

## African Indigenous Languages and the Millennium Development Goals in South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** The paper is based on the examination of secondary sources with regard to the role of African indigenous languages in the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Africa. It is argued that the role of these indigenous languages has been marginalized in the implementation of the MDGs. They are important communication tools which enrich social interaction. The following recommendations, among others, are made: (i) emphasis on the role of ICT in mobilizing African indigenous language tools such as idioms, adages, proverbs, witty expressions and figures of speech for the actualization of the MDGs (ii) Strengthen partnerships between public and private sectors to ensure equitable access to and relevance and quality of ICT for all sections of society, and, (iii) The need to develop and provide materials and software in local languages to foster participation and inclusion of minorities.

### INTRODUCTION

Allen and Thomas (2000) emphasize the fact that sustainable development which is conceptualized in various ways is a goal desired by all countries worldwide. The most frequently used definition of sustainable development is found in *Our Common Future* (Brundtland Report 1987): “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This implies environmental, economic and social well-being for today and tomorrow. The United Nations (UN) initiated the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 comprised of eight goals which include: to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality rates; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development.

Rhazaoui et al. (2005) indicate that whereas the first seven goals were meant for developing countries, the eighth goal was for the developed countries to meet their obligations in the attainment of these goals. In spite of the number of challenges facing the individual member countries in the implementation of the MDGs, especially those in the developing countries, the MDGs provided the world with a shared set of integrated goals. The challenges include slow

growth prospects; resource constraints; lack of institutional reforms; inadequate capacity development; uneven income distribution; global economic situation; lack of political will and commitment to the MDGs; lack of an enabling environment to attract investment and encourage private sector development; and the lack of inclusive growth (Mbah and Ayegba 2004).

However, one of the contentious issues which tend to be neglected in the implementation of MDGs, especially in Africa, is the role of African indigenous languages. The United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2012) looks at an indigenous language as a language that originated in a specified place and was not brought to that place from elsewhere. Therefore, African Indigenous languages are those languages which are aboriginal to Africa. For example, in South Africa they include all the San, Nguni and Sotho languages.

The importance of indigenous languages in the sustainable development process was well expressed by Fanon (1967) when he said that colonialism in Africa explicitly promoted white racial and language superiority over non-white colonial peoples. This situation created a sense of division and alienation in the self-identity and confidence of the colonized. According to Fanon (1967), under colonialism, the history, language, culture as well as belief systems of the white colonizer were considered superior to the indigenous knowledge systems and language-

es of the colonized. The perpetuation of this myth through colonial education and western mass media has led to a strong sense of inferiority among the colonized people. They have gone to the extent of adopting the colonizer's identity and languages as their own, even in the socio-economic development process.

Reversing this proclivity towards colonial languages poses a major challenge for most African countries and especially the political elite. In most instances, after the political power was handed to newly elected African governments, very little was done to improve the status of African indigenous languages and optimize the economic potential thereof. According to Spencer (1995), the post-independence African leaders who inherited political power from the departing colonial governments, for reasons of convenience and in order to maintain their grip on power, have made limited effort to indigenous languages for sustainable development.

It is on the basis of this consideration the paper argues that African indigenous languages have not received enough attention in Africa's development discourse. Most the debates on sustainable development in Africa including the attainment of the MDGs tend to marginalize the linguistic challenges. Various factors have been advanced to explain this situation: (i) development is often conceived in a rather narrow quantitative terms using indices such as the levels of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and other economic notions such as income per capita, etc. In this narrow sense of development the role of African indigenous languages in socio-economic development process becomes too marginal (Tade 2003).

(ii) the nature and role of African indigenous languages in the development process is often ignored by western trained scholars and development planners. Development is considered a language-neutral process and that any language could be used effectively to express African culture. Therefore Africa's development indicators could be improved by sheer hard work by Africans speaking any language. They argue that it may even be better to use "scientific" languages such as English and French as African languages are incapable of expressing certain scientific and technological concepts and perspectives that are inherent in most academic and scientific fields (Khalid 2000).

