

United, We Speak Different Languages and We Prosper in Africa

Africa holds the world's biggest reservoir of indigenous languages, a feature that is often cited as detrimental to the continent's aspiration towards increased intra-regional trade.

With approximately 3, 000 languages or one third of the world's linguistic heritage, Africa is considered the most linguistically diverse continent globally (Epstein 1998: 9).

However, in the times before colonial incursion, Africa's language multiplicity did not deter intra-regional and cross-border trade.

Indeed, it appears that colonialism with its determination to divide and rule, and ensure loyalty to only the colonial masters, put a blockade to what once was thriving economic relations across the region.

In any case, there is need for African governments, policy makers and concerned parties to put measures in place to strengthen indigenous languages across the region.

Strengthening indigenous languages will lead to increased international trade in Africa, for several reasons, some of which are here explored:

- **Increased Innovation and Creativity**

Innovation and creativity are the major drivers of growth and advancement in nations across the globe.

At the foundation of innovation and invention is knowledge, intimate knowledge of the environment within which the end-product will be utilized.

Indigenous knowledge forms the basic foundation of knowledge for much of Africa's population south of the Sahara. Africa's indigenous knowledge is housed in its indigenous or local languages.

This is because "language is not merely a tool for communication. It is embodiment of culture, thought process and expression of our behaviors.

One can express ideas, thoughts, and innovativeness when the person uses his/her mother tongue" (Shrestha 2018).

It is within local languages that native speakers can be free to be imaginative and creative, to express their thoughts and explore their minds.

▪ **Growth of Rural Economies**

Rural to urban migration and with it, the persisting underdevelopment of Africa's rural areas has been a major challenge Africa for decades.

A plethora of rural development policies by diverse players have failed to transform Africa's rural communities and reduce the mass exodus to the many overpopulated cities across the continent.

The role of indigenous languages in ensuring that communities actively and usefully participate, and are sustainably engaged in socio-economic development that pertains to them has been established in several studies.

A study of five communities in five local governments across Ebonyi state in South-Eastern Nigeria underscores the point.

According to the study, when projects were executed in the past using a foreign language, it largely resulted in "low achievement of the objectives of the agencies, which in turn affected the development of the communities..."

Another World Bank funded project, executed through the Ebonyi State Community Social Development Agency (EBCSDA) decided to utilize local languages, “in order to achieve the objective of participatory alliance.”

It was then observed that the level of participation of “community members was enhanced by the use of the language of the immediate environment (Okafor and Noah 2014).”

▪ **Growth of Agricultural and Agro-allied Industries**

Related to rural development is the fact that an increased support for local languages can boost involvement in cross-border agribusiness and the expansion of the agro-allied industries in a nation.

Studies indicate that, “increasing opportunities for formal cross-border agricultural trade by women has the potential to generate economic growth and increase food security while reducing poverty among vulnerable households.”

However, women involved in cross-border trade in East Africa have noted that their poor knowledge about taxation policies and formal trade documentation has stalled their businesses.

Many noted that writing the contents of the necessary documents in indigenous languages will go a long way in assisting in the growth of their various businesses.

▪ **Trade and Environmental Conservation**

Indigenous languages harbor indigenous knowledge; indigenous environmental knowledge is crucial in ensuring the preservation of species around the world.

Indigenous knowledge of the environment can be understood to stand for an “intimate and detailed knowledge of the environment, including plants, animals, and natural phenomena; the development and use of appropriate technologies for primary resource utilization; and a holistic world view that

parallels the scientific discipline of ecology” (Appiah-Opoku 2005, 103).

As the world continues to deal with severe environmental degradation occasioned by irresponsible and unsustainable trade practices, indigenous communities offer viable pathways on the sustainable harvesting of environmental resources in the pursuit of profit.

▪ **Social Cohesion**

A strengthened indigenous language regime in sub-Saharan will lead to increased social cohesion within the region, rather than exacerbate conflict as postulated in certain quarters.

When communities have respect for their own language and that of their neighbors, there is bound to be less conflict and more economic exchanges.

Since these communities are collectively high in the social-psychological ladder, they are often self-sufficient and can produce surplus for trade and exchange.

However, when communities are turned against its own language and culture and made to aspire towards some unreachable national goal spelt out in an ex-colonial language, then distrust, suspicion, low community morale and conflict will often result.

Further, acknowledgement and validation of indigenous languages will also invariably lead to respect and validation of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms that can be utilized to mediate between trade partners in various communities. Recourse to indigenous conflict mediation mechanisms in trade issues side-steps the notoriously slow and corrupt western styled judicial system that is prevalent in Africa.

Dr. Chika Ezeanya Esiobu is Founder and Executive Director of African Child Press www.africanchildpress.org @africanchildprs (twitter).

She blogs at www.chikaforafrica.com and her social media handle is @chikaforafrica