

Dreams and Realities: Developing Countries and the English Language

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Paper 3

Language policy, politics and development in Africa

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Introduction

'Africa is the only continent where the majority of children start school using a foreign language,' observes a recent UNESCO report (Ouane and Glanz 2010). This chapter will argue that this language policy is a significant contributory factor to the lack of development in the continent. The Western media have made many optimistic predictions for Africa in the last two decades: 2005 was declared the 'Year of Africa' (Wickstead 2005:37), while following the fall of apartheid in South Africa, the 'African Renaissance' envisioned by Nelson Mandela was much heralded in the closing years of the 20th century by Bill Clinton and Thabo Mbeki among others (Tikly 2003). On the heels of the 2010 football World Cup in South Africa there are optimistic forecasts for that country, and for a halo effect over the entire continent¹. However, the renaissance has not yet materialised, and the pessimistic comment from Tabatabai (1995:31), that there was 'an unmistakable trend towards the Africanisation of poverty', is confirmed in the UN Human Development Report for 2010, with African countries occupying 28 of the bottom 30 countries (UNDP 2010). In addition, widespread violence has been witnessed across the continent: recent years have seen massacres in Darfur, election riots in Kenya, religious killings in Nigeria, with ongoing conflict in Sudan and the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo, while the rule of law seems febrile in much of the remainder of the continent. One remedy to this widespread lack of stability is held to be development, and an adequately educated population is claimed to be one of the necessary conditions for this, whether it be human development (focused on human needs in terms of health, democratic participation, freedom from abuse, etc.), or economic development (measured in terms of increased prosperity of the state).

However, the link between education and development is contested (Rogers 1990, Street 1984), while the notion that education alone can cause development is palpably mistaken. Thus, although Anderson (1966:347) estimated that 'about 40 per cent of adult literacy ... is a threshold for economic development' (a claim ironically dubbed the 'magical figure of 40 per cent' by Rogers 1990:3; see also

Street 1984:2, Rassool 1999:81), he is at pains to point out that 'that level of education would not be a sufficient condition in societies lacking other support systems' (Anderson 1966:347). Indeed, a great deal of research over the past half century supports the view that adequate education is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for both human and national economic development (Knight and Sabot 1990, Lockheed et al. 1980, Moock and Addou 1994). Furthermore, research has also demonstrated that education can be a cause of economic development, as opposed to simply correlating with it (Hicks 1980, Wheeler 1980). In a particularly wide-ranging review, Azariadis and Drazen (1990) examined the development history of 32 countries from 1940 to 1980, and concluded that, while there was variation from country to country, a threshold level for a number of factors, including the educational quality of the labour force, was a necessary, but not sufficient², condition for rapid economic growth. What they see as particularly significant is that not one of the countries where the threshold level of labour force educational quality was not met managed to achieve rapid growth.

A worrying observation, however, is that the effects of education seem weaker in Sub-Saharan Africa than in other areas of the world. Fotso (2006:10) reports that the infant mortality rate of children up to the age of one year, per 1,000 live births for children born to women in Malawi with no education is 98.6 compared to 104.0 for children born to women with eight years of primary education. Fotso's explanation is 'that the mortality pattern whereby children from mothers with some primary education stand greater risk to die than those whose mother have no formal education, reflect, at least in part, the differentials in under-reporting of deaths by education (sic)'. This explanation is, as he admits, speculation. Earlier research had, however, come to similar conclusions: Hobcraft (1993), who reviews a number of major studies, notes that the length of mothers' education has far less effect on child survival for African countries than for countries elsewhere. Hobcraft's method was to calculate the odds ratio for the 'maternal education contrast' (an odds ratio of 0.5 means that the child of a mother with seven or more years of education has a 50 per cent probability of dying before age two, compared with the child of a mother with no education). In all nine Latin American countries studied the ratio was below 0.5. On the other hand, ratios in Mali, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Uganda were 0.75 to 0.8, and in Ghana, 0.95. In short, seven years of mothers' education in Ghana made little difference to a child's survival chances. Hobcraft could find no convincing explanation for his findings. The work of Cochrane and Farid (1989) had also concluded that in Sub-Saharan Africa there are smaller differentials in birth rates between the rural uneducated and the urban educated than in other regions (particularly Latin America).

