Leveraging indigenous languages for efficient local government: an analysis in a South African context

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ABSTRACT

South Africa is a diverse nation with a rich tapestry of indigenous languages spoken across its provinces. As the country continues its democratic journey, local government plays a pivotal role in ensuring service delivery, community engagement, and development. This article explores the potential of indigenous languages as a valuable resource for enhancing the efficiency of local government operations. Indigenous languages, often marginalised, hold a wealth of cultural, historical, and contextual knowledge that can be harnessed to improve governance, communication, and community engagement at the local level. This paper investigates the multifaceted benefits of incorporating indigenous languages into various aspects of local government activities. The paper also draws upon case studies on incorporating indigenous languages in municipalities for efficient communication.

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Introduction

Many regions around the world have diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Incorporating indigenous languages into local government activities can have various benefits (Bianco & Rhysdwen, 2001; Kasper & Omori, 2010). Battiste (2016) postulates that indigenous languages embody the wisdom, history, and traditions of indigenous communities around the world. However, most of these languages often stand at the precipice of extinction or marginalisation. The indigenous languages are threatened by a myriad of socio-cultural, political, and economic forces (Asobayire & Barley, 2015). In this era of globalization, indigenous communities grapple with the challenge of preserving their linguistic heritage while engaging with the demands of modernity (McCarty, 2003). The preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages hold particular significance is local government (Ward & Braudt, 2015).

Local governments are the frontline institutions responsible for delivering essential public services, administering justice, and fostering community development (Nannyonjo & Okot, 2013). Hence, Makanyeza, Kwandayi and Ikobe (2013) seem to be of the opinion that the government’s crucial responsibility is to deliver services that a society requires to maintain and improve its welfare. Therefore, it is important for local governments to have effective communication with the communities they serve, and language plays a pivotal role in this communication.

South Africa is a nation marked by its linguistic diversity, with 11 official languages in 1994, and later in 2018 a twelfth official home language, namely the South African Sign Language (SASL) recognized in its constitution (Reagan, 2001; Seethal, 2023). A historical analysis reveals that the imposition of colonial languages, particularly English and Afrikaans, has played a significant role in marginalizing Indigenous languages (Pennycook, 2002; Diko, 2022). However, post-apartheid South Africa has witnessed efforts to promote linguistic diversity and inclusion, with the adoption of policies favoring Indigenous languages (Mbolo, 2019). Carpenter and Tsykarev (2020) argue that indigenous languages are a vital part of the nation's cultural heritage. In South Africa, language became enmeshed with a host of variables, including hegemony and power on the part of the minority white community on the one
hand and powerlessness among the majority black population (Seethal, 2023). Local government, as the closest tier of government to the people, has the potential to harness the power of these indigenous languages for more efficient and inclusive governance.

The purpose of this article is to search deeply into the intersection of indigenous languages and efficient local government. The article attempts to comprehensively analyse the multifaceted relationship between indigenous languages and local governance. The article aims to shed light on the ways in which linguistic diversity can both pose challenges and present opportunities for more effective governance. Moreover, the article seeks to explore strategies and best practices that can be employed to leverage indigenous languages as assets for achieving efficient and inclusive local government.

**Indigenous Languages and Cultural Preservation**

Indigenous languages are not mere vehicles of communication; they are living repositories of culture, history, and identity (Joseph, 2004). These languages carry within them the collective wisdom of generations, encapsulating the unique worldviews, traditions, and values of indigenous communities (Whiten, Biro, Bredeche, Garland & Kirby, 2022). Every word, phrase, and narrative in any indigenous language holds a piece of a cultural mosaic that has withstood the test of time. Hallett, Chandler and Lalonde (2007) indicate that indigenous languages are linked with community's cultural heritage in a sense that when indigenous languages fade into extinction, so too does a significant part of a community's cultural heritage. Therefore, it is not merely a linguistic endeavour for the preservation of indigenous languages but a profound act of cultural conservation which safeguard the vibrant tapestry of indigenous identity for future generations to cherish.

