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OF
AFRICAN LANGUAGES
LANGUAGE POLITICAL REALITIES**

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chapter seven

The Northern- Sotho/Sepedi Language Research and Development Centre

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This paper seeks to outline the purpose, structure and achievements of the Language Research and Development Centres (LRDC) in general and to show how the Sepedi centre in particular has handled some of its projects.

LRDCs are national structures created by the National Language Service of the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC), to undertake research and development for each of the nine official African languages in the country. The overriding aim is to effectively develop the official indigenous languages to ensure their public usage in important fields such as law, commerce, science, politics and education among others. The centres form the backbone of the institutional infrastructure required for the successful implementation of the National Language Policy Framework¹.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Since 1997 the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST), has been in constant discussion and consultation with stakeholders about the urgent need to establish Language Research and Development Centres. Provincial consultations and audits of available capacity and resources were subsequently carried out to assess the need and feasibility of such an undertaking.

On the basis of the research results, it was concluded that the establishment of LRDCs is a critical imperative that must be expedited to give impetus to the implementation of the National Language Policy Framework (NLPF). One of the key objectives of the Language Centres will be to ensure that indigenous languages are being used as languages of business, politics, research and government throughout South Africa.

The DAC is of the opinion that investment in the LRDCs will not only boost the usage of the indigenous languages, but will also contribute to the promotion of the language industry in South Africa, leading to sustainable economic benefits.

A primary objective of these Centres would be to change deep-rooted attitudes towards indigenous languages – attitudes that reinforce practices as well as perceptions of inequality (due to the lack of/poor economic value attached to these languages). By generating language projects with immediate practical benefits for the wider community, the LRDCs would

¹ At present, there are eight LRDCs, i.e. for Sepedi, Xitsonga, Tshivenda, Setswana, Sesotho, isiNdebele, isiZulu and isiXhosa. The Siswati LRDC still has to be established.

contribute directly towards the achievement of the broader goals of transformation, nation-building and the creation of wealth for all citizens.

DEFINING THE LANGUAGE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT CENTRES

These Centres form the backbone of the institutional infrastructure required for the successful implementation of the National Language Policy Framework (NLPF) and all (related proposed) legislation, particularly at provincial level, and in close co-operation with PanSALB and the provincial Departments of Arts and Culture. It is envisaged that all key role-players will accept joint responsibility for overseeing the implementation of a multifaceted research and development programme that will seek to achieve a high degree of multilingualism, in a cost-effective manner and in as short a time as possible. Based within institutions of higher education, the Centres benefit from the capacity and expertise that already exist in such institutions. They also form a critical network of independent entities sharing common goals and objectives that are aligned with the priorities, as espoused in the NLPF.

AIMS OF THE LRDCS

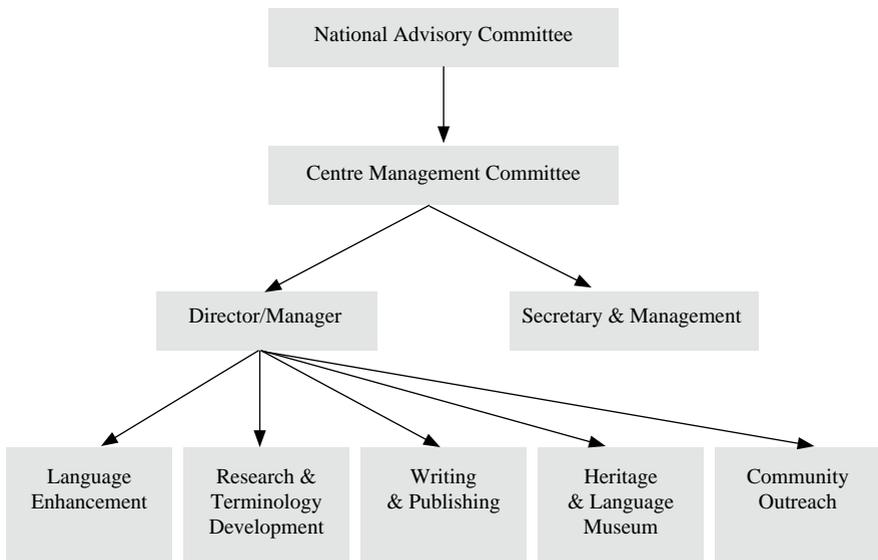
Drawing from the constitutional obligations as well as the policy intentions articulated in the NLPF, the aims of the LRDCs are to:

