

# **THE ROLE OF LOCAL LANGUAGES IN SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA**

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## **Abstract**

This study is an attempt to underscore the crucial role of local languages in facilitating community participation in socio-economic development. This is with particular reference to projects carried out in five communities from five Local Government Areas by the Ebonyi State Community and Social Development Agency (EBCSDA), Nigeria. The investigation was based on the responses of 10 project supervisory staff of EBCSDA and 94 executive members of development unions from the five communities studied. The instrument of data collection was primarily the questionnaire, supplemented by the interview and observation methods. Analysis of data was done through a simple statistical method using frequencies and percentages. Findings from the study revealed that successful implementation of sustainable socio-economic development projects are better achieved through both the use of local languages and participation of the target population. This paper concludes that language and community participation are crucial to socio-economic development. Hence, the use of indigenous languages is highly recommended; just as efficient corpus planning of the local dialects and the inclusion of the target groups in the execution of community development projects.

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**Keywords:** Local languages, development projects, Ebonyi State, community participation, communication, *Nka Uforo Ibaan*, hypothesis

## Introduction

There has been a plethora of activities by the global community toward engendering positive change and growth in all aspects of human life, especially, since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This period has witnessed the emergence of many organizations and government agencies in support of development. As defined by Coetzee (2001), “development is a form of social change that will lead to progress, the process of enlarging people’s choices, acquiring knowledge and having access to resources for a decent standard of living, and a condition of moving from worse to better (p.120).” In other words, development as a process of social interaction brings people together into a communicative event with the aim of making and exchanging meanings through signs in order to achieve a purpose. This usually results in a change or improvement in people’s living conditions. The concept of community development, therefore, is founded on the premise that changes in the living conditions of people are best effected by the people themselves. The term ‘community’ evokes, ideally, a homogeneous social group who can recognize their common interests and work together harmoniously for their common good. It is also, therefore, aimed at helping a community to strengthen itself and develop towards achieving its full potential.

This study sets out to examine the role local languages play in implementing community projects, with a focus on those executed by the Ebonyi State Community and Social Development Agency (EBCSDA) in Nigeria. Part of our thesis is that an improved understanding of the complexities and subtleties of communication, language, can be of great assistance to people involved in the social process of enhancing the quality of people’s life. The study, therefore, was motivated by the understanding that if development, as suggested by scholars, involves the coming together of stakeholders in a dialogue of ideas, needs (objectives, actions and human participation), then the language of the people holds the key to sustainable development (Manyozo 2006).

In a nut shell, the objectives of this study are to:

(i) Find out the role of local languages and participation of the target group in sustainable socio-economic development with reference to the activities of the Ebonyi State Community Development Agency; (ii) make recommendations on the use of the language of the target group in development programmes.

In order to achieve our objectives, the following hypotheses were developed:

i) Is the language used in community development programmes of any significance to the success of the programmes? ii) Does language have any significance in mass participation of the target group? iii) Does the success

of development projects have any positive impact on the socio-economic development of the target group?

### **Language and Community Development**

It is important to mobilize community members for community development. However, community members can only be mobilized when communication is effective. Community is precipitated on the fact that frequent interaction of citizens is essential to collective action and that effective communication serves to stimulate and direct such interactions (Communication and

Community Development in <http://www.communicationforsocialchange.org/maziarticles>). Language, therefore, is a mediating factor, which facilitates and contributes to a collective change process (Sarvaes and Liu, 2007).

However, language has not always featured prominently in development strategies. As observed by Prah (1993), in their search for solutions to the development problems of Africa, students of African development have often ignored linguistic and other socio-cultural resources (cf. Noah, 1999, 2003; Noah and Oyo, 2008). Often, when linguistic issues are addressed at all, the fact that there is a multiplicity of languages in African countries is often seen as a hindrance to the development of the continent. As Bodomu (1999) and Trudgel (2009) put it (also cf. Essien (2003) the apparent neglect of linguistic issues in development programs could be attributed to the fact that there is a traditional lack of cognizance that language plays an important role in social change. In fact, the tendency, quite unhelpful though, is to take language for granted, make it irrelevant to social-economic processes or dismiss it as commonplace (Noah, 1999, 2003).

