

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN ACHIEVING THE WORLD'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

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ABSTRACT: *Globalization in recent times has impacted positively on various aspects of life and advanced new opportunities for international co-operation, yet it has led to multifaceted social, economic, political and environmental challenges across the globe. Several developmental trajectories have been advanced towards addressing the dynamism of the developmental needs of countries by world leaders -from the 21st century Millennium Developmental Goals (MDGs) to the Education for all Goals (EFA) and more recently, the Sustainable development goals (SDGs) in their declaration of the anticipated future for global transformation, come 2030. The United Nations identified seventeen (17) sustainable developmental goals that will help world transformation, if achieved; but little attention was given to the societal organs/medium that will assist the realization of these goal such as language. This work therefore tries to fill this gap, using a qualitative research based on Sapir-Whorfian theory of language, with Leech's five characteristics of language- informative, expressive, directive, aesthetic and phatic. The study seeks to assess the role of language in the attainment of the Sustainable development goals, bearing in mind that the world is peopled with nations of diversified languages whose aims are to achieve collaborative partnership for world's transformation, by the year 2030. It was discovered that language plays a significant role in the achievement of virtually all the Sustainable development goals (SDGs)- from quality education to healthy living, promotion of peace and inclusive societies, industrialization and innovations, implementation and revitalization of global partnership and others for the purpose of world transformation.*

KEY WORDS: language, development, sustainable, development, goals.

INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable developmental goals consists of seventeen universal transformative goals with 169 targets which the United Nation member states adopted in September, 2015. This universal agenda titled :Transforming our world :The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development; seeks to address and resolve crucial global challenges in both developing and developed countries .These sustainable goals seek to build on the Millenium developmental goals and consolidate on areas which the MDGs could not address..At a preparatory event for Rio +20 held in Indonesia in July 2011, Columbia proposed the idea of the Sustainable development goals but the United Nations

adopted these goals as Millennium Developmental goals (MDGs) in September, 2011 at a Conference in Bonn, Germany. However, the MDGs could not adequately achieve most of the identified goals especially in the African continent, hence the need for a more encompassing and inclusive goals for addressing world challenges, using sustainable development as the philosophical principle.

The Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development –WECD (1987) views sustainable development as ‘the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it, two key concepts, the concept of needs; the idea of limitation.’

On the 25th September, 2015, at a Conference in New York, member countries of the United Nations adopted the new development agenda (SDGs) with the resolution of ‘The Future We Want’. The Sustainable developmental goals were integrated to address the three dimensions of sustainable development- economic, social and environmental dimensions(United Nations ,2015).These goals are far reaching ,involving the entire developing and developed worlds in a bid to resolving global challenges in a sustainable manner on or before the year 2030.The tripod global challenges -environmental, economic, and socio-cultural needs of the 21st century has given rise to various transformational visions such as The Millennium Developmental Goals, The Education for All Goals(EDA)and more recently, the Sustainable Developmental Goals(SDGs).The Sustainable Developmental goals aim at providing a more integrated and authentic paradigm for sustainable and equitable development both in the developing and advanced countries of the world. Many countries are already taking steps towards transmitting the developmental issues articulated in the 2030 Agenda into tangible outcomes for their citizens as well as integrating the SDGs into their national visions and plans. Having identified the desired goals for sustainable development, it becomes imperative to ascertain the medium through which these goals could be achieved. This work therefore attempts to assess the role of language in the achievement of the Sustainable developmental goals, by discussing these goals based on Sapir-Whorfian theory of language, and taking a leaf from Geoffrey Leech’s functionality of language.

This paper attempts to contribute to this developmental initiative by examining how language can be applied to achieve global sustainability, in line with the Sustainable developmental goals.

Language

Language is the unique characteristics of human species which serves as a medium of communication. The term language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols(Yule,1989).. An individual needs language to interact within and outside his environment. Language can be verbal or nonverbal in form. The verbal form of language consists of the use of sounds and symbols in expressions whereas the nonverbal language involves the use of signs and body language such as facial expressions, gestures, signs and other expressions in communication, without the use of sounds. Widowson (1979) affirms that all languages are highly developed and sophisticated communication systems, all capable of meeting the demands of the society in terms of expressing emotions and sending /receiving information. Nwadike(2004)views language as the key to the heart of the people .If we lose the key ,we lose the people. If we treasure the key, and keep it safe, it will unlock the doors of wealth or affluence, thus

bringing about national development. It therefore follows that language is pivotal in the developmental process of any nation, starting from the drawing board to the implementation and evaluation of identified societal goals and the sustainable developmental goals are not exempted. Language plays a significant role in creating, stating, interpreting and understanding these development goals as well as in its execution and evaluation process.