## METHODOLOGY

The study used an examination of secondary sources and cases from South Africa to discuss the role of African indigenous languages in the actualization of MDGs. Secondary sources refer to documents which emanate from original research work done by other researchers. In the context of this paper they included research journals, government reports, internet sources, news reports, encyclopedias, and books (Berg 2004). These were readily available and saved time compared to primary research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the role of African indigenous languages (AIL) in the attainment of each of the 8 MDGs including their contestations:

### **AIL and Goal 1: Eradicate Poverty and Hunger**

Poverty is the common problem affecting all the UN member states in the developing countries. Wade (2004) reveals that in 2010 more than 300 million people in these countries lived on \$1.25 a day. African member countries accounted for about 60 percent (Angus 2011). Stieglitz (2002) indicates that with this largest concentration of the poor, Africa will need an economic growth of a higher GDP growth of 9.1 percent per annum and an average investment requirement of 48.8 percent of GDP (Oxfam 2011). This information is never communicated to the people on the ground who are affected and expected to implement the processes of attaining this MDG. This brings the issue of AIL.

Mutasa (2003) states that people's languages are vitally important to them. It is through language, that people communicate, share meaning and experience including developmental challenges. This is elaborated by Rassol's (2006) whose experience shows that in various rural and urban development projects in South Africa development initiatives that were communicated using their own local languages and sought beneficiaries' involvement achieved 68 percent success, while those that did not, achieved a success rate of just 10 percent (Webb 2006).

The importance of African indigenous languages and community cultural histories in sustainable development and livelihood has

been recognized by the Department of Science and Technology-National Research Foundation Centre in Indigenous Knowledge Systems, by embarking on a project of enriching the National Recordal System (NRS) of Documenting Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) through integrating community cultural histories and epistemologies using local languages. The NRS is an initiative of the Department of Science and Technology (National IKS Office) to record, preserve, protect and promote South Africa's invaluable wealth of IKS for poverty eradication and sustainable development.

The role of African indigenous languages and culture in the development process of the continent has been reiterated by Wa Thiong'o (1986) who states that if culture is the main determinant of people's attitudes, tastes and mores, language is the central feature of culture. It is in language that culture is transmitted, interpreted and configured in sustainable livelihood. In the process of material production and people's development language is the most important means of human intercourse. Bunyi (1999) and Bamgbose (1991) add that language and cultural rights are central to all considerations of human rights including freedom from poverty and hunger.

### **AIL and Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education**

The importance of education in sustainable development is shown by the fact that children who receive a good educational foundation since pre-primary levels are in a better position to meet life challenges as they grow into adulthood. Yet data indicates that an estimated 67 million of the world's children are still not enrolled in primary education. Many of those who do enroll in school later drop out, partly due to the struggle with learning in foreign languages (Alexander 2008; UNESCO 2012).

The situation in Africa is compounded by the educational systems which operate in multilingual situations (Compton 2001). Often a child from a predominantly rural environment is expected to enroll in a school where the Medium of Instruction (MI) is not her/his home language, but rather the language of the government, or another dominant group. The situation becomes worse where and when the parents are illiterate and the medium of instruction at school is a for-

foreign language (Bunyi 1999; Mbah and Ayegba 2014).

The paper poses the questions as to why in all developed countries, the majority of schools and universities provide mother tongue education, but in African countries most learners do not have the benefit of being taught in their mother tongue? And why is it that in all developed countries the media industry, such as the electronic, print, radio, television, film, post and telecommunication, music, language practitioners and related sectors provide most of their products in the mother tongue, but in African countries the same industries provide very few if any products in the local languages?

