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Language and poverty in Africa: Do language policies help or hinder poverty reduction?

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Abstract

In June 1999, the G8 Heads of State and Ministers of Finance met in Cologne to launch a major debt relief initiative leading to the establishment of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) in many African countries. PRSPs serve as general policy frameworks for national policymakers and their international partners in more than 30 African countries today. Ten years after the Cologne summit, where do we stand with regard to the integration of language policy into African strategies for poverty reduction and sustainable development? This presentation first takes stock of the role of language and language policies in African PRSPs. It then identifies the main interfaces between language policies and poverty reduction strategies on the African continent and provides a generic description of main stakeholders and institutions that influence and are affected by specific policies and interfaces. Against this background, the potential impacts of language policies on poverty reduction are assessed, based on the notion of short and medium-term transmission channels. Which language policies are most effective in achieving poverty reduction, and which policies are likely to hinder poverty reduction? The conclusions and recommendations relate mainly to the current and potential complementarity between language policies and poverty reduction strategies, but also address the need for further international cooperation and scientific research in this area.

1. Poverty reduction and sustainable development as overarching goals

It was slightly more than ten years ago, in June 1999, that the G8 summit held in Cologne, Germany, agreed on an enhanced debt relief initiative to highly indebted poor countries (HIPC). Ten years later, 40 countries are participating in the HIPC-Initiative world-wide: 24 countries have gone through the full relief cycle i.e. achieved the so-called completion point, 11 countries have reached at least the HIPC-Initiative decision point, and five have applied but not yet attained their decision point. Among these 40 participating countries, 33 are located in Africa.¹

One condition for participation in the HIPC-Initiative is the development of a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) through a broad-based participatory process in the country. Furthermore, a country must adopt and implement its PRSP for at least one year in order to reach its completion point. A PRSP describes the macroeconomic, structural and social policies and programs that a country will pursue over several years to promote broad-based growth and reduce poverty. A PRSP is expected to be country-driven, results-oriented, comprehensive, partnership-oriented and embedded in a long-term perspective for sustainable development. In particular, a PRSP is expected to recognize the multidimensional nature of poverty.

The definition of poverty is a persistent challenge to national policy makers, planners, and their international partners. The one-dimensional approach, which applies a monetary threshold, such as one dollar a day of disposable income, to classify a person as poor or not, has been favored for various reasons by many international organizations to measure levels of poverty and progress in its reduction. At the same time, broad-based participatory processes that served as starting points for the formulation of many PRSPs gave rise to multidimensional definitions of poverty, reflecting the diversity of the unsatisfied basic needs as well as the specific social and cultural norms of each country. The first PRSP of the Republic of Guinea, for example, incorporated a composite index based on 15 poverty indicators. Many attempts have been made to standardize the multidimensional approach to the definition of poverty, most notably by means of the UN's Human Development Index (HDI), which combines

¹ Source: <http://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/facts/hipc.htm> (Aug. 14, 2009)

indicators for income, health and education to create one composite poverty index. Another approach has been developed based on the UN's Millennium Declaration, signed in September 2000. The Declaration enunciates 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with 21 targets and measurable indicators for each target. The MDGs address not only income, health and education, but also gender equality, environmental sustainability and international partnership. Since their introduction, the MDGs have been integrated into many PRSPs in Africa and elsewhere.

Language policy is one form of public policy, and as such must abide by the same rules and constraints as other areas of public policy. In the context of policy environments that are guided by the PRSP process, language policy makers are challenged, like their colleagues in other domains, to integrate their goals and actions into the overarching framework of poverty reduction strategies. Where do we stand today in this regard? The present paper provides a preliminary response to this admittedly complex question. It will also propose a framework by which to monitor and evaluate language policy's contributions to the achievement of the MDGs. Finally, it will suggest some areas for further cooperation and research, with a view to enhancing language policy's relevance for poverty reduction and sustainable development.

2. The role of language policy in poverty reduction strategies

To date, 24 countries have achieved the HIPC completion point, i.e. fulfilled all the conditions for a comprehensive debt reduction based inter alia on the elaboration and implementation of a poverty reduction strategy. 20 of these countries are in Africa. A sample of 5 have been chosen here to illustrate the extent to which language policy in Africa has been integrated into the overarching goals of poverty reduction and sustainable development.

