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Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

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NIGERIA

SAVING MINORITY LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA

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Introduction

Fantsuam Foundation lives and works among minority ethnic groups in northern Nigeria. Nigeria has over 500 languages[1] with three local languages dominant: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. This status tends to confer some socio-political advantages on the native speakers of these languages. Some minority languages are not yet in print, while some others are only found in religious books. Others are already near extinction.

A few years ago, Fantsuam Foundation started to document the minority languages of the southern Kaduna communities of northern Nigeria. This was the first attempt at publishing these languages online. The project's aim was to promote the rights of people speaking minority languages to participate in cultural life as provisioned in Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).[2]

The issue of languages in education is also relevant in this context. For example, Shaver argues that "every person has the right to education for literacy and the right to freely choose the reading material they prefer" and that this right is already implicit in international law and derives its legitimacy in the well-known rights such as education, science, culture and freedom of expression.[3] However, such a right can hardly be exercised in the current digital world if some languages are yet to be documented and digitised. This is the situation for many minority languages in Nigeria.

Internet access in Nigeria

The provision of broadband infrastructure to create an enabling environment for development can support the implementation of ESCRs in many ways, including in the documentation, preservation and development of indigenous minority languages of Nigeria. By June 2016, Nigeria's broadband penetration was only 14%;[4] but despite this low penetration, there are about 93 million internet users in Nigeria.[5] Therefore, the internet can have a positive effect on meeting some of Nigeria's ESCR obligations.

With an increasing interest in addressing the inequity in broadband penetration, civil society continues to play a significant role. This includes the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI),[6] which brings together stakeholders from civil society and the public and private sectors to promote affordable internet access. Nigeria's civil society was also in the team that crafted Nigeria's broadband plan in 2013,[7] with the goal of achieving 30% connectivity by 2017.

The level of internet access available to communities who speak marginalised languages is not reported on in Nigeria's access statistics.[8] However, if we consider the sizes of the population groups that speak endangered languages, and that many of these groups live in rural areas and cannot speak English, we can guess that internet access is low. Up to 400 minority Nigerian languages are considered endangered, with 152 of them at risk of extinction.[9] Basa-Kontagora had only 10 known speakers way back in 1987, while the number of speakers of the

1 Blench, R. (2012). *An Atlas of Nigerian Languages*. www.rogerblench.info/Language/Africa/Nigeria/Atlas%20of%20Nigerian%20Languages%20ed%20III.pdf

2 www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx

3 Shaver, L. (2015). The Right to Read. *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*, 54(1), 1-58. jtl.columbia.edu/the-right-to-read/ ssrn.com/abstract=2467635

4 Adepetun, A. (2016, 26 July). Nigeria's broadband penetration now 14%. *The Guardian*. guardian.ng/business-services/nigerias-broadband-penetration-now-14

5 Nigerian Communications Commission. (2016). Monthly Subscriber Data. ncc.gov.ng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=125&Itemid=73

6 Johnson, O. (2016, 22 July). Africa's Future in a Connected World. *Alliance for Affordable Internet*. a4ai.org/africas-future-in-a-connected-world

7 Nigeria's National Broadband Plan 2013-2018. www.researchictafrica.net/countries/nigeria/Nigeria_National_Broadband_Plan_2013-2018.pdf

8 Nigerian Communications Commission. (2016). Subscriber Statistics. www.ncc.gov.ng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=125&Itemid=73

9 NAN. (2014, 26 February). 'More than 400 Nigerian indigenous languages are endangered'. *Vanguard*. www.vanguardngr.com/2014/02/400-nigerian-indigenous-languages-endangered

Labir language in the state of Bauchi has dropped from over 13,000 speakers to just about 500.[10]

While there is "consensus around the idea that access to the internet allows or facilitates countless processes of expression and communication, thus enabling the realisation of human rights,"[11] whether or not access is a human right is still under debate. Nevertheless, its enabling role in supporting the cultural rights of speakers of minority languages and thereby fostering inclusive governance and equitable development is not in doubt. It is in this area that the Nigerian government can place more emphasis, as it will enable it to vicariously meet some of its ESCR obligations as they relate to minority languages.