Thus, people tend to ignore the role local languages play in carrying information, communicating values, attitudes, feelings, ideologies and expressing power and dominion in the field of development (Noah, 1999). Indeed, this connection has been elusive to many people. The tendency is partly a conceptual problem related to the term development, which has hitherto focused more on the product, such as improved infrastructure, rather than the skills and knowledge that are a prerequisite to achieving the desired change. For the most part, development is often conceived of, in a rather narrow sense, focusing mainly only on GDP, GNP and other economic variables, such as income per capita. Whenever issues on development are discussed, the consequences of this quantitative approach to development are that economic indicators are often erroneously equated with national development and societal well-being. In this narrow sense then, the role of language in development is seen as too tangential to be taken seriously.

Another reason why the language issue has not featured well in development discourses is that the nature and role of language in society is often completely misunderstood. Some development economists and educators are of the opinion that economic indicators can be improved just by sheer hard work by the people speaking whatever language; because in their conception, so many languages are incapable of expressing certain political notions and the technical concepts that are inherent in many academic fields.

However, in the last twenty years or so, individuals working in a variety of disciplines have come to recognize the way in which changes in language use are linked to wider social and cultural processes Christie (2005); Eggins (2004); Halliday (1994); Fairclough (1992, 2004). In fact, scholars and development workers are coming to appreciate the importance of using language analysis as a method for studying social change. According to Christie (2005), language is a basic requisite resource to negotiate social relationships with others, to construct our sense of the world by shaping values, meanings and understandings. To corroborate this, Djite in Trudgel (2009) argues that:

No matter how one defines development it cannot be achieved without reference to language as an important factor, and real development is not possible in Africa without the integration of all her human capital. The critical aspects of development are affected by language choice. Critical thinking ability is an important aspect of community-owned sustainable development since target populations need to be able to sort out the truly helpful development knowledge and programmes from those which neither meet felt needs nor are likely to benefit the community over the long run. For such critical thinking to take place maximal comprehension of the issues is necessary and this has direct implications for language choice (p. 75).

Also, Essien in Essien and Okon (2003) is unequivocal that "...developmental projects would be seriously flawed if language were not considered a major component of such programmes" (p.22). Development involves people interacting with concepts to create meanings and messages, construct and reconstruct meanings and values in order to arrive at a common understanding, witnessed usually by a common social action. Community participation seeks to enlist the active involvement and internal participation of the intended beneficiaries of development programmes in need of identification, prioritization, project initiation, financing, execution, monitoring, evaluation and subsequent sustainability. All these activities are rooted in language. Without language as a cohesive factor, there would

undoubtedly be incertitude and misunderstanding, which could result in conflict, lack of cooperation, as was said to be the case in Babel (Genesis 11). Conversely, open and more accessible discussions in local languages create a collegial and congenial atmosphere for community participation.

The idea of linguistic rights fits in well with the current agenda in development where emphasis is on participatory empowerment and ownership of the process of development by the target community. It is a fact that one can only participate actively in a social change if one has the access and right to, individually and collectively. This can be done by one voicing his experiences, using discourse choices and patterns that he is familiar with. Hence, there are strong arguments for the use of local languages as a way of achieving a people-oriented development in areas where the majority do not have equal access to the major world languages, such as English, in rural Ebonyi communities. Effective communication via the use of local languages can be the tipping point between success and failure in communal development projects. Our position is buoyed by an understanding that community development is a service-activity. This involves the selling of ideas that are aimed at influencing other people's way of lives so that they can change to a better life of dignity and less human suffering. Such influence relies, largely, on appropriate language use which forms the building-block for any meaningful interaction. Therefore, the clearer one understands the likelihood of better results.

Sometimes decisions on development initiatives, resource allocation, and programme execution rest largely with the central authorities. There is little doubt that over centralization is inconsistent with community participation as key decision-making is almost the exclusive preserve of bureaucracy. This implies that since the local people are not involved, their language obviously cannot be used either in decision-making or the project implementation.

