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Language Policy, Digital Governance, and Inclusive Development in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract:

Inclusive development and digital governance in Sub-Saharan Africa is still significantly reliant on language, but rarely explored. Governments are increasingly turning to digital platforms to deliver public services, create identities for citizens, educate, deliver health care, tax, and engage citizens in civic life, but these platforms can generate exclusion when they are based primarily on colonial official languages and inter-linguistic practices, instead of indigenous African languages and practices. The paper provides a discussion on the linkages between language policy and digital governance, and inclusive development in Sub-Saharan Africa. It claims that making a service online is not enough, inclusion requires that citizens can access, understand, trust and use digital systems in languages that are reflective of their social realities. Based on the discussion of multilingualism, digital transformation and participatory governance, the paper places language at the heart of the design of digital systems for citizens. Despite the focus on inclusion of the digital society in the African Union draft and the concern with linguistic diversity in digital spaces in the UNESCO 2003 Recommendation on linguistic diversity and universal access to languages, there are significant gaps in internet access, affordability, digital literacy, and local content that would prevent technology from ensuring inclusion (African Union, 2020; GSMA, 2024; UNESCO, 2003; World Bank, n.d.). Language sensitive digital governance is required to enhance access to public services, build confidence in the state, promote democratic engagement and lower social marginalisation, the paper concludes. It suggests multilingual digital policies that view African languages as legitimate political, innovative and citizenship tools.

Keywords: language policy, digital governance, multilingualism, Sub-Saharan Africa, digital inclusion.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Digital governance in Sub-Saharan Africa has grown quickly and has opened up new opportunities for public service delivery, civic engagement, economic integration, and state–citizen interaction. Governments all over the region are increasingly turning to digital platforms to create nationwide identification, tax, social protection, health information, education, business registration, electoral and public communication. This is part of a broader continental outlook of leveraging digital technologies as development tools, tools for integration, employment creation, and tools for poverty alleviation. For example, the vision of the Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020-2030) of the African Union (AU) is an integrated and inclusive digital society in which digital tools enhance the quality of life, bolster economies and contribute to addressing the digital divide. (African Union, 2020). But the concept of digital governance must not be divorced from the issue of language. The legacy of colonial languages, particularly English, French, and



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Portuguese, remains significant in many Sub-Saharan African countries in the arena of public administration. These are the languages that tend to be used in government documents, legal correspondence, government websites, digital identity systems, online service portals, and civic information systems. However, the daily fact of the language situation of African communities is much more complicated. Citizens may speak a mix of indigenous languages, urban vernaculars, pidgins, and multilingualism, which may not always be easily accommodated by the formal state language policy. This means that digital governance could create new opportunities for educated, urban, and official-language-using citizens, while leaving behind rural, older, low-literacy, and less dominant-language-using populations.

The issue is not only technical, but political and developmental as well. Language is what makes some information accessible to some and not to others, enables some to fill in online forms but not others, allows some to use digital services but not others, provides some with a voice to voice complaints but not others, allows some to attend consultations but not others, and enables some to read and believe government information but not others. Digital platforms, which are mostly created in official colonial languages, can perpetuate the inequalities that have historically restricted access to education, justice, health services, and administrative services. Digital exclusion does not just mean lack of access to the Internet, lack of affordability of devices, or lack of digital literacy. It's also about the kinds of languages in which citizens meet the state, whether familiar, meaningful, and socially legitimate.