There are, however, divergent views on this issue of learning in the local or foreign language. Bokamba (1993) shows that one of the most common objections thrown against the promotion of indigenous languages in Africa is that their increased use would merely serve as a means to divide people and create ethnic tensions since most nations in Africa are multilingual. This is also based on the propagated view that linguistically heterogeneous states, which struggle to attain social cohesion in a vast ethnic variety, remain economically underdeveloped in comparison to linguistically homogenous ones. The one-language framework strengthens national unity by making planning easier, avoids duplication of efforts through common provision of educational facilities, minimising communication gap between the elite and the masses, enhancing maximum participation by all citizens in the system (Scotton 1995).

Compton (2001) observed that sometimes parents fear that local language-based education may exclude their child from learning the dominant and marketable languages, which are often pathways to jobs and wider opportunities. For instance, in most Anglophone African countries including South Africa, parents would prefer their children to be taught in English because it is the language of the political and economic elite (Bamgbose 1991; Bunyi 1999). They believe that early exposure to English places their children at an advantage in a highly competitive society and job market (Bodomo et al. 1995; Kagusa 2009).

Alcock (2003) on the other hand has the opinion that the African masses have little say in the decisions which affect them because their lives are dominated by the decisions of a far off,

centralized, elite-based government. He uses the work of Amartya Sen (2001) who states that development is a process whereby greater 'freedoms' are sought for the majority. The argument goes further that if people value and strive towards greater levels of democracy, accountability, participation and transparency in African countries, then so too should they acknowledge the role that indigenous languages can play in either harming or helping the journey down this path (Agunga 1996; Hellinger 1992). This is elaborated by Bamgbose (2000) who states that so many people in Africa are left voiceless because the language they speak holds no weight as a language of national communication. In the case of South Africa, a situation currently exists where English still dominates education, the world of work, politics, economics and judicial matters. Essentially, English is the 'language of governance'. In South Africa, indigenous languages, in the context of this discussion, is a tool to facilitate democratic advancement by promoting wider acceptance of existing diversity. Accepting and appreciating the cultural and social values of indigenous languages, and incorporating them more formally into political and educational sectors is a means by which individuals can effectively shape their own destiny.

There are also those who propagate the view that given the multiplicity of many indigenous languages in Africa and the unity which has been provided by the dominant colonial languages, it is simplistic to describe the ex-colonial languages in Africa as 'foreign' (Schumann 1990). These languages have overtime come to form their own nuances and variations. They have themselves become 'indigenized' and represent second, not exogenous, languages of the people. This can be seen in the development of Pidgins. These are new languages which develop in situations where speakers of different languages need to communicate but do not share a common language (Rassol 2006). This explains their widespread use in urban areas. It is through these Pidgins that the rural and uneducated population feels connected to the domains where African Standard English dominates. Given its affinities to the indigenous languages and the local context as well as the fact that it is the mother tongue for many speakers, it cannot be argued that Pidgins are not African languages.

The crucial issue in Africa which is not dealt by defenders of local language-based education programmes is that, it is not the English or foreign language itself which causes the high dropout rates, mass illiteracy and corresponding lack of participation in national affairs, rather, the issue is economic; in which vast majority of the population are too poor hence deal with their day to day subsistence. This cannot be solved by turning to indigenous languages (Scotton 1995).

In the case of South Africa, the paper recommends that the post-apartheid government should focus on proper language planning which is aimed at elevating the status and advancing the use of African indigenous languages within the education, economic, social, cultural and political spheres (SA Constitution 1996: Section 6.2).

### **AIL and Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women**

UNESCO (2012) indicates the way women and girls are disproportionately represented amongst the world's most marginalized people. In most developing regions, despite improvements since 1990, many millions of girls are still not in school. Nearly two-thirds of the world's 796 million illiterate people are women. These women and girls depend on their indigenous languages for communication and livelihood. However, the fact that these languages and associated community-based or indigenous knowledge systems are not recognized in the search for sustainable solutions to developmental challenges such as food security, climate change, natural resource management, governance and conflict transformation, African women and girls are also excluded from these decision-making processes (Cajete 2007; Hill 2012).