- Effectively develop the official indigenous languages to ensure their public usage in important fields such as law, commerce, science, politics and education, among others;
- Encourage and support language-related research that is relevant and responsive to the needs of both language users and decision-makers, as well as to maintain an accessible database;
- Streamline activities, promote synergy and enhance work to avoid the duplication of effort and wastage of resources;
- Facilitate and nurture initiatives promoting prolific writing in indigenous languages by strengthening writers' association, facilitating workshops for writers, etc;
- Devise mechanisms and instruments that will deal effectively with matters related to the protection of intellectual property and copyright;
- Advise on programmes to attract more students to the study of African languages, by indicating clear employment opportunities, including opportunities for "experiential training", where applicable;

- Contribute to the development of linguistic competencies in other international languages to enable South Africans to participate meaningfully in regional and international organisations such as the SADC, the AU, NEPAD and UNESCO among others, in view of bilateral and multilateral co-operation and agreements entered into.

LRDC STRUCTURE

Each centre would ideally have one manager, one secretary, five co-coordinators and five researchers, as shown in the flow diagram hereunder:



LINKS AND COLLABORATION

In all their operations, LRDCs must collaborate closely with all other related language development and promotion structures, such as PanSALB’s Provincial Language Committees, the National Language Bodies and the National Lexicographic Units. In this regard, the LRDCs in Limpopo have formed a provincial language forum that tries to attend

to all language problems in the Province. LRDC managers, the provincial language unit chair and the provincial PanSALB manager, have formed a managers' forum within which business plans can be shared, thus avoiding the duplication of services. They also plan events for the financial year together and organise joint training sessions.

The head of the Provincial Language Unit in the LRDCs, also has the task of ensuring that provincial Members of the Executive Councils are fully informed of their work. The Directors of the Centres periodically report to the National Language Forum – a body representing all provincial and national government departments, including PanSALB.

LANGUAGE ENHANCEMENT

Like all professions, the language field demands a well-trained cadre of practitioners with a range of skills, knowledge and expertise. What is at stake in this case is the academic training of language practitioners who must emerge with specialisation in a variety of domains, e.g. terminology, translation, interpreting, editing and human language technology. In order to produce quality services in these fields in the previously disadvantaged languages, it is necessary to extend the knowledge base and skills among serving practitioners so that there is adequate capacity to deal with domains of knowledge from which they may have been effectively barred by lack of expertise or pre-democracy history.

With the usage of indigenous languages in service delivery being pivotal in government, there is an increasing demand for translation, interpreting and terminology development services. It is the task of the LRDCs to locate such expertise, build up a network of such experts and facilitate in-service programmes relevant and appropriate to the language industry. The aim is to match expertise, skills and knowledge to job requirements for language practitioners.

In addition to building capacity for ensuring quality language services, the Centres must also play a critical role in the area of “language for conceptual development”. This is a long-term project involving research into the use of indigenous languages for academic purposes. The scope of this project extends from primary, through secondary schooling to tertiary level, and is directed at the development of appropriate learning and teaching resources (giving priority in particular to the production of “specialised dictionaries”). Terminology development based on critical curriculum areas is also prioritised. The Sepedi LRDC has already worked through a number of such dictionaries as will be shown below.

SUPPORTING LANGUAGE-RELATED RESEARCH

Being established at institutions of higher learning, LRDCs liaise with the language departments in the host institutions regarding research initiatives. In the case of the LRDC for Sepedi, the head of the Department of Sepedi at the University of Limpopo sits on the Centre management committee to ensure close co-operation.

The main focus of research activities at the LRDCs is, however, on applied research, i.e. short-term projects that will be relevant and responsive to the needs identified for a particular language. Longitudinal research studies, for example to evaluate the impact of language planning programmes or for policy reviews, can, of course, also be conducted whenever necessary.

Research projects are related to the needs of both the public and private sectors. For example, research could be carried out to determine priorities in terminology development. Some of the marginalised African languages may have an urgent need for terminology in fields such as agriculture.

A very important function of the LRDCs is to set up research databases. Each centre has to collect all available information relevant to it, such as census statistics, surveys on language distribution across the country, etc. These databases can be used to respond to requests for information from clients, and to develop research products that are directed at the language community served by the Centre, other Centres and other language stakeholders.

Databases will also be maintained on language research undertaken by various language implementation bodies in the province, for reference purposes and as guides for further research. Apart from language-related research, databases are also compiled on research on the indigenous cultures of South Africa. LRDCs will also compile databanks of research instruments, e.g. survey questionnaires, observation schedules, interview sheets, etc.

PROMOTING READING AND WRITING IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES

The culture of reading in South Africa is generally very poor, especially from the point of view of the indigenous languages. Many arguments have been advanced to explain the

problem, such as inaccessible or unavailable library centres, poorly equipped libraries, lack of books in schools, high illiteracy rates, uninteresting or unappealing books and negative attitudes towards African languages.

