

From policy to practice: Implementation strategies for the national language policy in Nigeria

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Abstract

The *National Language Policy* (NLP), developed by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) under the auspices of the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) was adopted in 2022. It represents Nigeria's first comprehensive framework for regulating the status, functions, and use of its over 540 indigenous languages. Anchored on the principle of social change for sustainable development, the policy seeks to preserve endangered languages, promote linguistic equity, and enhance their utilisation across multiple domains, including education, governance, media, technology, health, and security. The NLP draws on global best practices in status, corpus, language-in-education, and prestige planning models, and was developed through an inclusive, multisectoral process engaging key stakeholders. To drive its implementation, the *National Language Policy Implementation Guideline* (NLPIG) provides strategies in legislation, research and development, advocacy, capacity building, resource creation, translation, quality assurance, infrastructure provision, partnerships, creativity promotion, monitoring, and financing. This paper explores some strategies for the implementation of the policy and the successful execution of the NLP which depends on sustained collaboration, adequate resourcing, and strong stakeholder commitment. It reiterates the policy's aims not only to safeguard Nigeria's linguistic heritage but also to advance national unity, participatory governance, socio-economic growth, and cultural identity.

Keywords: National Language Policy, indigenous languages, language preservation, multilingualism, policy implementation.

Introduction¹

The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), under the auspices of the Federal Ministry of Education, developed the *National Language Policy (NLP)* in 2021. The policy, which is premised on social change, was developed to regulate the coexistence, development and utilisation of all Nigerian languages for national growth. Specifically, the NLP assigns status, functions, and roles to languages at the different levels and arms of government and within the society for effective interaction and communication in different domains.

The NLP covers the nation's social, communicative, and administrative activities in all government structures (National, State, and Local Governments), as well as private institutions. Specifically, the NLP makes provisions for the use of language in education, the media, information, communication and technology, legislature, governance, administration and politics, town and regional planning, entertainment industry, trading activities, banking, science and technology, health, environment and agricultural extension services, and security.

The policy was adopted and approved by the National Council on Education (NCE) at its 65th meeting and the Federal Executive Council (FEC) in 2022 for implementation. On the 25th of May 2023, the Federal Ministry of Education unveiled the NLP to the public. To support the implementation process, NERDC developed a strategic implementation framework - the *National Language Policy Implementation Guideline (NLPIG)*. The guideline relates directly to the key objectives of the NLP to ensure a vigorous and systematic implementation process. It also identifies strategies and activities for the implementation of all the policy provisions. This paper, therefore, focuses on the overview of the NLP, the historical context and development of the NLP, major highlights of the NLP as well as some strategies for its effective implementation.

Overview of Nigeria's *National Language Policy*

Language is an important human attribute. It is essential and very germane to national, socio-economic and human development. In addition to the invaluable role of language in

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human development, language is also fundamental to the attainment of national goals and objectives. It is in recognition of its importance to human and societal development that nations make deliberate efforts towards the development, promotion and preservation of languages. As part of the effort to develop and promote the Nigerian languages, the Federal Government of Nigeria through the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), developed the *National Language Policy*. The Policy reckons with the pragmatic position that all the five hundred and forty (540) Nigerian languages are equal (FRN, 2021). Furthermore, the policy seeks to embolden all Nigerian languages through innovative contemporary transformation processes that enable the users to retain their cultural identities, while expressing their creative and innovative capabilities for making contributions to national and global knowledge resources. It explicitly accords status to the languages in Nigeria and makes stipulations on various aspects of language development, use and description. The Policy is multisectoral as it makes specific policy provisions for the use of languages in Nigeria in various domains/sectors of the nation. The key objectives of Nigeria's National Language Policy are to:

1. consolidate previous efforts and provide adequate and functional regulatory provisions for language use and development in Nigeria;
2. preserve Nigerian languages and save them from endangerment and extinction;
3. foster linguistic and national unity by providing each language an equitable role and attention within the national milieu;
4. enable the effective use of language in different domains, like education, legislature, administration, etc. with all the attendant positive outcomes;
5. promote Nigerian languages for effective communication in the print and electronic media;
6. promote participatory democracy and good governance through equitable use of Nigerian languages at various levels;
7. facilitate the management of culture and cultural diversity; and
8. implement regional and international initiatives on the development and use of Nigerian and other languages (FRN, 2022).