The importance of African indigenous languages comes in this MDG 3 by emphasizing the importance of gender equality and women empowerment. It emphasizes the fact that women and girls ability to access education and information in their own languages is vital for their empowerment. Paul (2008) research experience in bilingual education in Africa and Latin America has found that girls who learn first in familiar languages stay in school longer and are more likely to be identified as good students. In the

case of women, improving adult women's immediate situations is vital to achieving development goals. There are many examples of how boosting women's literacy in their local language, in combination with livelihood initiatives, improves their economic position, decision-making role at home and in the community. Providing women with information and support in their own language on how to protect themselves and girls from violence, domestic abuse and other forms of maltreatment has a great impact on their livelihood (Geisler 2004).

Ncube (2004) discusses the role of African women in preserving and promoting societal cultural values across generations using indigenous languages. She indicates that in all African societies, women as mothers play a very important role in the cultural process. They help to conserve these vital cultural elements that make African culture distinct. Like women the world over, African women are responsible in great part, for transmitting the oral literature and history of society, especially to children, through the channel of local languages and moonlight stories. These stories feature the traditional norms and values of society and through them children unconsciously assimilate the traditions of their society. As transmitters of culture through the local languages, women also ensure that there is no radical break with the past and that the process of change is gradual (Keena 2012).

Various national literacy programmes indicate that women's lives can be improved rapidly by literacy programmes focusing on local languages, preferably in combination with other participatory initiatives that enhance livelihoods. Effective literacy initiatives need to be rooted in understanding and knowledge of the local language, and local beliefs, culture, power relationships and problem-solving systems. Language investigation, for example, can reveal important barriers and opportunities for women. This is based on the realization that as awareness grows that empowering women is one of the fastest ways to improve overall conditions for families and communities, more attention is also being paid to the importance of local languages as part of the process.

For example, in UMkhanyakude District, KwaZulu-Natal Province (South Africa) the Provincial Department of Social Development

tries to assist rural women involved in various creative enterprises such as basketry, pottery, etc. to hold discussions on their business in the local language IsiZulu in order to gain control of the market for their products. Initially they never discussed business related concepts (Moses Kotane Institute 2015). After first gaining confidence and knowledge in communicating about such business concepts in their local language, the women decided they needed to become more skilled in English on the needs and practices of buyers. They then learned enough of the second language so they could negotiate for improved payments. This combination brought tangible income benefits, which had the additional effect of improving women's own livelihood and that of their families. It improved their business negotiating skills. In UGU District (KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa) rural women including those who are illiterate, working in isiZulu, use Information and Communications Technology (ICT) such as mobile phones to contact suppliers or clients for the small business enterprises. This implies that local languages can provide the basis for confidence building in learning other languages for development purposes.

#### **AIL and Goals 4 and 5: Reduce Child Mortality and Improve Maternal Health**

Rapid population growth has been identified as one of the main challenge in reducing child mortality and improving maternal health. This is due to the fact that it increases the amount of resources required to reduce child mortality and improve maternal health (Rhazaou et al. 2005).

The issue of the local language is important in achieving the MDG 4 and 5 because many lives can be saved through women receiving better information on nutrition, the important role of breastfeeding for child health, and how to prevent and treat infections, diarrhea and malaria in a language that is familiar to them and in ways that engage with their culture. Schmidt (2008) shows that in most African countries, especially in the rural and marginalized communities people identified language as a major constraint to accessing health services. Schmidt (2008) elaborates that in the health sector, patients and health providers need to be able to communicate. A health provider who does not

speak the same language as the patient may have difficulties in diagnosing and curing a health problem, or in sharing health information (United Nations 2008).