With the primary objective of language centres being to change deep-rooted negative attitudes towards indigenous languages, this situation cannot be allowed to continue. In fact, serious intervention needs to be made using a multi-pronged approach. Failure to do so would seriously hamper and even jeopardise the implementation of the National Language Policy. One of the first steps to be taken by the centres is to establish collaboration with writers' association and with any other non-governmental organisations that are actively involved with writers' association or individual authors. The purpose would be to understand available capacity and strengthen it where necessary. Workshops and seminars for writers could be a critical means to achieve this objective. In this regard, the Sepedi LRDC is an ex-officio member of LEBADI and organizes workshops and seminars in all genres for authors.

The Centre also collaborates closely with the University of Limpopo, to ensure that more students with qualifications in African languages are trained to write and report in the indigenous languages (e.g. in courses offered in journalism).

A large number of authors are concentrating on the production of school books and there is therefore a dire need to encourage writing in all languages for different types of readership. As an incentive, the media (the SABC and newspapers) could be involved in planning and organising competitions, with the expectation that such competitions would motivate writers further. Winning books/articles/poems, etc. could be serialised in TV drama programmes, radio stories, newspaper articles, etc. Such activities could also generate funding for the centres and, at the same time, serve as a critical source for writers and artists.

Given that government announcements need to be made in all official languages in the provinces, numerous job opportunities could be created for translators and editors who have studied African languages. In this way, the governments (at all three levels) could show their seriousness about multilingualism, as well as their concern about information accessibility to all citizens.

The LRDCs in the Limpopo Province also maintain close co-operation with Seipone, the only newspaper in the province that publishes in Xitsonga, Tšhivenda and Sepedi. Journalism students at the University are encouraged to write articles for Seipone and submit them to the respective centre for checking before submission.

HERITAGE AND LANGUAGE MUSEUMS

LRDCs have the following tasks regarding heritage and language museums:

(a) *Documenting stories, folktales, legends, idioms, etc.*

All centres are meant to have a unit dedicated to documenting stories, folktales, legends, idioms, etc. For this purpose, fieldworkers need to identify older people in communities who are repositories of such material, and then record all the information obtained from them for further study and preservation. This work needs to be done without delay for, as the African proverb puts it, “*Every time an old one dies a library burns down*”. In this country it is unfortunate that, 13 years into our democracy, there is still not a single museum for African languages. This shows some of the ravages of colonialism and apartheid. All of these sources – African stories, folktales, legends, idioms, etc., have always been the principal means of transmitting our values, traditions and customs from generation to generation. To prevent indigenous people from losing their identity completely, steps need to be taken immediately to collect this information.

(b) *Contributing to the heritage of oral history*

LRDCs have the same task as described above for collecting oral history. Additionally, the value of oral history needs to be emphasised, with communities being made aware of the fact that such history must not be regarded as being of lesser value.

(c) *Overseeing intellectual copyright*

LRDCs also have to oversee copyright issues – especially in the case of traditional literature. Folktale writing has become a business which, unfortunately, is being lucratively conducted by non-speakers of indigenous African languages. This has happened because not all indigenous speakers of African languages could write and, if they could, the publishing interests belonged to the speakers of other languages. It is therefore vital that the centres conduct research on this aspect of our indigenous knowledge and work out copyright and intellectual property rights mechanisms that will protect these resources from exploitation. The copyright Act, Act 98 of 1978, will also be invoked to protect literary, musical and artistic works and the sound recordings of narrated folktales.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

One of the main objectives of the centres is to promote and encourage the use of indigenous languages. The pre-1994 socio-economic and political system of South Africa contributed greatly to the marginalisation of African languages on public platforms and public discourse. With the new National Language Policy Framework, the government has recommended various ways to improve the status and usage of indigenous languages. This could be a self-defeating exercise if speech communities are not centrally involved in the language development initiatives. The LRDCs will contribute to this aim in the following ways:

- *Literacy Training*

The need for and value of literacy training in South Africa cannot be overemphasised. The LRDCs therefore need to initiate outreach programmes to bring literacy to the community, through:

- basic literacy training
- intermediate literacy training
- advanced literacy training

Collaboration with the NGO sector and the Adult Basic Education and Training unit of the Department of Education will be necessary. The centres could be instrumental in conducting impact assessment and tracer studies towards understanding the value of such literacy training programmes in uplifting the living conditions of the ordinary people of South Africa.

- *Basic Language Courses*

As the LRDCs will be located in institutions of higher learning, they will be able to negotiate with their host institutions and join efforts in offering basic language courses to non-speakers of African languages. It should be borne in mind that the use of African languages should be encouraged not just among the African communities but also among the other speech communities in South Africa.