Historical context and development of the NLP

The earlier efforts to harness the multiethnic and multilingualistic demography of Nigeria for nation-building and development predate Nigerian independence. Some of the very recent efforts include the *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999, as amended in*

2011); the *National Policy on Education* (NPE, 2013); the *Nigeria Broadcasting Code* (revised 2020) as well as the *National Cultural Policy* (1988). These policies were aimed at entrenching the effective use of Nigerian and other languages in the conduct of various government and socioeconomic functions in the media, education, the judiciary, etc. These early policy efforts, though commendable, were not expansive enough to promote the effective use of the Nigerian languages in all spheres of the nation's socioeconomic activities. More so, the provisions did not accord the Nigerian languages the requisite status. Thus, for over 4 decades, Nigerian linguists advocated a comprehensive language policy that accords status to Nigerian languages and promotes their effective use to forestall their extinction. The absence of a national language policy for many years in Nigeria impeded the development of many Nigerian languages.

The ideology of the *National Language Policy* is premised on a social change geared towards sustainable development, including human capital development. In this light, the *National Language Policy* is expected to: Ensure the promotion and preservation of Nigerian languages as national heritage to be transferred to subsequent generations; promote the use of mother tongue or the Language of the Immediate Community (LIC) as a medium of instruction at designated levels of education; ensure the coordination and conduct of research, codification, and documentation of Nigerian languages; promote the utilisation of Nigerian languages within the various sectors of the nation's economy; assign status, function, and roles to languages at the different levels and arms of government and within the society for effective interaction and communication in different domains; as well as equip languages with the potentials to enhance socio-economic activities and expand opportunities for sustainable development. It was essential that appropriate and context relevant policy models were adopted to guide the policy development actions. The models and approaches that provided the basis from which the principles, strategies and concepts were drawn and utilised included sound theories and best practices. The specific language policy models that shaped the development of the NLP are:

- The Status Planning Model which focuses on social role and standing of languages.
- The Corpus Planning Model which stipulates and focuses on language research, codification, standardization and documentation (including graphization, dictionary, etc.).
- The Language-in-Education Model/Approach which focuses on language regulatory provisions in the education sector. These include issues of instructional medium, curriculum and instructional materials across the various levels of education.

- The Prestige Planning Model which is inclined towards boosting the status or role of one particular language.

The development of the *National Language Policy* followed a technically sound, systematic, multisectoral and inclusive approach. This allowed deep engagement with a broad-spectrum of stakeholders at different stages of the development process and consultation of foremost linguists who were the pioneer advocates for a national language policy. Among the key stakeholders that participated in developing the NLP were the Nigerian Academy of Letters, Linguistic Association of Nigeria, language experts from various Nigerian universities, policy planners from the Federal Ministries of Education, Justice, Information and Culture, Environment, and Science and Technology. Others were the Nigerian Armed Forces, relevant Federal Departments and Agencies, and Technocrats from specialised fields like sign language, Information Technology, media, and agriculture.

Major highlights of the NLP

The provisions in the NLP cover the nation's social, communicative, and administrative activities in all government structures (National, State, and Local Governments), as well as private institutions. Specifically, the *National Language Policy* makes provisions for the use of language in the following domains:

- Education
- The Media
- Information, Communication and Technology
- Legislature
- Governance, Administration and Politics
- Town and regional planning
- Entertainment industry
- Trading activities
- Banking
- Science and technology
- Health
- Environment and agricultural extension services
- Security

The integrated and multilingual approach (which is a convenient blend of models and approaches) was adopted in the development of the *National Language Policy*. The policy provides enabling and far-reaching declarations and statements on language and language status in Nigeria. It also makes provision for effective use of Nigerian languages in the various sectors of the economy. The NLP clearly stipulates implementation and accountability strategies. It also identifies roles and responsibilities of government (Federal, State and Local Governments), communities, traditional leaders, and other stakeholders. Furthermore, the policy identifies strategies for the preservation, growth, and development of Nigerian languages through research and language extension services.