The situation becomes even more pressing since digital transformation is now key to development planning. Digitalization has an impact on the way governments provide services, the way citizens can access health services and education, and the opportunities that digitalization offers for economies. Meanwhile, the World Bank also notes that the benefits of digitalization are not equally distributed and that billions of people remain offline, while many other people lack the infrastructure needed to meaningfully engage in digital economies (World Bank, 2026). Likewise, GSMA's report on Sub-Saharan Africa indicates that mobile technologies are playing a growing role in economic activity, but there are substantial gaps in usage, particularly in an area where affordability, skills and access are factors that hinder meaningful participation (GSMA, 2024). In this context, language policy is imperative to inclusive digital governance. Even though a government service is available online, it is not truly inclusive if its content and functionality are not understandable or usable by a significant portion of the population. At the heart of UNESCO's multilingualism and linguistic diversity agenda are a series of statements that place equal access to the internet in the language and writing systems of their respective users at its core. The key elements of UNESCO's multilingualism and linguistic diversity efforts emphasize that equal access to the internet relies on the ability to access it in the language and writing system of each individual (UNESCO, 2026). This role is critical in the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, where language, rather than being an exception, is a central part of social life.

In this paper, we therefore consider the link between language policy, digital governance and inclusive development in Sub-Saharan Africa. It states that language policies that ensure that African languages are legitimate instruments of public administration, civic participation and development communication are essential to make digital governance complete. The paper also argues that inclusive development must be more than just expanding digital infrastructure but also enabling a multilingual content, culturally responsive interface design, inclusive data systems and citizen-centric services that are responsive to the linguistic context of the African population. The main focus of this research is the potential of digital governance to either diminish or exacerbate



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inequality, depending on how it is put together. Digital systems, that are multilingual, accessible, participatory and locally rooted, can enhance public confidence, service delivery and democratic participation. If they are based on tight language assumptions, however, they have the potential to produce a new digital form of elitism, where access to the state is based on an official-language level of competence. Finally, language policy in Sub-Saharan Africa is not just a cultural concern; it is an integral part of digital inclusion, governance reforms and sustainable development.

A Statement of the problem and focus of the Study

Digital governance has emerged as a key element of development planning in Sub-Saharan Africa. Governments throughout the region are turning to digital platforms to deliver public services, create national ID, collect taxes, ensure access to education, health and social protection, register businesses, and engage citizens. These usually come across as measures to enhance administrative efficiency, advance transparency, speed up bureaucracy, and extend access to public services. From a continental perspective, the African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020-2030) has placed digital transformation as a key enabler for inclusive growth, economic integration, innovation and better quality of life in African societies (African Union, 2020). In the same way, international development institutions have been stressing the need for digital technologies as tools that will aid in enhancing governance, service delivery, and development outcomes in the region (World Bank, 2024). But greater and more expanding digital governance does not come automatically with inclusion. In most of the Sub-Saharan African countries the digital exclusion is still influenced by the lack of internet, high data cost, weak infrastructure, lack of digital literacy, different access to devices and weak availability of locally relevant digital content. While mobile connectivity has grown significantly in Sub-Saharan Africa, many in the population, who reside within the areas covered by mobile broadband, are not using mobile internet due to affordability, skills, literacy, and relevance concerns, as noted by GSMA (2024). Digital society does not simply mean that people can participate in society if there is digital infrastructure.

However, language is one of the least talked about aspects of digital exclusion, in addition to the visible barriers. In Sub-Saharan Africa, most of the digital government platforms are created in the official colonial languages (English, French or Portuguese). Although these languages are still key in administration, education, law and formal governance, they are not always representative of the lived language experience of many African citizens. Communications are made in indigenous African languages, pidgins, creoles, urban vernaculars and mixed multilingual (mish-mash) practices across the region. Therefore, citizens who are not fully literate or comfortable in the official languages may find it difficult to use the Internet to access public services, to understand the government's information, to fill out online forms, to attend consultations, or to communicate with public institutions. This is a significant challenge for inclusive development. While digital governance is theorised to be citizen-centred, if digital systems are linguistically inaccessible, they can simply perpetuate past trends of exclusion. A government service might be available online, but if large portions of the population are unable to comprehend or access the service, it's not truly inclusive.

