

DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING NIGERIAN LANGUAGES IN THE ICT AGE

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0. INTRODUCTION

The ICT age is now and we are already in it. The Information and Communication Technology or ICT is a new concept in development, and has been shown to have considerable impact on economic growth and social development.

Education is the backbone of every society and in the current ICT age, we talk about ICT-based education. In Nigeria today, efforts are being made to introduce reforms in the education system by way of introducing ICT-based education. If we compare the Nigerian education system in the 80's with what obtains today, we can observe clearly the ICT-based reforms that have been introduced in the education system.

It has been pointed out that 'within education, ICT is seen as a way to promote educational change, improve the skills of learners and prepare them for the global economy and the information society. Furthermore, the desire to be globally competitive, grow the economy and improve social conditions is often used to justify significant public sector investments in educational improvement and the application of ICT in schools'. (Kozma (2005).

It is imperative to note that ICT-based education reforms are necessary in order to achieve desired social and economic outcomes. The outcomes must be built into policies and programmes.

It is pertinent to note that 'every country must craft its own policies and strategies for development based on a number of factors' including the following: history, culture, geography, unique competitive advantages and development goals. It is said that 'for many countries, achieving economic growth and social development is a *work in progress*'.

Kozma (2005) points out that global consensus on a comprehensive approach to development and poverty reduction had been the prime concern for the World Bank and the United Nations (UN) for quite some time now. UN established Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) whose target was 2015. Whether or not some or all of the MDG's will be achieved in Nigeria by 2015 should be a matter of concern to all.

1. THE CURRENT NATIONAL CONFERENCE

As pointed out earlier on, the ICT age is now. The organizers of the current National Conference came up with a cleverly crafted theme, i.e. Developing and Sustaining Nigerian languages in the ICT Age. The organizers do not want to hear anything about language death. God forbid bad thing! Is this surprising? No. After all, we must not forget where we are right now. We are at the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), an institution whose main mandate is 'to develop and sustain Nigerian languages'. NINLAN is quite capable of fashioning out ways to develop and

sustain Nigerian languages in the current ICT age. However, NINLAN wanted to be as democratic as possible by organizing a national conference to discuss this fundamental issue of developing and sustaining Nigerian languages. Language experts, policy makers and other relevant stake holders were duly invited to come forward and discuss this important matter. I am happy to note that the first sub theme of the conference is tagged *Nigerian Languages and National language Policy*.

One major obstacle to the development of Nigerian languages is lack of concrete policy for Nigerian languages. The importance of such a policy cannot be overemphasized. In the last four decades, scholars have been discussing the need for a befitting policy for Nigerian languages. The most recent attempt to produce a policy for Nigerian languages is the effort of the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), a parastatal of the Federal Ministry of Education, Nigeria, in conjunction with the Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN) and other stake holders. A National Technical Committee for the production of a befitting National Policy for Nigerian Languages was set up in July, 2010. The project however was halted due to lack of funds. It should be pointed out here and now that NINLAN has equal mandate to organize a program that would eventually lead to the production of a National Policy for Nigerian Languages.

2. NIGERIA ICT POLICY AND NIGERIAN LANGUAGES

The need for a strong ICT policy cannot be overemphasized. However, it must be pointed out that up to the year 2012, all Nigeria could boast of is a draft National ICT Policy! On page 13, section 3.1 of the 55-page draft, the policy statement for the National ICT Policy was stated as follows:

The main objective of the National ICT Policy is to create a conducive environment for the rapid expansion of ICT networks and services that are accessible to all at reasonable costs, and for the transformation of Nigeria into a knowledge-based economy.

We may desire an ICT-based education that will enhance the development of Nigerian languages and also sustain them. However that could only be possible if there is a very strong government policy on ICT enshrined in a national policy for Nigerian languages. Right now, Nigeria has only a draft ICT Policy for Nigeria. The draft as it were, does not contain any clear ICT policy in respect of Nigerian languages. The only clause in the draft ICT Policy that may be manipulated to support the cause of the development of Nigerian languages appears under item 4.12 entitled *e-Applications*. It goes as follows:

e-applications refer to the application of ICT in every sector of human life... Government will therefore put in place appropriate measures to create an enabling environment to enhance effective service delivery in all sectors.