The NLP: Moving from policy to practice

The phrase "From Policy to Practice" simply refers to the process of taking theoretical or formal guidelines, regulations, or policies and effectively implementing them in real-world settings. It emphasizes the shift from making policies to actively applying and integrating them into everyday actions and operations (practice). In a broader sense, it highlights the importance of ensuring that policies are not just statements or documents, but are translated into tangible outcomes that impact people, organizations, or systems. In order to achieve the objectives and ensure the effective implementation of the NLP, the National Language Policy Implementation Guideline was developed (NLPIG). The NLPIG can be regarded as an instrument for moving the NLP from policy to practice. The development of the NLPIG is seen as the surest means to put into effect the vast policy provisions pertaining to the use of language in the different spheres. It is anchored on the key objectives of the NLP with the intension to drive the policy implementation process vigorously and systematically. It further sets, in clear terms, a robust framework for the active participation of all stakeholders in the implementation process. Importantly, the implementation framework is premised on clear principles that will engender synergy, effective collaboration, sustainability, and monitoring and evaluation. However, the NLPIG does not constitute the totality of the strategies, actions and activities that are required for the effective implementation of the NLP. It is rather a springboard from which stakeholders can make innovations in the exercise of their roles and responsibilities.

NLP implementation strategies

The strategies for the effective implementation of the NLP are not exhaustive. However, NERDC, in the *National Language Policy Implementation Guideline* (FRN, 2023), identified some strategies that will guide the activities of all stakeholders in the implementation of the NLP. Among the strategies are:

Legislation, legal actions and regulatory adjustments - The objectives of this strategy are to provide the legal backing and support for the operationalisation of the NLP and to ensure that institutions, bodies and stakeholders identify and make necessary adjustments to accommodate the regulatory requirements for effective implementation of the NLP.

Research and Development (R&D) - Research and development provide the foundational knowledge and tools needed to successfully implement a language policy. By continuously assessing linguistic needs, creating relevant educational resources, identifying gaps in the implementation processes of the NLP, examining the criteria for the achievement of the objectives of the NLP, and innovating based on latest research reports, R&D will not only help ensure that the NLP remains responsive to changing societal needs, but also sustain effective implementation of the policy.

Sensitisation and advocacy - Sustained and intensive sensitization and advocacy will play critical roles in the successful implementation of the NLP. They will help to bridge the gap between the policy and practice by ensuring that all stakeholders are aware of the policy and are motivated to support and implement it effectively. Without awareness through sensitisation, members of the public may not know how the policy impacts them or how to comply with it. Sensitization and advocacy, therefore, will help to inform and educate members of the public on the provisions of the NLP, enhance positive values and attitudes towards Nigerian languages, mobilise support and political will for the implementation of the NLP, ensure easy access to the policy by all stakeholders and mobilise stakeholder ownership and participation in the implementation of the NLP. To ensure easy access to the NLP by all stakeholders and members of the public, it has been uploaded on NERDC's website (www.nerdc.gov.ng).

Capacity building and training - This strategy will help to empower stakeholders with the essential skills for the effective and sustainable implementation of the NLP. Capacity building and training programmes are required in the following critical areas:

- Domestication of the NLP at various levels.
- Knowledge production, transmission and storage in Nigerian languages.
- Value framing and branding in Nigerian languages.
- Development, production, adaptation and use of digital facilities and applications to address Nigerian language needs.
- Digital storytelling in Nigerian languages
- Providing local content in foreign competitive and non-competitive games.
- Digitising Nigerian traditional games.
- Development and publishing of teaching and learning materials in Nigerian and foreign languages.
- Translation and interpretations in Nigerian languages.
- Broadcasting in Nigerian languages
- Digital literacy for teachers (elementary, intermediate and advance)
- Utilisation of Digital Open Education Resources (OER)
- Skills development in Natural Language Processing and Computational Linguistics
- Use of Nigerian languages in new media
- Curriculum development in Nigerian languages
- Pedagogy and testing in Nigerian languages

Development of materials and resources - This strategy involves content creation, conversion and production of digital and non-digital contents, programme development, language documentation and description, development of digital and assistive technologies among others. This strategy will help to facilitate the creation and production of knowledge and material resources, facilitate the storage and transmission of contents that boost the development and utilisation of Nigerian languages, ensure that curricula and teaching materials are developed in cognisance with the NLP, aggregate and develop databases and tools for effective implementation of the NLP across all sectors and agencies.

Translation and interpretation - This strategy is aimed at enhancing communication and information dissemination in Nigerian languages, promoting the utilization of Nigerian

languages in the various sectors, imprinting contents in Nigerian languages into the global space and information infrastructure and fostering the translation of contents from other languages to Nigerian languages and vice versa. The strategy can be used through translation of relevant documents and, software development for translation, development of metalanguage and translation of Nigerian contents into other languages and vice versa.