The main issue to be tackled in this study is thus the lack of a comprehensive integration of a language policy into the digital governance planning in Sub-Saharan Africa. While infrastructure, connectivity, cyber security, digital identity, and digital skills are in the spotlight of government and development partner agendas, less is paid attention to the language conditions that shape the meaningful access to and the use of digital public services by citizens. The gap is important



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because the design and the linguistic realities of digital transformation can increase or decrease inequality. This research explores the linkages between language policy, digital governance and inclusive development in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is primarily intended to examine the potential of language-sensitive digital governance in enhancing access, participation and equity in delivering public services. Overall, the study focuses on the impact of language policy on citizens' access to and participation in digital governance systems, the extent to which digital platforms in the region support indigenous languages and multilingual communication practices, and how multilingual digital governance can enable inclusive development of marginalised and linguistically diverse groups.

The study adopts a perspective on digital inclusion that does not just consider internet infrastructure or online platforms. Inclusion, however, must also be judged based on the ability of citizens to understand, trust and interact with digital systems in languages that are meaningful and reflective of their lived experiences. The study thus asks itself the following questions: How does language policy influence access to digital governance services in Sub-Saharan Africa? How inclusive are digital governance systems in terms of indigenous languages and practices of multilingual communication? And how can language-sensitive digital governance contribute to inclusive development in the region? The study responds to these questions and makes a contribution to the debates on digital transformation, language policy and development in Africa.

Review and Discussion of the conceptual aspects of the Literature

Language policy, digital governance and inclusive development in Sub-Saharan Africa is best understood in terms of access-questions. Language policy influences language usage in public institutions, the digital governance affects the citizen's relationship with the state through digital technologies and inclusive development relates to the possibility of participation of all groups in social, political and economic life. When these ideas are combined, it is evident that digital transformation cannot be truly inclusive without paying attention to the linguistic context in African societies. Language policy in Sub-Saharan Africa remains strongly influenced by colonial histories. Many countries have an official policy of acknowledging indigenous languages; however, official language of governance remains English, French, Portuguese, or other colonial languages. The languages are the mother tongues of the public administration, law, education, official documents or many digital government platforms. Many citizens, however, engage in their daily lives in indigenous African languages, pidgins, creoles and multilingual forms of communication. This leaves a language divide between the language of the state and the language of common people.

This gap does have direct implications for digital governance. Digital platforms are now a key element of governments' public services, identity systems, taxation, education, healthcare, business registration and citizen engagement in the region.

Language is thus a key component of inclusive development that must be enforced. If government platforms are developed only in one or more official languages, then those who speak a language that is not the official language or those who speak the official language but began using the platform late may be left out of services provided to them. This may impact on access to health information, education, social protection, agricultural support services, legal awareness, tax systems and civic participation. UNESCO has reiterated the importance of linguistic diversity to ensure everyone's equal access to digital spaces and knowledge societies (UNESCO, 2023). Previous debates on Digital transformation in Africa tend to concentrate on infrastructure, Digital identity, Cybersecurity, Data governance and Digital skills. These are required, but do not



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adequately reflect the language barriers that affect citizens' ability to productively use digital systems. This paper thus proposes to view language policy as an integral component of digital governance and not as a mere cultural problem. To be inclusive, digital development in Sub-Saharan Africa must be both multilingual and use content in local languages, be culturally responsive, and acknowledge African languages as real tools of governance and citizenship.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the capability approach with some ideas from the theories of digital inclusion and language policy. The capability approach coined by Amartya Sen (1999) views development as the ability of all people to have a meaningful and dignified opportunity to live their lives. In this sense, digital governance is inclusive, if and when citizens are able to access digital public services, rather than if and when they are offered online. This is relevant as there are many projects in Sub-Saharan Africa working on digital governance infrastructure, platforms and service automation. But citizens can still be excluded if they have no access to the internet, lack technical skills, don't have an affordable device, lack confidence in government systems, or lack the language ability to use digital platforms. Even in areas with mobile network coverage, mobile internet usage is still a significant challenge in Sub-Saharan Africa, as highlighted by the GSMA (2024) report. The study is strengthened also by the language policy theory, which supports the explanation of how decisions made in public institutions about language choices can either include or exclude citizens.