We explore below the reasons for this failure of much African primary education to ameliorate infant mortality. For the moment, we may note that one reason for the lack of positive impact of education in Sub-Saharan Africa is that what contributes to development is not simply 'education' in the sense of providing schools, teachers and materials for learners, but effective education, and that a crucial feature of much formal African education is precisely that it lacks effectiveness.

Language and education

By far the greater part of formal education in Africa takes place in the primary school classroom; primary to secondary transition rates are, with a few exceptions (e.g. Botswana, South Africa), low. As a prime site of communication, it is clear that the language of the primary classroom is crucial, whether the class operates through child-centred activities, where knowledge is created through negotiation and where pair or group discussion is a frequent feature, or is run along teacher-dominated lines, where knowledge is transmitted from teacher to learners. It might be suggested, however, that if students do not understand the language that the teacher is using (with the same language also serving as the language of the textbooks) then learners in a teacher-dominated class are at more of a disadvantage than those in a learner-centred class, where there is at least the option of communicating with each other in a familiar language. Although in rich countries, especially the English-speaking ones, child-centred education is assumed to be the norm in state systems, there is ample research to suggest that in much of Sub-Saharan Africa the teaching is largely teacher dominated. It is not the purpose of this chapter to judge between the merits of child-centred versus teacher-dominated classrooms, but merely to point out the singular disadvantage of children in a teacher-dominated class who do not understand the teacher or the textbooks.

By way of example there follows an extract from a third-year reading class in Zambia (Williams 1996:199). It is typical of teaching in most 'Anglophone' Sub-Saharan African countries:

Teacher: *We are going to read the story that is Chuma and the Rhino. That is paragraph three and four, which has been written on the board. Who can read the first sentence in paragraph three? Yes?*

Pupil: *Look at that hippo's mouth father.*

Teacher: *Read aloud.*

Pupil: *Look at that hippo's mouth father.*

Teacher: *Once more.*

Pupil: *Look at that hippo's mouth father.*

Teacher: *Yes. The sentence is 'Look at that hippo's mouth father'.*

Class: *Look at that hippo's mouth father.*

Teacher: *Look at that hippo's mouth father.*

Class: *Look at that hippo's mouth father.*

The lesson continues in this vein, with no attention to the presentation or checking of meaning. Such rote-repetition of written text without comprehension is a 'reading-like' activity, but not reading in the sense of cognitive engagement with text (although it qualifies as a 'literacy practice'). Likewise, copying from the

blackboard without comprehension is 'writing-like' but not 'true' writing, and has a similar implication for effective education.

It should come as no surprise that children subjected to this type of teaching fail to achieve command of English adequate for academic purposes. Their weak command of English (which, let us not forget, was the language of instruction in all subjects for the class above) is amply evidenced by test results from many quarters of Africa. In Zambia and Malawi, Williams (1996) administered modified cloze tests of 30 items in English and in ChiChewa (an important language spoken in both countries) to Year 5 students in six primary schools in each country. In Malawi 203 students out of 290 (70 per cent) were judged to have 'inadequate reading comprehension' in English, and in Zambia 150 out of 227 (66.1 per cent). This conclusion is roughly in line with other findings. Williams (1998) estimated that 74 per cent of Zambian students and 78 per cent of Malawian students at Year 6 had 'inadequate reading comprehension' in English, while the SACMEQ studies³ (Nkamba and Kanyika 1998, Milner et al. 2001) concluded that 74.2 per cent of Zambian students and 78.4 per cent of Malawian pupils at also at Year 6 did not reach a minimum 'level of mastery' in reading English. Similar low levels of reading have been documented by SACMEQ for other countries in southern Africa: for Zimbabwe, Machingaidze et al. (1998:71) conclude that at Grade 6 between 60 per cent and 66 per cent of pupils did not reach 'the desirable levels' of reading in English. Comparable findings are reported for Zanzibar (Nassor and Mohammed 1998), Mauritius (Kulpoo 1998), and Namibia (Voigts 1998), and suggest that about two thirds of the students in each country are highly likely to have difficulties in understanding their English school texts in other subjects, and that very few of the remaining third have fluent comprehension. The situation in Rwanda is more drastic: results of a study by Williams et al. (2004), who tested 251 Year 6 students in five primary schools indicated that only two (0.77 per cent) could read adequately for their studies in English at primary level. These findings suggest that the Rwandan government's current policy – that English should be the sole medium of instruction from Year 3 of primary schooling – is likely to face difficulties (although fewer than those arising from the policy in force from 2009 until 2011, which decreed that English should be the sole medium of instruction from Year 1).

