

The Language Factor in the Attainment of Millennium Development Goals: The Case of Multilingual Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) offered an opportunity to the world to address the problem of underdevelopment especially in the developing countries. In order to realize these goals, governments around the world came up with different strategies. Language however, did not appear on the development strategies of many governments especially in Africa. This gave rise to debate among scholars about the significance of language in the realization of these goals. Whereas other continents like Europe were closer to realizing the MDGs by the deadline of 2015, Sub-Saharan Africa still lagged far behind. By the time the 8 MDGs expired in December 2015 and were replaced with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), most African countries were far from attaining the goals. This paper argues that in order to attain the MDGs in Sub-Saharan Africa, languages of the Africa masses needed to be part of the strategy. The paper further argues that in a region that has a high linguistic diversity like Sub-Saharan Africa, local languages had a significant role to play in the attainment of the MDGs. The paper calls for the empowerment of languages of the African masses so as to effectively involve the masses in development and eventual attainment of SDGs by the set deadline of the year 2030.

Ikisiri

Malengo ya Maendeleo ya Milenia (MMM) yalitoa fursa kwa ulimwengu kusuluhisha tatizo la ukosefu wa maendeleo ulimwenguni hasa katika mataifa yanayoendelea kustawi. Ili kutimiza malengo haya, mataifa ya ulimwengu yalibuni mikakati anuwai. Hata hivyo, suala la lugha halikupewa nafasi katika mikakati iliyobuniwa katika mataifa mengi ya ulimwengu, hasa yale ya Afrika. Kwa sababu hii, kumekuwa na mjadala miongoni mwa wataalamu kuhusu dhima ya lugha katika kutimiza MMM. Ingawaje mabara mengine yalikuwa yanakaribia kufikia Malengo hayo ilipofika mwaka 2015, mataifa ya Kusini mwa Sahara yalikuwa yangali nyuma mno. MMM yalipobadilishwa na Malengo ya Maendeleo Endelevu (MME), mataifa mengi ya Afrika yalikuwa yangali mbali sana katika kufikia MMM. Makala hii inaona kwamba ili kutimiza MMM katika eneo la Kusini mwa Sahara, lugha za umma wa Afrika zilihitaajika kuwa sehemu ya mikakati ya utimizaji wa malengo hayo. Makala inatoa wito wa uwezesaji wa lugha za Kiafrika

ili kuhusisha umma wa Kiafrika kikamilifu katika maendeleo na utimizaji wa MME kufikia mwaka 2030.

1.0 Introduction

The adoption of the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals by the U.N. Assembly in September 2000 was a bold step by the international community to expedite development in the developing world, where at the turn of the century, there were millions of people living in extreme poverty. The declaration set out to achieve eight critical economic and social development priorities by the year 2015.

By the end of 2015, significant strides towards achieving the goals had been made, yet reaching all the goals by the 2015 deadline remained challenging because the world's poorest, most of who live in Sub-Saharan Africa, were left behind. The state of development for the Sub-Sahara ethno-linguistic minorities continued to lag behind, putting them at risk of even greater disparities that may have hindered efforts to overcome poverty, illiteracy and disease. So: Could there have been a missing link between the strategies and their intended beneficiaries? The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of language as the missing link to development efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa.

2.0 Language Situation in Sub-Saharan Africa

It is estimated that there are 6912 languages in the world today (Gordon, 2005). Although some of these are considered as dialects, 2092 of the languages are found in Africa, 239 in Europe, 1002 in America and 1310 in the Pacific. A large percentage of the 2092 African languages are found in Sub-Saharan Africa. This gives the Sub-Saharan region a high linguistic diversity compared to Europe, America and the Pacific regions.

Sub-Saharan Africa's linguistic diversity makes it unique. The uniqueness is further complicated by the high illiteracy levels where majority of countries have adopted foreign languages e.g. English, French and Portuguese as official languages (Wolff, 2006). Given that development policies towards the attainment of the MDGs were formulated and implemented in these official languages, millions of poor people who did not understand or had little understanding of these foreign languages may have been effectively locked out of the development agenda.

3.0 The Role of Language in Development

Since Sapir (1958) claimed that language affects human thinking, scholars around the world have engaged in the debate about the role played by language issues of development. Many of these scholars are now in agreement that language,

communication and development are, in fact, very closely related (Wolff, 2006; Koul, 2006; Chiswick, 2008; Trudell, 2009; Casale et al, 2010). As Shitemi (2001) puts it, language in its variant forms and presentations is central to everything we do. Hence, we can hardly function without it. It is indeed true that language as a tool for communication has inheritably become a tool for development. It is almost impossible to conceive progress devoid of communication (Chessa, 2001). It is also true that human communication is effectively achieved through the use of language. Therefore, issues of language could not be divorced from issues of the MDGs. Communication has a crucial role to play in all sectors of development and issues of language will always emerge during any efforts of development in an environment that is linguistically complex as is the case in Sub-Saharan Africa. Development begins with sharing of ideas, thoughts and information. This therefore means that this information, thoughts and ideas can only be shared between people who share a common language. It also means that a person can only interact with an idea or information from publications if it is available in a language in which he has no problem understanding.