Schneider (2003) recognises South Africa as a diverse country whereby each Indigenous language is a unique window into the worldviews and identities of its speakers. South Africa not only preserves its cultural diversity through indigenous languages but also strengthens the bonds of unity among its people. Therefore, it is important to safeguard and celebrate the indigenous languages. Most importantly, utilise these languages in local government’s programs. The revitalization of Indigenous languages is not merely a linguistic process; it is a commitment to nurturing the very soul of the nation, ensuring that the wisdom of its ancestors and the vibrancy of its cultures continue to flourish for generations to come.

**Challenges and Barriers of incorporating indigenous languages for efficient local government**

Incorporating indigenous languages for efficient local government can be a complex and challenging endeavour due to various barriers. These challenges often revolve around linguistic, cultural, logistical, and policy issues. Here are some of the key challenges or barriers:

**Linguistic Diversity**

Indigenous communities often speak a wide variety of languages within a single region. Linguistic diversity within a community, while a testament to the richness of culture and heritage, can often pose significant challenges to efficient local government operations (Piller, 2016). Goswami, De, and Datta (2009) indicate that rich linguistic diversity in South Africa poses a challenge to the integration and exploitation of socio-economic opportunism. Which implies that in the setting with a multitude of languages spoken, ensuring that government officials can effectively convey information and policies to all residents becomes a daunting task. These languages may have different dialects and scripts, making it difficult to standardize communication. Therefore, translation and interpretation services may be required, incurring additional costs and potential delays in disseminating crucial information.

Civic or community engagement and participation can be hindered by linguistic diversity (Parekh, Maleku, Fields, Adorno, Schuman and Felderhoff, 2018). This makes it difficult for residents to understand government communications in their native languages, leaving communities disenfranchised and disengaged from civic affairs. In some instances, the absence of engagement can lead to reduced voter turnout, limited participation in public hearings, and ultimately, a disconnect between local government and its diverse constituents (Alex-Assensoh, 2005; Michels & De Graaf, 2010). The provision of essential services during emergency situations, such as natural disasters or public health crises, demand clear and rapid communication; efficient provision of these services maybe hindered by linguistic diversity.

**Limited Resources**

Limited resources often stand as a significant barrier to efficient local government Budget constraints and resource shortages can hinder the ability of local governments to provide essential services and respond promptly to community needs (Kloot & Martin, 2000; Stephen, Norris & Fletcher, 2003). When funds are scarce, local governments may struggle to invest in critical infrastructure, public safety, education, and social services (Washburn, Sindhu, Balaouras, Dines, Hayes & Nelson, 2009). Furthermore, limited resources can result in under-staffing, overworking government employees, and reducing their capacity to carry out their responsibilities effectively. This can lead to burnout, decreased morale, and a decline in the quality of public service delivery. Therefore, investing incorporating indigenous languages in local government becomes the last priority.

Inefficient resource in local government hinders the development of indigenous language initiatives for efficient local government since these initiatives are capital intensive. Without the necessary financial means to adopt new tools and systems, local governments may continue to rely on traditional processes of engaging communities dominated by colonial languages.
Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity, although a vital aspect of inclusive governance, can sometimes become a barrier to efficient local government when not navigated carefully. Political, economic situations, and regional sensitivity inclusivity are to be considered in inclusive governance. However, inclusive governance can be meaningful in a system where decisions are made at multiple levels (Craye, and Funtowicz, 2009).

Striking a balance between respecting diverse cultural practices and upholding universal legal standards can bring with problems in incorporating indigenous languages in local government. Gutmann (1993) indicates that there are different kinds of controversies associated with multiculturalism including social justice. Local governments must ensure that cultural sensitivity does not compromise essential regulations, which can lead to legal conflicts or inconsistencies in public policies (Conradie & Choenni, 2012). Moreover, excessive cultural sensitivity can create inefficiencies in local government service delivery due to indigenous languages not fully incorporated.