Linguistic diversity in Nigeria

Nigeria has a large linguistic diversity: while Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are spoken by up to 54% of the population,[12] 20% of the population speaks 390 languages, and over 300 minority languages are spoken by 7% of the people.[13]

The Nigerian minister of information and culture recently stated that 80% of Nigerians between the ages of two and 18 had difficulty speaking their mother tongues.[14] It therefore appears that the intergenerational transmission of Nigerian languages is not happening; and this is even more so with minority languages.

The three major languages in Nigeria are regionally based and by their sheer numbers have promoted the displacement of the minority languages in the spheres of economic and political influence. This situation is illustrated in the case of Babur/Bura, a minority language in north-eastern Nigeria. Bukar Usman[15] attributes this situation to military conquest that is usually followed by imposition of the victors' language and also to the numerical superiority of a particular language which allows it to be imposed on the development of various key policies (socioeconomic policies, in education, etc.). The minority language speakers, in an attempt to promote their own careers and take part in the historical advantage and opportunities created for speakers of the major languages,[16] often have to migrate to the language of power, leading their own language into disuse and sometimes extinction.[17]

However, the irony is that the younger generation of the major language tribes are speaking less of their mother tongues because their parents prefer to speak English in the house rather than the native language.[18] As a result of the country's colonisation by Britain, English has been the official language of communication in Nigeria.

Fantsuam Foundation's project

In this context, Fantsuam Foundation launched the Zitt Localization Project.[19] Nearly 80% of Nigeria's 500 languages are spoken in the "Middle Belt", home to minority communities sandwiched in between larger ethnic groups in the country.

Hausa, an Afro-Asiatic, Chadic language, is the lingua franca of northern Nigeria, and this holds true all over the state of Kaduna, where over 50 languages are spoken. However, in the southern areas, Benue-Congo languages, particularly those of the Plateau variety, are the mother tongues spoken by indigenous people. Despite a lack of sufficient data, the languages of southern Kaduna are undoubtedly endangered, understudied minority languages that have fewer than one million native speakers. Meanwhile, indigenous tribes in the Kafanchan area cannot access our organisation's computers and internet services due to the language barrier. The fact that these populations cannot read or write in English creates a great barrier for them, despite the fact that they are custodians of a rich oral culture of knowledge and skills.

The Zitt Localization Project was the first attempt to digitally document some of these languages. The languages selected for localisation were Fantswam (Kafanchan), Gong (Kagoma), Gworok (Kagoro), Hyam (Jaba), Jju (Bajju), Koro, Tsam (Chawai) and

10 Endangered Languages of Nigeria. Nairaland Forum. www.nairaland.com/1842351/endangered-languages-nigeria-others

11 Lara, J. C. (2015). *Internet access and economic, social and cultural rights*. Association for Progressive Communications. https://www.apc.org/en/system/files/APC_ESCR_Access_Juan%20Carlos%20Lara_September2015%20%281%29.pdf

12 Agheyisi, R. N. (1984). Minor languages in the Nigerian context: Prospects and problems. *Word*, 35(3).

13 Jibril, M. (1991). Minority Languages and Lingua Francas in Nigerian Education. In E. N. Emenanjo (Ed.), Multilingualism, *Minority Languages and Language Policy in Nigeria*. Agbor: Central Books.

14 Okeke, C. (2015, 27 November). Indigenous Languages on Brink of Extinction. *Leadership*. leadership.ng/business/478303/indigenous-languages-brink-extinction

15 Usman, B. (2014). *Language Disappearance and Cultural Diversity in Biu Emirate*. Abuja: Klamidas Communications.

16 Mustapha, A. R. (2003). Ethnic minority groups in Nigeria: Current Situation and Major Problems. Commission on Human Rights, Sub-Commission on Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, Working Group on Minorities, Ninth Session, 12-16 May.