Conversely, in educational contexts where African languages are taught and employed as media of instruction, students display considerable proficiency, as might be expected. Test findings in African languages from the same primary school students in Malawi, Zambia and Rwanda as reported in the previous paragraph (Williams 1996 for Malawi and Zambia, Williams et al. 2004 for Rwanda,) tell a very different story. In Rwanda, testing in Kinyarwanda of the same 251 Year 6 students concluded that the vast majority of students (over 90 per cent) could read independently in that language. These were students who, at the time of testing (2003), had experienced Kinyarwanda as a medium of instruction. Likewise, the 290 Malawian students who scored poorly in English achieved a median score of over 65 per cent on ChiChewa tests, and the conclusion was that the overwhelming majority of Malawian students were adequate readers in ChiChewa. On the other hand, in Zambia, on a near-identical ChiNyanja test (ChiChewa and ChiNyanja being effectively two labels for one language), but where the local languages are largely neglected as

subjects, and not used as media of instruction, the median score was ten per cent with only five students out of 227 scoring over 50 per cent.

If children in developing countries have little exposure to the language of instruction (be it English, French, Portuguese, etc.) outside the school, and if teaching the language of instruction is ineffective inside the school, then low quality education is inevitable. There is a considerable risk in such cases that the school experience may be a stultifying, rather than an enlightening one. Indeed, it is entirely likely that the above-mentioned findings by Cochrane and Farid (1989), Hobcraft (1993) and Fotso (2006), of the relatively weak effects of education on child survival in Sub-Saharan Africa, are simply the result of education in Africa being less effective, and the fact that the learners lack proficiency in the language of instruction must be a contributory factor.

The cognitive gains from investment in inadequate education are, as one would expect, negligible (Knight and Sabot 1990). Crucially then, it is effective education that enables individuals to acquire knowledge and skills, which in turn can contribute to development. The overwhelming case for educating children in a familiar language has been echoed, in the case of Africa, by repeated calls from educationists over the last hundred years (from the United Missionary Conference in Kenya in 1909, to the African Conference on Integration of African Languages and Cultures into Education, Burkina Faso, 2010) advocating a central role for African languages in primary education. Despite such views being widespread, governments have shown little will to change their policies, and their favouring of exoglossic languages such as English is generally supported by local communities for whom 'English equals education'. Families see English as a 'strong' language, and primary school English as the first step towards the coveted white-collar job. Although simple conversational skills (exemplified by responses to banal questions such as 'What is your name?' 'How old are you?' posed by one-off visitors to African classrooms) may be acquired within a year or two, what governments and families appear not to appreciate is the considerable amount of time, effort and resource that is needed to learn a language to a point where learners are capable of using it for academic purposes – widely agreed to take five to seven years (cf. Cummins 2000).

Political motivations in language policy

Why is the solution advocated by so many, namely to use a known language (probably, but not necessarily the child's mother tongue) not implemented in primary schools? One important answer is that the political will is lacking. The reasons for this lack of political will are various, some being relatively obvious and explicit, others more subtle. African governments invariably cite the need for national unification and development as reasons for eschewing African languages. John Mwanakatwe, Minister of Education in post-independence Zambia, a country with some 20 different languages (Kashoki 1990), spelled out the motivation clearly:

Even the most ardent nationalists of our time have accepted the inevitable fact that English – ironically a foreign language and also the language of our former colonial master – has definitely a unifying role in Zambia. (Mwanakatwe 1968)

Furthermore, the role of schools was crucial in promoting this unity through English:

For the sake of communication between Zambians whose mother tongues differ and in order to promote the unity of the nation, it is necessary for all Zambian children to learn the national language [i.e. English] as early as possible, and to use it confidently. (Ministry of Education Zambia 1976, para. 47)

A similar situation obtained in Malawi, which has around 14 indigenous languages (Lewis 2009); although English was not regarded as the sole linguistic means of fostering national unity (ChiChewa was, from 1969, the medium of instruction in the first four years of primary education), it was an official language, and it is clear that within the 'upper levels' of state institutions English was intended to play a unifying role. It was made compulsory in parliament, and under the regime of President Banda all Members of Parliament were 'required to pass a stringent test' in it (Schmied 1991:24). While opting for English may have succeeded in preventing conflict in the educational arena between competing language groups, and while its dominance in the same arena is largely welcomed by the public, the language has, however, created division between, on the one hand, those who have good access to it, typically members of the reasonably well-off urban groups, and, on the other hand, those who do not, typically the members of poor urban and especially rural groups.