COUNTRY (PRSP DATE)	REFERENCES TO LANGUAGES OR LINGUISTICS IN PRSP
Ethiopia (7/2002)	Training teachers: using native English speaking trainers to enhance the quality of English language instruction in primary grades starting from grade 1; Conduct assessment studies on selected languages of nations and nationalities that are used as medium of instruction in order to explore ways of enriching the instructional contents of the languages, special needs education: Offer short-term training programs in Braille, sign language, mobility, orientation, etc., to teachers and professional to enhance the integrated special education program and further enrich the formal education curricular materials.
Niger (1/2002)	No references.
Rwanda (6/2002)	Rwanda's assets in the fight against poverty: Linguistic homogeneity; the overwhelming majority speak Kinyarwanda. Two international languages, French and English, are also increasingly widely spoken, although a large proportion of people speak only Kinyarwanda. Primary education: The curricula should also provide the necessary foundation for mastery of the three languages – Kinyarwanda, English and French. This policy will be very expensive and challenging because many teachers do not speak more than two of these languages. However, considering the long-term impact of this programme on development, the cost is justified.
Uganda (3/2002)	Budget information for citizens: two publications translated into 7 major local languages; justice: language barriers; constitutional review: sensitise the masses about this exercise through both electronic and mass media in the major local languages.
Zambia (3/2002)	Education: use of local languages for initial literacy (encourage local language use in primary schools); agriculture: provide land information in local languages.

Table 1: References to languages or linguistics in African PRSPs

In one sampled country (Niger), there is no reference at all to issues of language policy. In three other countries (Ethiopia, Rwanda and Zambia), the references relate mainly to primary education.

Other sectors, such as agriculture (Zambia) and law and justice (Uganda) are given brief mention elsewhere. In the case of Rwanda, linguistic homogeneity is referred to as an asset in the fight against poverty.

If the above sample is representative, then it may serve as evidence for the generally weak integration of language policy into poverty reduction frameworks in Africa. There are many possible explanations for this phenomenon. One may be simply the absence of a language policy. Another reason may be the lack of communication between language policy makers and planners on the one hand, and policy and decision makers in charge of poverty reduction schemes on the other. In Africa, there is a dearth of empirical evidence clearly establishing a causal relationship between adherence to a given language community and levels of poverty. Although there is ample data available – most household income surveys, for example, take into account the self-declared language competence of the survey respondents – very few analytical studies have been conducted in this area to date. While some scholars have recognized a close causal link between poverty on the one hand, and language maintenance and diversity on the other (e.g. BATIBO 2009, BRENZINGER 2009), the emphasis of linguistic research to date has been on how poverty impacts on language, rather than vice versa. Finally, language issues are often politically sensitive, and there may be a tendency to avoid them in public policy debates.

The potential link between language policy and planning on the one hand and poverty reduction on the other may also be illustrated in relation to the MDGs, as presented in the following table.

MDG	POTENTIAL LINK TO LANGUAGE POLICY AND PLANNING
Goal 1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger	Bi- and multilingualism can enhance access to jobs and higher income. Dietary information needs to be communicated in a language that the recipient understands. Effective disaster management requires rapid provision of crucial information to all affected communities.
Goal 2. Achieve universal primary education	Mother-tongue instruction at an early age facilitates children's acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills. Books and other pedagogical material need to be translated competently into mother tongues. Social and cultural obstacles to school enrollment need to be addressed in a language that parents, teachers and administrators understand.
Goal 3. Promote gender equality and empower women	Special measures may be required to promote bi- and multilingualism among girls and women. Gender linguistics can provide orientation for eventual language reforms aiming to promote gender equality.
Goal 4. Reduce child mortality	Parents require information about childhood disease prevention and treatment in a language they understand. Access to medical services for infants and other children depends inter alia on competence in the language of the service providers (doctors, nurses etc.).
Goal 5. Improve maternal health	Both fathers and mothers require reproductive health information in a language they understand. Midwives should be able to communicate in the language of their clients. In cases of emergency (e.g. need for a Caesarian), own-language communication is essential to obtain adequate assistance.
Goal 6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases	Literacy is an important factor affecting public and personal health. Information on disease prevention and treatment should be provided in a language people understand. Lexical modernization may facilitate access to essential information. Introduction of ethical terms may reduce stigmatization of persons living with HIV/AIDS. Research into local languages may reveal traditional knowledge relating to prevention and treatment of diseases, hygiene, nutrition etc. (cf. ethno-botany).