While it is essential to accommodate diverse cultural needs by utilizing indigenous languages, an excessive focus on catering to every cultural nuance can strain resources of the municipality. Hassan, Larreguy and Russell (2023) argue that the risk of favouritism or bias is another potential issue when local governments are overly deferential to specific cultural groups or ethnic groups. Local governments are highly charged with politics of locality and ethnicity. Therefore, cultural sensitivity in incorporating indigenous languages for effective local government can be a daunting task.

Integration with Official Languages

It can be challenging to balance the use of indigenous languages with official languages, and this can damage the revival of indigenous languages. Although, it is difficult to quantify the extinction of these particular indigenous languages (Zuckermann, Shakuto-Neoh & Quer, 2014). Governments may need to prioritize one over the other in certain situations, leading to tensions. Integrating an official language, while a well-intentioned policy, can sometimes become a barrier to efficient local government, particularly in multicultural and linguistically diverse communities.

Resistance to Change

Resistance to change often serves as a barrier to efficient local government. In some cases, local government agencies are entrenched in longstanding practices, procedures, and organizational cultures that resist innovation and adaptation (Geddes, 2000). This includes resisting incorporating indigenous languages in local government’s affairs. Taking to consideration that long-established procedures and hierarchies can discourage employees from embracing change, even when it promises greater efficiency (Kett, Ingraham, Sanders & Horner, 2010). Resistance can manifest as reluctance to adopt new systems and practices. Moreover, resistance to change can also emerge from community stakeholders, such as citizens and local interest groups.

Legal and Policy Barriers

Legal and policy barriers can significantly impede efficient local government operations. One of the primary challenges is navigating complex and often outdated regulatory frameworks. Local governments must adhere to a multitude of laws, regulations, and policies that can be convoluted and contradictory. These legal intricacies can slow decision-making processes, introduce unnecessary bureaucracy, and lead to compliance errors, ultimately impeding efficiency. The laws may delay the incorporation of indigenous languages for efficient local governance. Furthermore, local governments may face challenges in adapting policies to evolving community needs. Outdated or rigid policies can hinder the implementation of innovative solutions and hinder the responsiveness required to address rapidly changing circumstances, such as technological advancements, demographic shifts, or economic fluctuations.

Enhancing Local Governance through incorporating indigenous languages

Local governance is the foundation of effective democracy that thrives when communities are engaged and empowered (Tshoose, 2015). The use of indigenous languages in local government is one powerful tool for achieving this empowerment. In diverse nations like South Africa, where numerous Indigenous languages are spoken, this approach can be particularly impactful. Here are several ways in which leveraging Indigenous languages can enhance local governance:

Inclusive Participation

Molale (2021) indicates that some of the key legislations regulating local government administration in South Africa require municipal authorities to ensure participation of local communities in the planning and execution of a local development agenda. However, various communication-related gaps were noted. The lack of active citizen engagement and participation, a lack of proper feedback facilitation as well as the inability of local citizens to be afforded the space to make final decisions regarding local development and social change needs are the communication gabs (Molale, 2021). Callahan (2007) asserts that inclusive participation is a cornerstone of democracy, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued in decision-making processes. This is important in involving the community for decision making process and it also fosters a sense of ownership and encourages citizen engagement. Indigenous languages can play a pivotal role in fostering this inclusivity provide a means for all community members, especially
those in rural or marginalized areas. Moreover, indigenous languages aid communities to participate actively in local government meetings, consultations, and decision-making processes. Here are several ways in which Indigenous languages promote inclusive participation (Barchas-Lichtenstein, 2013).

Incorporating Indigenous languages into inclusive participation efforts is not just a matter of linguistic diversity; it's a commitment to social equity, cultural recognition, and the strengthening of democratic processes (Kymlicka, 2012). Through the utilisation of indigenous languages in local government public participation programs like ‘Imbizos’, the community can effectively participate and clearly communicate issues that affect them.

