

## **The Relevance of Indigenous Languages in Education for Sustainable Development.**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to explore the role that can be played by indigenous language education in the attainment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thus, it focuses on the potential benefits, barriers, and strategies of integrating indigenous languages into the educational system to support sustainable development. A qualitative research design is adopted for the research. The researcher used the narrative review method which involves summarizing and synthesizing extant literature on a particular research question in a narrative format to gain insights and make conclusions. The research finds that one key aspect of achieving Sustainable Development Goals is the recognition and promotion of indigenous languages in education. Indigenous languages are a critical component of cultural heritage, and are key to preserving indigenous knowledge, practices, and values. Thus, incorporating indigenous languages into education can help to promote cultural diversity, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. Indigenous languages offer unique perspectives on the natural world and traditional ecological knowledge, which can contribute to sustainable resource management and environmental conservation. By integrating indigenous languages into educational curricula, teachers can promote greater understanding of traditional ecological knowledge and the importance of biodiversity. However, the use of indigenous languages in education is often limited due to unfavorable language policies, lack of resources, and the marginalization of indigenous communities. In conclusion, addressing these challenges and promoting the use of indigenous languages in education as a means of achieving the SDGs is important.

**Key words:** *Education, indigenous languages, indigenous knowledge, communication, knowledge management, sustainable development*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 goals adopted in 2015 by UN member states to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all. One of the key goals of the SDGs is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all, which is essential for achieving sustainable development. The SDGs recognize that education is not only a fundamental human right but also a driver of economic growth and social development. To achieve this goal, the SDGs call for the provision of quality education at all levels, from early childhood to tertiary education, that is accessible, affordable, and equitable for all. This includes

ensuring that all learners have the necessary knowledge and skills to thrive in today's rapidly changing world, and that they are empowered to contribute to sustainable development in their communities and beyond.

### **Background**

Recognizing and promoting indigenous languages in education is crucial for achieving the goal of inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Indigenous languages are a critical component of cultural heritage and play a vital role in preserving indigenous knowledge, practices, and values (Smith, 1999). They offer unique perspectives on the natural world and traditional ecological knowledge that can contribute to sustainable resource management and environmental conservation. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000:1) highlights that “Linguistic and cultural diversity on the one hand and biodiversity on the other hand are correlated - where one type is high, the other one is too, and vice versa”. Incorporating indigenous languages into educational curricula can promote cultural diversity, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability, as well as help to foster a greater understanding and appreciation of the histories and cultures of indigenous peoples.

Moreover, language is a key factor in building strong relationships between individuals and communities, and in facilitating communication and collaboration. By promoting the use of indigenous languages in education, communities can strengthen their social networks, enhance cultural identity, and foster sustainable development through collective action. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) notes that the disregard for indigenous languages in education is not only a cultural tragedy, but it is also a form of genocide. Indigenous languages can also help to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous learners by ensuring that they have access to culturally relevant and responsive education that reflects their unique perspectives and experiences.

According to Salimi (2019) language and culture are two sides of the same coin and they both shape the identity of a person and form their perspective. As a distinctly human phenomenon, language is central to the collective advancement of communities by leveraging knowledge sharing and creation of new knowledge. According to Ondondo (2020) the language, knowledge, and know-how of indigenous people, which is deeply rooted in their relationship

with nature and community, has proven to be efficient in responding to some of these challenges including environmental degradation.

However, the use of indigenous languages in many African jurisdictions in education is often limited due to language policies, lack of resources, and the marginalization of indigenous communities. Tikly (2016) warns that, "...it is alarming that language-in-education policy is so often at the periphery of global debates about the quality of education at a time when learning for all is a key part of the educational component of the Sustainable Development Goals." It is important to address these challenges and promote the use of indigenous languages in education as a means of achieving the SDGs.

After this brief introduction, the paper addresses how incorporating indigenous languages into education can promote cultural diversity, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and economic development, the third section discusses the connection between indigenous language education and aspects of sustainable development, the next section identifies problems bedeviling the use of indigenous languages in education and lastly, the concluding section summarizes the salient points raised in the paper.

### **Problem statement**

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of sustainability and the need to promote it in educational systems, indigenous languages are often overlooked in this context. This is concerning given that indigenous languages play a critical role in preserving traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and ecological wisdom that are essential for sustainable development. The lack of attention paid to indigenous languages in education can contribute to the erosion of cultural diversity, the loss of traditional knowledge, and the degradation of the natural environment. Therefore, there is a need to explore the relevance of indigenous languages in education for sustainable development and identify strategies to promote their integration into educational systems.

