

RELEVANCE OF NIGERIAN LANGUAGES IN ACHIEVING THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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ABSTRACT.....

Nations all over the world are increasingly concerned about achieving the millennium development goals by 2015 and Nigeria cannot afford to sit on the fence. As nations strategise on how to have the goals achieved, it is pertinent to bring to the awareness of government and policy-makers the fact that the relevance of indigenous languages towards meeting these goals cannot be dispensed with. This is because languages constitute a strategic factor of advancement towards realizing these goals. In addition sustaining national development as well as maintaining harmonious relationship among multi ethnic communities could be made a reality. Nigeria is a nation with very high and well thought out policies but very low in and deficient in implementation.

It is equally observed that language policies cannot be divorced from language politics, but every nation must employ realistic, sincere and well fashioned direction as well as collective political will to bring out a pragmatic language policy. This paper therefore explores the relevance of Nigerian languages in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015. It is therefore recommended that Nigeria needs to do more in the area of developing orthographies of more Nigerian languages, effective implementation of the language in education policy must be ensured and recruiting more teachers of local languages into the schools as well as establishing more Mass Education Centres across the nation using the indigenous languages as media of instruction.

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Keywords: *Nigerian Languages, Millennium Development Goals, National Development, Language Policy Implementation.*

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is not left out in global initiative like the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and the Education For All (EFA) goals. This is in recognition of the importance the nation attaches to national development. This no doubt translates to the national vision stated in the Draft Harmonised National Policy on Education (2007) which states that, our vision is to become an emerging economy model, delivering sound education policy and management for public good.

Emenanjo (1998) notes that in educational matters and others, Nigeria is one nation that is very high and rich in policies but very low and deficient in implementation. The National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) recognizes education as a vital transformation tool and a formidable instrument for social economic empowerment. It is observed that the target is to increase the percentage of primary school graduates who acquire functional literacy and numeracy to 100% and adult literacy to 80% by 2012. The Universal Basic Education Act of May 2004 is another attestation to the wonderful moves been made by the government.

In 2000 the following goals were officially adopted by 189 United Nations members' states with the agreement to have them achieved by 2015:

- Achieving universal primary education
- Promoting gender equality and women empowerment
- Reducing child mortality
- Improving maternal health
- Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Ensuring environmental sustainability
- Developing a global partnership for development. (Summer Institute of Linguistics [SIL] International, 2000)

A nation that succeeds in achieving these MDGs can be regarded as a highly developed country. For a country to be developing, it means that, enhanced human well-being as well as continued national economic growth is on going (Trudell, 2009:73), and according to Robinson (1996), sustainable development requires the full participation of the target community as any development that is done to people has little chance of sustainability.

To ensure the full participation of all in any community, education is the best instrument to bring about that. For instance, the national educational goals as enunciated in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria are the:

- development of the individual into a morally sound, patriotic and effective citizen,
- total integration of the individual into the immediate community, the Nigerian society and the world as a global village
- provision of equal access to qualitative educational opportunities for all citizens of all levels of education, written and outside the formal school system
- inculcation of national consciousness, value and national unity, and

- development of appropriate skills, neutral physical and social abilities and competencies to empower the individual to live in and contribute positively to the society (N P E, 2007:6 Draft)

It should be noted that these listed goals can be realized if the local languages are effectively and adequately utilized as media of instruction. UNESCO (2008:50) notes that concerns such as meeting the goals of Education for All (EFA)

can be addressed in some measure by explicitly including local languages in formal education systems. The research evidence today shows that mother tongue is crucial to effective learning. Indeed some educationist have argued that the only countries likely to achieve EFA are those where language of instruction is the learners' mother tongue.5&6

This view is equally supported by Professor Kathleen Heugh in Pinnock (2009) that the language models used in Africa fail the majority of students and that early change to English/ French/Portuguese/Spanish medium of school instruction is a primary cause of failure and drop –out rate. The paper therefore explores the relevance of Nigerian languages in achieving the MDGs by examining the goals one after the other.

LANGUAGE SITUATION IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is a multi-lingual nation with the number of languages currently estimated and catalogued to be 521 (Lagbaju and Ogunjimi 2010). Out of the many languages the government recognizes three languages as major languages (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba).

Language in education policy in Nigeria can be summarized as follows.

- Mother tongue (MT) or Language of Immediate Community (LIC) for use as language of initial literacy at the pre-primary and the junior primary levels and of adults and non-formal education.
- The three major (national) languages Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba at L₂ as the language of national culture and integration.
- English and French as the two official languages.
- English as the language of formal literacy, bureaucracy, secondary and higher education, the law courts etc.
- French and Arabic as languages of international relations. There are special villages for both French and Arabic in Nigeria for language immersion programmes (Emenanjo, 1998)

It is to be noted that the medium of instruction policy in the first three years of primary education has been modified.

In the modified edition of NPE (2007:14 section 3, No 18 d&e, p14), it is states that,

The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of environment for the first three years in monolingual communities. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject. From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French/Arabic shall be taught as subjects.

The observed modification is in form of an added preposition phrase "in monolingual communities". This no doubt was in response to the criticisms that greeted the previous editions.

LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Language is unique to human existence the world over. It is the principal means through which human beings communicate ideas, feelings, knowledge, information etc. among themselves. Indeed, no meaningful development can be witnessed in a given society without the use of language. The reason being that language is the eye with which an individual interpretes and understands the world around him or her. Language is the key to a people's heart (Nwajuban and Okereke, 2008), and it (language) makes it possible for people to transmit knowledge across space and time (Nwadike, 2006 in Nwajuba and Okereke, 2008). Indeed it is the most veritable tool for transmitting and preserving people's culture.

Language is a part of culture and an indigenous language will express the culture of a people better than a foreign language. For the school curriculum to transmit the culture of a given society, the language of the culture must be employed as a medium of instruction. For economic and political growth as well as national reconstruction and development the effective use of the language of the people cannot be underestimated. It is therefore safe to say that languages in Nigeria have significant role to play for the MDGs to be achieved.

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND LANGUAGE RELEVANCE

Matsuura a Director General of UNESCO cited in SIL International (2000) had opined that languages are very essential to the identity of groups and individuals for the peaceful co-existence. He notes that languages constitute a strategic factor of progress towards sustainable development and a harmonious relationship between the global and the local context. Languages according to him are of utmost important in achieving the six goals of Education For All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals on which the United Nations agreed in 2000.

These writers stress the view of SIL International (2000) that language-based development is essential in achieving the MDGs especially in Nigeria. Each of the goals will be examined with the view to identifying how languages could be relevant in the Nigerian context toward, achieving the said goal.

1. Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger

Educating Nigerians in their mother tongue will make them literate in such languages in the school system. Literacy liberates individuals from ignorance and help in the acquisition of skills that will lead to better income and better living conditions.

2. Achieving the goal of Universal Primary Education

Universal Basic Education programme has been launched in Nigeria. Mother-tongue or the language of the immediate environment is expected to play vital roles in helping beneficiaries to achieve permanent literacy and numeracy. With the mother-tongue as the language of initial literacy, the learning of other languages is enhanced and acquisition of functional education is ensured.

3. Promoting Gender Equality and Women Empowerment.

Access to basic education provides level ground for both male and females to operate. Females often perform better in verbal abilities than their male counterparts. Initial literacy in mother-tongue is expected to be the privilege of every Nigerian child. Though education of the-girl child have been given too much attention in recent years. It is noted that the education of the girl-child is not seen as a priority in some parts of Nigeria. Awareness creation of the role of education to individual and societal development in local languages through electronic media has brought much result. More girls are being enrolled in schools in recent years.

4. Reducing Child Mortality

Basic education provides for the education of the illiterate adults in the society including women. The electronic and media pass information about disease prevention and treatment in indigenous languages like Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba. Literacy in at least such languages will help the people in no little way.

5. Improving Maternal Health

As indicated in 4 above, literacy in mother tongue will help mothers to give care to themselves as well as to their children and other members of the family. Family planning strategies and health information are better understood when women are taught in their local languages. There are adult literacy centres in the name of centre for continuing education. Some churches are also involved in organising adult literacy classes for their members.

6. Combating HIV/AIDS Malaria and other Diseases

Literate individuals have the opportunity of reading materials about health care, prevention and treatment of diseases either in their local languages and or other languages. Access to information on diseases clears doubt and misgivings surrounding HIV/AIDS and similar terrible diseases.

7. Ensuring Environmental Sustainability

In Nigeria people are informed via the electronic media, posters about the dangers of deforestation and the need to preserve and protect the environment in local languages. Environmental sanitation days are observed and information about this are conveyed in the local official languages. Those who are literate in local and official languages have no problem getting along with government directives on environmental sustainability. Those who acquire their languages informally would be limited to information they are privileged to gather to gather via electronic media in such indigenous language.

8. Developing a Global Partnership for Development

Literacy in mother tongue enhances the learning of other languages whether national languages or official as well as international languages. Literacy in the mother tongue helps an individual to be creative and as such are bilinguals or multilingual, it widens their horizon as they benefit maximally from global technologies which eventually leads to societal development.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

It could be seen that language plays a key role in the overall development of any nation. It becomes more evident in the foregoing discussion that local or indigenous languages are relevant in achieving the MDGs in Nigeria. If other nations are discovering that by using their local languages in new area of their lives, they could adequately find solution to the challenges identified in the MDGs, Nigeria needs to do more in the following areas:

- Developing orthographies of more Nigeria languages.
- Ensuring the effective implementation of language in education policy.
- Recruiting of more teachers in the local languages into the schools.
- Sponsoring workshops on language re-engineering where more scientific and technological terminologies will be translated into the local languages.
- Revisiting the result of the Ife Six-Year Project and other studies in mother-tongue education by extending the initial literacy to cover the first six (6) years of Basic Education while English and French languages should be effectively taught as subjects during those six (6) years.
- Ensuring that both the primary and Junior Secondary Schools are well-equipped in terms of facilities for promoting skills in Introductory Technology, scientific skills and as high proficiency in both the oral and written forms of official and local languages.

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