Communicating for equitable development: what chance for ethnolinguistic minorities in the SDG agenda?

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This paper will explore critical questions with regard to the nature of participation in development that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) imply, given the new emphasis on equity.

With the adoption of the SDGs, the debate on education and development has shifted; no longer are educational goals articulated separately; they have become an integral part of the development agenda. In consequence, a two-way dialogue opens up on language issues: on the one hand, questions of language in education must address how multilingual education (MLE) will contribute to the broad thrust of the SDGs; and on the other hand, promotion of the SDGs must address issues of language in development, as well as what kind of education will best facilitate the individual and societal learning that the SDG agenda implies.

The place of ethno-linguistic minorities in this process will be a litmus test of how far development efforts, at national and international levels, focus on relevance and equity, and how far community-level communication processes in local languages are factored into goal-setting and implementation on the ground.

Drawing on debates on language in education and on communication for development, the paper will illustrate the arguments from community contexts in Africa and Asia, and by this means posit the essential linkages to be forged if the international agenda is to have any reality on the ground. The paper will conclude by calling for stronger dialogue between the constituencies of development promotion/intervention, on the one hand, and the education/language/culture, on the other.