This initiative will accelerate the development and usage of indigenous languages in South Africa and, where applicable, even abroad. For example, the US has links with some universities in South Africa for promoting research in isiZulu. Students spend time in these institutions and get to understand the cultures as well. Such exchange programmes could be strengthened and expanded in a much more structured manner.

In the context of globalisation, South Africa is fast becoming a critical player. It is therefore imperative for as many South Africans as possible to learn and study “foreign/international languages”, not only for interpreting locally but also for obtaining meaningful employment opportunities abroad, in our foreign missions, co-operating government, etc. The Department of Foreign Affairs is the only department that trains officials in international languages, yet there is a great demand for such linguistic skills in, for example, the Departments of Home Affairs, Trade and Industry, the SANDF, the Department of Tourism and Environmental Affairs. More academic programmes need to be accessible to South Africans in this regard, with the centres mobilising resources and expertise to make this realisable.

- *Promoting the Study of African Languages*

Tertiary institutions report a decrease in the number of students majoring in African languages. To counteract this trend, LRDCs could play a role in encouraging students to study African languages, with the aim of making their careers in fields such as language teaching (from primary to tertiary level), translation and interpreting, communication studies (including advertising and journalism), and the performing arts and entertainment (e.g. scriptwriters of stage, radio and TV plays). Since tertiary institutions are already engaged in teaching these disciplines and LRDCs do not have the capacity to do the teaching themselves, they could collaborate with tertiary institutions by providing funds (grants or bursaries) for students wishing to study in these fields. Such funding could be linked to the creation of opportunities for experiential training (internships) enabling students to acquire the necessary practical experience in their chosen field(s), either at the LRDCs and tertiary institutions, or through the intermediation of the LRDCs in community-based projects and the private sector. Language-related studies could further lead to the development of learning and teaching materials in African languages, to enhance teaching in the various disciplines. These materials could also be produced in the course of these studies.

WHAT HAVE THEY PRODUCED?

The LRDC for Sepedi has produced the following:

a. On language enhancement and terminology development, as follows:

- Three glossaries have been translated from English into Sepedi from NCS (National Curriculum Statement):
 - Life orientation, grade 4-7

- Arts and culture, grade 4-7
- Economic and management sciences, grade 4-7

Work on their external verification has already begun and the final products will be sent to PanSALB for verification and approval before being submitted to the NLS for publishing and publicising.

- Translations of important documents are continuously done from English to Sepedi. These include the state of the Province addresses, budget speeches, municipal policies, documents on Islam, health documents like Stop smoking pamphlets, agricultural documents and private sector material, e.g. the Pretoria brickworks, and school textbooks on the OBE (Outcome Based Education) approach to teaching. The translations done are in line with the government policy that encourages the use of mother-tongue as medium of instruction.

b. Prospective authors are regularly supported by workshops and encouraged to write manuscripts and send them to the centre for typing, editing and checking. To date the following are ready for submission to publishers:

- 8 novels
- 8 short story books
- 13 dramas
- 11 anthologies and
- 13 folklore collections

c. Heritage and Language Museum

- Books in Sepedi have been collected and kept according to their years of publication.
- Research articles for BA Honours in Sepedi from different institutions have been collected. This is an on-going project.
- MA dissertations and PhD theses in and about Sepedi have been collected.
- A database of authors and their different periods has been created. A few bibliographies and photos of authors have also been collected.
- Space allocation for the museum is been organised and the internal design is about to begin, pending availability of funds.
- Documented histories of a number of chiefs have been collected and some are being prepared by different chiefs with assistance from the Sepedi LRDC.

CONCLUSION

The present LRDCs are pilot projects that have a life span of only three years. The intention of the NLS is to find out whether structures like these are really helpful in implementing the NLP. The experience accumulated since July 2005 shows that grass-root communities are currently more aware of the constitutional language stipulations and the role their mother-tongue can play in a country like South Africa. Unemployed graduates with mother-tongue specialisation can henceforth see the light at the end of the tunnel as they can become meaningful citizens by contributing in many ways to the development of their languages. Language awareness is now conducted on a regular basis by the LRDCs, which are closer to the speech communities. Professions like translation are now beginning to pay off and students and lecturers now know more clearly how translation should be studied and taught.

Since LRDCs are language specific, the concentration on both language and cultural issues can be handled with more confidence than when different languages had to be developed by the same group of people speaking different languages.

The amount of work which has been undertaken by the Sepedi LRDC over the past two years demonstrates its self-sustainability and its ability to support the implementation of the NLP. Language development based on research results cannot be done in three years; it needs to be undertaken on a continuous basis.