she cannot properly expressed it in the language of instruction, he/she would score lower marks or even fail (Bunza, 2006).

The confinement of the role of the mother tongue as medium of instruction to the lower level of education in many African countries could be seen as basically a perpetuation of the colonial master plan by our policy makers and planners. Adebisi (2006:20) reported that "colonial authorities discouraged the teaching of indigenous African languages because of their acute awareness of the power of language." It seemed almost certain they were aware that non-utilisation of African languages as media of educational instruction will ultimately reduce African societies to the status of recipients rather than contributors of knowledge. It is, therefore, important to find ways of experimenting with indigenous languages as media of instruction in at least some of our schools, thereby complementing English language which still serves as the sole source of knowledge (western or formal) in the country.

Expanding the use and teaching of African languages may also serve as a means for the promotion of literacy which is undoubtedly the single most important indicator of a country's journey into the top-tier economies of the world. 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.

#### 4. Conclusion

Our aim has been to show that language is at the heart of the process of inclusive and sustainable development; that language use and choice are key components in the determination of the extent to which individuals and communities make meaningful contribution to national development, hence to sustainable development. We argued for the recognition of language as an economic resource with attributes comparable to other natural resources available and deployable by a nation. Of course, the empowerment of the African languages cannot be at the expense of exogenous languages such as English. That would imply certain reversal of the very little development that is currently taking place. Rather, our view of multilingualism includes all languages, local and foreign, big and small. Taken together, they are capable of enhancing social and economic inclusion, hence the promotion and entrenchment of the principles of sustainable development. Linguistic inclusion can complement and propel political inclusion, as well as facilitate socio-economic empowerment. These are the optimal conditions favourable for the eradication of poverty, ethnic and gender inequalities and inequities, culminating in an inclusive and sustainable development.

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