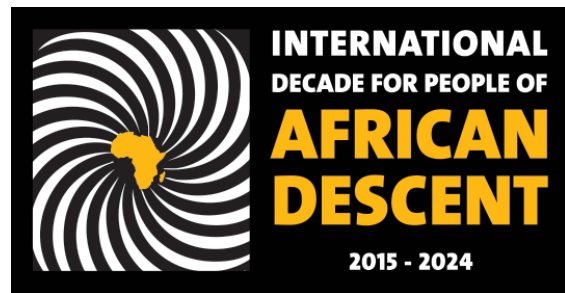


International Mother Language Day



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Date Monday 21 February 2022.

Structure

1. Introduction & overview of the Decade
2. Meaning of Mother language
3. Significance of language
4. Examples/ case studies
5. Conclusion

Introduction

About the Decade

The International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024 is a United Nations programme adopted for implementation from the resolution 16/237 of 2013 passed by UN General Assembly.

The decade seeks to address injustice and discrimination faced by people of African descent globally, reflecting on and taking into account the history of mistreatment of people of African and African Descent from Slavery and Colonialism through to contemporary times.

At the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in 2001 in Durban, the UN member states highlighted 2011 as the United Nations International Year for People of African Descent. And in resolution 16/237 for the current United Nations International Decade for People African Descent - 2015 -2024, a need to focus on specific compensatory needs arising from this history for protection and asserting equal enjoyment of all fundamental human rights by the people of African Descent, where they live.

By proclaiming the Decade, the international Community recognized that people of African Descent are a group of people, whose human rights and freedoms must be affirmatively promoted and protected, owing to the protracted history of discrimination. The Decade is therefore a firm

commitment of the international community and a call for National Action Plans and measures to eradicate racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance to people of African Descent and everyone.

Thematic areas

➤ Justice

Requires all States to enact and implement policies and mechanisms for People of African Descent to access justice, to eradicate racial profiling and discriminative law enforcement that arbitrarily violates the rights of People of African Descent. States to adopt laws that combat racial discrimination and to provide enabling institutions to protect against racial discrimination; And to withdraw reservations and objections that are contrary to the International Covenant on Elimination of all Forms of racial Discrimination, among others.

➤ Recognition

While people of African descent are enormously contributing to all aspects of life in countries they live, as a people they are seldom recognized. States are tasked to provide avenues for the recognition of the people of African descent in all spheres of life.

➤ Development

States should enable People of African Descent to participate in development and decision making. Also provide affirmative programs that compensate people of African descent, given the history of mistreatment directed toward them and their descents.

Objectives

- To promote respect, protection and fulfilment of all fundamental human rights and freedoms of People of African Descent as recognized in the UDHR.
- To promote greater knowledge and respect for the dignity, culture, heritage and the contribution of People of African Descent to the development of societies.
- To adopt and strengthen national, regional and international frameworks according to the Durban Declaration and Program of action and the International Covenant on Elimination of all Forms of racial Discrimination and to ensure their full and effective implementation.

In 2013, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 68/237, proclaiming the International Decade for People of African Descent under the theme “People of African Descent: Recognition, Justice and Development”.

So, this program is implemented by the international community, international and regional organizations and is monitored and coordinated

by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

In Ireland, the UNIDPAD specific activities started on 25 February 2019, when the Government of Ireland held the first meeting with stakeholders and members of the African and African Descent Community to discuss the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent (UNIDPAD) and its implementation in the republic.

The Irish government also initiated, convened and led a public consultation meeting with the African and African Descent Community and other stakeholders on 3 April 2019 at the Department of Justice Meeting Hall.

On the 16 of March 2019 in a public meeting held at the Teachers Club in Dublin, the People of African Descent in attendance formed a **Steering Committee** to represent the African Community in discussions with the Irish government on the implementation of the Decade and to mobilize the African community and public in Ireland to support the UNIDPAD.

Highlights of what has been done

- **The Steering Committee** began discussions with the Government of Ireland through the Justice and Equality Department, to adopt the program for the Decade and its implementation to address issues

affecting the People of African descent in Ireland as the UNIDPAD 2015-2024 requires.