This provision of the Nigerian ICT Policy will be pursued vigorously by stake holders to ensure that ICT facilities are fully utilized for developing and sustaining Nigerian languages. Stake holders must identify all language needs to be handled by ICT. Thus, the communiqué of the present conference must identify in clear and unambiguous terms the crucial issues that require ICT support for developing and sustaining Nigerian languages. That being the case, it is expected that experts writing on each of the 12 sub-themes of the conference will provide information regarding the application of ICT to each of the sub-themes. This way, the present conference will gather enough

data to allow the articulation of a befitting ICT-based approach for developing and sustaining Nigerian languages.

3. SOME EARLIER EFFORTS

It is not as if no previous efforts were made to subject Nigerian languages to ICT despite the absence of a comprehensive Nigerian ICT Policy. Indeed there were efforts here and there for ICT-based approach to the development of Nigerian languages. A very early effort is the development of computer keyboards that are meant to capture every sound in every Nigerian language as well as all diacritic symbols.

Another serious effort is the establishment of an organization called the African Languages Technology Initiative (ALT-i for short) at Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. The founder and Chief Executive of ALT-i is Engineer-Linguist Dr. Tunde Adegbola. ALT-i Ibadan has done a lot of ICT work on Yoruba language, and recently in partnership with MICROSOFT, had developed a language interface pack for Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages. Each pack contains comprehensive translations of two thousand internet terms and a window for each of the languages. For example, the Hausa pack is referred to as **Hausa_latn_NG Glossaryok**. It is a 158-page Hausa glossary.

The University of Uyo language documentation program is a giant project for the documentation of languages in the Lower Cross area and is fully ICT-based.

There are also individual efforts to provide ICT-based soft wares for Nigerian languages. For example, at the 24th Conference of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria (24th CLAN) at Bayero University, Kano in 2011, a Biochemist presented to the audience a soft ware in the form of a talking dictionary for Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The dictionary is intended to provide basic guide in each of the three languages by way of short sentences and phrases for use in the market place, restaurant, drug store, hospital, etc.

In 1934, Rev. G. P. Bargery wrote a 1226 –page dictionary entitled *Hausa-English Dictionary and English-Hausa Vocabulary*. This dictionary was converted into a small computer program by Microsoft Corp. and NEC Corporation in 1981 and 1994. In 2001, AJAPHA came up with *Electronic Search Program DIC & DICX* of the same dictionary.

All these private efforts need to be backed by strong ICT policy.

4. CONCLUSION

The present conference is timely and the theme quite appropriate. Nigeria must strive to be fully ICT compliant in line with all serious nations on the globe. Language and ICT experts must work hand in hand to ensure that Nigerian languages benefit greatly from ICT-based policies for development. The following information may present a graphic picture of ICT compliance amongst some selected countries:

Singapore (Population 4.2 million)

2003: Singapore had 622 PCs per 1000 people (World Bank Report 2005)

2003: Singapore had 509 internet users per 1000 people (UNDP Report 2005)

Finland (Population 5.2 million)

2003: 441 PCs per 1000 people (World Bank Report 2005)

2003: 508 internet users per 1000 people (UNDP Report 2005)

Egypt (Population 73.4 million)

2005: 22 PCs per 1000 people (World Bank 2005)

2005: 4% connected to internet (UNDP 2005)

Nigeria (Population over 120 million)

Before 1999: -Development of IT sector of Nigeria was minimal.

-Regular internet users less than 200,000 out of a population of over 120 million

2005: 2,418,679 internet users

2008: 10 million internet users

2014: over 44 million internet users

(Source: Draft Nigeria ICT Policy (2012))

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