

## Indigenous Nigerian languages as instruments for sustainable development

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Imelda Udoh  
Department of Linguistics & Nigerian Languages  
University of Uyo, Uyo

[imeldaudoh@uniuyo.edu.ng](mailto:imeldaudoh@uniuyo.edu.ng)

### Abstract

Nigeria is a highly pluralistic nation with an extremely diverse linguistic landscape. While this diversity poses challenges for the documentation, development, and use of indigenous languages, threatening their long-term viability, it also offers significant advantages. Linguistic diversity shapes social, economic, environmental, educational, spiritual, and cultural life, providing a holistic foundation for sustainable development. It enables intergenerational knowledge transfer, supports the application of information and communication technologies, and enhances the use of scientific and technological innovations for national growth. Recognising this, the Federal Government of Nigeria recently introduced a *National Language Policy* (NLP) to regulate and promote the use of Nigerian languages. This paper examines the role of linguistic diversity in sustainable development and evaluates how the NLP can be implemented to strengthen documentation, development, and utilisation of Nigerian languages across all domains, thereby securing their viability as tools for national progress.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Nigerian languages, linguistic diversity; sustainable development; national language policy, cultural preservation

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Nigeria is made up of thirty-six (36) states and a Federal Capital Territory (FCT), further grouped into six (6) geopolitical zones: South-South, South-East, South-West, North-East, North-Central, and North-West.

Sustainable development is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Sustainable Development Commission, 2011). Achieving sustainability requires balancing present needs with the preservation of resources and systems for future use. In the Nigerian context, this involves creating strategies that ensure survival and growth across different sectors of national life, particularly in relation to language. Nigerian languages must therefore be preserved, developed, and transmitted across generations to guarantee sufficiency, usage, and continuity.

Sustainable development is guided by structured principles that promote long-term human advancement (Traore, 2017). Within this framework, language plays a central role. It is not only a medium of communication but also a resource that carries identity, culture, and knowledge. Therefore, the survival and effective use of Nigerian languages are critical to building capacity, strengthening national cohesion, and fostering sustainable development.

## **The linguistic situation in Nigeria**

Nigeria has a very dynamic and diverse linguistic landscape, with about 540 languages (NERDC 2021, 2022). Many urban areas in Nigeria are linguistically diverse as many people from different linguistic backgrounds converge in the urban towns. There is a trend of multilingualism in the country.

Nigeria draws from major language families of the world: Niger-Congo like Yoruba, and Igbo; Afro-Asiatic like Hausa, Bade, Margi; Nilo-Saharan like Kanuri, Kanembu, etc. The linguistic groups are usually categorised into three major groups, and several minor groups with each having linguistic peculiarities. The Hausa language is predominantly spoken in the northern part of the country, the Yoruba language is spoken in the southwest part of Nigeria and the Igbo language is spoken in a part of the southeastern region of the country. While these three languages were given a special status as “major” languages, all others

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were tagged as “minor” languages. These three “major” languages enjoyed a lot of government patronage and they served as some form of “national” languages, especially in their different regions and in the national scheme of things as well.

English is the official language in Nigeria. The history of English in Nigeria is traceable to three main events: trade and commerce activities between British traders and Nigerians in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, missionary expeditions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and colonisation of Nigeria in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, it has coexisted with the indigenous languages, even as an official lingua franca across ethnic groups, and as an official language, it is used in education, governance, business, and all domains. The Nigerian Pidgin is used as an unofficial lingua franca across the country.

Nigeria is therefore linguistically diverse and rich because linguistic diversity has several advantages. But, with this richness associated with linguistic diversity, it has several challenges it is facing, documentation, description, documentation, standardisation, education, etc. Many of the languages are endangered due to such factors as inadequate documentation and description, the assimilation of the minor languages by the dominant ones, urbanisation, globalisation, lack of interest and use, lack of intergenerational transfer (Udoh et al, 2022). However, there are ongoing efforts to revitalise the languages, especially the threatened ones. Such efforts by linguists, educators, community members, and sociocultural groups are yielding efforts in language documentation, description, development, and advocacy projects to support the languages.

