

EVENT REPORT

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

SOUTH AFRICA
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Catalysing Indigenous Languages

United Nations declared 2019-The Year of Indigenous Languages (IY2019). This was done “in order to raise awareness, not only to benefit the people who speak these languages, but also to appreciate the important contribution they make to our world’s rich cultural diversity”. Indigenous languages worldwide face the threat of extinction.

On 27 September the University of Limpopo hosted a conference titled Catalyzing Indigenous Languages. The conference was done in cooperation with ILAF (Indigenous Languages Action Forum) and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. Over 80 delegates attended the conference. The delegates comprised of language practitioners and students.

Challenges

South Africa has eleven official languages however in general English dominates as the language of business and teaching. Afrikaans also has some prominence as a medium of instruction in schools as well as at institutions of higher learning. Though it is now being challenged as some Universities, which were previously using Afrikaans as a medium of instruction are now replacing it with English.

Indigenous African languages are lagging far behind, some of them are not recognized as official languages. For instance, a language like Xhosa and many others are not given proper recognition as a result they may face extinction.

According to statistics presented by Dr Conrad Steenkamp (ILAF):

- 9% of the South African population are first speakers of English;
- 91% of the population are second speakers of English;
- 80% of the population are first speakers of African languages;

-20% of the population are the second speakers of African languages. However, English is at the forefront.

Importance of indigenous languages

Indigenous languages are used for:

- expression and communication;
- survival;
- they carry cultural values;
- they also carry indigenous knowledge which may lose meaning if it is translated.

Zama Bekweni in his presentation on the value of multi-lingualism in business stated that advertisers use diverse languages to reach their markets, call centres also do the same, banks use multilingualism on their Automatic Teller Machines (ATM) therefore business must recognize multi-lingualism as a resource for economic growth.

Indigenous Languages in Education

There are many benefits of using indigenous languages as a medium of instruction. Learners understand better and grasp concepts easily when they are taught in their mother tongue and this translates into high achievement rates. Learning in mother tongue also improves the learner’s confidence to participate in class because they can express themselves freely. Learners who are taught in a different language besides their mother tongue are at a disadvantage. A student who is in the process of registering for her PHD in Northern Sotho at the University of Limpopo felt empowered to approach the University and convince her lecturers to allow her to write her dissertation in Northern Sotho after listening to presentations at the conference.

Myths about multilingualism

Mr Mashatole, a lecturer at the University of Limpopo mentioned some myths against adopting multi-lingualism:

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-multi-lingualism causes confusion;
 -indigenous languages are not advanced to deal with complex theoretical terms;
 -parents prefer English as a medium of instruction.

There was active participation and engagement from the delegates and most expressed the wish to have a follow-up conference in 2020.

Truths about multi-lingualism

However, some parents settle for English because they are not given an option for their kids to be taught in an indigenous language:

-multilingualism fosters social cohesion;
 -some parents prefer English as a medium of instruction as opposed to mother tongue education however some prefer mother tongue education but they are not given the option or they don't have schools in their neighbourhood which offers teaching in their mother tongue.

Conclusion

The political, economic and social development of Africa is delayed as a result of the disregard of indigenous languages. Some children are struggling to read with comprehension when being taught in any language, other than, their mother tongue.

Multilingualism is a driver for the growth of the economy.

Practical steps must be put in place to help with the promotion of indigenous languages and multi-lingualism. For instance, at the University of Limpopo there is a qualification known as Bachelor of Arts in Contemporary English and Multilingual Studies (BA CEMS). In BA (CEMS) students are taught in an indigenous language and English.

There must be training for translators and interpreters. Legal documents like contracts must be translated in all indigenous languages in SA for easy access by everyone. Learners must have a choice to be taught in their mother tongue. Most importantly, indigenous language writers must be encouraged and given support to publish in indigenous languages to have a record for the present and future generations.



Impressum

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