- The Steering Committee has also engaged the African community in joint open public meetings in various Counties, asking members to engage their city and county councils and key public and private stakeholders to implement the UNIDPAD.
- In 2019 the Committee made a presentation on behalf of the People of African Descent in Ireland, at the United Nations Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination 2796th meeting in Geneva where the Government of Ireland was present and made submissions.
- In 2021, it issued a public statement on the demise of an African young man (George Nkecho) in the hands of An Garda.
- Presented to the Department of Equality, a comprehensive plan of the Decade launch in Ireland.
- Partnered with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Public jobs agency to organize and present at key meetings on public sector employment event for People of African Descent.
- Made submissions to the National Antiracism committee.
- Formed seven sub committees including Justice and legal, health, wellbeing and welfare and Art, culture and heritage sub committees to tackle designated thematic areas.

To do

- Hold a public meeting on 26 March 2022.
- Commemorate Africa Day on 25 May 2022.

THE INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY 2022

Today, the Decade in partnership with AkiDwA joins the rest of the world to commemorate the International Mother Language Day by providing a platform for the People of African Descent in Ireland to participate in the celebrations.

Meaning language

Language is a means of communication. It is a lens through which people understand and conceptualize the world in which they live and it enables them to meaningfully relate with other human beings.¹ It reflects a society or community that is united or bound up by its culture²

So, language is characterised by or may be words (spoken or sang), knowledge, culture and heritage.

Mother tongue is the first language one learns as a baby rather than the language learned at school or as an adult.³ Therefore, any other is a second or third language and this means that people can decide what will

¹ Noelle Higgins and Gerard Maguire, "Language, Indigenous Peoples and the Rights to self-determination" New England Journal of Public Policy (2019) 31:2 Article 8.

² *Ibid.*

³ Cambridge Dictionary

constitute one's first language (mainly parents who can nature their children).

Several languages are spoken globally and as of 2007, they were estimated at seven thousand (7000)⁴.

Africa has over 2000 languages.⁵ East Africa, there are about 239 living languages⁶ while Nigeria in West Africa alone has approximately 248 yet still, many languages that form part of Africa's cultural complexity are spoken by a small number of speakers.⁷

A few languages however, like Swahili in East Africa and Hausa- Fulani in West Africa are and continue to be spoken by millions of people (multilingual groups).⁸

The numerous African languages are classified into language families like the Sudanic, Hamitic and Bantu.⁹ Afroasiatic languages (include ancient Egyptian, Semic, Berber, Chishti and Chad), the Niger-Congo language (include Mandigo, Kwa, Bambara, Worof, Voltaic, Ijo, etc), Sudanic (from south Sudan basin) and Click languages (like Bantu languages found in South Africa, Congo, Uganda, Kenya; and Khoisan languages).¹⁰

⁴ John Nobel Wilford. "World's languages dying off Rapidly," New York Times September 2007.

⁵ Mwenda Mukuthuria, "African Languages as Key to African Identity"

⁶ Global Advice Newsletter

⁷ Ntongela Masilele, "Language as a cultural issue in Africa today"

⁸ Ntongela Masilele, "Language as a cultural issue in Africa today"

⁹ Westermann, Meinhof and Werner.

¹⁰ Ntongela Masilele, "Language as a cultural issue in Africa today"

These language classifications are central to Africa's cultural history. However, we note that Afrikaans is a language in South Africa that arrived due to imperial penetration into the continent, so it presents an issue of cultural imperialism in African Cultural history.¹¹

Questions for discussion are.

Keeping in mind that there are many Official languages of the African Union include Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Kiswahili and any other African language.¹²

1. Whether Arabic is an African language considering its origin being traced to the Arab region versus the Islamic religion and the existence of African Arabs.
2. Is having one unifying African language possible in a continent with diverse languages? If so, how?

If not, there is probably hope as recently Kiswahili which is a widely spoken language and is used by the East African Community (EAC) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) has been adopted as the African Union's official language.¹³

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognised Kiswahili to be among the ten

¹¹ Ibid 7.