The Concept of Development.

Development can be viewed as the provision of qualitative improvement in the lives of people. It is a form of social change that leads to progress, acquiring knowledge and having access to resources for decent living. (Coetzee 2001:120) Development can be viewed from the individual and societal levels. At the individual level, it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being while on the societal level it involves the utilization of its available resources to build a more viable and sustainable future for the citizens through the provision of basic amenities, science and technological advancements and other incentives for the well-being of the society.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development according to the United Nations is the organizing principle for meeting human development goals while at the same time, sustaining the ability of natural systems to provide the natural resources and ecosystems services upon which the economy and society depends. The desirable end result is a society where living conditions and resource use continue to meet human needs without undermining the integrity and stability of the natural systems.

Sustainable development goals

A goal can be defined as an idea of the future or desired result that a person or a group of people envision, plan and commit to achieve. People endeavor to reach goal within a finite time by setting deadline. (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>). The Sustainable development goals consists of seventeen sustainable goals with 169 specified targets, designed for collaborative partnership of all countries of the world to address some pressing global challenges.. According to the United Nations proposal, the Sustainable development goals is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. All the member nations of the United Nations, acting in collaborative partnership are meant to implement this plan. Additionally, the creation of the SDGs is geared towards strengthening universal peace eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty which seems to be the most challenging issue in sustainable development.(United Nations,2015:7).

Specifically, the United Nations resolved by the year 2030, to end hunger globally, combat all forms of inequalities within and amongst nations, evolve peaceful, just and inclusive societies, protect human rights and promote gender equality and other global challenges. The SDGs were articulated and grouped into three dimensions- the economic social and environmental concerns which transcend far above previous trajectories, making a paradigm shift to a more balanced model for sustainable development aimed at securing freedom and prosperity for all, without discrimination. The Sustainable developmental goals are as follows:

Goal 1 : End poverty in all its form everywhere.

Poverty is more than the lack of income and resources to ensure a sustainable livelihood. Its manifestations include hunger and malnutrition, limited access to health services, joblessness and economic instability amongst individuals and communities.

Goal 2: Zero hunger

Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries can generate sustainable incomes and provide nutritious food for all to combat hunger. A profound change of global food and agricultural system is needed eradicate hunger globally. Language will be useful in articulating these agricultural/other needs and transmitting them to the stakeholders for the desirable change.

Goal 3: Good Health and Well being

Ensuring healthy lives and preventing child and maternal mortality is essential to sustainable development. Many more efforts are needed to fully eradicate a wide range of diseases and emerging health issues such as researching on ways to combat these diseases and language comes in handy in this regard. .

Goal 4: Quality Education

In the past, major progress has been made towards increasing access to education at all levels and increasing enrolment in schools especially for girls and women. Basic literacy has improved tremendously, but more concerted efforts are needed towards achieving universal and quality education for all by assessing the linguistic strategies adopted for quality education and evolving a viable medium of communication and education, using language.

Goal 5: Gender Equality

Even though the world has significant progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment under the Millennium Development goals, women and girls continue to suffer discrimination and violence in every part of the world. Such harmful practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation which has greatly declined in the past decade, need to be completely eradicated. Language will play a significant role in the sensitization of this goal amongst societies and the creation of awareness on the ills of gender inequality in societies.

Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

Millions of people all over the world, including children die every year from diseases associated with inadequate water supply , sanitation and hygiene. Water scarcity , unclean water and inadequate hygiene impact negatively on food security, housing and other aspects of life. To improve sanitation and access to good drinking water, there is need for increased investment in the management of fresh water ecosystems and sanitation facilities especially in several developing countries and this involves a lot of research and scientific innovations which can only be achieved through language.

Goal 7: Affordable and Clean energy sources

Focusing on universal access to energy ,increased energy efficiency and use of renewable energy through new economic and job opportunities is crucial to creating more sustainable and inclusive communities and combating environment challenges such as climate change. Language will serve as the medium of compiling the different data on climate change and possible avenues of

providing affordable and clean energy, Additionally ,training the personnel on achieving this goal will require the use of language.

Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

As labour productivity decreases and unemployment rates rises, the standard of living grossly declines, due to low income. There is need for decent jobs by creating job opportunities that are sustaining and can revamp the economies of nations. Language will be used in the articulation and creation policies that will provide job opportunities and economic growth.

Goal 9: Industries, Innovation and Infrastructure

Investments in infrastructure – agriculture, transport, energy, manufacturing sector, information and communication technology and other viable sectors of the economy are crucial to achieving sustainable development and empowering people in many countries. Another issue of concern is the safe evacuation of unwanted industrial wastes such as the emission of carbon dioxide in the process of manufacturing and others which will involve indepth research to protect the environment .Environment research are made possible with language as the medium of communication..

Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and amongst countries

The international communities have tried to make the least developed countries and the small island developing nations to relatively measure up with the development ones in terms of poverty alleviation .However, economic growth is not sufficient to reduce poverty, if it is not inclusive of the social and environmental dimensions as stated by the United Nations. Literary efforts through language can be used to expose ills og inequality and its implications to global peace.

Goal 11 : Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Maintaining cities in a way that can sustain job creation and prosperity, good housing as well as adequate securities of life and properties involves many challenges .Common urban challenges include congestion, lack of funds to provide basic services, shortage of adequate housing, declining infrastructure, insecurity and rising air pollution. These challenges need decisive measures to achieve sustainable living conditions. More importantly, training of adequate man power will provide the nations with the desired knowledge to address these multi-faceted urban challenges and training involves the use of language.

Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

This entails putting in place, efficient mechanisms to ensure sustainable consumption practices and production patterns that are economically, socially and environmentally friendly for a better quality of life for all .Research is key to this specialized area of development and language will serve as the medium through which adequate research will be carried out.

Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impact.

Climate change is a global challenge that does not respect national borders-weather patterns change, sea levels rise and weather events become extreme and gas emissions reach very high levels that are life threatening. To strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change, countries adopted the Paris agreement at the COP21in Paris which came in force in November 2016. Efforts at various local levels are on ground to address this challenge globally. This initiative and other upcoming responses adopt language as a means of stating their findings.

Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use of the oceans, seas and marine resources

Continuous deterioration of coastal waters owing to pollution and ocean acidification have adverse effect on the functioning of ecosystems and on small scale fisheries. Marine protected areas need to be effectively managed and well-resourced with due regulations to reduce overfishing, marine pollution and ocean acidification. In the light of this challenges, adequate manpower is needed to address them and training through language is key.

Goal 15: Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss.

Forests provide food security and shelter and are key to combating climate change, protecting biodiversity and the homes of the indigenous population. Ensuring forest protection will help in strengthening natural resource management and increase land productivity. Deforestation and desertification –caused by human activities and climate change- pose major challenges to sustainable development and have affected the lives of millions of people in the fight against poverty. Afforestation and other forest protective strategies need both human knowledge through language as well as adequate. Material resources to ameliorate these problems.

Goal 16: Promote, just, peaceful and inclusive societies

Threats of international homicide, violence against children and women, human trafficking and sexual violence are important areas to address in order to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development. Judicial acts need to be enacted based on equity and fairness and language serves as a medium of formulating and enforcing these acts..

Goal 17: Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

A successful sustainable development agenda requires partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society. Successful partnership involves mutual understanding and compromise through a common language or languages. These inclusive partnership give rise to principles, values and shared vision that ensure sustainability in all aspects of life..

Theoretical Framework

The study is predicated on the role of language in achieving the SDGs, using the Sapir-Whorfian theory of language as the theoretical framework. This theory was first introduced by Edward Sapir in 1929 and was subsequently developed by Benjamin Lee Whorf in 1938 with his idea of linguistic relativity, meaning that a speaker's perception is relative to his spoken language. This goes to show that one's way of thinking and expressiveness has much to do with his socio-cultural environment. Viewing the Sustainable developmental goals from the prism of this theory, we find a strong relationship between language and culture and the need for intercultural education especially in the area of interpreting the goals through language. According to Brown (1968) Language is a living organism attributed to human nature and a purely abstract construct created to address the need for communication. It then follows that every language is borne out of a unique environment which supports Sapir-Whorfian theory.

