International Mother Tongue Day

Dr. Donald Kaberuka
President

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Input:
The African Development Bank is delighted to join UNESCO and the rest of the world in celebrating the International Mother Tongue Day this year. The significance of mother tongue to Africa cannot be over-emphasized, especially when one considers the estimated 700 languages and about 3000 dialects that co-exist in a continent of 885 million people, about 60 percent of whom live in rural areas.

Further, only 50 of these languages are spoken among populations of more than one million. With a staff of about 1025 from 69 countries, 49 of which are regional member countries, the African Development Bank can claim to be one of the most diverse institutions in Africa. This diversity is being harnessed for Africa’s development.

Language and Communication in the Bank’s work with travel and trade among diverse peoples over the ages, Africans have always engaged in communication with one another in spite of the many local languages and dialects. But within a largely oral culture like Africa, language has also more recently been used to isolate people who can neither read nor write.

On the other hand, as more African languages are classified and transcribed, functional literacy programmes, such as those financed by the Bank, are enabling millions of people, especially young adults, to emerge from the isolation of illiteracy and to contribute to the economic, social and political development of their countries. The role of communication in African languages in the Bank’s mission of poverty reduction is thus a very critical one.

Research has demonstrated that for children whose mother tongue is neither English nor French, learning outcomes are much more sustainable if their education begins in their mother tongue, and they are taught in foreign languages after they have learned and internalized basic concepts. These findings have significant implications for African education.

If mother tongue is to be transmitted in a diverse environment, some critical questions must be addressed. Which languages should be taught and who should teach them? Where will the learning materials come from? How will their production be funded and sustained? And for adult learners in particular, after the level of basic language learning has been attained, what next?

Many of our regional member countries have provided some good answers to these questions and the Bank is providing them support in implementing their mother tongue policies.
Challenges to Africa’s Language and Culture

We should also note that the survival of Africa’s rich cultural and linguistic heritage depends on the value that countries place on mother tongue. African poetry and literature; her traditional songs and music; folk tales, proverbs, and ancient riddles are at the risk of disappearing forever if they are not preserved.

In celebrating the International Mother Tongue Day this year, I ask that we keep these challenges in mind and commit ourselves to overcoming them.

Thank you.