Cultural Sensitivity

Indigenous languages carry the cultural nuances, values, and traditions of their communities (Rowe, Straka, Hart, Callahan, Robinson & Robson, 2020). By conducting local government affairs in indigenous languages, automatically officials demonstrate respect for the cultural heritage of their constituents. This, in turn, can lead to increased trust and cooperation between the government and the community. Many Indigenous languages are closely tied to specific cultural groups. When these languages are used in participatory processes, it acknowledges the cultural diversity within a society and allows individuals from these communities to express their perspectives without the need for translation or interpretation. This is important in making sure that the messages are not distorted, and real community concerns are heard and addressed by the local municipality.

Effective Communication

Communication, governance and development are closely linked. Hence, communication for social change is the nurturing of knowledge aimed at creating a consensus for action that takes into account the interests, needs and capacities of all concerned (Servaes, 2009). Good governance is a prominent issue in the management of public administration, with effective communication as one of the fundamental pillars of good governance (Abdou, 2021). This implies that using Indigenous languages ensures that important information about local policies, services, and projects reaches all residents clearly and comprehensively, reducing misunderstandings and misinformation.

Efficient and responsive local government is depended on effective communication. In multicultural and multilingual societies like South Africa, harnessing the power of Indigenous languages can significantly enhance communication between local governments and their constituents. Indigenous languages can be used for effective communication in local government in the following ways:

i. For citizens to report problems, concerns or issues to local authorities, effective channels of communication need to be put in place (King & Brown, 2007). Therefore, utilising indigenous languages can enable local government to create a proper feedback loop which is crucial for identifying and addressing community challenges promptly.

ii. Effective communication with the aid of indigenous languages helps local governments understand the community’s needs and priorities. This insight is essential for efficient resource allocation and targeted development initiatives (Méndez, Flores-Haro & Zucker, 2020).

iii. Misunderstanding may arise in any communication and natural languages may tend to be well equipped with means for signalling as well as well as resolving it (Mauranen & Ranta, 2009). Not all community members have a good command of lingua franca, in the South African context, not all community members are good speakers of English or Afrikaans. Indigenous languages can aid in transparent and open communication between local government and the community it serves. This can help prevent and resolve conflicts within communities. When people feel heard and understood, they are more likely to find common ground and work toward peaceful resolutions.

Access to Services

The language barrier problem is complicated by the fact that many providers and institutions have no effective system in place to deal with a language barrier when it presents. In many cases, Indigenous language speakers face barriers in accessing essential government services due to language differences (Timmins, 2002). Peprah, Agyemang-Duah, Arimiyaw, Morgan and Nachibi (2021) argue that making local government services available in local languages removes barriers and improve the quality of life for all residents by fostering a sense of social justice. Hence, indigenous languages serve as a bridge between community members and critical services such as healthcare, education, and government assistance. Therefore, when local governments as service providers communicate in the indigenous languages spoken within a community, they break down language barriers, fostering a deeper understanding of local needs and cultural nuances. For example: access to healthcare is significantly improved when healthcare providers can converse with patients in their native language. This ensures clear communication regarding symptoms, treatment options, and preventive measures (Jacobs, Shepard, Suaya and Stone, 2004; Al Shamsi, Almutairi, Al Mashrafi, & Al Kalbani, 2020). Therefore, when local governments offer services in indigenous languages, it enhances civic engagement and ensures that community members can access resources and benefits to improve their quality of life.
Empowering Communities

Indigenous languages have the transformative power to empower both local governments and their respective communities. When local governments recognize and actively support the use of indigenous languages, they demonstrate a commitment to cultural diversity and inclusivity (Cantoni, 1996). This, in turn, fosters trust and cooperation between governments and indigenous communities. By incorporating these languages into official documents, public services, and communication channels, governments ensure that policies and information are more accessible and comprehensible to indigenous populations (Lubogo, Lubogo, & Lubogo, 2023). This inclusivity strengthens the democratic process, as it encourages broader participation in civic affairs. Communities are likely to fully participate in decision making processes using their indigenous languages, they become more self-reliant and are better equipped to address their unique needs and challenges. This empowerment can lead to more effective, locally-driven development initiatives.