17 Moses J. M. (2014, 22 August). Are Nigeria's indigenous languages going extinct? *Peoples Daily*. www.peoplesdailyng.com/are-nigerias-indigenous-languages-going-extinct; see also: Bassey, B. (2015, 18 November). Dead Nigerian Languages: 10 local mother tongues, you will never get to hear. *Pulse.ng*. pulse.ng/arts_culture/dead-nigerian-languages-10-local-mother-tongues-you-will-never-get-to-hear-id4369768.html

18 Leadership. (2015, 3 December). Before Our Languages Go Extinct. *Leadership*. leadership.ng/opinions/480071/languages-go-extinct

19 zitt.sourceforge.net/zitt.php?su=eng&ibe=4

Tyap (Kataf). A glossary of the commonest 100 words and expressions in each of these languages is being compiled.

Besides preserving indigenous knowledge and culture, Fantsuam believes that access to relevant information on the internet in the appropriate format and local language is one of the keys to achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of poverty reduction in Nigeria.[20]

Government's role

Nigeria formally ratified the ICESCR on 29 July 1993.[21] However, it is interesting that, until now, Nigeria is not listed among the following African countries that have provided updates on issues arising from the implementation of ESCRs in their countries: Namibia, Kenya, Burkina Faso, Uganda, Sudan, Gabon, Egypt, Togo, Rwanda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad and Angola. Considering the series of socio-political challenges that Nigeria has faced in the past 16 years, it is unlikely that there could be no issues arising from the implementation of the covenant. It seems more likely that the implementation of the covenant may be in abeyance, hence the absence of any report updates from Nigeria.[22] There are no public records of any efforts to raise awareness about citizens' rights to ESCRs in the country, including among key stakeholders such as the judiciary, public services, or the private sector.

It must be placed on record that the government has some interest in the nation's languages as evidenced in the establishment of three parastatals under the Ministry of Education that deal with language issues: the National Institute of Nigerian Languages, the Nigerian French Language Village and the National Arabic Language Village. However, the recognition accorded two foreign languages – Arabic and French, with English as the official language – does not show a government that gives attention to its own minority languages. The prominence given to the three colonial languages in a country that has already lost some of its indigenous languages, and with several others on the endangered list, does not leave much room for optimism for the fate of minority languages in Nigeria. It is therefore safe to state that so far, Nigeria has not made much progress in the promotion of its minority languages as part of its fulfilment of its ESCR obligations.

The apparent inaction on the implementation of the ICESCR in Nigeria may be linked to the availability of resources, implied in the concept of "progressive realisation". Progressive realisation is basically a "recognition of the fact that full realisation of all economic, social and cultural rights will generally not be able to be achieved in a short period of time. (…) It thus imposes an obligation to move as expeditiously and effectively as possible."[23] However, an argument based on a lack of resources may not be tenable for Nigeria, one of the previous highest earners of oil revenue in the world. Nevertheless, the dedication of three parastatals to the issue of languages (albeit two of these promoting colonially inherited languages) may indicate a move in the right direction.

Conclusions

The Fantsuam Foundation efforts at the localisation of five minority languages had a major flaw: it did not have adequate buy-in from stakeholders in a position of social and economic power, including community leaders and mothers, who arguably play a strong role in developing primary languages in children. There was also not enough awareness of the impact of the family as a unit, and the influence that the family space has on languages. These are critical for the intergenerational transmission of a minority language. We found that the elitism and power associated with the major languages sometimes make parents prefer to use these languages as the first language of communication with their children.

Several suggestions on how to promote the intergenerational transmission of indigenous languages include encouraging parents to minimise the use of the English language within home settings, making the local language their children's first language, and making the study of indigenous languages compulsory in the nations' schools.