Throughout the world, communities are discovering that by using their mother tongues, they are able to counter challenges of development in a better way than would be, the use of a second language. Language, therefore, becomes an important component of development in all political, social and economic spheres. Wolff (2006) rightly argues that development in Sub-Saharan Africa has a lot to do with how language issues are being treated. For example, development projects in rural areas aimed at alleviating poverty and hunger require the involvement of local communities, especially the marginalized communities. The involvement of these communities needs a communication strategy. However, such communication to the poor masses in Sub-Saharan Africa is a complex issue. This is because many governments have adopted the use of foreign languages as official languages. This is in spite of the fact that many people in this region do not have proficiency in these languages (Trudell, 2009). This for example, is the case in Southern Africa (Moyo, 2009) and Kenya (Kembo-Sure and Ogechi, 2006). Therefore, a communication strategy in the effort to mobilize the poor and marginalized communities of this region must include the use of local languages. What then was the role of these languages in the attainment of the individual goals? In the following section we discuss the place of language in attainment of MDGs.

3.1 MDG 1: Eradication of Extreme Poverty and Hunger

According to the World Bank Millennium Development Goals Report (2011), poverty and hunger can be eradicated through investment in agriculture, job creation, universal primary education and promotion of gender equality. This

report recognizes that majority of the world's poor people live in rural areas, and therefore, investment in the agricultural sector has the ability to boost their income and help alleviate their poverty. Majority of Sub-Saharan Africa poor masses are small holder farmers. Therefore, investment in this sector is critical in alleviating poverty and hunger in this region.

However, investment in agriculture in a region that has a high linguistic diversity as Sub-Saharan Africa can be challenging if issues of language are not addressed. The agricultural sector is increasingly becoming knowledge intensive. This makes availability of information critical for any meaningful investment to take place. The resource-poor small holder farmer in Sub-Saharan Africa needs information about what to grow, how to do it, where to do it and when to till their land and grow crops or raise animals. They also need information about how to add value to the product and best product marketing practices. The farmer needs information about how to get inputs necessary for farming. The farmer also needs to know the benefits that will accrue from her/his farm investment. Information about options for the challenges encountered in farming such as disease and pest control, changing weather patterns and how to access markets for the produce is also critical for the farmer. This information can only be accessed by the farmer if she/he has the right language to access relevant information. This means that this information needs to be appropriately packaged in the language that is understood by the farmer.

Investment in the business enterprise also needs language. Language is important in communication between business owners and their customers and suppliers. Toboso (2012 and 2014) in his study about business communication in Eldoret town in Kenya found out that 96.4% of communication between traders and their customers were conducted in local languages or code switching which included local languages such as Kalenjin dialects, Luyia, Dholuo, Maasai, Somali and Kikuyu. This testifies to the argument that the success of business enterprise depends on communication that involves locally spoken languages. Language is also important in sharing of ideas between business people and their peers in the business world. The poor rural dwellers who would like to supply vegetables to town dwellers, for example, need language to facilitate communication between them and their customers, especially those who do not speak their language. The poor slum dweller needs the right language to hawk her/his goods across the slum and in the suburbs of the city where local languages may be in use. This means that the right language is needed in the right market place. Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger in Sub-Saharan Africa under MDG number 1 therefore needed involvement of local African languages.

3.2 MDG 2: Universal Primary Education

Many of the world's out-of-school children live in Africa, many of them in Sub-Saharan Africa. By the year 2015, some Sub-Saharan countries had however made great strides towards attaining this millennium goal by ensuring free primary education for most school going children. However, the success in education and raising literacy levels goes beyond just ensuring that children attend school.

It has been argued that without education through mother tongue or another equally familiar African language at all levels of education, there is no future for African development (Prah and Brock-Utne, 2009). The prosperity and economic prowess of Asian countries is a perfect example of the role of mother tongues in achieving high standards of education and economic prosperity. This means that MDG number 2; universal primary education could not be easily achieved without linguistic considerations. The argument is that there is no development in the educational or economic sector without the engagement of languages that are confidently understood, spoken and written by the overwhelming masses of the people (see Shitemi, 2010). For this reason, it has been argued that use of foreign languages as a medium of instruction in Sub-Saharan African schools is one reason which has contributed to underdevelopment in the education sector (see Kembo-Sure and Ogechi, 2006). Kembo-Sure and Ogechi rightly argue that attainment of meaningful universal primary education cannot occur in this region without using the African languages as a medium of instruction in schools. They propose prolonged use of local languages as a medium of instruction in the schools. As it has been said before, languages are not important merely for achieving the political end. They are closely linked to human development.