### **Research objectives**

The paper examined the role of indigenous languages in preserving traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and ecological wisdom that are essential for sustainable development;

explored the potential benefits of integrating indigenous languages into educational systems for sustainable development, including the preservation of cultural diversity and the promotion of ecological sustainability; identified and interrogated best practices and strategies for integrating indigenous languages into educational systems for sustainable development, including approaches to curriculum design, teacher training, and community engagement; and assessed the challenges and barriers to integrating indigenous languages into educational systems for sustainable development and identify potential solutions to these challenges.

### **Scope**

The study carried out a comprehensive examination of the issue of integrating indigenous languages into educational systems for sustainable development. This involved examining the role that indigenous languages play in preserving traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and ecological wisdom, as well as investigating the extent to which they are currently integrated into educational systems and identifying the factors that contribute to their neglect.

The study also explored the potential benefits of integrating indigenous languages into educational systems, including the preservation of cultural diversity and the promotion of ecological sustainability. The challenges and barriers were assessed integrating indigenous languages into educational systems and identify potential solutions to these challenges. The study would be focused on the intersection of indigenous languages, education, and sustainable development, with a particular emphasis on identifying practical solutions that can be implemented in educational settings.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Cultural diversity**

Incorporating indigenous languages into education can promote cultural diversity, social inclusion, environmental and economic sustainability in several ways.

By recognizing and promoting the use of indigenous languages in education, we can acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of cultures and ways of life that exist within our

societies. This helps to foster a sense of respect for cultural differences and promotes intercultural dialogue and understanding (Hinton, 1994). Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) views cultural diversity, which is maintained by linguistic diversity as important as biodiversity in the context of human survival. Her views are not perplexing by any measure because all knowledge is stored and shared through language in a cultural context. Promoting indigenous languages in education also ensures that Indigenous peoples are not excluded or marginalized within mainstream education systems, which in turn contributes to social exclusion and discrimination.

Furthermore, indigenous language education can make a significant contribution to promoting cultural diversity by supporting the preservation and transmission of indigenous knowledge. According to Hikwa and Maisiri (2020) by preserving indigenous languages, a country preserves its intangible heritage while maintaining the diversity of its knowledge base. Development in almost all spheres of life draws on multiple sources of knowledge, including indigenous knowledge, to make advancements that improve the people's quality of life. Indigenous knowledge is thus an integral tool for development and advancement of communities. The use of indigenous languages in education ensures the preservation of indigenous knowledge.

### **Social inclusion**

SDGs aim for inclusive development that leaves no one behind. Social exclusion of indigenous communities is one of the foremost impediments to achieving SDGs. Van der Stoel (1997: 153) warned that "...in the course of my work, it had become more and more obvious to me that education is an extremely important element for the preservation and the deepening of the identity of persons belonging to a national minority. It is of course also clear that education in the language of the minority is of vital importance for such a minority." De Varennes and Kuzborska (2016) concur, and they posit that language has a tremendously important role as both gatekeeper and doorway. While social inclusion is the process of ensuring that all individuals and groups in society have access to the resources, opportunities, and services that they need to fully participate in society. Education plays a critical role in its realisation by creating a society where all people are valued and respected, regardless of their background or circumstances, and where everyone has the chance to reach their full potential. Provision of

education that provides for the linguistic preferences of indigenous communities has been shown to improve student retention and success in schools. It involves removing barriers to participation and creating a more equitable society. This can include addressing issues such as poverty, discrimination, and social exclusion, and ensuring that everyone has access to education, healthcare, employment, housing, and other essential services. Social inclusion is important because it helps to promote social cohesion, reduce inequality, and create a more just and sustainable society.

### **Environmental sustainability**

Also, incorporating indigenous languages into education can help to preserve and transmit traditional ecological knowledge, which is often embedded in indigenous languages. If indigenous languages are not maintained, vast knowledge of plants held by farmers, local knowledge of medicinal plants and systems, as well as the plants themselves could become extinct within one or two generations (Thrupp, 1999; Christie & Moonie, 1999). Traditional ecological knowledge encompasses the knowledge, practices, and beliefs that indigenous peoples have developed over generations to manage and sustainably use natural resources. By integrating indigenous languages into educational curricula, we can help to ensure that this knowledge is passed on to future generations, contributing to environmental sustainability and the preservation of biodiversity.