Nigeria is a multilingual nation, and its linguistic landscape is very complicated. Several factors have contributed to this complication, like, the geopolitical adjustments over the years which split homogenous groups and merged heterogenous groups. Beyond that, problems arise from the different names given to the same language(s) by other people, the difference between a dialect and a language, and the people's wishes. These challenges have led to several figures being presented as the number of languages spoken by about 373 groups (Otite, 2001).

*The Index of Nigerian Languages* (1976), edited by Hansford et al put the number of languages at 395. The 1992 edition of *The Index of Nigerian Languages*, edited by Crozier & Blench has over 400. The classification used in arriving at this number is based on the genetic relationships of these languages. Grimes (2000) presents 515 languages. Of these languages, 505 are still living indigenous languages, 8 are extinct and 2 are second languages. Recently, the NERDC (2021), in a validation of a sociolinguistic survey of

language diversity and use carried out in 2008, recorded 540 languages, which the *National Language Policy* uses as a basis for the recent policy (NERDC, 2022).

Nigeria's official language is English. It is the official lingua franca, while the Nigerian Pidgin is the unofficial lingua franca. But in addition to this, and perhaps the need to break off imperialistic ties, it unofficially chose three official regional languages - Hausa, spoken by about 20 million people in the northern region, Yorùbá, spoken by about 19 million in the western region, and Igbo, spoken by about 17 million people in a part of the southeast region. These three languages were regarded as 'major' languages.

In addition to these three, about 12 other languages are regarded as 'medium' size languages. This is because they are very prominent in the zones where they are spoken. They are described as medium because their population is between 500 to 2 million people. They are used as the medium of instruction in the regions that they are spoken up to junior secondary school three. Apart from these, they are taught in the colleges of education and the universities in those regions and have a sizable orthography. These are Fula/Fulfulde, Kanuri, Efik/Ibibio/Anaañ, Tiv, Izon (Ijo), Edo, Nupe, Urhobo, Igala, Idoma, Ebira and Itsekiri.

The third group is those minority languages that have very few speakers. Some of the speakers are as few as 100 or even less. These are called 'minor' languages (Crozier & Blench, 1992; Grimes, 2000). Over eighty-five percent of Nigerian languages belong to this group, some of which are Akpes, Ogu, Shua-Arab, Ayere, Basa, Bekwara, Berom, Bokyi, Ora, Emai, Agatu, Dadiya, Eggon, Ejagham, Ekpeye, Gbagyi, Ghotuo, Gokana, Ihievbe, Ika, Ikpeshi, Iyayu, Jibu, Jukum-Takum, Kakanda, etc.<sup>2</sup>

Along similar lines, Unoh (1987), groups these languages into three:

| Group | Category    | Description                                               | Examples |
|-------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| A     | The 3 Major | These are the major languages                             | Hausa    |
|       |             | They have orthographies                                   | Yoruba   |
|       |             | They enjoy a lot of government patronage                  | Igbo     |
|       |             | They have meta-language projects going on to develop them |          |
|       |             | They are fairly developed                                 |          |

<sup>2</sup> More information on the linguistic situation in Nigeria is published in Udoh (2019).

|          |                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                     |
|----------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>B</b> | Spoken by a wider group   | Used as common languages at the State level<br>Spoken by about 300,000 to 2 million people<br>Some have orthographies, but others do not have                                                                                            | Efik, Ibibio, Fulfude, Igala, Ijaw, Kanuri, Nupe, Tiv, Urhobo, Izon |
| <b>C</b> | Spoken at the LGA levels. | These correspond to tiny ethnic groups<br>Spoken by about 1,000 – 100,000 people<br>They are more in some States<br>No orthographies<br>Spoken only within their immediate communities<br>Radio programmes featured in them occasionally | Leggbó, Bahomono, Bette, Biase, Boki, Mbembe, Lokaa, Yala           |

Nigeria, indeed, has very many languages at different levels of development and vitality.