There is, however, a small but increasing proportion of pupils throughout Africa who gain access to high-quality English teaching through attending private fee-paying primary schools. Referring to this effect of English in Malawi, Kayambazinthu (1999:52) says that:

The dominance and limited access to English ... has created an élite group, [whose] proficiency in English is near-native ... these élites maintain and regularly use their knowledge of English in their professional environments, where they typically occupy the middle ranks of the political, administrative and academic institutions.

Far from being a source of unity, the use of English in education in Africa has become a factor in national division, while the distribution of English proficiency in society is an indicator of the extent of this division. As Heugh (1999:306) puts it:

... the role of superimposed international languages has been hugely overestimated in their capacity to serve the interests of the majority on the continent [...] these languages serve only the interests of the élites.

'Élite closure' is the term Myers-Scotton (1990) has coined for the process whereby a small dominant establishment in African countries ensures that they and their families have access to high standards of English while inadequate education systems mean that this is largely denied to the majority. Perhaps the most extreme current example occurred in Rwanda where, following the massacres of 1994 and the intervention of the 'Anglophone' RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front), political and economic power has tended to be concentrated in the hands of a relatively small English-speaking group, mainly educated in Uganda, who in 2009 introduced legislation to 'anglicise' Rwanda, with a 'straight for English' policy in primary

education, accompanied by Rwanda joining the (ex-British) Commonwealth. This policy was modified in February 2011 such that Kinyarwanda became the medium of instruction for the first three years, with English as a subject. Nonetheless, since Rwanda is one of the few African countries where almost all inhabitants already share a common language (Kinyarwanda), this language policy does not seem to be focused on unification. It is therefore almost certain that Rwanda will generate a small English-proficient élite.

Likewise, as far as development is concerned, many governments look upon English as a vital tool. Yisa Claver (Director, Policy Planning at the Ministry of Education in Rwanda) commenting on Rwanda's 2009 decision to go 'straight for English' as a medium of instruction was clear on the role of the language in development:

Really it is not choosing English for its own sake ... This is a way to make Rwanda to be equal, to use English ... English is now a world language, especially in trade and commerce. Rwanda is trying to attract foreign investors – most of these people are speaking English ... It's choosing English as a medium of instruction so we Rwandans of today, and tomorrow, will benefit. (Quoted in McGreal 2009)

To date, however, there is no doubt that in other countries in Africa, the dominant role of English in primary schools (the only level of education for the vast majority of people in poor countries) has proved to be a barrier to education, and hence to development, for the majority, since most students fail to acquire adequate academic competence in the language. It is no surprise then, that, whether one looks at development in terms of economic progress or of human needs, poor countries such as Malawi, Zambia and Rwanda that use English or French as a means of 'accessing development' have not hitherto made great strides, as Table 1 suggests.

Table 1: Indicators of development for Malawi, Zambia and Rwanda (UNICEF 2010)

Indicator	Malawi	Zambia	Rwanda
Population below USD1.25 (GBP0.81) per day poverty line (%) (1992–2007)	74	64	77
GDP per capita average annual growth rate (%) (1990–2008)	0.6	0	1.5
Life expectancy in years (2008)	53	45	50
HIV/AIDS : 15–49 year old population (%) (2007)	11.9	15.2	2.8

In short, there is no evidence to suggest that the use of exoglossic languages such as French and English have contributed to development in proportion to their excessive dominance in educational and other official domains⁴. Nothing leads one to doubt Djité's opinion of nearly two decades ago (Djité 1993:149) that exoglossic languages have led neither to unity nor to development:

Reliance and dependency on superimposed international languages to achieve development in Africa over the last three decades has proven to be a failure. Instead of leading to national unity, this attitude has significantly contributed to the socio-economic and political instability of most African countries.