The paper supports the view that without culturally appropriate communication, it is difficult for patients to develop a sense of trust with health care providers. Language and culture provide the experiential context for comprehension of health information. The culturally bound beliefs, values, and preferences a person holds influence how a person interprets healthcare messages. Therefore, knowing about a patient's language and culture is key for knowing how health literate the person is in a given situation. Therefore, recognizing the importance of language in national health policies and strategies is vital to ensure that all people, including marginalized women, are reached (UNESCO 2012).

Researchers have provided many examples of health successes as a result of focused engagement with local languages (Alexander 2008). For example, in UMzinyathi district municipality (KwaZulu-Natal), there is increasing participation and enthusiasm among local people, especially among rural women, after a local primary health care provider worked with community members to produce videos, story boards and other health education materials in IsiZulu. TV, radio, songs, video and Community Theater have all been used effectively to introduce health messages too hard to reach populations and where there is a lack of literacy.

#### **AIL and Goal 6: Combat HIV and AIDS, Malaria and Other Diseases**

Hill (2012) shows that at the end of 2010, there were about 34 million people were living with HIV and AIDS worldwide, half of them women. In 2008, there were 247 million cases of malaria and nearly one million deaths – mostly among children living in Africa, where the disease accounts for 20 percent of all childhood deaths. Therefore, preventing these dreadful diseases in Africa is an essential part of improving the lives and prospects of millions of people.

The issue of indigenous languages is crucial in MDGs because poor and illiterate people living in multilingual countries become vulnerable to dreadful diseases such as HIV and AIDS, malaria and other health challenges due in part to the lack of essential information provided in

their own languages, in a culturally sensitive manner and by people they trust. The complexity of, and the stigma often associated with, HIV and AIDS makes the way we communicate about the issues particularly important. Educational campaigns on HIV can help dispel fear and stigma and encourage people to access services and treatment (Myrick 2002; United Nations Economic and Social Council 2013).

A best practice of communicating health information to local communities has been demonstrated by the The DramAidE (Drama in AIDS Education). It is facilitated by the University of Zululand and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Durban) via The Centre for Communication, Media and Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. It was established in 1992 and operates as a university-based, donor-funded agency. It uses participatory and interactive educational methodologies for community development, public health communication and education. These methodologies are non-judgmental, culturally sensitive, conducted in isiZulu and English and accessible to all ages, levels of education and cultural backgrounds. Since its inception, DramAidE has worked in over 850 schools in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), in 19 tertiary institutions nationally, as well as in communities both urban and rural, training teachers, peer educators, nurses, care-givers, members of NGOs, CBOs and FBOs, as well as in prisons.

The paper advances the opinion that local participation in the production as well as the reception of health care messages is vital. This implies that working with and listening to communities in their own local languages, is vital for identifying the most appropriate and culturally acceptable ways to introduce health information, and to ensure that all members of the community, including women and girls, are reached. Finally, the medium can often be just as important as the message. Radio, video, community-based discussions and community theater in local languages can be strong tools to access and communicate marginalized communities.

#### **AIL and Goal 7: Ensure Sustainable Development**

In the context of this discussion sustainable development refers to using and managing resources in ways that meet current human needs without compromising the ability of future generations to also meet their needs. African is rich in natural resources and biodiversity including

cultural and linguistic diversity. Nigeria, for example, has more than 400 languages and is one of world's leading biodiversity "hotspots". Tanzania, with more than 100 languages, is another leader in cultural and bio-diversity. African indigenous languages in this situation are important for sharing appropriate ways of using the societal resources sustainably (Beukes 1996).

The use of foreign languages which are not accessible to the majority of the population will no doubt stifle participation and limit the process of sustainable development. The use of indigenous languages is also critical to ensure appropriate use of scientific and technological advancement (Schumann 1990; Paul 2008). The right to use one's own language and the right to take part in public service without discrimination on the grounds of language are clearly stated in Paper 27 of The International Conventions on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Paper 30 of The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (UN 1990).

