

## **Language Documentation as a Means to Achieve the MDGs**

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### **SUMMARY**

What I want to examine is language documentation and how it can be used as a way to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

History teaches us nothing. The early Christian missionaries learnt the language of the population. Back in 1953, UNESCO called for the use of the vernacular yet many languages have disappeared. Since then there have been further calls for use of the mother tongue, that people need to educate themselves in their mother tongue and from there learn another language.

Steps should be taken for children to learn in their mother tongue. Since 2006, we see efforts to do this everywhere.

In Africa, we are still not learning in the mother tongue. Using languages such as Arabic, English and French as the language of tuition has negative consequences.

After 50 years of independence, Africa is still underdeveloped and mired in poverty. Despite aggregate gains, ethnolinguistic groups still lag behind, suffering from poverty and illiteracy. Five years before the achievement of the MDG goals in 2015, the situation has not changed.

Achieving the MDGs, what does this mean when many people still lag behind, the environment is being degraded, and the gap between rich and poor increasing?

My concern, and this is a pessimistic question, for any African, language is important. But our language policy is not well integrated. Ethnolinguistic groups must be included.

When we look at Documentary Linguistics (DL), there are two parts: language documentation and language descriptions. Language Documentation provides a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices of a given speech community. Language Description is the description of a language including its abstract elements, constructions and rules.

What are the characteristics of DL? They include focus on primary data; specific concern for accountability; and concern for long-term storage and preservation.

Modern communications and technology make the task of preservation easier. We can work in interdisciplinary teams, and have close cooperation with the speech community.

Preserving language is necessary for sustainable development, for knowledge and culture. We need to invest in education. We need mother tongue teaching and learning materials. The use of African languages is important for health campaigns.

In conclusion, what will it take to achieve the MDGs? We need to embark on DL. We need to add two new MDGs, namely real democracy and respect for constitutions and election verdicts in African countries. We need real peace. And we need to make the MDG Africa Steering Group less elitist.

### **DISCUSSIONS**

Question: How can we reach the MDGs by 2015? Education is clearly the key.

Answer: We need education for girls, education in the mother tongue. But French and English is what is used in Africa.

UNESCO is advocating use of the mother tongue. We need to go above words. We cannot afford to produce knowledge. We may need to take action and even enter politics. Many (politicians) don't know what the mother tongue is.

What is needed has not been obtained. Everybody is sitting watching, waiting for people to help. We are in danger in Africa. This is an emergency. Nobody is rescuing us.

We need to work in the language everybody understands.

In Cameroon there are 286 languages. Some people question whether multilingual is a curse or positive.

We need to use the mother tongue opportunity. We've tried French and English and they never work. Start in the mother tongue before going on to other languages.

What I am trying to do, trying to show with documentary linguistics, is that we can preserve them with modern tools and multimedia, setting up a digital archive. People can then access it.

The MDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7, all can be achieved through education, not just education but education in the mother tongue. Look how ridiculous it is when billboards warning against HIV are in French and English. Only 45% of the population can read them. We need information in their mother tongue.

UNESCO should leave it up to the country. The problem is that UNESCO sits in New York. How can we achieve goals if there is no education for all. There should be a mechanism to engage with those who meet the policy makers. We face a critical situation.