Goal 7. Ensure environmental sustainability	Environmental awareness building requires communication in a language that target groups understand. Research into local languages may reveal traditional knowledge of the natural environment as well as strategies for surviving under adverse environmental conditions.
Goal 8. Develop a global partnership for development	Strategies and practices to promote good governance and combat corruption need to be communicated in languages that people understand. Public service providers (e.g. magistrates, school inspectors, tax collectors) should be competent in the language(s) of their clients. Global communication requires not only a common language, but also a common terminology.

Table 2: Potential links between MDGs and language policy and planning

The above table highlights the areas in which language policy and planning may contribute in a more or less direct manner to poverty reduction and the achievement of the MDGs. Other areas exist, in which this contribution may be less direct. In particular, recognition of minority language competence as an asset can enhance self-esteem within minority language communities and thereby provide important motivation to them to improve their situation. Obviously, without broad-based motivation, even the most well-formulated poverty reduction strategy will be condemned to failure.

Recognition of the multidimensional nature of poverty, as defined in the MDGs, gives rise to the need to deal with a multitude of diverse groups when designing poverty reduction strategies. This brings us to the question of who stands to gain or lose through poverty-oriented language policy and planning. The main stakeholders and concerned institutions may be listed as follows:

- Officials at various levels and in various sectors of public administration,
- Educationalists, especially in primary education,
- Health service providers, especially in primary health care,
- Legal professionals,
- Members of minority language communities,
- Researchers in languages, language policy, socio-linguistics and related areas,
- Providers of language services (translators, publishers etc.).

Each of these groups can be affected either positively or negatively by changes in language policies. Policy reforms should be based on well-founded feasibility studies, taking into consideration the specific strengths, weakness, fears and aspirations of all concerned stakeholder groups. A well-founded language policy reform should incorporate elements to mitigate the eventual negative impacts of policy change on groups that may undermine or even prevent the implementation of the envisaged policy reform.

Further scientific research is still required to guide language policy makers and planners in their efforts to enhance the relevance of their interventions for the broader societal goals of poverty reduction and sustainable development. There is a large body of research literature available describing the links between language policy and education, as evidenced by the large number of "hits" obtained when applying the Internet search engine Google to these two terms (resulting in about 330,000 hits). The results are quite different when combining the term "language policy" with the terms mother and health (36,200 hits), gender and women (16,100 hits), HIV and AIDS (13,800 hits) or "child mortality" (1,480 hits). The results are similarly skewed in favor of education when applying the same terms in French or German. These results suggest that much more scientific research needs to be done to define the potential links between language policies on the one hand, and issues of gender equality (MDG 3) and health sector policy (MDGs 4, 5 and 6) on the other.²

3. The potential contribution of language policy to poverty reduction in Africa

Language policies are rarely subjected to any sort of systematic evaluation (cf. GRIN 2006:87ff). To my knowledge, the impacts of language policies on poverty in developing countries have never been evaluated using internationally recognized evaluation standards. Nevertheless, evaluation standards are

² The figures are drawn from Google search results obtained on Aug. 13, 2009.

available which may be appropriate for such purposes. In particular, an impact evaluation methodology developed by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) could possibly lend itself well to the needs of language policy makers and planners interested in knowing more about the potential or real impacts of their interventions. This methodology will be described in brief below, before relating it to the specific issues in question.

The methodology of Poverty Impact Assessment (PIA) was developed mainly for purposes of ex ante impact evaluations, but may also be used for interim or ex post evaluations. Its aim is help inform policy makers about the expected intended or unintended consequences of their interventions (policies, programs, projects). It provides an assessment of the well-being of different social groups, focusing on poor and vulnerable people. Its approach to poverty is multidimensional. In practical terms, it involves the application of five standard modules:

- Module 1: General poverty situation and relevance of the intervention to national strategies and plans,
- Module 2: Stakeholders and institutions,
- Module 3: Transmission channels used and overall results by channel,
- Module 4: Capability of stakeholders and target groups,
- Module 5: Impact on MDGs.

