

SPEECH

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES MEDIA SEMINAR

07 August 2024

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Dr Mathatha Tsedu

Representations from our strategic partners: SANEF, the UN in South Africa, the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (SAASTA) and the MDDA

Our Facilitators and panellists

Members of the media here present

Distinguished guests

Today, we contemplate not only the past three decades of democracy and the freedoms we now enjoy, but also engage in introspection as a society and constitutional democracy, pondering the question: Have we taken satisfactory measures to ensure equal respect for Indigenous languages? Can ordinary South Africans readily access information in their preferred languages? If we discover that more can indeed be accomplished, we must inquire, do we possess the requisite infrastructure to actualize our objectives?

Ladies and gentlemen, the significance of safeguarding and promoting Indigenous languages within our society cannot be overstated. Language serves not only as a means of communication, but also embodies a fundamental aspect of our identity, culture, and heritage. Our Constitution imposes a responsibility on the state, as well as society at large, to implement practical and positive measures to elevate the status of previously marginalized Indigenous languages. Furthermore, the Constitution emphasizes the promotion and equitable respect for all official languages, ensuring inclusivity and enhancing the use of marginalized languages. Linguistic diversity, freedom of expression, and the right to use language and participate in cultural life, as well as access to information, are freedoms guaranteed in Sections 16, 30, and 31.

Therefore, we should ask ourselves, can we guarantee that every citizen has access to information? The Constitution recognizes that social justice aims to enhance the quality of life for every citizen while unleashing the potential of each individual as stated in the preamble of our constitution. Access to information in languages that citizens understand and speak proficiently guarantees social justice, and socio-economic progress, and addresses various social challenges. Unfortunately, despite these constitutional provisions, significant challenges arise from non-compliance, not only by government departments but also by society at large. This has led to a disengaged citizenry, a lack of equal respect for Indigenous languages, and a lack of meaningful participation by many South Africans in state empowerment programs. The challenges at hand cannot be ignored. The media plays a crucial role in informing, educating, and entertaining the linguistically diverse people of our nation. However, it is unfortunate that most of the information consumed by South Africans is primarily in English, leading to a society that is gradually contributing to the decline of Indigenous languages in the mainstream.

Nevertheless, avenues for progress do exist. The nationwide implementation of Mother Tongue Based Bilingual Education (MTBBE) can contribute to enhancing literacy levels and cultivating media professionals who are proficient in their mother tongue. The Incremental Introduction of African Languages in former model c school must be embraced by all schools, public and private, to ensure social cohesion and nation building. There is no learner in South Africa leave school without learning a previously marginalised language for basic communication purposes. This endeavour should be paired with the implementation of the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions following the likes of UKZN where no student completing a junior degree without learning isiZulu. We take pride in the University of North West for initiating a short training courses for journalists in Indigenous language media. This achievement not only forms a part of the outcomes of our inaugural seminar in 2023, but also signifies a significant stride towards enhancing the potential for linguistic diversity within the broader media landscape.

In an effort to level the playing field for indigenous languages to not only survive, but to thrive within the media sector, PanSALB has made submissions to the Competition Commission to include the amendment of Section 6(3)(a) of the Constitution to increase the minimum number of official languages used by the national government for official purposes. We believe that if government departments are obligated to communicate in more official languages, this would in turn bode well for the media sector, particularly smaller community media houses in terms of generating advertising revenue. This constitutional amendment would also ensure equitable treatment of official languages. Furthermore, the proposed amendment of the PanSALB Act and the Use of Official Languages Act is imperative to ensure their enforcement and prescription through legislation.

It is essential for society to acknowledge the significance of linguistic diversity and the media's role in preserving and promoting Indigenous languages. The media actively supports the transformation agenda of the Constitution, bolsters democracy, and embraces linguistic diversity. Only through the

ability to engage in public life using one's language can we truly unlock the potential of every South African citizen and facilitate meaningful participation in our democracy for all individuals living within it.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize that it is our collective responsibility to uphold the preservation of Indigenous languages and contribute to the realization of our Constitutional ideals of multilingualism. Therefore, this serves as a call to action for each of us to recognize the value of Indigenous languages and strive for their promotion and preservation.

Thank you.