

## **Namibian multilingualism and sustainable development**

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### **Abstract**

*This position paper provides a critical discussion on the significance of indigenous languages in development in Namibia. The importance of the relationship between language and society is unquestionable as language in general allows communication to take place in society. The premise of this line of reasoning is to argue that though multilingualism may provide a challenging linguistic scenario for a country like Namibia which has a fragmented population running across different ethnic groups, the role of native languages in economic and social development should not be ignored as native languages can perpetuate sustainable development. This paper used qualitative content analysis, employing a desktop examination of secondary sources that pertain to language and economic development. As a desktop study, the data was collected through critical reading and analysis of language and development literature.*

**Key words:** indigenous/native languages, multilingualism, sustainable development, language planning, literacy.

### **Background**

Namibia is a multilingual country, comprised of 14 regions and each region is comprised of people from different ethnic groups whose languages differ from each other. In some instances where people share a language, the language is again divided into different dialects. Because of this diversity, at the inception of independence, the newly formed independent Namibia had to adopt a language that would unify the inhabitants of the country. Choosing one of the indigenous languages would perhaps have been seen by other language groups as discriminatory and preferential, therefore, the newly formed government then saw it befitting to choose a language that would connect Namibia to the global network, a language that

would harmonize and pave the way for development for the entire nation.

To this effect, at the helm of independence, English was adopted as the language of official communication. This move was advantageous for national reconciliation and international communication. Though this was a good move from Afrikaans, which was seen as a language of oppression, it also presented other challenges since English even after years of independence, is not yet a lingua franca in the country, many Namibians are still not yet eloquent in this language; yet official documentation of developmental projects are articulated in the English language. However, there is no doubt that Namibia has benefitted from the use of English as its official means of communication. This language has allowed Namibians from different ethnic groups to communicate on personal, national and international levels. However, the use of English alone in legislature and policies might hinder Namibians from fully understanding and participating in developmental efforts of the country since many people are not fluent in this language.

Currently, newscasts are abuzz with economic struggles that Namibia is presently undergoing. Therefore, the Namibian government like all nations in the world seeks to develop Namibia in a sustainable manner. This development can be achieved through different methods and indigenous languages should be used as a means to articulate to the hearts of all Namibians. Sustainable development, according to World Bank (2003, as cited in Springer, 2015) aims to improve the quality of life in an all-inclusive manner, including economic prosperity, social equity and environmental protection. For sustainable development to be realised in any nation, economic, social, environmental and cultural aspects need to be integrated in a harmonious manner that would enhance the intergenerational well-being of Namibia's inhabitants. Also, for Namibians to fully understand public policies and initiatives, these aspects could be communicated to all citizens in an equitable manner if information is disseminated in languages that Namibians are fluent and comfortable to communicate in. Though various initiatives have been put in place for national development, many Namibians are still struggling to make ends meet. This hardship is articulated on national television and radio programmes, newspapers and other platforms. Therefore, it is necessary that the government and Namibians in general,

find means to lessen these challenges. As a result, it is befitting for scholars in different fields of study to develop and disseminate information that would ultimately contribute towards achieving equitable development.

### **The Problem**

Language pervades just about every facet of individual and social life, including economic processes. It is consequently , imperative that the issue of language as a means to individual and national achievement is critically analysed. Batibo (2007) argues that Africa, lacks proper language planning and effective language policy implementation. As a result, many African countries do not attach developmental value to their indigenous languages. As a matter of fact according to Babito, multilingualism is seen as a hindrance to social and economic development. As a consequence, indigenous languages are often under-developed and not used optimally. For that reason, the speakers of these languages are sidelined and not fully involved in contributing in public activities. In congruent with this argument, Idris, Legère and Rosendal (2007), in their presentation of the Namibian situation, stipulate that many Namibians can only be implicitly addressed in terms of development, as many citizens are not competent/ fluent in the country's official language thus, hindering them from actively participating in the development dialogue. "Thus, many citizens in some African countries are denied true democracy and equality, either because they lack sufficient proficiency in the ex-colonial language or because they are not mother-tongue speakers of the nationally dominant language" (Batibo, 2007, p. 18).Hence , indigenous languages as part of individuals' identity should be promoted and used in national developmental initiatives as they allow all Namibian citizens to fully participate in national initiatives for personal and national developmental goals. It is to this end that this position paper is written.