Sustainable Development

Indigenous languages play a crucial role in promoting sustainable development within local governments (Jacobs, 1999). These languages are repositories of traditional ecological knowledge, passed down from one generation to the other, providing insights into sustainable land use, resource management, and conservation practices (Drew, 2005). The engagement between local governments and indigenous communities in their native languages enable access to this invaluable knowledge. This enable more informed and effective decision-making regarding environmental policies and sustainable development initiatives. Additionally, indigenous languages foster a sense of cultural identity and pride among community members (Good, Sims, Clarke & Russo, 2021).

People are more likely to protect and preserve what is culturally significant to them. Hence, cultural resilience strengthens social cohesion and a collective commitment to sustainable practices (Besculides, Lee & McCormick, 2002; Soini & Birkeland, 2014). Therefore, local government can create an inclusive environment by embracing indigenous languages whereby indigenous communities actively participate in shaping sustainable development agendas. Moreover, indigenous languages can be harnessed as tools for environmental education, helping to raise awareness about sustainable practices and the importance of preserving natural resources (Ramadhan, Sukma, & Indriyani, 2019; SauvA, 1996.). In essence, the integration of indigenous languages in local government efforts contributes to sustainable development.

Case Studies

Examining successful initiatives and case studies from municipalities that have embraced Indigenous languages in local government can provide valuable insights and best practices. Embracing indigenous languages in local government is crucial for fostering inclusivity, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting effective communication with the local population. Here are a few potential case studies from South Africa that might provide valuable insights and best practices:

Case Study 1. The Use Of Translators At Local Municipalities: A Case Study Of Moqhaka Local Municipality, South Africa ) (Hlohlolo, 2018).

Hlohlolo conducted a study at Moqhaka Local Municipality that used the critical theory to determine the contextual factors that appear to help in understanding the language rights of Black literate and semi-literate residents within local municipalities in South Africa. This study employed mixed methods approach. Open-ended interviews were conducted with Moqhaka Local Municipality officials. Qualitative data was analysed using interpretative-phenomenological data analysis while quantitative data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences.

The results from both qualitative and quantitative data revealed that the use of translator(s) is a need and essential in helping out (better understanding of municipal language of choice) Black literate and semi-literate residents within the Moqhaka Local Municipality. Hlohlolo found out that translator(s) are valuable in ensuring that residents within local municipalities in South Africa are afforded their language rights to be accommodated in their preferred languages, taking into cognisance the official municipal language, as per Municipal Systems Act. No 32 of 2000. Local municipalities have language policies which in turn have provided for the employment and use of translator(s). As a result, an effective language policy should be triumphed by

The implementation plan and employment of translator(s) thereof. It is pivotal to establish a language unit at local municipalities in South Africa in order to promote indigenous African languages and multilingualism.

Local municipalities have raised a concern that languages are an unfunded mandate; as a result there is no mention of language practitioners (for this study translator or translators) in the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) or within municipal organograms. Local municipalities will be advised and encouraged to have language services within their Integrated Development Plan (IDP) to address the stipulation of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act. No 108 of 1996). The study recommends that local municipalities (for this study, Moqhaka Local Municipality) respond to the stipulations in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act. No 108 of 1996) and use translator(s) when communicating with residents (especially Black literate and semi-literate).
Case Study 2. City of Johannesburg

Johannesburg, South Africa, is a city known for its linguistic diversity, with residents speaking a wide range of languages (Barwell, Chapsam, Nkambule & Phakeng, 2016.). To handle this linguistic diversity effectively, the City of Johannesburg, which is a Metropolitan area employs various strategies and initiatives. Here are some ways in which the City of Johannesburg addresses language diversity:

i. **Official Languages**

The City of Johannesburg conducts its official business in all 11 languages to ensure inclusivity. The municipality provides services in multiple languages to cater to the linguistic diversity of its residents. This includes translating official documents and forms into different languages.