This leaves a space for the languages of everyday life to be distinct from the language of the state. This concern is reflected in UNESCO's outlook on multilingualism in cyberspace, which calls attention to the importance of linguistic diversity as a means to access universal knowledge and services on the Internet (UNESCO, 2003). The study thus takes a language as a development capability perspective. Access to public information, online procedures, and the ability to interact with state authorities in the language they understand are key factors for the benefit of citizens to digital governance. Multilingual digital governance, in this way, improves citizens' powers of action to engage in the public sphere. This is in keeping with the African Union vision of a digital inclusive society and economy and the World Bank's Digital Economy for Africa initiative that will have individuals, businesses and governments in Africa digitally enabled by 2030.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative desk-based research. This is a suitable method as the paper looks at policy, governance, and development issues rather than numerical relationships. The study is based on the existing scholarly literature, policy documents, institutional reports, and development frameworks to help analyse the impact of language policy on digital governance and inclusive development in the Sub-Saharan Africa context. The material for the study is sourced from secondary sources like academic journals, books, government and intergovernmental policy documents, and reports from reputable organizations, such as the African Union, the World Bank, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and the GSMA. These sources are relevant in that they offer trustworthy evidence on digital transformation, multilingualism, digital inclusion and African development policy. The Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020-2030) by the African Union is particularly relevant as it introduces digital transformation as a tool for inclusive growth and quality of life in Africa. The paper features document analysis as an avenue of inquiry in (African Union). This includes reading and analyzing current texts to determine important themes, patterns and missing areas.



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The analysis centres on three key challenges: firstly, the impact of language policy on the access to public services; secondly, the potential of digital governance platforms to include or exclude citizens; and thirdly, the potential of multilingual digital systems to promote inclusive development. In the context of digital participation, the role of linguistic diversity can be analysed based on UNESCO's recommendation on multilingualism and universal access to cyberspace. (UNESCO) The study will focus on Sub-Saharan Africa but may be based on examples from other countries as needed. It is not country-specific, but regional. Yes, because many of these countries in the region have similar problems such as colonial language heritage, high linguistic diversity, low access to digital services, and lack of citizen-centric digital services. GSMA's report on the region demonstrates that mobile Internet is still underutilised due to issues of digital skills, safety, relevance and affordability, confirming the need to explore language as a component of a wider digital inclusion problem. Analysis is interpretative and thematic (GSMA Event Assets) It does not attempt to give any statistical indication of digital exclusion. Instead, it aims to illuminate the possibilities for language as a bridge and/or barrier to digital governance. The study links language policy, digital inclusion and development theory and offers critical insight into the need to design digital transformation in Sub-Saharan Africa in a language-sensitive fashion.

3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The review reveals that language plays a significant but under-discussed part in digital governance and inclusive development for people in Sub-Saharan Africa. Governments and development institutions are increasingly championing digital transformation as a means to growth, service delivery and citizen participation, but many digital systems are still built within language structure that do not reflect the daily lives of African societies. The African Union's digital strategy equates digital transformation with inclusive growth and better lives for citizens but such an objective can only be realised if digital platforms are accessible to citizens not just in terms of technology but in terms of language. One of the important findings is that if the digital governance is predominantly based on official colonial languages, it can have the potential to reinforce inequalities. (African Union) English, French and Portuguese continue to be the languages of public administration, education, law and digital government communication in many Sub-Saharan African countries. Many citizens, however, speak indigenous languages, pidgins, and multi-lingual, in everyday life. This "gap" between government and people's language is widened. Digital platforms can be better suited to the needs of educated and urbanized populations if they are designed in just the 'official' languages, and can exclude older citizens, low-literacy populations, speakers of marginalized languages and rural communities.