Quality assurance - There is the need to provide quality mechanisms and controls for the implementation of the NLP. This will help to ensure that quality standards are adhered to at all stages of the implementation and that individuals and organisations involved in the process of implementation are qualified and properly oriented to provide quality services. This strategy, therefore, involves defining of standard parameters for quality assessment, development of a standard manual for use by stakeholders, establishment of basic levels of qualification and professional competence for actors at different levels of the implementation of the NLP and capacity-building workshops to maintain standards.

Physical and digital infrastructure and tools – The objectives of this strategy are to: identify and provide digital and non-digital infrastructure to facilitate the effective implementation of the provisions of the NLP; develop local content capacity in digital technologies and publishing in Nigerian languages and support stakeholders to identify and obtain physical and digital infrastructure and tools, open-source and propriety resources for the realisation of the provisions of the NLP. The use of this strategy will involve the establishment of the National Language Policy interactive website and portal, coordination of a network of institutions and digital literacy experts for the mass digitisation of indigenous audio and textual contents, facilitation of the development of Nigerian language-based utility applications, development of local technology contents and applications, training of personnel in intermediate digital application skills in the use of linguistic tools and applications among others.

Value framing and branding - This strategy involves the use of Nigerian languages in branding of products, the environment, services and infrastructure. It also involves the promotion of Nigerian language content in software applications, search engines, maps, Robot interaction, etc; bilingual naming of streets and public buildings in the Nigerian languages of the immediate environment and English; development of signages (road and

traffic signs, environmental signs, road directions and safety manuals) in Nigerian languages or languages of immediate environment; placing of notices on national assets , entry borders and ports in Nigerian languages of immediate environment and English; rendering safety instructions in aviation, rail transportation in English and Nigerian languages; rendition of the National Anthem, Pledge and other symbols in Nigerian languages; running sports commentaries in Nigerian languages; inclusion of Nigerian languages as prerequisite for licensing and accreditation requirements for tertiary institutions; provision of financial, and banking information in multimedia modes in Nigerian languages; provision of ATMs and banking documents in English and the languages of immediate community; translation of government policy documents, economic frameworks, laws, statutes, gazettes and other government contents and so on.

Partnerships and collaborations - This involves building a synergy with development partners, associations, agencies, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), the private sector and others in the implementation of the NLP.

Encouragement of creativity in Nigerian languages – This strategy involves the presentation of honours and awards to deserving individuals with exceptional display of skills in Nigerian languages, the inclusion of Nigerian languages in the NLNG Nigerian Prize for Literature and other bodies that award literary prizes, organizing competitions in Nigerian languages and so son.

Monitoring and evaluation - This strategy involves the evidence-based assessment of the effective implementation of the various provisions of the NLP. The Federal Ministry of Education, State Ministries of Education, the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, National Population Commission, National Bureau of Statistics, language institutions, language associations and other stakeholders shall be involved in the monitoring and evaluation of the NLP.

Financing and resource mobilisation - This strategy will involve government at all levels, tertiary institutions, MDAs, financial institutions, corporate bodies and industries,

Development Partners, NGOs, communities, professional associations and so on. The strategy will help to ensure sustainable funding of NLP implementation through innovative sources and mechanisms. It will require the inclusion of a budget line for the implementation of the NLP at the federal, state and local government levels, sponsorship for capacity development activities, financing and domestication of NLP by professional bodies in their areas of operation, scholarships and grants for the implementation of the NLP.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the successful implementation of the National Language Policy (NLP) in Nigeria requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, guided by a robust strategic framework. The National Language Policy Implementation Guideline (NLPIG) serves as the blueprint for this effort, emphasizing a systematic approach through legislative backing, research, capacity building, sensitization, and infrastructure development. However, for this policy to move from theory to practice, it is essential to ensure continuous advocacy, foster partnerships, and secure adequate financing. By doing so, the NLP will not only preserve Nigeria's linguistic heritage but also enhance socio-economic development, national unity, and cultural diversity. The future of Nigeria's languages lies in the effective realization of this policy, ensuring their promotion, use, and sustenance across all sectors of the nation.

Special appreciation to Linguistic Association of Nigeria

NERDC deeply acknowledges and immensely appreciates the effort of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN) in the development and implementation of the NLP. The initiative of making the effective implementation of the National Language Policy the focus of LAN's 2024 annual conference is historic and highly commendable. This initiative by LAN will certainly open up new vistas of ideas in the implementation of the NLP. Other language associations and groups are, therefore, encouraged to follow suit. The NLP is multisectoral; thus, no single government agency or body can drive its implementation alone. All hands must be on deck!

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