#### **AIL and Goal 8: Foster Global Partnerships for Development**

UN Johannesburg Declaration (2002) and Keena (2012) rightly state that the cultures of the world together create a rich and varied tapestry. The resulting cultural diversity expands choices, nurtures a variety of skills, human values and worldviews and provides wisdom from the past to inform the future. This creates opportunities for global partnerships as diversity is a mainspring for sustainable development for individuals, communities and countries. Thus, building an effective global partnership approach to sustainable development needs to address respecting, protecting and maintaining the cultural diversity of the world now and in the future. The partnerships to harness the strengths of nations, institutions and civil society around the world are vital to enhance policies and practices towards realizing the MDGs. The private sector also plays an integral role, as a critical driver of innovation and investments in essential services such as health care, education and clean water and sanitation.

The paper indicates that colonialism and globalization have established a hierarchy of standard languages, reflecting the global power relations. The overall effect of this configuration has been to hasten the extinction of indigenous

languages (Bokamba 1993). When wa Thiong'o (2014) was interviewed at the University of Bayreuth (Germany) in 2014 on the issue of global dominance of a few cultures and languages, he responded by comparing the hegemony to the reduction of a big Richard Wagner orchestra to a few, similar sounding brass instruments. He reiterated that the death of any culture and language in the context of global human partnership minimizes the human world orchestra. The life of every language and culture throughout the world enriches the human orchestra including the actualization and sustainability of the MDGs.

It is on the basis of this consideration that the paper brings in the role of ICT in promotion of African indigenous languages for the actualization of the MDGs in the context of building of global partnerships. ICT is an umbrella term that includes any communication devices, encompassing radio, television, cellular phones, computer and network hardware and software, satellite systems, etc. as well as associated services and applications such as videoconferencing and distance learning (Kabanda 2008; Roger 2005).

The paper emphasizes the building of partnerships to broaden access to new technologies and bridge the "digital divide" across nations. ICT can be a powerful tool for sharing knowledge and information in pursuit of development goals. In education, African countries are recognizing that ICT can facilitate learning among traditionally excluded social groups such as girls, women and persons with disabilities. Therefore, national policies and practices that support increased access to ICT help pave the way for greater inclusion for all (World Bank 2009). In South Africa, example could be given of the Project Masiluleke (Project M), launched in 2008. It sends out important health information in phone text messages in local languages. South Africa has 11 officially recognized languages, and in order to reach as many people as possible, the project has acknowledged that it is crucial for people to be addressed in a language they understand. Since October 2008, Project M has sent out more than 1 billion short message service (SMS) text messages to the general public on HIV and AIDS, resulting in a huge volume of calls to the national AIDS hotline. The project has reported a greater increase in calls when

messages are received in vernacular languages such as IsiZulu, compared with when they are sent in English (Centre for Health Market Innovations 2010).

### CONCLUSION

The paper was based on the view that one of the contentious issues in the actualization of the MDGs in Africa is the role of African indigenous languages. Colonialism marginalized these languages in the socio-economic development process of the continent. However, there is growing realization that until African indigenous languages are empowered and fully developed as main mediums of expression in the socio-economic development process, Africans are 'merely pursuing a dead end.' This is based on the increasing realization that there is a strong relationship between indigenous languages and sustainable development. A language is more than a tool of communication. It is a channel of values, traditions and cultures and the foundation of interaction in any given society is the local language of the people in that community. Indigenous language being a person's means of communication, endows him/her with the facility for greater self-expression and improved relations with others in the same language community. It creates cultural and social bonds for those who share it.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends the following: (i) need to change negative perceptions against African indigenous languages and appreciate their socio-economic value in attainment of the MDGs. (ii) emphasis on the role of ICT in mobilizing African indigenous language tools such as idioms, adages, proverbs, witty expressions and figures of speech for the actualization of the MDGs. (iii) Strengthen partnerships between public and private sectors to ensure equitable access to and relevance and quality of ICT for all sections of society. (iv) The need to develop and provide materials and software in local languages to foster participation and inclusion of minorities.

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