Indigenous languages offer unique perspectives on the natural world and traditional ecological knowledge that can contribute to sustainable resource management and environmental conservation in several ways. They often contain a wealth of knowledge about local ecosystems and the biodiversity that exists within them. This knowledge is embedded in the language itself, reflecting the close relationship that indigenous peoples have with the natural world. For example, some indigenous languages have specific terms for different types of plants, animals, and natural phenomena, which reflect the unique characteristics and uses of these resources. By incorporating indigenous languages into educational curricula, countries ensure that this knowledge is passed on to future generations, contributing to sustainable resource management and environmental conservation.

Through their languages, indigenous communities reflect a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all living beings and the importance of maintaining balance and harmony within ecosystems. This knowledge can help to inform sustainable resource management practices that are based on principles of reciprocity and respect for the natural world. For example, some indigenous communities have developed traditional practices of hunting, fishing, and farming that are based on principles of sustainability and long-term resource management. By incorporating indigenous languages into educational curricula, we can help to ensure that these practices are preserved and passed on to future generations.

### **Economic development**

Finally, language-in-education policy draws attention to the continuing hegemony of colonial languages in the context of contemporary globalization and the marginalization and under-development of indigenous languages (Tikly, 2016). Participation in the national and global economy has for a long time been coupled with competence in dominant, colonial languages. The marginalisation of indigenous languages on many levels has mirrored the exclusion of indigenous communities. However,

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Research design**

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was employed, including surveys, interviews, and case studies, to gather data from a range of stakeholders, including teachers, students, community members, and policymakers. Qualitative research is adapted for exploring and understanding complex social phenomena such as education and sustainable development. The study uses the narrative review approach which involves summarizing and synthesizing the existing literature on a particular topic or research question in a narrative format (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). This approach is particularly useful in exploratory research of this nature where the goal is to broadly understand the relevance of the incorporation of indigenous languages in education to support the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals.

### **Data collection**

Data for this research study was collected systematically through a rigorous process of identifying, selecting, and synthesizing relevant studies on the topic of education and sustainable development. The main steps involved in data collection were searching for relevant studies from various online scholarly sources, such as databases, journals, books, reports, and websites. This was followed by extracting and summarizing the key information from each study.

### **Data analysis**

The study utilized a thematic analysis approach for processing the research data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method that involves identifying and analyzing patterns or themes in a set of data. The study focused on the benefits and challenges of incorporating indigenous languages in education for sustainable development.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Benefits of integrating indigenous languages into Education for Sustainable Development**

The analysis of literature reveals that the use of indigenous languages in education is an indisputable asset for achieving quality and inclusive education for all. However, its implementation is often limited by a range of challenges, including language policies, lack of resources, and the marginalization of indigenous communities.

#### *Sustaining cultural diversity*

One of the key aspects of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is to respect and value cultural diversity and local knowledge, including indigenous languages. Indigenous languages are not only a means of communication, but also a source of identity, culture, history, worldview, and wisdom. They embody the collective memory and experience of a people and provide insights into their relationship with nature and their environment. It has been shown that there is a positive relationship between cultural and linguistic diversity on one hand, and biodiversity on the other.

#### *Responsiveness to needs of learners*



ESD endeavors to respond to the global need for advancing the cause of the attainment of SDGs. The integration of indigenous languages in the education system responds to the linguistic preferences of learners. It can also enhance the quality and relevance of education by making it more responsive to the needs, interests and aspirations of learners and communities. Marginalized communities are likely to respond positively to new systems when they incorporate elements of their language and culture. The success of the overarching goal of providing quality and inclusive education for all may hinge on attuning the curriculum and its delivery to responsively address the needs of communities.

*Fosters intercultural dialogue*

ESD fosters intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding among different groups and promote respect for human rights and diversity. Unity in diversity is an integral element of sustainability and world peace. An education system that recognizes different cultures promotes diversity and encourages dialogue among different cultures throughout society.

*Promotes social cohesion*

The recognition of indigenous languages in education may play a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion, peace, and stability by fostering respect for diversity, human rights, and democratic values. By demonstrating that less developed, minority or marginalised languages have value in the generation and transmission of knowledge, communities appreciate the value of every member of society and accept their cultural values as equal to their own. Moreover, appreciation of diversity serves to dispel myths and unwarranted stereotypes held by one group against the other through education and dialogue.

*Preservation of indigenous cultures*

The integration of indigenous languages into education curricular improves the preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages and cultures, which are often endangered or marginalized by dominant languages and cultures. It can also strengthen the sense of identity and belonging of indigenous peoples and empower them to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives.

### *Creates decent jobs*

At the societal level, ESD can support the transition to a green and circular economy that reduces environmental impacts, creates decent jobs, and improves resource efficiency. Education is a key enabler of social mobility especially for indigenous communities from marginalised backgrounds. Improved accessibility of education through the integration of indigenous languages thus provides opportunities for future decent jobs, awareness of the imperative to manage resources and avoid excessive environmental impact.