A case in point was the strategy adopted by the Nigerian Government to actualize community development in 1986 by creating the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DIFFRI). DIFFRI carried out its needs-identification, prioritization, financing, and even the contracting for project execution, first from Lagos and later from Abuja, without any recourse to the benefiting communities. Understandably, the communities never saw the projects as their own, hence the demise of DIFFRI (Soola, 1995). It could not have been otherwise because the intended beneficiaries were not part of the decision making process (through the use of their local knowledge). This is at variance, in terms of the success level, with projects undertaken via local languages, such as the ones under the aegis of *Nka Uforo Ibaan* in Akwa Ibom State in the 1990's. Among other variables, the Akwa Ibom State projects were domesticated in the local language (Ibibio)

and the people were given some sense of belonging, hence the huge success rate of the development projects.

### **The Ebonyi State Projects**

Language and development are so interrelated that it is impossible to talk of development without mentioning language and vice versa. As stated by James Iro, one of the Coordinators of EB-CSDA (*Personal Communication*), the execution of sustainable socio-economic development projects had been somewhat difficult in Ebonyi State of Nigeria due to the use of language that was foreign to the development target groups; as well as the failure to involve the target population in development programmes. The result was low achievement of the objectives of the agencies, which in turn affected the development of the communities, hence the recourse to the use of the local languages of the target community in projects implementation by EBCSDA.

The Ebonyi State Community Social Development Agency was established in 2009. It is part of the World Bank's Intervention Programme in the State to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, which emphasize the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. The major objective of the Agency is to facilitate and increase community partnership on human development by EBCSDA.

The objectives of the Ebonyi State Community Social Development Agency (EB-CSDA) are realized through the: (a) reconstruction and/or rehabilitation of multipurpose community centres; (b) construction and/or rehabilitation community of market stalls community skills acquisition centres; and (c) construction of community security posts. (*EB-CSDA Manual: 2010*).

Table 1 below shows projects carried out by EB-CSDA and the local languages spoken in the project areas.

Table 1: Projects carried out in the Areas of Study and Local Language Varieties Used

<b>LGA/Community</b>	<b>Projects Carried out</b>	<b>Local Languages/ Dialects Used</b>
Ohaukwu /Ezzamgbo	Construction/Rehabilitation of community market stalls.	Ngbo

Findings from some of the senior staff members of EB-CSDA revealed that one very strong code of conduct among the staff is that the native languages or dialects of the immediate environment of the benefiting communities must be used to interact with them. This was done in order to achieve the objective of participatory alliance. It has been observed that the level of participation of the community members was enhanced by the use of the language of the immediate environment. Consequently, most of the staff sent to the project sites speak the language of the target groups. This is

indeed the case in all the states of Nigeria where such agencies operate. In spite of the deliberate effort to use the dialect of the target community in the mobilization process, it was however, observed that some members of the communities as well as the EBCSDA supervisors code-mixed intermittently. Nevertheless, communication was not adversely affected by that social act.

### **Methodology**

The purposive sampling technique was adopted to identify respondents who could provide the most appropriate information that would achieve the desired objectives of the study. The population for the study consisted of the Project Supervisors of the Ebonyi State Community Social Development Agency (EB-CSDA) as well as the executive members of the respective town unions of the communities, where EB-CSDA projects had been carried out. A total of 104 respondents comprising ten staff members of EB-CSDA and 94 executive members of five town unions were used for the study.

The primary source of data included (information elicited from) questionnaires, direct observations and interviews of the project supervisors. Data also collected from the EB-CSDA library and the Internet. The principal instrument of data collection was a carefully prepared ten- item questionnaire which was administered on the respondents for the purpose of eliciting information. Administration and collection of instrument was done by trained research assistants engaged for this purpose. The instrument was validated by experts in the area of social research. To ensure reliability, the questionnaire items were piloted using 25 respondents in the Abakaliki Metropolis, two weeks before the actual administration of the instruments. Crombach alpha of 0.72 was obtained, which is an indication of good reliability. The completed copies of the questionnaire were retrieved for analysis. Analysis of the data was by simple statistical method of frequencies and percentages, presented here in table 2 below.

### **Results and Analysis**

**Hypothesis:** Is there any relationship between language and community development?

Table 2: Relationship between language and community development

S/No	Items	Responses			
		Agreed		Disagreed	
		No.	%	No.	%
1.	Community development is a way of helping a community to strengthen itself and develop towards its full potentials.	98	94.23	6	5.77
2.	Local language leads to effective collaborative efforts in issues of development.	102	98.07	2	1.93
3.	Use of common language leads to good participation in community development.	101	97.11	3	2.99
4.	The use of local language is more effective in community mobilization than the use of foreign language.	104	100	0	0

From the response obtained from (question) item 1 in Table 2 above, 98 respondents representing 94.23% of the total respondents, understood the concept of community development. This validates the choice of purposive sampling technique adopted for this study. The respondents were mainly people who were directly involved as participants in the various community projects, that were carried out by EBSCDA in collaboration with the target communities. However, 6 respondents, representing 5.77%, were of a contrary view.