### **Linguistic diversity in the sustainable development of indigenous Nigerian languages**

Language is a human system of communication used by a community or country. It is a crucial aspect of a community and an important index of identity. It is used for all communicative functions that a community requires and it serves as a powerful tool for communication and disseminating knowledge, ideas, social transformations, experiences, meaning, sense of individual identity, community identity, culture, etc. It serves as a repository of a people's culture, history, exploits, etc. Language plays a very important role in shaping the identity of a people, preserving their cultural heritage, and sustaining their development in all aspects of their existence.

Linguistic diversity plays an important role in sustainable development. If language transmits and archives different aspects of a people, then different aspects of a group need to be preserved and transmitted across generations to sustain development in different aspects of the people. Linguistic diversity impacts different aspects of the people, socially, economically, environmentally, educationally, spiritually, and culturally, and it ensures a holistic approach to development that is sustainable.

Linguistic diversity allows the transmission of knowledge across generations, allows the application of information and communication technologies, and ensures further exploitation of scientific and technological progress for sustainable development. The

importance of linguistic diversity in sustainable development can be seen in the important role it plays in different areas of society.

### **Preservation of cultural heritage and identity**

Linguistic diversity helps in the preservation of cultural heritage and identity. Language archives and transmits contents of the culture, history, and identity of a people. The promotion of diverse indigenous languages can contribute to the preservation of the cultural heritage, traditions as well as indigenous knowledge system. Preservation is also essential for sustainable development as it fosters a sense of belonging in the people and pride in a communal and cultural transgenerational transfer of the tangible and intangible heritage.

### **Cultural revitalisation and sustainability**

Linguistic diversity promotes cultural revitalisation. Language revitalisation efforts, especially in areas of diversity that have endangerment implications, also contribute to the sustainability of linguistic, cultural, and ecological knowledge across generations. The revival of endangered languages strengthens and propagates cultural identity as well as fosters both community pride and resilience.

### **Effective communication and access to information**

Linguistic diversity fosters effective communication and provides access to information. As a primary tool for communication, language is important in any community. Such communication and access to important information is most effective in the indigenous language. Communities who share a language develop close affinities, and cooperation and engage in a common bond. They share and exchange ideas, knowledge, information, and other information that help in addressing complex situations and challenges in the community.

Linguistic diversity exhibits diverse human experiences, perspectives, and knowledge, and it provides different communities access to education and inclusive development. Education provided in the learners' mother tongues enhances learning outcomes, cognitive development, literacy, and numeracy, which generally lay a good foundation for learning and development.

## **Education and knowledge transmission**

Multilingual education programs can improve learning outcomes by teaching students in their native languages, as it promotes inclusive education. This approach makes education more accessible and effective, particularly for marginalized and indigenous communities. Also, encouraging the use of multiple languages promotes bilingualism and multilingualism, equipping students with valuable skills for future opportunities in a globalized world.

Mother Tongue Education is very effective in sustainable development. Education provided in the learners' mother tongues enhances learning outcomes, cognitive development, literacy, and numeracy, which generally lay a good foundation for learning and development.

Regarding Knowledge Systems, indigenous languages often contain unique knowledge about local ecosystems, agriculture, medicine, and sustainable practices. Many local languages contain unique knowledge systems, traditions, and oral histories. Teaching in these languages helps preserve this knowledge for future generations, ensuring that cultural practices and histories are not lost. Preserving these languages helps retain valuable knowledge that can contribute to sustainable development of rich indigenous knowledge systems.

Indigenous languages are repositories of cultural, traditional, ecological, practices, and resources of the people which are handed over to the next generation. These knowledge systems are preserved and transmitted through languages. The integration of IKS into sustainable development management is very effective.

## **Social inclusion and equity participation**

Linguistic diversity fosters social inclusion. It helps provide terms that define both individual and group participation in society. That way it helps to create a balance and equity as abilities are improved and opportunities balanced, thereby reducing inequalities. The different linguistic groups can then contribute to the development of society. This supports social cohesion and reduces conflicts. Access to information and services in speakers' languages provides them the empowerment to participate more effectively and productively in other spheres of life in society like economic, political, and even social.