The MDG of achieving universal primary education could not be achieved as long as access to education in Sub-Saharan Africa was restricted to those who are fortunate enough to be exposed to languages of political and economic power, namely, English, Portuguese or French. Programmes aimed at ensuring the fulfillment of this goal needed local language to succeed. And as Miti (2009) posits, children and adults have to read and write in their local languages before they can learn to transfer their literacy skills to the national language, then to the basic foreign or international language. He maintains that primary education programmes that begin in the mother tongue help students to gain literacy and numeracy skills more quickly. When taught in their local languages, students readily transfer literacy skills to official languages.

Importantly, there is need to empower the African languages in order to give them strength to effectively perform the responsibility of a medium of instruction. Otherwise, the use of underdeveloped languages may lead to further marginalization of the speakers of these languages. Empowerment of these languages, will give their speakers confidence and self esteem that will help them

believe in the service of their language as a medium of instruction and in development in general.

The use of local African languages will also serve to encourage their speakers to pursue their education beyond lower primary level. This will subsequently help to minimize school dropout cases and make the universal primary education programme more successful. It should be noted that school dropout cases in Sub-Saharan countries like Kenya are partly attributed to the medium of instruction in school. The medium of instruction currently in use makes instruction un-enjoyable to many and in turn makes many pupils to fail exams because language is an obstacle to examination performance (Kembo-Sure and Ogechi, 2006).

Apart from their use as a medium of instruction in schools, local African languages have an important role to play in reaching out to rural dwellers in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially pastoral and marginalized communities which greatly treasure their pastoral and cattle rustling culture at the expense of education. These languages have an important role to play in any strategy that aims at encouraging these marginalized communities to embrace universal primary education. Such strategy that may include use of personnel and the media to educate these communities about the benefits of education will need the use of local languages. In order for programmes such a mobile schools to successfully attain their objectives, mobilization efforts have to take care of linguistic issues. Towards this effort, African languages needed to become an important tool of mobilization in the effort to attain the MDGs.

3.3 MDG 3: Achieve Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women

According to the Global Poverty Report (2002), efforts towards achieving gender equality and women empowerment centered towards eliminating the enrollment gap between boys and girls at all levels of education. Efforts were also centered towards ensuring the reduction of school drop-out cases for girls. In order to improve the enrollment of girls in school and keep the girls in school, the role of language in the mobilization efforts is critical. Choice of language to be used as a medium of instruction in school especially primary school is critical in order to make learning enjoyable. Appropriate language is also critical in countering cultural practices that make girls drop out of school, for example, forced and early marriages.

3.4 MDG 4: Reduce Child Mortality

1 in every 8 children in the world died before the age of 5 years in 2009 (UNICEF, 2012). Many of these deaths occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa. Efforts towards reducing child mortality have centered on the provision of information about

disease prevention and treatment. In this region in which many rural dwellers speak their local languages, mothers need information about cheap and effective remedy for common child-killer diseases like malaria. They also need to know drugs that have been subsidized by their government in the effort to counter child mortality. As it has been said before, such information can effectively reach the masses through their local languages. Efforts by governments to relay this information to the poor rural masses in Sub-Saharan African should therefore consider the use of African mother tongues for effective communication.

In essence, information about treatment of tropical and other diseases, including tuberculosis, pneumonia and diarrhoea, and preventive measures like provision and use of chemical-treated mosquito nets, indoor residual spraying and good sanitation, should be relayed to the people through local languages that they best understand. Community health programmes through which these services can reach the rural masses need relevant languages for effective communication and success. This is necessitated by the fact that poor understanding can lead to dangerous or even fatal misinformation. Ethno-linguistic communities can combat child mortality when they have the linguistic resources and capability to obtain essential health knowledge.

3.5 MDG 5: Improve Maternal Health

Expectant women around the world still die from causes such as severe bleeding after childbirth, infections, hypertensive disorders and unsafe abortion (WHO Report, 2010). In Sub-Saharan Africa, a woman's risk of dying from preventable and treatable complications of pregnancy and childbirth over the course of her life time is 1 in 31, compared to 1 in 4300 in the developed countries (UN Report, 2010). In its 2010 report, WHO says that in order to reverse this trend and achieve the goals of improving maternal health, there is need to reach out to women from ethnic minorities and indigenous groups, and women living with HIV in conflict zones.

