Language as a driving tool for the implementation of African Union's Agenda 2063

Solomon Fashie Aongo

[1]*Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University of Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria.*
phashsolo2020@gmail.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: Language is one of the major drivers of human development. This paper critically reviews the Sixth Edition of the African Union Handbook (2019) and regrettably observes that conveners of the African Union's Agenda 2063, a fifty (50) year incubation framework to overhaul the socio-politico-cultural and economic fortunes of the continent, erroneously failed to take a categorical decision on the particular language(s) to aid in the implementation process of the project. Accordingly, the paper recommends that instead of investing huge resources on over 2000 indigenous African languages to create awareness for the implementation of the Agenda, such resources should be used to promote the teaching and learning of the four official languages of the AU. The recommendation is predicated on the fact that sizeable populations of AU Member States already use these four official languages (Arabic, English, French and Portuguese) which are also global languages thereby making it easier, cheaper and faster to implement.

Keywords: AU Agenda 2063, Development, Foreign languages, Implementation, Indigenous languages, Language

1. Introduction

The African Union, (hereafter, AU) is a socio-political convention of sovereign African States that was formally inaugurated on May 25, 1963 for faster development of the African continent. The Union celebrated her Golden Jubilee in the Summit of May 2013. On this 50th Anniversary, the leadership of the Union took stock of all the achievements and challenges of the Black continent and re-dedicated itself through a pragmatic proclamation to throttle the socio-political and economic opulence of African sister States to the trajectory of development. The developmental trajectory is construed to be achieved through a fifty-year continental framework. This framework is what is known as African Union Agenda 2063. After due consultations, the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government during its January 2015 submit held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia finally adopted the Agenda 2063 with retrospective effect from 2013. In effect, by 2063, the AU would celebrate her 100 years anniversary as a Union with qualitative and quantitative improvements in the well-being of her citizens.

Basically, the Agenda contains seven (7) Aspirations. For ease of implementation, the seven Aspirations are further broken down into a five-ten decade execution proposals to realise the vision of the "Africa We Want" by 2063. The issue of concern is that language is not accorded the proper place it deserves in the implementation of the Agenda and this becomes a worrisome observation calling for immediate scholarly attention. Experience has shown that the multilingual heritage of African countries has clearly become a linguistic burden stifling many developmental experiments in the continent and the AU project will not see the light of the day without a definite language policy that will facilitate the implementation process.

2. Language as a driving tool for development

Language is the precursor of development. The issue with African linguistic landscape is that there are too many competing indigenous and foreign languages. The plural linguistic situation presents enormous problems to the continent (Adams 1996:35). It has become a barrier to unity and development of the continent (Spencer, 1962 and Bamgbose 1990 cited in Olofin 2012: 135). Ogba (2017:4) commenting on the relationship between language and development argued that the limits of language are the limits of thought. This argument implies that any meaningful discourse on people oriented development must revolve around

language. From the foregoing, one will understand that the seven Aspirations, set goals and implementation plan of the AU Agenda 2063 can best be communicated to the citizenry of the respective Member States through the instrumentality of language.

3. The Seven (7) Aspirations of the AU Agenda 2063

The seven (7) aspirations are adumbrated as follows:

i. An Africa that is rooted on prosperity, growth and development;
ii. A continent with a stable political unity;
iii. A continent with good governance where respect for human rights and rule of law prevail;
iv. A peaceful Africa with strong security;
v. An Africa with vibrant culture/heritage, good values/ethics;
vi. An Africa where potentials of the citizens are invested in the development of the continent; and
vii. An Africa that will participate and partner with other nations across the globe (The African Union Commission, 2013:33).

4. Critique of AU Agenda 2063

The seven Aspirations are discussed in details under the first ten-year execution template of the Agenda 2063. However, the discussion addressing language which should have been one of the major concerns of the Union comes under Aspiration 5 among other concerns (The African Union Commission, 2013:37). However, there is just a general mention of African languages with no show of serious commitment. Though, it is expected that a huge project of this nature would have begun with a comprehensive list of all the African languages and their geographical specifics.

It can be inferred from the foregoing that the Union did not take "language question" serious as one of the major drivers of the Agenda. This subsisting linguistic indecision derives its roots from the vague statement by AU regarding its four working languages (all foreign, for instance. English, French, Portuguese and Arabic) and any African languages (with no specification) (AU Handbook, 2019: 15). This shows that the planners of the Agenda have not come up with a deliberate language policy to guarantee the attainment of the project. Though, the planners are quite aware of the role of communication in the course of implementing the set goals of the Agenda as they lamented that the choice of language as a communication tool have been one of the major setbacks earlier experienced in the implementation of previous projects involving AU member states (The Africa Union Commission, 2013: 27). Accordingly, the Union developed a good number of communication tools which include radio and television broadcasts, meetings, songs/plays, use of internet and social media, publications, promotional mix, teaching in schools among others (The Africa Union Commission, 2013: 95). Consequently, the Union stipulates that the communication tools should be enforced using the national languages spoken by citizens of the respective member states of the AU (The Africa Union Commission, 2013: 75).