### *Foster entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity*

ESD can also foster entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity, which are essential for economic growth and competitiveness. Drawing on the indigenous knowledge systems of environmental protection, food production among others, innovations and new businesses may emerge as members of communities begin to leverage their education and indigenous knowledge for sustainable development.

Incorporating indigenous languages in education for sustainable development can have positive impacts on the cognitive, social, cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions of learning. It can also support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which call for inclusive and equitable quality education, cultural diversity and intercultural understanding, and the protection of the planet and its natural resources.

## **Challenges encountered in integrating indigenous languages into education for sustainable development.**

### *Language policies*

Many countries have language policies that prioritize the use of a dominant or official language in education, often at the expense of indigenous languages. This can make it difficult for indigenous communities to use their languages in educational contexts, particularly if they are not recognized or supported by the state.

### *Lack of resources*

Indigenous languages are often under-resourced in terms of teaching materials, teacher training, and infrastructure. This can make it difficult for indigenous communities to develop and implement effective educational programs that incorporate their languages.

### *Marginalization of Indigenous communities*

Indigenous communities are often marginalized and disadvantaged within wider societies, which can make it difficult for them to access education in their own languages. Discrimination, poverty, and social exclusion can all contribute to the marginalization of indigenous communities and limit their opportunities for educational success.

### *Attitudes towards Indigenous languages*

Negative attitudes towards indigenous languages, including beliefs that they are primitive or inferior, can also pose a significant barrier to their use in education. These attitudes can be held by both non-indigenous and indigenous people, non-educated and educated folk, and can contribute to a lack of support for their use in educational contexts. This is especially true during this era where knowledge generation, technological innovation and business has been dominated by a few hegemonic languages.

### *Lack of political will*

Finally, a lack of political will or commitment to supporting the use of indigenous languages in education can also be a significant challenge. This can be due to a range of factors, including political instability, competing priorities, and a lack of recognition of the importance of indigenous languages in advancing sustainable development.

To address these challenges, it is important to develop policies and programs that recognize and support the use of indigenous languages in education, and to work towards creating more inclusive and equitable societies that value cultural diversity and indigenous knowledge.

## **Discussion**

This study set out to highlight the relevance of indigenous languages in the implementation of Education for Sustainable development. Findings reveal that when integrated into the education system, indigenous languages had several benefits which include maintenance of cultural diversity and promoting environmental sustainability through preservation of indigenous knowledge. The study also established a myriad of challenges that bedevil the use of indigenous languages in education. Nevertheless, these challenges are surmountable, and the study notes several avenues for alleviating the same. ESD advocates for inclusivity and quality education for all regardless of cultural background or economic status. The study establishes a positive connection between the use of indigenous languages in education and the sustenance of cultural diversity. Moreover, language is a source of identity, culture, history, worldview, and wisdom. Thus, indigenous languages in education would ensure the preservation of critical knowledge drawn from various indigenous communities for the benefit of the entire world, whose survival may hinge on such knowledge.

While education aims to impart knowledge, the study further acknowledges that such knowledge must be relevant to the needs of the learners. The United Nations Education Science and Culture Organisation (UNESCO) recognises the centrality of mother tongue instruction especially at the early stages of education. The study finds that the incorporation of linguistic preferences of the learners as a facet of responsiveness to learner needs serves an integral purpose. It heightens the relevance of education and promotes positive attitudes towards education which in turn enables wider coverage as envisaged in the SDGs.

Intercultural dialogue and social cohesion are important in the sustainability matrix. Collaboration among cultures united under the banner of humanity fosters peace and stability which are backbones of sustainability. This research underscores the importance of indigenous languages in the education system to social inclusion, cohesion, and intercultural mutual understanding.

Improved accessibility to education through the integration of indigenous languages provides opportunities for future decent jobs, awareness of the imperative to manage resources and avoid excessive environmental impact. Politics that recognize the rights of indigenous communities to access education in their languages are likely to achieve higher education coverage particularly

for marginalized groups. Higher educational coverage predicates a better chance of achieving sustainable development.