Towards this end, the role of African languages cannot be overlooked. This is because a mother is better able to care for health if she is literate in her mother tongue and has access to health information in a language she understands well. It is therefore prudent that any strides towards improving maternal health should take care of linguistic factors in the highly multilingual Sub-Saharan Africa. For, example, African languages cannot be excluded in any effort to access women in rural areas and poor households. Many of these women do not speak foreign languages of wider communication like English, French and Portuguese. This means that the most appropriate languages to be used in this endeavour are African languages.

WHO Report (2011) indicates that greater attention to improving sexual and reproductive health care and universal access to all is required to prevent unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions, to prevent mortality due to sexually transmitted infections and to provide a high quality pregnancy and delivery care. Provision of such care will not achieve its objective without careful linguistics considerations. Use of contraception and family planning in general is one way of improving maternal health by guarding against unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections including HIV. In Sub-Saharan Africa, use of the right local language is pivotal in ensuring that information about availability of family planning devices and their right use reaches the women.

Antenatal care is another crucial service for healthy motherhood. Although this is the case, the recommended norm of four antenatal visits is still inaccessible to 55% of pregnant women in Sub-Saharan Africa (WHO Report, 2005). One of the contributing factors to this situation is lack of information. Much of the information about antenatal care is presented through the media or publications which, in many Sub-Saharan countries, use official and national languages which many rural women do not understand.

Much of the efforts in reducing maternal death have included training of health workers and midwives. It is important to note that trained health workers and midwives without relevant language skills will meet challenges in their effort to provide healthcare services. Successful delivery of health care by these health workers needs the use of local languages which the people understand. It is through these languages that the women can be given instructions about medication, family planning, disease control and management and good dietary and sanitary habits without misinformation. Some Sub-Saharan governments have deployed community health extension workers in the rural areas far away from any hospital or clinic. The success of this programme also needs the use of an appropriate language that to the rural women understand.

3.6 MDG 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other Diseases

In the fight against HIV and AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa, there is need for the use of socially and culturally acceptable terminology and expression in indigenous Africa languages in all written communication and verbal deliberation (Miti, 2009). In other words, languages used in the fight against HIV and AIDS should convey important information about the disease but at the same time take care of different cultural issues regarding the use of taboo words. This means that governments in the Sub-Saharan Africa needed to consider language policy as part of the strategy to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. The absence of this strategy may have hampered the achievement of MDG number 6.

It is important to note that language use varies depending on the user and the audience. Therefore, the fight against HIV/AIDS which has entailed reducing new HIV infections, increasing the number of people on life saving treatment, reducing deaths from opportunistic disease and increasing capacity of women and adolescent girls to protect themselves from HIV infections all need the use of local language in order to achieve success. The bold steps in the campaign against this disease and other disease in Sub-Saharan Africa cannot succeed without appropriate choice of language to be used in reaching people living with HIV/AIDS. It will therefore be important for governments in Sub-Saharan Africa to consider language issues in their efforts to achieve SDGs, especially after failing to achieve MDGs by the set deadline of 2015.

3.7 MDG 7: Ensure Environmental Sustainability

Principles about environmental conservation need language in order to be effectively communicated to the recipient. Information about proper disposal of industrial and consumer waste, recycling of used products and new environment friendly technology cannot reach the recipients without use of appropriate language. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where deforestation is a critical problem, the campaign against the practice and strides towards forestation and reforestation need proper language in order to achieve meaningful results. Language is important in the effort to convince the rural farmer against logging and the destruction of natural water sources, which could lead to environmental degradation.

3.8 MDG 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development

Achieving this millennium goal required greater co-operation between countries for development. In order for Sub-Saharan Africa countries to attain this goal, they needed to partner with the international community in all areas of development. This partnership may have been in the form of seeking aid from the developed countries for development. Towards this effort, language had and still has an important role to play in negotiations for Official Development Assistance (ODA) and debt relief. Language is also important in negotiations for the reduction of subsidies to farmers and elimination of trade barriers in the developed countries that discourage African exports.

Co-operation between various African countries in trade is another area of partnership. This area also needs language. Efforts towards regional integration like the formation of regional trading blocs such as the East African Community (EAC), Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) need language considerations.

This is due to the fact that these blocs are meant to create an enabling environment for free movement of citizens from various countries.

4.0 Conclusion

Language is an important variable of any development strategy. This means that there is no development that can occur in a multilingual setting without an appropriate language plan. As concerns the MDGs, it is important to recognize the fact that Africa is highly diverse linguistically and this made it impossible for meaningful success to be achieved toward attaining the Millennium Development Goals without considering the language factor. Many of the Sub-Saharan poor people who were the target of this development lived and still live in rural areas where the languages of communication are mother tongue, and not the official foreign languages. These languages should therefore have been part of any plan towards achieving the MDGs in this region. However, for any language to function effectively, it needs to be empowered. Sub-Saharan countries need to come up with appropriate language policy, empowerment and language management programmes to ensure effective use of African languages.

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