From the response obtained from item 2 in table 2 above, 102 respondents representing 98.07 of the total respondents were of the view that the language used in carrying out developmental projects is of great significance to the success of the project. Nonetheless, 2 respondents, representing 1.93%, had a contrary view. It was also observed from the responses obtained from item 3 in table 2 above that 101 respondents believed that when local languages are used in the execution of community development projects, participation is enhanced. Only 3 respondents believed otherwise. However, 100% of the respondents, to item 4 in the same table above, agreed that the use of local language of the target group is better than the use of foreign language, for the purpose of community mobilization.

## **Discussion**

Table 2 (above) reveals that the use of the local languages of the target communities in communication is of enormous significance in community development. It was also revealed that effective communication has a great impact on people's participation in community development. In other words, the effect of the use of the language of the immediate environment in the development of communities is critical, when one realizes that there is need for collaborative actions among community members. For this collaboration to be achieved, there is need for effective communication, which is better enhanced by the use of the local language of the target group. Community development depends on the effectiveness of communication as it helps in the sharing of ideas and opinions (Anyanwu, 1990). Effective communication is guaranteed when interlocutors engage in the use of a common (local) language; which is intelligible to all the parties involved. As also observed by Coetzee (2001), communities are able to participate actively in a decision-making process when they use their local language. The use of local language allows participants to explain the concepts to themselves in the manner that they understand best. Kishe (2004) has also explained how language can facilitate development by showing that there is a close relationship between language and development; and that meaningful development cannot take place where linguistic barriers exist. According to him, "for development to take place and the desired objectives to be realized, there is need to unite people through the use of a common language" (p.122).

## **Summary and Conclusion**

The study investigated the role of local languages and popular participation in sustainable development, using projects carried out by EB-CSDA in selected communities in five Local Government Areas of Ebonyi State. The study revealed that communication among community members is a crucial factor for development; and that communication can be achieved through the use of a common language of the target community.

In other words, the study has re-affirmed that communication plays a fundamental role in community development programmes; and that language is a key factor in effective communication and in the implementation of these programmes. This is so because the use of local language in communication is essential in eliciting community participation in development programmes. People can only participate actively in a social change if they have the access to it, individually and collectively. This access enables them to voice their experiences, using discourse choices and patterns that they are familiar with. Hence, there are strong arguments for the use of local languages, as a means of achieving a people-oriented development in areas where the majority do

not have equal access to the major world languages, (like English) as is the case in rural Ebonyi State, especially.

Although the English language appears to have opened the doorway to western culture, education, science and technology, it has also shut the door of opportunities for millions of indigenous Nigerian people, Noah (1999, 2003). Therefore, indigenous languages are needed to unlock this door, harness the rich cultural heritage of Africans and to assist them attain a higher level of development, culturally, socio-economically, politically, and technologically. This is so because intelligible reaction by speakers to new ideas and technologies, are better registered, processed and transmitted through their own mother-tongue. After all, indigenous voices encapsulate valuable indigenous knowledge and mode of perception, the negligence of which can, and does actually; undermine the success of rural development projects. More than that, the more our indigenous languages are used beyond the rudimentary domestic spheres; and the more corpus planning is enhanced, the more chances of their survival, given the debilitating battering they suffer from the English language and skewed globalization.

### **Recommendations**

In order to achieve a sustained socio-economic community development in the State, Nigeria, we dare to make the following recommendations, which are borne out of the findings of this study;

- a. The local language of the people should be used in the prosecution of development projects.
- b. Government should support and sponsor corpus planning of local dialects in order to empower them in the task of community development.
- c. Consciousness level should be raised among the local communities for them to appreciate more the significance of indigenous languages in their lives; and how these languages can impact positively on their worldview. This can be achieved by campaigns, among other means, that can help awaken the people's sense of pride and respect for their local languages.

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