

Minority literacies¹ as tools for civic education: lessons from Malawi

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The attainment of democracy in Malawi in 1994 ushered in a new system of governance and citizenship, which was new to both the state and its citizens. The state and its supporting arms were expected to, among other things, protect and uphold the principles of democracy, including basic human rights of the citizens as enshrined in the national constitution and other human rights charters to which Malawi is signatory. One such basic right is the right to information. Chapter 4, section 37 of the 1995 National Constitution of the Republic of Malawi stipulates that every person has the right of access to all information held by the state or any of its organs at any level of governance in so far as such information is required for the exercise of his/her basic rights. Democracy being a new concept to Malawians (after three decades of autocratic rule), both the state and civil society saw the need to educate all actors on principles, values and requirements of democracy. Those governing and those governed needed to understand their roles in the implementation of democratic processes and its sustenance. Additionally, in line with principals of democracy, there was a need to equip and empower people with information and knowledge on issues and institutions that affect their everyday life so that they can critically and meaningfully engage with them, make informed decisions and take control of their lives.

Indeed, the citizens' levels of information and knowledge about particular issues and institutions influence their relative ability to participate in democratic processes. Active involvement of citizens in the decision-making process should therefore be grounded in a critical knowledge base about the issues and institutions involved, in freedom of information and speech, in the existence of a democratic polity and in dynamic interactions between institutions and citizens. Additionally, inclusive language and literacy policies are crucial to citizens' active participation, as the use of languages and literacies that are controlled by the elite marginalises the majority of the population and makes governance undemocratic and unrepresentative.

Malawi's move towards linguistic inclusion of minorities

Acknowledging Malawi's linguistic diversity and realising the power of the written language in national development, the dawn of democratic governance was marked by a deliberate effort by some individual government departments and civil society organisations to provide public information² in a number of minority literacies so that people are not denied access to information on the basis of their linguistic background. This move marked the beginning of a somewhat 'inclusive' use of literacies in Malawian indigenous

languages to facilitate easy understanding of public information on various issues. For the first time in post-independence Malawi, minority literacies were subtly being linked to civic education as an indicator of social inclusion. There was some realisation on the part of the civil society and government departments that as the political bases of society were changing, people's positions and roles and the various linguistic orientations within the changing society needed to be accommodated in the new social consciousness.

This trend has continued to date, and Malawi's minority literacies are increasingly becoming an integral part of information communication. On the surface this appears to give the citizenry wider opportunities for access to and exchange of information independent of time and space. Furthermore, the trend appears to offer people a wider selection of information to critique, or reflect or act upon, in addition to creating new knowledge and individual ideas from such scrutiny.

However, Malawi's existing language policy is in sharp contrast with these new developments. The policy is silent on the role of minority languages in national development matters. Neither is adult literacy offered in Malawian minority languages, despite having such provisions in the 2008 Adult Literacy policy. This has profound implications on the provision of formal literacy training in the minority languages. Currently, formal provision of basic literacy training is offered in Chichewa and English only in schools, with Chichewa offered only in adult literacy training. Moreover, adult literacy programmes are non-existent in many parts of the country due to poor funding and other factors.

Gaps in reaching out to minority language groups

A recent study³ on the literacy practices of minority language speakers (Kachiwanda, 2009) shows that efforts to reach out to different linguistic groupings with information in their own languages are not generating the desired outcome. Many people are not literate in their own languages; as such they are unable to access such information. Apparently, there is a strong assumption on the part of public service providers that speakers of minority language groups can easily transfer literacy skills acquired in Chichewa to their first languages. While this is possible to some extent through individual efforts, the reality on the ground confirms that literacy is not a neutral skill and therefore not easily transferable. New understandings have shown that literacy is not just a skill but a social construct that is affected by many factors.

In a mixed linguistic setting like Malawi, the national language policy provides one of the key means through which control is exercised over the forms and types of literacy that are legitimatised. Those that are sanctioned by the national language policy are valued more and are supported and sanctioned by the education system, the media, judiciary and other influential public domains. The less valued languages and associate literacies are overlooked and little is done to develop them. Inversely, citizens with a limited repertoire in the mainstream languages and literacies are inevitably socially disadvantaged and have restricted access to information and other resources that are available within their context.

Such a distribution of languages plays a significant discriminatory role in governance and participatory citizenship in democracy and nation development issues. Privileging the study of Chichewa and English has rendered minority literacies powerless, thereby working against the very efforts of the individual government departments and civil society organisations in supporting democratic efforts.

While it cannot be denied that the initiatives taken by individual government departments and civil society organisations have acted as catalysts for the promotion and development of minority literacies to some extent, these organisations are also acting as inhibitors to literacy development in the minority languages. Obviously, in the absence of an inclusive language/literacy policy for Malawi such public service providers are not fully committed to take responsibility to protect and safeguard the linguistic rights of minority language groups. The reality is that while these organisations have created conditions for the promotion and reading of information texts in particular languages among adult rural populations, they have also exacerbated inequalities in terms of who can access what information and in which language. For instance, the choice of medium for the texts is biased towards particular minority languages. Furthermore, there are no guiding principles for the choice of medium at institutional level.

Conclusion

In the absence of an inclusive language policy, public information dissemination will continue to be discriminatory to the disadvantage of certain minority language groups. What is of paramount concern is that human rights are interdependent and interrelated. People cannot enjoy the right to health, education or justice without the right to information in a language they understand better. Neither can they cast their eyes wider, beyond their immediate context, and access information independent of time and space if they do not have access to such literacy training. Linguistic constitutional safeguards should be translated into practical realities on the ground for all Malawians to benefit from existing efforts that are aimed at ensuring active participation of all Malawians in national development agendas – be it on health, education, food security, justice or environmental management.

Endnotes

- 1 The term is used here to refer to written forms of minority languages.
- 2 Information that is assembled and disseminated by government or its organs, individuals and civil society organisations for the benefit of the general public either to generate new knowledge on issues and institutions that affect their everyday life or just for the sake of information.
- 3 'An ethnographic study on the literacy practices of minority language speakers of Ciyawo in Malawi: Issue of language in written texts'. The study was a doctoral research by the author.

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