

The Roles of Language in the Attainment of the Millennium Development Goals: A Case Study of Nigeria

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Abstract—Language is a key to national development thus the reason while the National Policy on Education emphasizes the roles of language in achieving the national education goals. The global efforts at ensuring that all countries enjoy robust growth and development is evident in the global strategies adopted for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Thus, many countries are struggling to get the goals achieved without adequate attention paid to the roles language could play in this regard. This paper therefore reviews the Millennium Development Goals and advocates language strategies that could help achieve the goals by the various countries.

Keywords— development, goals, language, policy.

I. INTRODUCTION

LANGUAGE as a system of communication remains a veritable instrument of development as there is no meaningful development in any sector that can take place without effective communication. Odion (2005) described the relevance of language from the angle of the brain box of a car without which all the functions of the car remain stalled. Adebé (2008) corroborated this when he stated unequivocally that language is the hall mark of modern development. This probably accounts for the various efforts being made in most countries to put language development on the priority list of national educational tasks.

Language remains an indispensable instrument needed by man to fast track development, is a means to express himself, and a means to develop consciousness about the essence of one's existence. Language becomes the means by which the government could carry out any social reconstruction and that is why it has been widely accepted that no nation can develop outside its language. One of the problems many governments have been having has got to do with the inability to make the people believe and aligned themselves with the programmes of the government but this can not be done except the people have equal access of intelligibility to the the language being used to convey governments' intentions.

This therefore underscores the importance of a common medium, common language by which the government and the governed could use for effective communication; national rebirth or reconstruction is meaningless if there is absence of a

common language. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) according to Fagbounbe (2007) is not just a slogan but a sign of commitment of world leaders to the emancipation of the populace from poverty, illiteracy, diseases etc. The attainment of these goals is sequel to the commitment of government of nations not only in term of commitment of resources but also in making adequate plan for sensitization in term of effective use of language. Language therefore remains a veritable tools that should be considered and adopted for use in achieving the MDG goals.

II. WHAT IS MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS?

We have the opportunity in the coming decade to cut world poverty by half. Billions more people could enjoy the fruits of the global economy. Tens of millions of lives can be saved. The practical solutions exist. The political framework is established. And for the first time, the cast is utterly affordable. Whatever one's motivation for attacking the crisis of extreme poverty-human rights, religious values, security, fiscal prudence, ideology-the solutions are the same. All that is needed is action.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) according to Brownson(2004) are the world's time-bound and quantified targets for addressing extreme poverty in its many dimensions-income poverty, hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter, and exclusion-while promoting gender equality, education, and environmental sustainability. They are also basic human rights-the rights of each person on the planet to health, education, shelter, and security as pledged in the universal declaration of human rights and the UN millennium Declaration.

The target for the attainment of the goal is 2015. How will the world look in 2015 if the goals are achieved? Okeke 2000 provided a vivid answer that looks utopian to achieve; more than 500 million people will be lifted out of extreme poverty. More than 300 million will no longer suffer from hunger. There will also be dramatic progress in child health. Rather than die before reaching their fifth birthdays, 30million children will be saved. So will the lives of more than 2 million mothers. 350 million fewer people are without safe drinking water and 650 million fewer people live without the benefits of basic sanitation, allowing them to lead healthier and more dignified lives. Hundreds of millions more women and girls

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will go to school, access economic and political opportunity, and have greater security and safety.

The MDGs are drawn from the actions and targets contained in the millennium declaration that was adopted by 189 nations and signed by 147 heads of state and governments during the UN millennium summit in September 2000.

The eight MDGs according to Okeke (2000) are broken down into 21 quantifiable targets that are measured by 60 indicators.

- Goal 1: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Goal 2: achieve universal primary education
- Goal 3: promote gender equality and empower women
- Goal 4: reduce child mortality
- Goal 5: improve maternal health
- Goal 6: combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability
- Goal 8: develop a global partnership for development.

III. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MDGs

In 2001, in response to the world leaders' request, UN secretary general presented the road map towards the implementation for the United Nations millennium declaration, an integrated and comprehensive overview of the situation, outlining potential strategies for action designed to meet the goals and commitments of the millennium declaration.

In 2005, the secretary-general prepared the first comprehensive five-yearly report on progress toward achieving the MDGs and he made this remarked which underscored the roles of language in achieving the goals:

"Time is short, we must seize this historic moment to act responsibly and decisively for the common good using the most acceptable language to get everybody involved."

With only six years until the 2015 deadline to achieve the millennium development goals, UN secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon chose these words to strongly urge governments to engage constructively in the activities towards achieving the goals using the most acceptable language to convey the message to the people.

In the 2009 millennium development goals report released earlier this year, the secretary-general noted:

"We have made important progress in this effort, and have many successes on which to build, it is clear more people can now see with us, act with us because they can now understand us."

The 2010 high-level meeting, he hopes, will not only result in a renewal of existing commitments but also can decisively galvanize coordinated action among all stakeholders through the use of the appropriate language to convey the core messages and strategies of the MDG to the people.

To enable all countries to achieve the MDGs, the world must treat them not as abstract ambitions but as practical policy objectives that every citizen must strive to achieve, but this will only be possible if the citizens are well mobilised through effective language. The practical steps to achieve the goals in each country can and should be

diagnosed, planned, and implemented with the proper focus and actions, combined with suitable and appropriate language use.

IV. LANGUAGE: A NATIONAL STRATEGY TO ACHIEVE THE GOALS

In every country that wants to achieve the MDGs, the starting assumption should be that they are feasible unless technically proven otherwise. In many of the poorest countries, the goals are indeed ambitious, but in most or even all countries they can still be achieved by 2015 if there are intensive efforts by all parties to improve effective language use.

Alayande (2004) cautioned that technical constraints e.g. language use, should not be confused with financial constraints. Although poverty reduction is the primary responsibility of developing countries themselves, lack of national language will continue to widen the gap between the poor and the rich as only the rich will be able to use the elitist official (foreign) language. Alayande (2004) went further to urge all low – income countries to increase their own resource mobilization and promote national language development by devoting high percentage of the budget to education while language promotion should occupy priority investments.

V. INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION ABOUT THE MDGs

The United Nations as a key player in the implementation of the millennium declaration and the achievement of the MDGs has identified strategic communication as a key factor in achieving the MDGs. By consequence, language becomes a veritable tool to support the millennium campaign, the millennium project and country reporting, communication about the MDGs using language.

Countries make use of language to produce television documentaries; there are visual and written media advertisements to promote MDG issues. The messages according to Okeke (2000) therefore have the potential to reach members of the society. The general public and youth do enter the picture by way of, for example, soccer TV commercials and documentaries. There should also be an also TV initiative using African stars.

The best political strategy according to Brownson (2004) is to emphasize the MDGs in all governments programmes and to spread the message that "it can be done". A number of famous individuals (such as the soccer star Kanu could be invited to join in this communication effort by being 'Ambassadors for the goals'.

Language is responsible for internal communications and awareness-raising for the benefit of the MDGs. This is being used to develop a suitable advocacy and communications tool-kit for the programme. The objective is that communications through effective language use become part of everybody. Considerable efforts is being invested in the process, especially, as experience shows that good language use would get MDG campaign staff on board before trying to move into the public domain. The goals of the campaign is to create

awareness about the goals, convince the public that the goals can be achieved with a later result of the staff spreading the word to people they work with outside using language effectively.

One of the questions the MDGs are confronted with is: What is the message in the MDGs? How do you make the message meaningful? Up to the present, thinking about the MDGs suggests that the message should resonate at the national context in a day-to-day language that people understand. It is also thought to be unnecessary to refer to the MDGs as a whole and more efficient to be thematic where one can view the rest of the goals through one specific lens of interest.