Governments, however, are not entirely to blame: they have strong support from the majority of parents, for whom 'education equals English'. In South Africa, for example, local communities determine the medium of education for any given primary school, and although there is theoretically a choice of any of the 11 'official' South African languages as media of education, in practice the choice is overwhelmingly for English, which is regarded as a 'strong' language (Heugh 1999, Webb 1999). And of course, parents are not entirely misguided on that point – many white-collar jobs require English; however, to mystify millions of children over several generations in order for the few survivors (often taught at private schools or élite state schools) to obtain relatively well-remunerated employment is a questionable policy.

Zambia provides clear evidence of this 'education equals English' attitude: in 1996, the year when the Zambian policy document *Educating our Future* was being drafted, and also a general election year in the country, politicians were worried that to promote Zambian languages as media of instruction at the expense of English would be a potential vote-loser. 'It proved not possible, for political reasons, to go as far as changing the medium of instruction to a local language' (Linehan 2004:7). Ruling politicians 'made clear to senior education officials that unless a non-contentious formula [for including local languages] could be found, the political preference would be for maintenance of the status quo, with English remaining in the same position as it had done from 1965' (Linehan 2004:7). The compromise position was, that initial literacy in year one should be in one of the seven 'educationally approved' Zambian languages, while English continued officially to be the medium of instruction. Even so, some Zambian Members of Parliament protested that the 'new language policy ... forces children to learn in a foreign language' (Linehan 2004:8). Rather unexpectedly, 'a foreign language' here refers to a Zambian language, rather than to English.

The obverse of this over-estimation of English is the under-estimation of African languages, and the negative impact of English on national self-esteem. An early expression of this came in 1969 from Kapepwe, at the time Vice President of Zambia, who said:

We should stop teaching children through English right from the start because it is the surest way of imparting inferiority complex in the children and the society. It is poisonous. It is the surest way of killing African personality and African culture.
(Cited in Serpell 1978:432)

Factors in development

One should not, of course, overstate the case for local languages in education; likewise, one should not overstate the case for education as a factor in development. Appropriate language policies are not the entire answer to poor quality education, and effective education is not the entire answer to human and economic development. Hawes et al. (1986:13) point out that 'it would be foolish to make exaggerated claims for the power of education to solve [Africa's] profound problems'. For many African countries, there are a host of inhibiting domestic factors, including corruption, administrative inefficiency and armed conflict within

or between countries. Likewise, climatic disasters frequently blight agricultural production, while the high incidence of HIV/AIDS is particularly debilitating at every level of society; the extent to which an effective state education system can operate within a malfunctioning state is debatable.

However, although there is no grand theory for sustainable development (see Kaul 1996, whose UN Committee concluded 'We simply do not know' how to achieve this aim), what is not disputed is that if poor countries are to provide better lives for their people in the modern world, then they need to acquire economic capital, social capital and human capital. By way of conclusion, we shall examine these three types of capital in the general African context:

Economic capital

In Africa, the framework of global economic structures within which countries have to operate renders economic growth problematic. Internationally, the industrialised countries have built up a technical advantage in manufacture which, without protectionism or massive technology transfer, is not likely to be bridged. With the failure of economic growth through structural adjustment programmes of the early 1990s in poor African countries (*The Economist* 1995:48), the developed world has since been seeking answers to development in policies oriented more to human needs (DfID 1997:1.7), while the World Bank 'is defining a new role for itself as a global welfare agency and is placing education firmly at the centre of its strategy' (Ilon 1997:414).

Although the 21st century has seen partial debt relief for a number of African countries, whether this is sufficient to turn around African economies is open to question. Likewise, adverse conditions of trade (e.g. rich countries imposing tariffs on imports from developing countries, while subsidising their own exports), although showing signs of ameliorating (UN 2005:38-39), are not likely to undergo the kind of changes that will bring about significant benefits in Africa. In short, as far as economic capital is concerned, outside agency, largely Western, has hitherto lacked the will to help Africa, while African agency lacks the resource. For most children in Africa, the 'level playing field' will continue to look decidedly uphill: poor quality education is both a cause and an outcome of poverty, at household and national levels (cf. Kadzamira and Rose 2003, Colclough et al. 2000). It remains to be seen to what extent the considerable and ongoing Chinese activity in Africa, in terms of investments, loans and a growing Chinese diaspora in Africa (see Addis Fortune 2010, Foster et al. 2008) affects this economic scene, and indeed, the linguistic landscape in Africa.