### **Classification of Namibian Languages**

Like in many African countries, there is a multiplicity of languages in Namibia; a scenario that could be mistakenly seen as a challenge to national development. Though compared to other African countries, the Namibian population size is relatively small. Despite the small population size, there are 26 languages spoken in the country (Namibia Biodiversity Database, 2012); hence, the government's decision for the introduction of a perceived language of mutual understanding. The following information illustrates the working

classification of Namibian languages as taken and adapted from Namibia Biodiversity Database (n.d.):

### *Niger-Congo Language Family*

According to the Namibia Biodiversity Database (2012), the Niger-Congo language family represents over 1500 African languages, divided into several subgroups. All Namibian representatives are reported to belong successively to the Southern Bantoid, the Narrow Bantu, and its Central language grouping. The Oshiwambo group is described as the largest in the country spoken by 48.5% of the national population. The group is then divided into Oshindonga, Oshikwanyama and Oshikwambi, just to name a few. Another language group is Otjiherero, which is spoken by 7.9% of Namibians. This group is subdivided into two groups; Mbanderu and Otjihimba. Moreover, the Kavango languages are comprised of Rukwangali, Thimbukushu, Rugciriku, Rumanyo and Rusambyo. In the far north of the country, the Zambezi languages are spoken by 5% of the population. These languages are subdivided into; Silozi, Shiyeyi, Chifwe and Chikuhane. Further, 0.3% of the Namibian population speaks Setswana.

### *Indo-European Language Family*

The Namibian language groups do not end with the Niger-Congo Language Family as the country is also inhabited by the Indo-European Language family. This group comprises of English (1.9%), Afrikaans (11.4%) and Deutsch (1.1%) speakers.

### *Khoisan language family*

The Khoisan language group consists of 27 languages. In Namibia a distinction is made between Khoekhoegowab and Bushman languages. Khoekhoegowab is spoken by 11.5% population of Namibia. This is a language spoken by the central Namibian group. The Khoekhoegowab group is divided into Damara, Nama, Heillom and Topnaar. Khoekhoegowab has a well-established orthography, and spoken by a large segment of the population. This family also consists of the so-called Bushman languages (spoken by 1.2% of Namibia's population); a number of languages from all three groups, many without formal orthographies, some endangered or extinct, in all spoken by a relatively small segment of the population. This group is divided into Ju'hoan, Kxoe, Naro and Mangetti Dune !Xung. The above information is further modified by the latest census information of 2016. The 2016 Namibia Inter-censal Demographic

Survey (NIDS) report, a first of its kind, puts the population of Namibia in 2016 at 2.3 million people (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2017). This is an increase from 2.1 million in 2011. With regard to population distribution, the Khomas region recorded the highest number of people followed by Ohangwena and Omusati regions. The Namibian population is still predominantly rural with about 52% of the population residing in rural areas. According to the NIDS, the level of literacy in Namibia for the population aged 15 years and above remained the same at 88.7% between 2011 and 2016 with a slight increase in rural areas compared to urban areas where a slight decline in literacy level was recorded. More interesting, the survey indicates that the number of people having access to mobile phones has drastically increased from 53% in 2011 to 75% in 2016, similarly the number of people having access to internet has increased from 9% in 2011 to 21% in 2016. Oshiwambo at 50% is still the most spoken language at home followed by Nama/Damara at 11%. About 23% of the Namibian population according to the NIDS has attained secondary education. These figures show Namibian indicators of development as stipulated below.

Development is a multidimensional process that can be measured along a plethora of dimensions and hence, there are many ways to define economic development. In Namibia and many other countries, development can be measured and indicated through aspects such as population living in urban or rural areas, housing conditions (access to safe and clean drinking water, access to sanitation, electricity and lighting, etc.), education levels and literacy rates, household incomes, maternal and infant mortality rates, health (the prevalence of infectious diseases), measures of the incidence of poverty or access to sufficient calorie and protein intake, life expectancy at birth, household incomes. In this paper therefore, the role that language can play in fundamentally contributing to these in Namibia is discussed.