Inclusive sustainable development requires the active participation and engagement of all stakeholders, including marginalised and minority groups. Recognising and respecting linguistic diversity ensures that diverse voices are heard, perspectives are valued, and decisions are inclusive, leading to more equitable and sustainable outcomes.

### **Economic development**

Linguistic diversity supports and grows local economies, tourism, cultural industries, crafts, cuisine, fashion, and other endeavours, especially drawing from indigenous knowledge systems. These can also provide bases for tourism, drawing from the heritage sites, festivals, crafts, music, etc. Entrepreneurship will also thrive with linguistic diversity, and this will provide economic growth and diverse perspectives can be maximized to provide innovative solutions to development in a sustainable way.

### **Environmental sustainability**

Indigenous languages have special traditional ecological codes that support environmental conservation and sustainable resource management. Such knowledge provides very useful insights that can support transgenerational transfer economic practices. Linguistic diversity is linked to biodiversity (Gorenflo & Romaine 2021). Linguistic preservation can support biodiversity conservation, because linguistic diversity, cultural diversity, and biodiversity are closely linked. They need to be properly connected and such a connection helps in the preservation of natural environments and indigenous people. Indigenous people should be engaged in the conservation of biodiversity as they live in, manage, and build the environment (Pen State 2021).

Understanding local languages can facilitate better communication among various stakeholders involved in conservation efforts, including local communities, NGOs, and government agencies. This collaboration can enhance the effectiveness of biodiversity conservation initiatives.

### **Governance and policy-making**

Multilingualism in governance ensures that all community members are informed and can participate in decision-making processes. This leads to more inclusive and representative

policies that consider the needs and knowledge of diverse linguistic groups. Linguistic diversity must be considered in both local and global sustainable development policies to ensure they are culturally appropriate and effective.

### **Global development goals**

Linguistic diversity is aligned with several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all; SDG 10, which is to reduce inequality within and among countries, and SDG 16, which is to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Disseminating information about the SDGs, practices, and initiatives in indigenous languages increases their accessibility and relevance to communities and this fosters greater engagement and participation.

Seeing how important languages, linguistic diversity and the important roles they can play in sustaining development, no language should be allowed to die as efforts are intensified to maximise linguistic diversity.

We present in the next section the important role the *National Language Policy* can play in the development of Nigerian languages.

### **The *National Language Policy* (NLP) and the development of Nigerian languages**

The way forward is to empower all Nigerian languages and enable them to be used in the different domains of society (Udoh, 2023). Language plays an important and multifaceted role in sustainable development. As an archive, it propagates, promotes, preserves, and transmits both tangible and intangible aspects of a people.

Nigeria had no national language policy in the real sense of the word for several years. Policies guiding linguistic issues were drawn from several documents, particularly the *National Policy on Education* (NPE, 2014), whose provisions cover the use of language in the educational sector, the *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* (1999 as amended 2011), the *National Broadcasting Code* (2016, amended 2020), provide for the use of Nigerian and foreign languages for national development.

A policy is a formal document of government, which contains a set of ideas and plans used to regulate and maintain uniform standards and quality. Along these lines, the *National Language Policy* (NLP) was finally developed for Nigeria.

The NLP was launched on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 2023. It draws its philosophy from the overall Nigerian philosophy of fostering unity and harmony founded on the principles of freedom, equality, and justice. It is based on an integrated and multilingual approach, and it draws heavily from sociolinguistics, language description, and pragmatics. The focus is on status planning, corpus planning, language-in-education, and domain-sensitive models. The NLP is a deliberate and strategic effort of the Federal Government of Nigeria to regulate the use and development of all Nigerian languages for national development (NERDC, 2022).

The Federal Government of Nigeria, in this Policy, has removed the dichotomy between the “major” and “minor” languages and has provided specific policy declarations, directions, and guidelines on language use in all sectors of the nation and the various levels of government. Although English is still the official language, all other languages can be used in all sectors. The following declarations specifically define the roles and functions of these languages thus:

14. c. All Nigerian languages are national treasures and heritage and shall be preserved from endangerment and extinction.

14.d. All Nigerian languages are equal, and none shall be held superior or inferior against the other.

