Role of languages in achieving some of the major SDGs in the ethnolinguistic communities in Nepal

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1. Introduction

• This paper attempts to examine the role played by mother-tongues in basic education, i.e., mother-tongue based multilingual education, in achieving some of major SDGs, viz., poverty reduction, quality education, gender equality, reduced inequalities, climate action and partnership for the goals especially in ethnolinguistic communities in Nepal and suggest some strategies (i.e., based on experiences gained in the linguistic survey of Nepal) for meeting challenges and barriers in those communities for achieving those goals.

• Nepal has more than 125 officially recognized caste and ethnic groups with distinct social and cultural background and around 123 officially recognized languages of four language families, namely, Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian and Kusunda, a language isolate (Census, 2011).

• Map 1 presents the languages and dialects of Nepal.
Map: Languages and dialects of Nepal
• Of 123 languages enumerated in 2011 Census of Nepal, more than 56 % are unsafe (Regmi, 2013).

• Ethnolinguistic communities constitute more than 55% of total population (CBS, 2012).

• They are characterized mostly by illiteracy, unemployment, mass poverty, gender inequality, domestic violence against women and ignorance of climate change.

• In practice, the quality basic education is made inaccessible in almost ethnolinguistic communities enforcing reading materials written in Nepali.

• Nepali, the lingua franca, as almost the compulsory medium of instruction (MoI) in Nepal.
2. SDGs in ethnolinguistic communities

• MDGs (2015:3-6) maintained that ‘unprecedented efforts’ were made in eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing child mortality, ensuring environmental sustainability, and developing a global partnership for development.

• Nepal has also claimed that it has almost achieved the MDGs related to poverty and hunger, universal primary education, gender equality and women’s empowerment, except environmental sustainability and global partnership (NPC/N, 2013).

• MDGs (2015:7) rightly noted: “Despite many successes, the poorest and most vulnerable people are being left behind.”
• In ethnolinguistic communities in Nepal, poverty and gender inequality still persist and many people in the remote areas are living without access to quality basic education, knowledge of climate change and partnership for development.

• Nepali, which is spoken as mother tongue by 44.6%, has been serving as the lingua franca as well as the medium of basic education in Nepal for a long time.

• Multilingual education planning and policy has not yet been clearly framed in Nepal for ethnolinguistic communities (Regmi and Regmi, 2015)
3. Language situation in ethnolinguistic communities

• In Nepal, about 30 are vigorous, 51 threatened, 11 shifting, and the rest are either moribund or nearly extinct (Regmi, 2013).

• Most of the endangered and shifting languages belong to ethnolinguistic communities in Nepal.

• Nepal naturally demands a multilingual policy. However, the issues related to minority/ethnic languages are deliberately ignored and therefore they are functionally marginalized.

• Around thirty ethnic languages are vital and viable for use in basic education: Kaike, Tharu and its different dialects, Tamang and its dialects, Magar and its dialects, some Rai-Kirat languages, Newar and its dialects, Gurung, Lowa, Lohmi, Sherpa, Ghale, Jumli, Thakali, Dhimal, Rajbansi, Manage, Limbu, Lepcha, etc.
4. Challenges and barriers for achieving the SDGs

- Achieving SDGs, i.e., poverty reduction, quality education, gender equality, reduced inequalities, climate action, etc., in ethnolinguistic communities in Nepal is not an easy task.
- These SDGs are cross-cutting issues to be integrated into the overall activities of development. One of the major activities which can address these cross-cutting issues is education, for which every language is very crucial.
- The deep-rooted ideology of linguistic assimilation is still, in fact, reflected lingering in education policy and practice in Nepal.
- Even though primary education may be attained constitutionally in one’s respective mother tongues, due to the gaps in policy, still, formally, the MoI in basic education is Nepali, even in the ethnolinguistic communities in Nepal.
• Teaching materials and textbooks are also in Nepali. Such materials and textbooks have ignored the students’ own knowledge and experience obtained from their parents and others in their home communities.

• Students do not understand the teacher's’ background and language, nor are teachers likely to share the students’ social and cultural background nor to speak the students’ language. Schools have been simply been just ‘an unfamiliar place teaching unfamiliar concepts in an unfamiliar language’ (Sheldon, 2007).

• Such situations posed double sets of challenges to the children of ethnolinguistic communities: learning a new concepts which are embodied in a new language.