The second is digital access isn't synonymous with digital inclusion. By the end of 2023, mobile internet penetration in Sub-Saharan Africa was at 27%, with a usage gap of 60% (people living in the mobile internet coverage area but not using mobile internet). This is attributed to affordability, digital skills, safety and relevance in the report. Language is on-point with relevance. A digital service can be in place but, if it's not intuitive for citizens, then the interface, instructions, forms or public messages remain largely inaccessible.

As is further illustrated in the discussion, the degree to which inclusive development is possible relies on digital systems increasing the actual capacity of people to engage in public life. The World Bank's goal is to make every person, business and government in Africa digitally empowered by 2030, through the Digital Economy for Africa initiative. But digitale enableness should go beyond access to a device or network. (World Bank) It should also entail the ability to



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comprehend public communications, finish digital transaction, ask questions, receive assistance, and communicate with government in a language that is understood and meaningful. Language exclusion in practice can impact various aspects of development.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The connection between language policy, digital governance and inclusive development in Sub-Saharan Africa has been explored in this paper. It has been suggested that digital transformation is not just about infrastructure, internet connectivity, platforms or automation. These factors are relevant, but do not adequately reflect the social context that makes or breaks the possibility of citizens accessing digital public services. One such thing is language. The discussion reveals that there are a number of digital governance systems in Sub-Saharan Africa that remain a legacy of official-language administration. Despite the fact that a significant part of the population speaks predominantly indigenous African languages, pidgins, creoles and multilingualism, English, French and Portuguese are still the predominant languages in many government platforms. This leaves a space for the state language and many citizens' languages. Digital services, which may be available in just one or two official languages, can have a positive effect on access for certain groups and a negative for others.

It is also demonstrated in the paper that digital inclusion is not only about the physical access to technology. The GSMA report on Sub-Saharan Africa indicates that mobile internet penetration has risen while there are also significant gaps in mobile internet usage, where many people residing in areas covered by mobile networks do not use mobile internet due to factors like affordability, skills, safety and relevance (GSMA, 2024). This is a relevance problem related to language. If it is there and I can't read it, it's not accessible.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments in Sub-Saharan Africa should consider the implementation of multilingual planning from the initial design of the platforms as part of their digital governance policies. Digital services are not to be developed largely in the official language of the coloniser, and then translated into the indigenous language at a later stage. Rather, the accessibility of language should be raised in the initial design of the services, particularly those for health, education, agriculture, social protection, taxation, civic participation and identity registration. Second, national language policies need to be revised to reflect the facts of digital governance. Digital governance demands a more comprehensive approach to many language policies that were originally designed for education, culture or administration. Governments need to establish priority indigenous languages for public digital communication and define standards of translation, terminology, support of the user and local-language interface. This position is in line with UNESCO's argument that multilingualism and universal access are at the heart of inclusive participation in cyberspace (UNESCO, 2003). (UNESCO)

Thirdly, digital public services must offer several communication channels, not just written content. Voice-based services, audio prompts, community radio integration, local-language chatbots, visual guides and assisted digital service centres are all ways of enhancing access in multilingual and low-literacy settings. This is especially vital for the informal sector, older people, women and rural populations with low levels of formal education. Fourth, African governments should engage with universities, language experts, civic technology organizations, local communities and private-sector innovators to create digital materials in African languages. They can consist of linguistic material, translation software, speech-recognition software, electronic



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dictionaries, and common terminology in public services. This partnership can help advance good governance and digital innovation at the local level. Finally, digital inclusion policies need to include language as a key accessibility measure. Digital inclusion is currently mainly represented by connectivity, affordability, devices and digital skills. They are essential but without language access, they are not enough. “Digitally enabled” should also mean linguistically enabled (World Bank, n.d.) because the World Bank’s Digital Economy for Africa initiative envisions every person, business and government on the continent to be digitally enabled by 2030. (World Bank

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