14.e. All Nigerian languages shall be assigned equitable functions and roles for communication and interaction within the socioeconomic domains of the country.

105. This Policy recognises the English language (British Standard English) as the official language of Nigeria.

106. The English language shall be the official and administrative language at the Federal level, while official documents shall be rendered and/or translated into identified Nigerian languages of wider communication.

107. The official language in the state shall be English. In addition, the business of government, at the state level, shall also be conducted in Nigerian languages of wider communication identified by the state governments in conjunction with the local governments.

An appropriate guide has been provided in specific declarations guiding the use of the languages in different sectors and domains. Highlights of these declarations are provided under the following subsections:

1. Policy declarations and statements on language and language status
2. Policy statements on language use in specific sectors, like:
3. Education at different levels, covering basic, post-basic, mass education, nomadic education, teacher education, technology education, and innovative enterprise institutions (IEIs).
4. Information, Communication and Technology (ICT).
5. Culture, tourism and entertainment.
6. Government/Administration.
7. Legislature.
8. Judiciary.
9. Security.
10. Town planning, environment, health, and agricultural extension services.
11. Commerce, trade, banking, financial and economic activities.
12. Language research, development, and extension services.
13. Policy implementation and accountability strategies.
14. Funding, resource mobilisation, monitoring, and evaluation of the NLP
15. Roles and responsibilities of stakeholders.

These different sectors have roles to play in this policy, just as functions have also been assigned to all the languages. Specific roles of government, key institutions, and agencies are also covered.

The government/administration will provide appropriate legislation to guide all sectors.

Relevant ministries, Government agencies, and parastatals will oversee the implementation and funding of related sectors.

Education agencies and parastatals will organise training and build capacity, coordinate, and promote language research and advocacy.

Tertiary institutions will train and retrain personnel in language matters and develop applications (ICT, HTL, etc.) to address the language need and transform traditional narratives into cartoons and science motifs.

Linguistic and language associations will build capacity, and train language personnel, teachers, and language developers.

Specific sectors – legislature, judiciary, ICT, culture, tourism, entertainment, security, transportation, town planning, trade, banking, healthcare, financial and economic activities.

These sectors must comply with the policy. Notices, forms, signposts, and manuals, will be either written in Nigerian languages and translated into English and other languages, or if written in other languages, will be translated into Nigerian languages. Announcements in public places will be made in Nigerian languages and English. More Nigerian language content will be used in the media.

The Federal Government of Nigeria's *National Language Policy*, in providing the political will and the framework for the development and utilisation of all Nigerian languages for national development is on the right track to explore the viability of Nigerian languages and position them for sustainable development in all aspects of Nigeria's national life.

### **Concluding remarks**

Languages are sustainable tools and weapons that should be adequately harnessed as well as key to sustainable development. They bind a nation together in terms of governance, values, integration, instruction, economic and social development. Nigerian languages can be used as a key to sustainable development. Some areas are very important avenues of this sustainability, like development, usage, propagation, revitalisation, preservation, and transmission of both tangible and intangible aspects of culture and knowledge systems of communities.

Linguistic diversity is a vital component of sustainable development. It enhances cultural richness, educational outcomes, social inclusion, economic growth, environmental sustainability, and effective governance. Recognizing and promoting linguistic diversity can lead to more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable development pathways. Linguistic diversity, cultural diversity, and biodiversity are closely linked. They need to be properly and closely connected and this will help the preservation of natural environments and indigenous people. Indigenous people need to be engaged in the conservation of different aspects of their existence, including biodiversity, such that the people manage their environments, preserve, sustain and transmit all aspects of their existence.

The Federal Government of Nigeria's *National Language Policy*, in providing the political will and the framework for the development and utilisation of all Nigerian languages for national development is on the right track to position the Nigerian languages for sustainable development in all aspects of Nigeria's national life. The NLP is a deliberate effort to

provide a structure to regulate the status, use, promote, preserve, and sustain all Nigerian languages.

The way forward in sustaining all forms of development in Nigeria is to empower all Nigerian languages and enable them to be used in the different domains of society. Language plays an important and multifaceted role in sustainable development.

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