Social capital

While Bill Clinton's famous message 'It's the economy, stupid!' helped to secure victory for him in the US Presidential Election of 1992, development in Africa is not a matter of simply attending to economics. A number of observers of the African scene (e.g. Edwards 1999, Pakenham 1991, Reader 1997) claim that African countries will develop not through achieving a level economic playing field, but through transforming themselves into 'polities' – a 'polity' being a cohesive and functioning state (Edwards 1999:68). What polities need to function successfully is 'social capital', which is defined as a critical mass of trust, reciprocity and a sense

of obligation between members of the polity at all levels, with governments and individuals committed to the welfare of all their fellow citizens.

Africa's crisis in this analysis is largely, although not entirely, brought about through a lack of social capital. Edwards (1999:66) claims that 'development needs stability, stability requires a legitimate state, and legitimacy rests on ... a level of political participation that is meaningful in local terms'. Many development specialists claim that it is 'the polity' that distinguishes the East Asian experience from that of most of Africa (e.g. Sachs 1996, cited in Edwards 1999:68) while Robinson (1996:170-171) stresses the importance of the social and political elements in development:

[There is a] growing appreciation in development circles that development is certainly not only about economics, and may not even be primarily about economics ... [S]ocial and political development are seen as the underpinnings of economic development at least as much as the other way around (and probably more).

Likewise, over three decades ago President Kaunda of Zambia was wont to draw attention to the lack of 'civic responsibility' in his country, while Bamgbose (1991:44) claims that 'the primary causes of poverty are deficiencies in education, organisation and discipline'. In such analyses, the lack of social capital is seen as brought about by corrupt individual performances, which can be remedied when honest individuals take over.

Bayart (1993), however, has a different take on the nature of political power in the African state – that of 'the politics of the belly', where the expectation is that 'big men' generally, and state leaders in particular, will amass and redistribute wealth. Bayart is at pains to point out that this is not 'similar to a more or less erratic, 'political culture' for which it might be possible to substitute 'good governance'; rather it is a system of historic action whose origins must if possible be sought in the Braudelian *longue durée*.' (Bayart 1993:ix). And again:

Anyone seeking to dismiss this form of politics as no more than a symptom of corruption or of the decadence of the state is making a grave mistake. These representations can be institutional. The authors of Nigeria's draft constitution in 1976, for example, defined political power as 'the opportunity to acquire riches and prestige, to be in a position to hand out benefits in the form of jobs, contracts, gifts of money, etc. to relations and political allies.' (Bayart 1993:xvii)

If Bayart's disquieting analysis of the exercise of power in Africa is correct, then the accumulation within African countries of social capital is problematic, since it suggests that leaders at all social levels will continue to amass wealth at the expense of the population generally, but will redistribute it to a group of 'relations and political allies'. True, individual leaders may be deposed by violence or the ballot box, but the system will continue. Thus Finlayson (2005:48) notes that although Bakili Muluzi, who took over democratically as President of Malawi from Kamuzu Banda, claimed to be a reformer, in due course 'Bad habits cultivated under the dictatorship of Kamuzu Banda started to reassert themselves ... [T]he slide into autocracy and corruption became inexorable'.

If Bayart's analysis is wrong, and the many cases of autocracy and corruption by African leaders are a matter of one-off deviancies which may in principle be halted, then the accumulation of social capital may be a more feasible eventuality. In either case, it is not clear that this mode of exercising political power, whether it is rooted in 'tradition' (for want of a better term), or simply the result of a sequence of rapacious leaders, can itself generate the agency for its own demise.

