

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2004

Cultural liberty in today's diverse world

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

BOX 3.7

Multilingual education in Papua New Guinea

Nestled between the South Pacific Ocean and the Coral Sea, Papua New Guinea is the most linguistically and culturally diverse nation in the world, accounting for approximately a sixth of the world's 6,000 languages. A century of colonial occupation created a lingua franca, a neo-Melanesian pidgin, *tok pisin*, derived from English, German, Spanish, Malay and Papua New Guinea's own languages and spoken by half of the population of 5 million.

To meet the needs of indigenous people for relevant basic education, the Department of Education implemented a major education reform in 1993, introducing mother tongue instruction in the first three years of schooling. After that, the medium of instruction is English. By 2001, 369 indigenous languages had been introduced in 3,600 elementary schools. A third of children now start elementary school in their mother tongue.

No statistical study has been done, but there is abundant anecdotal evidence that children become literate and learn English faster and more easily when they start their schooling in their mother tongue. Access is improving, and the dropout rate, particularly of girls, has come down. More than 70% of grade 6 students go on to grade 7, compared with less than 40% in 1992. Lower-secondary enrolments have doubled since 1992, and upper-secondary numbers have quadrupled. Teachers report that children appear more self-confident and inquisitive.

The education reform came after 20 years of widespread public consultation, and implementation was gradual. Non-governmental organizations got grants to develop a writing system for some languages that had never been written before. Communities wanting to convert their schools to the local language had to agree to build new facilities, assist in the life of the school or share their culture with the children. The learning material is deliberately simple: copies of a prototype textbook are printed with blank lines to be filled in with the local language. Costs were kept in check by using black and white text and soft covers. Communities choose local people with at least a grade 10 education as teachers.

They are paid less than nationally recruited certified teachers, but many are pleased to be doing worthwhile work for a steady income.

Papua New Guinea sought and received large donor support from Australia to introduce the reform, but it is expected that the system will be cost-efficient and sustainable over the longer term. Studies are under way to assess its results.

Source: Klaus 2003; SIL International 2004a; CRIP 2004.

BOX 3.8

How many languages are there in Africa?

85% of Africans speak 15 core languages

The profusion of languages in Africa gives the impression of unending fragmentation. Closer examination reveals convergences and structural similarities for superficially distinct cultures, clans and languages. Colonial administrators and missionaries, sometimes for administrative expediency and sometimes for proselytizing reasons (biblical translations, in particular), elevated small dialects to the status of languages and narrow local groups to the status of tribes. Just as colonial-era ethnologists would eagerly “discover” tribes that were often more appropriately parts of much larger groups, so languages in Africa have much greater affinity to each other than is commonly believed.

Most of what are counted as distinct languages in Africa are actually dialects of core languages. As first, second or third language speakers (most Africans are multilingual), more than 75% of Africans speak 12 core languages: Nguni, Soth-Tswana, Swahili, Amharic, Fulful, Mandenkan, Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Luo, Eastern Inter-lacustrine and Western Interlacustrine (Kitara). Some 85% of the African population of the continent speaks 15 core languages (the three additional languages are Somali-Samburu-Rendille, Oromo-Borana and Gur). Though lexically different, these languages are similar morphologically, syntactically and phonologically.

If linguists across national boundaries in Sub-Saharan Africa were to work together to standardize vocabularies, it would be possible to use these languages to teach not just in the first three grades of primary school, but eventually in higher grades.

Source: Prah 2004.