Although the study identifies several benefits of incorporating indigenous languages in education for sustainable development, it notes a few challenges. Language policies in Africa for instance, largely remain colonial in outlook serve for a few polities, with the colonial language dominating all the high function domains of government, business, and education. This scenario has encumbered the development of many indigenous languages to attain enough materials to be meaningfully used in formalized domains such as education. The lack of materials is itself a separate barrier albeit one that is perpetuated by the policy environment which continues to favor the so-called dominant languages like English and French. The situation is often compounded by the lack of political will to recognize indigenous languages in high status domains. The tacit link between language and ethnicity especially in Africa means that recognising linguistic diversity may militate against the nationalist goals of nation building. In some cases, however, indigenous communities themselves exhibit negative attitudes towards their languages which limits the success of implementing education in those languages. In the ensuing section, we deal briefly with strategies for overcoming some of the challenges identified above.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The paper offers a concise outline of the salient issues pertaining the importance of recognizing and promoting indigenous languages in education as a means of achieving the SDGs. It identified and discussed several benefits linked to the use of indigenous languages for the advancement of sustainable development. The study also identified challenges that have largely impeded the recognition and promotion of indigenous languages in education for sustainable development.

### **Strategies for promoting the use of indigenous languages in education as a means of achieving the SDGs.**

There are several strategies that can be employed to address the challenges of lack of resources, lack of political will, and negative attitudes towards indigenous languages, and to promote the

use of these languages in education as a means of achieving the SDGs. Some of these strategies include:

*Advocacy and awareness-raising:* Raising awareness of the importance of indigenous languages for sustainable development and promoting their use in education can be an effective strategy for addressing negative attitudes and lack of political will. Advocacy can involve engaging with policymakers, educators, and the wider community to promote the value of indigenous languages and the benefits of incorporating them into educational curricula.

*Capacity-building:* Building the capacity of Indigenous communities, educators, and policymakers to develop and implement effective educational programs that incorporate indigenous languages is critical for promoting their use in education. Capacity-building can include providing training and support for language teachers, developing teaching materials and resources, and investing in infrastructure and technology to support language learning.

*Community-led initiatives:* Community-led initiatives that prioritize the use of indigenous languages in education can be an effective way of promoting their use and ensuring that they are grounded in local contexts and cultures. Such initiatives can involve engaging with Indigenous communities to develop educational programs that reflect their unique perspectives and experiences, and that are designed to meet their specific educational needs.

*Collaboration and partnership-building:* Collaboration and partnerships between Indigenous communities, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders can be an effective way of addressing the challenges of lack of resources and political will. Collaborative efforts can involve sharing resources, expertise, and knowledge, and working together to develop and implement effective strategies for promoting the use of indigenous languages in education.

*Policy and legal frameworks:* Developing policy and legal frameworks that recognize and support the use of indigenous languages in education is critical for promoting their use and ensuring that they are protected and valued. Such frameworks can include language policies, legislation, and regulations that prioritize the use of indigenous languages in education, and that provide resources and support for their development and implementation.

By and large, promoting the use of indigenous languages in education as a means of achieving the SDGs requires a range of strategies, including advocacy and awareness-raising, capacity-building, community-led initiatives, collaboration and partnership-building, and policy and legal frameworks. By working together to address the challenges of lack of resources, lack of political will, and negative attitudes towards indigenous languages, we can ensure that they are recognized and valued as important components of cultural heritage and key to achieving sustainable development.

### **Implications**

The research has significant implications for various stakeholders, including indigenous communities, policymakers, educators, and linguists. Some possible implications involve preservation of cultural heritage, empowerment of indigenous communities, improved communication and understanding, protection of biodiversity, linguistic diversity and human right, and economic development.

Overall, the paper concludes by briefly identifying areas of possible future research to actualise the integration of indigenous languages in education for sustainable development.

The study has shown that, to attain sustainable development, indigenous cultures must be preserved and maintained. Indigenous languages are often closely linked to the cultural heritage of a community. Promoting and recognizing these languages can help preserve cultural traditions and knowledge, which are essential for sustainable development. Therefore, achieving sustainable development is inextricably linked to the preservation of cultures worldwide. Languages perform the dual function of communication and carrying culture, thus there is no cultural preservation without linguistic diversity.

Further, the study establishes that the recognition and promotion of indigenous languages can empower indigenous communities by giving them a voice in the development process. It can also help to reduce inequalities and discrimination against indigenous people. Policy makers would benefit from the recognition that empowerment and involvement of indigenous communities in development discourse is a net positive for the goals of sustainable development.

Indigenous languages often contain knowledge about local ecosystems and natural resources. Promoting these languages can help to protect biodiversity and support sustainable management of natural resources.

Recognizing and promoting linguistic diversity as a human right can help to protect and promote the diversity of languages and cultures around the world.

Promoting indigenous languages can also have economic benefits, such as fostering cultural tourism, creating jobs in language-related industries, and promoting local products and services.

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