There is no doubt that indigenous languages provide great tools for mobilisation on developmental issues especially at the grassroots. Language can play a significant role in development in several aspects. As a tool for communication, language facilitates development and inclusiveness. At the same time, it can also play a role as a key element of culture. Namibian Indigenous languages can be used in early formal education, health campaigns, governance

information dissemination, conflict resolution and peace building, adult literacy, mass media, confidence building and enhancement of self-esteem, and in internal trade. Wa Mberia (2015, citing Rwantagu, 2011) maintains that the language factor weighs in heavily as a tool for the appropriate transformation of socio-cultural, political and economic systems of a society.

Therefore, if well planned and implemented, indigenous language policies can play a role in education which is one cornerstones of development by fast-tracking learning. Wa Mberia (2015, citing Othieno, 2014) observed that, in education, pupils perform better when the language of instruction is familiar to them because it improves the quantity and quality of information transmission.

Further, with regards to health and development, Mberia (2015) points out the fact that performing arts in indigenous languages can be used to improve health in African populations. These art forms can be used to educate people on illnesses such as HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, polio, kwashiorkor, cholera and tuberculosis.

African development is to a large extent hampered by conflicts. At present Namibia, however, still enjoys peace and tranquillity. Wa Mberia (2015) also asserts that though indigenous languages can be the cause of conflict, quite often, they are used for conflict prevention and conflict resolution.

Literacy is another important aspect of development, if Namibians can read and write in their own languages, they would be able to read and understand national policies and developmental initiatives as developed and propagated by government. This means that indigenous languages can be used to promote and empower the Namibian population to read and write developmental information and participate in programmes that would benefit them as individuals and Namibia as a whole. Wa Mberia (2015) lists some of the advantages that can be gained from being literate in native languages; reading and comprehending instructions on human medicine, veterinary drugs, fertilizers and insecticides.

Indigenous Languages can also be used to appreciate mass media and participation in national matters. Namibia has an advantage

in that it has well-developed mass media platforms. Furthermore, the country boasts a sophisticated Information and Communication Technology system that includes world class television and radio broadcasts as well as newspapers in English, Afrikaans and indigenous languages. Access to internet and social media is also high. At the same time, ownership of mobile phones has increased tremendously during the last few years.

By disseminating important information to the citizens, the media allows Namibians to be more informed on important national issues. Promotion and usage of indigenous languages can enable citizens to engage in national discourses by writing letters, meaningfully participating in seminars, participation on social platforms such as Facebook, twitter and Instagram and raising issues in local meetings. The usage of local languages in national developmental policies and communication enables citizens to effectively participate in political and governance processes.

The film industry in Namibia is also well developed and gaining momentum especially with usage of local content and language. Indigenous languages in films and short video can be used to address many issues that impede development such as alcoholism, gender and domestic violence, and corruption. At the same time, factors that promote development such youth and women empowerment, child mortality, literacy and development, can be raised on these platform in a language that the targeted audience fully understands and comprehends.

The informal sector in Namibia is thriving and contributes tremendously to employment, incomes and poverty alleviation. There is no doubt that indigenous language through internal communication practices of businesses can play a crucial role in the economic performance of business and hence to the overall development of Namibia.

### **A synopsis of Namibia's developmental initiatives**

The Namibian government developed vision 2030, an initiative to steer the country into a developmental state by the year 2030. "The goal of our vision is to improve the quality of life of the people of Namibia to the level of their counterparts in the developed world by 2030" (Office of the President, 2004, p. 9). Further, the vision

aims to foster an open market economy, with a resource based industrial sector and commercial agriculture, emphasising on skills development.

In response to this aim, the Ministry of Trade and Industry developed an industrial policy, whose vision is anchored in Vision 2030. According to Ministry of Trade and Industry (2012), by the year 2030 Namibia should be characterised as a thriving and industrialised country, developed by her human resources. The above statements show that the government is concerned about the general well-being of the Namibian citizens. This vision also aims to ensure social and economic development throughout Namibia by the implementation of efficient poverty reduction measures; creating an enabling environment for all citizens to gain access to equitable opportunities (Office of the President, 2004). However, it is a matter of concern that the vision is only written in English not in the languages that many Namibians fully understand. Therefore, this vision, if not translated into native languages, many people will remain oblivious to its existence and significance; thus, robbing the country of the contribution of all Namibians in realising the success of the vision.