• Due to this, for them quality basic education is inaccessible leading them to be marginalized and excluded from most of the development process of the nation.
5. Some strategies for meeting challenges

• Indeed, there is no lack of legal provisions supporting the fundamental right to receive basic education in one’s mother tongue in Nepal.
• Despite these facts, Nepal has not achieved the goals in this respect as it was expected.
• Unfortunately, many schools where MLE was implemented as a pilot project have been stopped due to the lack of incentives, lack of teachers, and reading materials.
• It is multilingual education, that promotes life-crucial knowledge and cognitive development for quality education, which has to be implemented compulsorily with a strategy of integrating these cross-cutting issues into the overall process of teaching in the mother-tongue in the ethnolinguistic communities of Nepal.
• Some specific strategies are as follows:
1. **Framing multilingual education policy**: As per the spirit of the constitution (2015), a true multilingual education policy has to be framed and implemented in ethnolinguistic communities. Then they will have access to quality basic education in their respective mother tongues. Inequality in access to basic education in terms of ethnicity and language will have been reduced.

2. **Writing textbooks and reading materials**: While writing textbooks and reading materials in the local language, special attention has to be paid to including local economic resources, local medicines, local cultures and traditions and livelihood systems in the textbooks and reading materials. Once the students learn the proper use and importance of local resources, they will not attempt to migrate from their native places for employment. Mass poverty will be eradicated.
3. Creating awareness: Every community is blessed with a particular natural resources. In most of ethno-linguistic communities, people are made ignorant of the life-crucial knowledge embodied in their languages because their languages are gradually shifting to Nepali or tending to be endangered. Whatever education they get in the present system of education is not directly related to their local needs and aspiration on the one hand; on the other, they do not understand the value of education imparted in other tongues in basic education. Creating awareness in climate action is more effective in the mother tongue.

4. Responding to the aspiration: Most of the indigenous community have aspired that MLE schools be established immediately as suggested by Appreciative Inquiry Tool. It helped to involve the community for sustaining MLE effectively for quality basic education in such communities.
5. Recognizing forms of speech: MLE should be started immediately in whatever language/dialect/forms of speech the majority of the indigenous children know/speak as suggested by the use of a participatory tool referred to as Dialect Mapping Tool. This fosters the recognition of language/dialect/forms of speech in the minds of children.

6. Developing writing system: Most of the indigenous languages are preliterate. They are not written, if they are to be written, they are to be written in the Devanagari script as suggested by the reports. Especially language activists, not linguists, are creating issues in writing systems. As children have to transit to Nepali, with the consent of the respective speech communities, Devanagari writing system should be adapted for the indigenous languages.
7. **Making MLE compulsory for basic levels:** Transitional bi/multilingual education should be made compulsory in such indigenous communities (e.g., Western Tamang) where neither the local teachers are adequately proficient in Nepali, nor the children understand what is taught in Nepali in basic levels.

8. **Non-formal education in mother tongues:** Apart from MLE in basic levels, indigenous languages and cultures may be fostered by conducting nonformal education in mother tongues.

9. **Research in languages and cultures:** Once MLE is introduced, gradually it necessitates conducting ethnographic documentation, writing grammars, compiling dictionaries, and other linguistic activities in the concerned languages.
10. **Slowing the migration rate:** Many ethnic communities, mainly in search of better opportunities for livelihood, are migrating to urban areas. Once MLE is introduced, the younger generations will understand what opportunities are there in their own area. Then migration rate will slow down. Both languages and cultures will be seen as valuable resources.

11. **Recognizing MLE teachers’ role:** Once MLE is started and the role of MLE teachers is properly recognized, they will gradually teach the communities not only about the importance of language and cultures but also about reducing poverty reduction, providing quality education, reducing gender inequality, maintaining reduced inequalities, being aware of climate action, and partnership for the development of the ethnolinguistic communities.
6. Conclusion

• Till the date, no attempt has been made to integrate SDGs (i.e., cross-cutting issues) into education, i.e., multilingual education.

• From the present MLE policy in Nepal, it is very difficult to achieve SDGs, i.e., poverty reduction, quality education, gender equality, reduced inequalities, climate action, etc., in ethnolinguistic communities in Nepal.

• Young generations have to be first familiar with their own cultures before they get introduced to mainstream and global cultures.

• They need to observe the structural relationship of their family and community, surrounding environments, flora and fauna, economic resources, cultural and religious matters.
• To create a conducive situation, in a true spirit, MLE policy has to be framed based on linguistic pluralism.

• Mother tongues must be made compulsory Mols for the preprimary and primary levels.

• The curriculum, textbooks and reference materials have to be prepared in line with linguistic diversity to maintain retention rate and to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education.

• Multilingual education, which is indispensable to promote life-crucial knowledge and cognitive development for quality education, has to be implemented compulsorily with a strategy of integrating these cross-cutting issues into the overall process of teaching in mother-tongue.