ii. **Community Engagement**

The City engages with various communities and community leaders to understand their linguistic needs and preferences. This engagement helps tailor services and communication accordingly. The municipality also utilizes a range of communication channels, including local radio, community newspapers, and social media, to disseminate information in multiple languages.

iii. **Language Support in Education**

Local schools offer instruction in multiple languages to accommodate linguistic diversity, and the municipality supports these efforts to ensure that students have access to education in their preferred languages.

iv. **Cultural Celebrations**

The municipality hosts cultural events and celebrations that showcase the linguistic and cultural diversity of the city, promoting tolerance and understanding among different language communities.

v. **Translation Services**

When necessary, The City of Johannesburg may employ professional translation services to ensure that important information is accurately conveyed in multiple languages. Furthermore, the emergency services are provided in various languages to ensure that residents can quickly access help and support in times of crisis.

While Johannesburg makes efforts to address linguistic diversity, it's important to note that challenges still exist, such as resource limitations and the need for ongoing community engagement.

**Conclusions**

Leveraging Indigenous languages in South African local government is a complex yet essential endeavor. It holds the potential to foster efficient and inclusive governance while honoring the country's rich linguistic heritage. By addressing the challenges and implementing the proposed recommendations, South Africa can take significant strides toward a more equitable and responsive local government system that serves all its citizens, regardless of their language backgrounds. Enhancing local governance through the use of Indigenous languages is not only a matter of linguistic diversity but a crucial step toward more inclusive, participatory, and culturally sensitive governance. It strengthens the bonds between government and citizens, fosters community empowerment, and contributes to the overall well-being and development of the nation. South Africa, with its rich tapestry of Indigenous languages, stands to gain significantly from such an approach to local governance.

Examination of policy frameworks and guidelines that can support the integration of indigenous languages into local government operations. Formulation of recommendations for local governments, policymakers, and community stakeholders interested in implementing language-focused initiatives. Effective implementation of local policies often requires community understanding and cooperation. Using indigenous languages can aid in conveying policy information accurately.

To promote efficient local government through Indigenous languages, the following recommendations are proposed:

i. Local governments should invest in training programs for its officials for capacity building to enhance their language proficiency and cultural sensitivity.

ii. Develop cost-effective translation and interpretation services should be developed to bridge language gaps. This will ensure citizens have equal access to important local information during meetings and community engagement initiatives.

iii. Local government should implement inclusive language policies that recognize the importance of all Indigenous languages, avoiding linguistic hierarchies.

iv. The local community should be engaged by involving Indigenous language-speaking communities in decision-making processes and service delivery.
v. The local government should hire workers that speak multiple languages. The local government recruitment strategy should hire officials that speak English as well as commonly spoken languages of their respective communities. Offering services and information in multiple languages, providing language training for government staff, and promoting cultural sensitivity can help overcome language barriers, enhance accessibility, and promote efficiency by ensuring that all residents have equal access to government resources and information.

vi. Municipalities should upgrade local signage by including indigenous languages spoken in the communities on infrastructure such as road signage and public transit routes maps.

vii. Local governments must prioritize budget allocation, explore alternative funding sources, and engage in cost-saving initiatives. This should include collaborating with the private sector and leveraging public-private partnerships can also help stretch resources further. Additionally, seeking community input and fostering transparency in resource allocation can lead to more efficient use of limited funds and better meet the diverse needs of the community.

viii. To overcome these challenges, it’s essential for local governments to collaborate closely with indigenous communities, linguists, educators, and cultural experts. Building trust and engaging in a meaningful dialogue with these communities can help identify and implement effective strategies for incorporating indigenous languages into government operations while respecting cultural diversity and heritage. Additionally, supportive policies and funding allocation for language preservation and promotion are crucial for long-term success.

ix. Local governments must engage in comprehensive policy reviews and updates, ensuring that regulations align with current needs and goals. Additionally, fostering collaboration and communication among different levels of government can help streamline decision-making processes and mitigate jurisdictional conflicts. By addressing legal and policy barriers proactively, local governments can pave the way for more efficient and effective governance.

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