Recently, the government in 2016 adopted the Harambee Prosperity Plan (HPP) to augment and complement its national development plans (Office of the President, 2016). The HPP is a targeted action plan to accelerate development in clearly defined priority areas, which lay the basis for attaining prosperity in Namibia. This is a short to medium term plan which aims to identify goals that can be pursued with vigour in the short-term implementation period and lay a solid base to attain prosperity. The plan is aimed at including all Namibians in the development of the country. It is therefore, imperative that the plan is translated into indigenous languages so that it can speak to the hearts of all Namibians, thus encouraging citizens to embrace and own processes that would lead to the desired levels of development in the country.

### **Language and sustainable development in Namibia**

Though there are many languages spoken in Namibia, these languages should not be seen as impediments to developmental initiatives in Namibia. But, rather as pillars on which equitable sustainable development can be built. The policy framework for long term national development main document by the Office of



the President (2004) advocates for sustainable development by stipulating that Namibian communities should be encouraged to “take responsibility for their own development...” (p. 175). Further, the needs of the population should be promoted through developmental activities in which different communities should take ownership of developmental services and infrastructure. However, Namibians can only feel that they own these activities if they can wholly read and understand their developmental implications.

Moreover, the above mentioned policy framework recognizes the value of citizens to the country as it stipulates one of the national ideals of the country by 2030 as; people are the nation’s wealth: “a population of healthy, well educated, skilled, pro-active and financially stable people with a broad range of talents and positive attitude towards themselves, their fellow citizens, their country and global humanity” (Office of the President, 2004, p. 14). This realisation by the government of Namibia is commendable considering that without the efforts of the ordinary man and women of Namibia, whatever aspirations the government holds for the nation would be insignificant without their participation. Therefore, the goals of this framework should be translated into languages that people fully understand and appreciate.

Language, any language plays a significant role in all human communication, but the ability to communicate fluently, enables people to negotiate in all spheres of their lives. In general, language serves as a catalytic agent in national development; through language, individuals are able to develop skills and techniques that are beneficial in their personal and social lives and ultimately to the general development of the country.

The role of language in human society is indispensable. It provides means for social function, management and organization. Development is the sustainable economic, political, socio-culture and technological transformation of a society and language on the other hand, provides the means of conveying the developmental paradigm to the society (Emeka-Nwobia, 2015, p. 115).

The above synopsis of the role of language in social and economic development shows that language encapsulates all human activities.

However, we argue in this paper that, in particular, native language, a language that one is more conversant in, a language the we would like to call ‘a language of the heart, is needed to convey important aspects of human development. Olaoye (2013) maintains that if individuals in society achieve their personal ambitions in the society, the nation would develop as well. It is through interaction with government agencies that individuals develop comprehensively; educationally, socially, economically, politically and culturally. Government agencies should also use media to disseminate ideas and policies in the languages that the individual best understand. The African continent iconic leader, Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa once said “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart”. This implies that if government and all its stakeholders communicate all developmental knowledge in English and Namibian native languages, individuals might gain skills that would enable them to sustain their lives and inevitably boost the economic growth of the country. Native languages equip speakers with a linguistic approach to negotiation that might improve their living standards in a comprehensive manner.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we discussed and argued for the articulation of developmental policies in Namibian native language. Though the English language plays a significant role in sustainable development in Namibia, the country’s native languages must also be used for personal and social development of Namibians, hence enhancing economic development. For that reason, our submission is that language is an epitome of culture, consequently; culture can be well understood in one’s language. For example, the concept of Harambee can be well articulated in indigenous languages as the concept of working together is not a new one to Namibia or Africa as a whole, the culture of hard work for betterment of communities is by and large embedded in many African cultures. Collectively, the different languages in Namibia are an important resource for development. The Namibian indigenous languages if well promoted, enhanced and used can play a fundamental catalytic role for national development. Therefore, we strongly recommend that the Namibian Government invest more in the promotion and usage of indigenous languages and mother tongue education, if its vision of becoming a developed nation is to become a reality.

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