¹² Article 11 of the Protocol on Amendment of Constitutive Act of the African Union

¹³ Reuters for Citizen Digital, 'African Region adopts Swahili as an official working language'. 13 February 2022.

(10) most widely spoken languages in the world and has unanimously proclaimed 7 July as a world Kiswahili Language Day to be celebrated annually.¹⁴ Kiswahili therefore goes on record as Africa's first Dialect to be recognized by UNESCO.¹⁵ **Might this be the desired African Unifying language?**

Significance of language

As a means of communication, language is used for

- Expression (by word, signs, songs)
- Identity (It represents culture, history and heritage)

It is used to connect communities, assert identities that is, a sense of belonging and to preserve culture).¹⁶

- Tool of power and control

Language is an instrument of subjugation, a means of oppression and domination of non -dominant groups of people. (for example imperialism by taking away or restricting the use of native languages).

Wa Thiong'o notes that language is a means of control and domination of non-dominant groups, often leading to their exclusion and

¹⁴ General Conference 41st Session Paris, 5 November 2021 <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379702>>

¹⁵ Reuters for Citizen Digital, 'African Region adopts Swahili as an official working language'. 13 February 2022.

¹⁶ Noelle Higgins and Gerard Maguire, "Language, Indigenous Peoples and the Rights to self-determination" New England Journal of Public Policy (2019) 31:2 Article 8.

assimilation for example language specifications in jobs, schools and programmes.¹⁷

Illustrations/ Scenarios

- i. Communities are identified by the languages they speak(The Masai, Yoruba, Fulani, Zulu, Bantu, etc) and people are easily identified as members of their communities by their ability to speak the language.

A best practice worth adopting in Africa-Aboriginal song lines of Australia illustrate language as a means of identity and cultural preservation as they are used to trace the journey of ancestral spirits. They contain information about land, location of resources and access to landscape. The song lines have been of ancestral significance concerning land so that one's ability to sing a song line proves ownership of land and this is now acceptable as evidence in land claims.

- ii. Language used as a tool of control and domination- English, French, Spanish and Portuguese are European languages that were introduced in Africa by colonial masters who dominated their subjects. These continue to be used as official languages and

¹⁷ Wa Thiong'o (2011) page 244.

medium of instruction in schools of the former colonies and this is simultaneous with the subordination of African national histories to European imperial histories.¹⁸ This explains why most African literature is for instance documented in foreign as opposed to local languages.

- iii. To travel to some countries, knowledge of the country's language is a requirement for instance English language for travellers to Europe (Majority are subjected to English courses and exams for example as a way to facilitate communication but is also a source of income generated from the courses offered). This can be a best practice for adoption in the African context for visitors to African countries to take initiatives to learn the languages there.

Conclusion

It is important for people to know their language/ mother tongue as a form of identity and preservation of culture. To use and be accorded an enabling environment to use their language because denying or destroying a language threatens Peoples' very existence.¹⁹

Quotes

- i. "Language holds our culture, our perspective, our history and our inheritance. What type of people we are, where we come from, what

¹⁸ Ntongela Masilele, "Language as a cultural issue in Africa today"

¹⁹ Commission on Human Rights Sub commission on the Prevention of Minorities; The International Protection of Minorities Under the League of Nations. E/CN 4/Sub. 2/6. 7 November 1947.

land we claim...all are based on the language we speak” (Teresa L.Mc Costy and Sheilah E Nicholas, “Reclaiming Indigenous Languages,” Review of research in Education (2014) 3. 1 pages 106-136)- Citing a member of an Indigenous Community Mary Siemen.

ii. **UNESCO’S six level scale to measure language endangerment-**

A language is safe if it is spoken by all generations and intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted. It is vulnerable if most children speak the language as a mother tongue but only in specific places. A language is endangered if children no longer learn the language as a mother tongue at home. It is severely endangered if it is spoken by only grandparents and older generation... it is critically endangered if the youngest speakers are grand parents and older persons who speak the language partially or infrequently. A language is extinct if there are no speakers left.