Module 3 plays a pivotal role, translating the envisaged intervention into short and medium-term impacts within six dimensions, called “channels”: Prices, employment, transfers, access, authority and assets. These channels are subdivided into more concrete categories, such as production, consumption, formal and informal employment, tax revenues, formal and informal authority, and physical and human assets. Module 3 also describes risks that may influence the effectiveness of any channel, and the sources and quality of information used to conduct the assessment (cf. OECD 2007).

In practice, an evaluation the impact of a given language policy reform, for example, the introduction of bilingual education in primary schools, might be carried out in the following manner:

- Module 1: Provide basic information regarding the incidence and depth of poverty, and analyze their correlation with socio-linguistic variables. Analyze the political, social and cultural factors that may affect implementation of bilingual primary school education. Review existing national strategies and programs to identify eventual policy conflicts. Describe how the new policy aligns with strategies and interventions that exist already or are expected in the future.
- Module 2: Identify stakeholders (agencies, organizations, groups or individuals with a direct or indirect interest in the reform) and target groups (who stand to benefit from the reform). Will teachers, for example, accept their new responsibilities to provide bilingual instruction? Will budget planners provide the necessary funds for additional books and pedagogical material? Will special interest groups (e.g. unions, elders, religious groups) resist introduction of the second language?
- Module 3: Will the reform be funded through an increase in taxes? If so, to what degree, and who will be affected most? Will bilingual education lead to increased school enrollment rates? If so, what will be the consequential costs? Will books and other material be produced locally or abroad? If locally, to what extent will new jobs be generated by the reform, in the short term, and in the medium term? Will the reform help prevent language extinction and thereby contribute to the preservation of a cultural asset?
- Module 4: Will bilingual education help families and their children to pursue sustainable livelihoods, to provide income, and to finance consumption and savings? Will bilingual skills help improve standards in health, education, nutrition, clean water, and help the target group(s) to participate better in broader societal processes? Will bilingual education improve respect of human rights, and strengthen the ability to withstand economic shocks? Will some stakeholders feel marginalized by the reform (e.g. third language communities)? What are the main risks to reform implementation, and what mitigating or reinforcing measures are required?
- Module 5: How do the expected impacts align with the MDGs? How does bilingual education contribute to other policy objectives, such as peace, security and disarmament, good governance and protecting the global environment?

The PIA approach may be applied not only to a given planned language policy reform, but also to any number of alternative policy reforms, to gauge the relative advantages and disadvantages of each policy option. With this, decision makers will be in a better position to identify language policies that will be most effective in achieving poverty reduction and sustainable development. At the same time, they will be better able to identify language policies that are likely to hinder poverty reduction or sustainable development in the short or longer term. Such policies would be in contradiction to established poverty-oriented policy frameworks and as such, difficult to defend or justify.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

One main conclusion to be drawn from this review is that language policy and planning in Africa are not yet well integrated into national policy frameworks for poverty reduction and sustainable development. Nevertheless, there are clear potential links between language policy and planning on the one hand, and the Millennium Development Goals on the other.

Another conclusion drawn here is that more scientific research needs to be done to establish clear links between language policy and planning on the one hand, and issues of gender equality (MDG 3) and health sector policy (MDGs 4,5 and 6) on the other.

Finally, the conclusion may be drawn that more information is required regarding the potential impacts of language policy interventions on poverty, with due respect for its multi-dimensional nature, and that the OECD's Poverty Impact Assessment (PIA) may provide an adequate methodology. However, the PIA approach has yet to be tested in this policy area.

Against the background of these conclusions, the following recommendations may be made:

- To conduct a more detailed analysis of the real and potential links between language policy and planning, poverty reduction strategies and the MDGs in Africa,
- To develop and implement African language policies and plans that are clearly poverty-oriented, and
- To carry out pilot assessments, within the context of international cooperation and development research, of the poverty impacts of African language policies and their implementation and thereby enhance our understanding of their potential direct and indirect benefits as well as their eventual negative impacts and related risks.

To conclude, I would like to reiterate a key statement put forward by Neville Alexander more than a decade ago: "If we are to remain true to our democratic principals and goals, persuasion, not compulsion is the only permissible strategy". This principle should hold true not only for language policy, but also for all public policy, in Africa as elsewhere.

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