5. Linguistic shortcomings of the Agenda 2063

Experience has shown that any attempt to use national languages to implement the plan as stipulated by the Union will definitely meet stiff oppositions from citizens of the respective Member States. African countries such as Nigeria and Cameroon have a plethora of indigenous languages and these countries are still battling with the national language question while, countries like Egypt have over 11 national languages. The cost of translating the communication tools into all the spoken languages of the Member States will be colossal and many Member States will back off. Citizens whose mother tongues are not selected as languages of communication for implementing the Agenda will also oppose the project. Another contentious issue is that some of those languages do not even have standard orthography to facilitate translation.

The Union imposes another worrisome mandate to Member States by imploring them to scan through the African Island States, explore creole languages around these regions, and include them on the linguistic atlas of Africa (The Africa Union Commission, 2013: 75). This is a clear indication that the Union has not fully appreciated the linguistic predicament of the continent because at a time developed countries over the world are making collaborative efforts to communicate in one language, Africa is busy launching odysseys to discover more languages, even though, the overabundant ones cannot deliver to the continent "The Africa We Want" in 2063. This argument is in line with Agantiem and Aongo (2021: 121) who state that "Africa seems to be obsessed with unending linguistic exploration – wasting human and material resources trying to evolve 'neutral' languages as well as resuscitate dead ones."

Given the linguistic encumbrances surrounding indigenous languages seen from the above discussion so far, it is glaring that the AU Agenda 2063 came too soon at a time African languages are not fully harnessed to communicate the Agenda to a sizeable number of the African populace. On the other hand, the four AU working languages mentioned above can easily fill this void. This is because, for a long time, foreign languages have been the vehicles of intercultural dialogue and political integration at different levels of economic, political and diplomatic relations among African nations (Finex, 2008: 145).

6. Recommendations

Based on the discussion and observations above, the paper recommends that:

1. The AU leadership should come up with a deliberate language policy by adopting the four official working languages of the Union in the respective Member States where they are spoken to implement the Agenda 2063.
2. The four official working languages should be incorporated into the Aspirations of the Agenda to be implemented from the Second Ten-Year Plan of the AU Agenda 2063.
3. Resources should be committed to promote the learning and teaching of the four official working languages in the educational system of the Member States in such a way that by 2063 African children would have mastered the global languages and be better equipped to compete with their contemporaries anywhere in the world.

7. Conclusion

From our discussion so far, we observed that the policy consultants of the AU Agenda 2063 failed to accord language the prominence it deserves and this has already started affecting the implementation of the Agenda. There have been a plethora of crises ranging from insurgency, threat to unity, refugees, massive political apathy, hunger, unemployment, and communal crises and many more. The response of the AU governments to these crises has always been to set up ad-hoc committees to formulate palliative measures. This shows that the Agenda 2063 has not been effectively communicated to the African citizenry to give them the sense of ownership thereby enhancing greater participation.

This can be reversed by adopting the four working languages of AU. It is on record that African nations have since independence adopted foreign models such as democracy, economic policies, education policies, lifestyle, architecture, and religion and others. What is more? Africa only needs to swallow her pride and view this linguistic mirage as a supreme sacrifice her citizens have to pay for colonialism in order to move forward since this seems to be the surest and fastest way of achieving Agenda 2063.

References

1. Abdulaziz, Y. L. (1993). The Language Situation in Africa Today. *Nordic Journal of African Studies 2(1): 79–86*
2. Adams, B. B. (1996). On Language and Development in Africa: The Case of Ghana. *Nordic Journal of African Studies 5(2): 31-51*
3. African Union Handbook. (2019). *Sixth Edition*. Jointly published by the African Union Commission and New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade/Manatū Aorere
4. Agantiem, A. A., & Aongo, S. F. (2021). The Trajectory of Foreign Language Influence in African National Development: A Sad Reality. *Journal of the English Scholars' Association of Nigeria (JESAN)*. 23 (1): 116-131
5. Finex, N. (2008). Language and African Development: Theoretical Reflections on the Place of Languages in African Studies. *Nordic Journal of African Studies 17(2): 137–151*
6. Ogba, T. I. (2017). The Relationship between Language and National Development. *Journal of Resourcefulness and Distinction,* 14 No. (1): 1-6
7. Olofin, A. O. (2012). Effects of English Language on National Development. *Greener Journal of Social Sciences*, 2 (4): 134-139
8. The African Union Commission. (2013). African Union Agenda 2063, the Africa We Want: First Ten Year Implementation Plan 2014-2023.

ACADEMIC VOICES (AV)