Applying the theory to the achievement of the sustainable developmental goals (SDGs) , Robinson (1996 :4) maintains that wherever people are put in the centre of the development process, issues of language will always be close to the surface. Djite(2008:8) further argues that attention to language issues is crucial to successful and sustainable development in these words: '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 the world without the integration of local languages and the full participation of all her human capital’.

Djite (2008:109) further observes that ‘the assumptions about language made by the proponents of development in the world are simply incorrect: even the use of ‘supposedly simple (European) language that people do not understand, betrays a lack of understanding of the people in focuses. Consequentially, when two cultures and languages meet, the need for translatability arises. According to Zygmunt (2008:36-37).

.’Translatability makes us sensitive to the problem of intercultural understanding and inter language communication. The lexicon of the language mirrors objects and ideas created by the minds of a given language user who differ in customs, behavior and tradition from other languages .users. It has to be stressed that the basic difference between two language communities can be found in the ways of their thinking and therefore- expressiveness. Hence ,inter language communication can only be successful when users of one language are able to follow the grammar rules normally practiced by other language speakers and make use of their lexicon which precisely reflects their way of thinking .It means that instead of’ names’ ,thoughts must be translated.’

From the foregoing, it is obvious that if the issue of translatability is not addressed amongst nations, there will be limitations in the understanding of the developmental goals, and invariably hindrance in negotiation and communication. Thus cooperation can only be successful when the co-operating parties understand one another, tolerating beliefs and points of view and showing respect..All these can be achieved through discourse by negotiation, problem solving discussions, and exchange of experience and knowledge. Pipere et al (2015) concludes that mutual understanding, tolerance and respect can give guidance to a successful construction of the social environment and its protection.

DISCUSSIONS

Language and Sustainable Development

The functionality of language in the achievement of the world’s developmental goals can be viewed from different perspectives. Leech (1974) identified five main functions of language in the society namely- informative, expressive, directive, phatic and aesthetic. Each of these functions of language can be harnessed in the achievement of the sustainable developmental goals in the following ways:

- Creating the goals- Language informs the thinking of the mind of the individual and by extension, the community, given that beliefs are thoughts. Without language ,the idea of the SDGs cannot be conceived

.Lev Vygotsky puts it succinctly in these words-‘A word (language) is a microcosm of human consciousness(thought).A goal can only be achieved if first conceived .Language enables the SDGs to be created in the first place.

- Stating the goals-The expression of the seventeen developmental goals can only be expressed through language. It will be inconceivable that representatives of the one hundred and ninety three (193) countries of the United Nations sitting in conference, have no means of presenting the mental conception of the 17 SDGs factually for adoption. Language plays this vital role.

- Interpretation and understanding of the goals- The Unitary role-Amongst the criteria for section in the calls for papers made by the British Council for the 12th International Language and Development Conference on the Theme, Language and the Sustainable Development Goals, held on the 27th-29th November, 2017 in Senegal are evident statements verifying the role of language in enhancing interpretation amongst other roles. The call stated that proposals must meet the criteria of clarity, coherence and organization. It must have the potential for audience interaction and involvement. The language to be used throughout the conference would be English and French with the insistence that speakers must specify their preferred language for delivery of the session. In addition, it stated that if presenters chose to deliver in a language other than English or French, the organizers would make every **effort** to find an interpreter. The unitary role of language therefore is to achieve understanding, for active participation and unification of the speakers' plethora of ideas amongst peoples of diverse ethnic affiliations.
- Executing the goals: In the execution of the Sustainable developmental goals, the role of language is also eminent. At the recent symposium on Language and the SDGs, at the United complex in New York on the 21-22 April, discussions were focused on the linguistic obstacles that could potentially stand in the way of achieving the SDGs. Suzanne Romaine in her keynote address at the symposium, maintains that the SDGs need to address more strongly, the place of language and their outcomes. Language no doubt plays a significant role in the execution of these goals as intended.
- Evaluating the developmental process and making amendments: Language can be used as a measure of effectiveness of the developmental process, taking cognizance of the setbacks and improving and building on viable goals.

CONCLUSION

The seventeen sustainable developmental goals are well articulated themes which consists of universally identified challenges that militate against the holistic developmental framework of nations. Amongst other mediums of achieving these goals, language plays a significant role in stating, implementing and evaluating developmental goals vis a vis the dynamic problems of political exclusion, economic marginalization and social discrimination in most countries of the world.

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