Government finds it difficult to target the MDG message at various different audiences, because according to Brownson (2004) there are no conscious efforts on the part of the government to create language strategies for effective communication of the ideals. Meanwhile, part of its mandate is to use language to advocate for the MDGs, it has shirked from doing this effectively.

VI. STRATEGIES OF USING LANGUAGE TO PROMOTE MDGs IDEALS

- 1) Inculcate Language use in Civil Society Strategies: There is a fundamental need to get the support of civil society organizations that are mostly involved in promoting MDGs ideals to promote the use of effective language communication as one of their strategies in their campaigns. This view was supported by Odion (2005) when he recommended language shift paradigms to Civil Society organizations in their approach to public campaign for the MDG.
- 2) Take a Mixed Approach: Direct and indirect communications will work in support for the MDGs. Incorporate the MDGs in existing campaigns or make links to them in new ones. Do not be too hooked on the labels.
- 3) Communications should be Simple and Country Specific: The MDGs should be communicated to the people in the simplest way, technical jargons should be avoided or they should be translated from technical jargon into formulas that, true to their actual meaning, can be readily understood by the men and women in the streets (Bissio, 2003).
- 4) Go for 'Grab you by the Collar' message: The message could focus on the solution to the problems and the opportunities provided by the MDGs. Get help from groups meetings and professionals in the marketing and campaigning world.
- 5) Involve Youth: The youth communicate regularly with their peers, siblings and parents. They develop language patterns that are suitable for what they want to say, they communicate easily and possess high level of flexibility in the use of language. They will be the adults and taxpayers of 2015; they must therefore be involved and be made to

involve others.

- 6) Be Opportunistic: Every event in the communities, clubs, and religious houses should be an opportunity to communicate the ideal of MDG to the people. Events should be organized around United Nations International Days (such as the World Poverty Day, etc) as the likelihood of getting press coverage may increase.

VII. IMPLICATION ON NATIONAL LANGUAGE

There is no gainsaying the fact that the roles of language in national development are unquantifiable. The attainment of MDG by any country is sequel to the ability of the country to use her advantage of language to get the people involved. In a multicultural, multilingual country like Nigeria where only 20% can speak the official language (Ajulo, 2005), the issue of using language to communicate becomes a herculean task as the message would have to be interpreted in various local languages.

It therefore becomes pertinent that a national language is imperative in Nigeria. A national language helps in fostering national unity, and stability which in turn create the kind of peaceful atmosphere required for meaningful development of the nation. According to Iwuoha (2004) underdevelopment, timidity, primitivity and backwardness are signs of nations without a national language. Almost all the advanced countries do not have language problems; they do not waste time on prolonged dialogue as a result of difficulty in understanding one another. All the countries, USA, China, Britain, that have made it technologically are countries with national language irrespective of the number of their nationalities. UNESCO (1951) had suggested that mother tongue should form the foundation for a child's education. English language we are using as the official language is alien to our culture; Nigerian languages should be developed to evolve a national language without further delay.

VIII. SUMMARY

This paper made attempts to review the concepts of MDG especially its link with language. The paper explicate on the various strategies that can be adopted in using language as a veritable tool to achieve the MDG goals.

IX. CONCLUSION

The countries that planned and developed a national language are more economically and technologically developed than those that are not. In Nigeria today, communicating the MDGs ideals may become a mirage as a result of our language situation and if we must join the whole world to achieve the MDG, then we must start to develop our indigenous national language.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends that government of various nations should consider the issue of language seriously if they are serious about achieving the MDG goals. This calls become

pertinent to nations whose official language is different from the mother tongue where majority of the citizens are not versed in the official language. In this wise, the Government should consider its language policy and entrench a system that will encourage a situation where majority of the population will be able to communicate to one another using the same language. The paper also advocates the use of peers as effective tools to educate others since they speak the same language they can all understand. It is also pertinent to note that various mobilization agencies will be very useful in carrying the message to the rural communities for effective dissemination and appropriate feed back.

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