It is interesting that government initiatives may have underestimated or overlooked the role of the internet in fostering the survival and revival of Nigeria's minority and major languages, especially with

20 Leonard, T. (2005, 7 March). Knowledge Fades As African Languages Die. *Associated Press.* truth-out.org/archive/component/k2/item/52823-knowledge-fades-as-african-languages-die

21 Ratification, Reporting & Documentation for Nigeria. tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/TreatyBodyExternal/Countries.aspx

22 www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CESCR/OHCHR_Map_ICESCR.pdf; see also: www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/HRIndicators/MetadataRatificationStatus.pdf

23 Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR). (1990). General Comment No. 3: The Nature of States Parties' Obligations (Art. 2, Para. 1, of the Covenant) (E/1991/23). www.refworld.org/docid/4538838e10.html

regard to the younger generation. In spite of Nigeria's low internet penetration,[24] this generation has taken to the internet and social media more readily than their parents. The advent of the 3G phone has made internet access even more available to the youth.

However, given the fact that the custodians of Nigeria's minority languages are adults, a challenge is presented: the literacy level of many adults in Nigeria is still low[25] and the potential role of the internet serving as a useful medium for sharing minority languages is limited. Because of this, civil society or government interventions are necessary. These interventions should be aimed at improving the literacy levels of the older generations and documenting the oral use of their languages, while providing basic internet infrastructure that will make access affordable. For illiterate adults, affordable internet access that has appropriate audiovisual content could facilitate the online proliferation of minority languages.

Action steps

The following advocacy steps are suggested for civil society:

- There is an urgent need to raise awareness of the status of Nigerian languages. It is interesting that the focus on minority languages has also revealed that the major languages may be in danger of attrition because some parents insist on using English as the preferred language of communication within the family; this happens even in families that belong to the major languages groups.

- Both the minority and major languages can benefit from concerted efforts by government to provide an internet backbone that reaches out to remote and rural communities in order to offer affordable internet access to these communities.

- Relevant content, especially content that can be accessed offline that promotes minority languages, should be developed. Efforts like the Fantsuam localisation project can be replicated or extended to other minority languages.

- Civil society should continue its advocacy for equitable distribution of broadband nationwide.

24 Adediran, Y. A., Opadiji, J. F., Faruk, N., & Bello, O. W. (2016). On Issues and Challenges of Rural Telecommunications Access in Nigeria. *African Journal of Education, Science and Technology, 3*(2) www.coou.edu.ng/journals/ajest/vol_3_iss_2/on_issues_and_challenges_of_rural_telecom.pdf; see also: Africa Telecom & IT. (2013, 8 July). Nigerian rural areas targeted for broadband service. www.africatelecomit.com/nigerian-rural-areas-targeted-for-broadband-service

25 NAN. (2014, 27 July). UNESCO tasks Nigerian govt. on adult illiteracy, out-of-school children. *Premium Times*. www.premiumtimesng.com/news/more-news/165668-unesco-tasks-nigerian-govt-on-adult-illiteracy-out-of-school-children.html; see also World Bank, Adult literacy rate, population 15+ years, both sexes (%). data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS

Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

The 45 country reports gathered here illustrate the link between the internet and economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs). Some of the topics will be familiar to information and communications technology for development (ICT4D) activists: the right to health, education and culture; the socioeconomic empowerment of women using the internet; the inclusion of rural and indigenous communities in the information society; and the use of ICT to combat the marginalisation of local languages. Others deal with relatively new areas of exploration, such as using 3D printing technology to preserve cultural heritage, creating participatory community networks to capture an "inventory of things" that enables socioeconomic rights, crowdfunding rights, or the negative impact of algorithms on calculating social benefits. Workers' rights receive some attention, as does the use of the internet during natural disasters.

Ten thematic reports frame the country reports. These deal both with overarching concerns when it comes to ESCRs and the internet – such as institutional frameworks and policy considerations – as well as more specific issues that impact on our rights: the legal justification for online education resources, the plight of migrant domestic workers, the use of digital databases to protect traditional knowledge from biopiracy, digital archiving, and the impact of multilateral trade deals on the international human rights framework.

The reports highlight the institutional and country-level possibilities and challenges that civil society faces in using the internet to enable ESCRs. They also suggest that in a number of instances, individuals, groups and communities are using the internet to enact their socioeconomic and cultural rights in the face of disinterest, inaction or censure by the state.

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