Human capital

What is crucial in human capital is effective education. Although there is no simple causal connection from the language through which education is conducted to the well-being of the state, the weight of evidence suggests that literacy skills are more easily acquired in a language with which learners are familiar, leading to more effective education; in turn, effective education can contribute to poverty alleviation and development. It is abundantly clear that education in a language that few learners, and not all teachers, have mastery of, detracts from quality and compounds the other problems arising from economically impoverished contexts. Robinson (2005:186) concludes from his review of Ouane (2003) that such 'patterns of language use in education systems continue to contribute to failure, alienation and waste', while Kelly (1995:6) delivers a harsher judgment on the compounding effect of the Zambian language policy:

The colossal neglect of education during the years of economic collapse, droughts and sickness are among other adverse factors. But ... were it not for the language policy, we would have had better educated people who would have known better how to cope with the economic problem, and even with those arising from drought, AIDS and other extrinsic factors. (my emphasis)

While it is all very well to advocate that children be taught through their mother tongue, or at least a language with which they are familiar, an issue that cannot be avoided in this context is the choice of language of instruction. Sub-Saharan African countries are multilingual, some intensely so: even identifying the languages in a country can be problematic. Thus the 1990 Census of Zambia (CSO 1995:34) says, 'it has been estimated that the country has 72 tribes, each with its own unique language or dialect'. On the other hand, the Zambian linguist Kashoki (1990:109) claims that Zambia has 'approximately 80 Bantu dialects' which are grouped into slightly over 20 more or less mutually unintelligible clusters or 'languages', while Lewis (2009) lists 40 indigenous languages for Zambia. While this indeterminacy arises from political versus linguistic criteria for defining 'a language', it nonetheless suggests there will be difficulties in even arriving at the number of 'mother tongues' eligible as media of instruction (and Zambia is of course not the only country to feature such indeterminacy). Nonetheless, whatever method may be used to arrive at a total, the number of languages in Zambia, and in most African countries, remains considerable. Africa has between 1,000 and 2,500 depending on definitions, according to Ouane and Glanz (2010:8), who go on to say 'It is assumed that managing so many speech communities is problematic and costly'.

While practical solutions to this reality do not readily present themselves, one answer is to employ a language which is closely related to those spoken by all the learners, provided of course that they share related languages – thus the use

of ChiChewa in Malawi does not seem to pose problems for speakers of other African languages in the country, according to research by Williams (2006:125-26). Where circumstances allow, this strategy offers a reasonable solution. Similarly, in urban contact areas where there is particularly intensive multilingualism, the most appropriate solution would seem to be to employ the language in which the learners communicate with each other outside the classroom. Such solutions require careful research and preparation, and are unlikely to be cost-free. Nevertheless, they arguably offer better value than using an ex-colonial language, where the learners' lack of proficiency in the medium of instruction means that there is massive wastage in the attempt to build human capital.

Conclusion

It is difficult to disagree with the above indictment by Kelly of the Zambian language policy. And of course, not only Zambia but the majority of African countries are affected by their educational language policy's failure to contribute to human capital. The crucial issue is how to take account of language diversity and at the same time deploy an educational language policy that is effective in empowering learners. African languages must play a part here, and at the same time access to a global language such as English is a political imperative: no African politicians are prepared to deny their citizens such access, inadequate though it may be in reality.

Effective teaching of English (or other ex-colonial language) as a subject in Africa, which is what occurs in much of the rest of the world, is the most obvious answer, rather than employing it as a medium of instruction. As to addressing the apparent lack of political will in this matter, there is no simple answer: African politicians seem convinced that the best way to teach English is to use it as a medium of instruction. However, they do not seem to have fully understood the difficulties of conducting state education in a language that few learners, and not all teachers, have mastered, nor have they understood the advantages of educating learners in their own languages. Likewise, it would appear that these politicians do not appreciate the risk to national development, nor the threat to national stability, posed by 'élite closure' which arises from their current educational language policies. There is also a less generous answer: that African politicians have indeed understood the issues, but that, in the final analysis, they have more pressing concerns than attempting to improve the welfare of their people through appropriate educational language policies.

Notes

1. 'A great 2010 World Cup can open doors for all of Africa, bringing much needed infrastructure, tourism and money to a continent that needs it more than any other.' (Burtner 2009)
2. Azariadis and Drazen offer no precise explanation for the failure of economic growth in countries where the threshold level of education obtained but they speculate on the effects of 'wasteful economic policies, wars and other political upheavals, natural disasters' (1990:519), together with flaws in the working of credit markets.
3. Large-scale pieces of research carried out on behalf of UNESCO by the Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality.
4. In UNDP's Human Development Index for 2010, Malawi is ranked 153 out of 169 countries, Zambia 150 and Rwanda 153 (UNDP 2010; see also Appendix 1 below).

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