



# Nurturing reading cultures and literacies in post-pandemic ecosystems

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## Enhancing Publishing and Promotion of South African Indigenous Languages

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# ENHANCING PUBLISHING AND PROMOTION OF SOUTH AFRICAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

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# ABSTRACT

*The “Conversation” an educational journal published in May 17, 2018 points to the poor reading culture and low literacy levels in South Africa as a crisis. According to this journal nearly a quarter of a century into democracy, four presidents and several curricular revisions later, South Africa has made little headway in its reading crisis. It also further notes that South Africa ranked last out of 50 countries in the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) study and this cannot be divorced from the inaccessible publishing markets in South Africa as well as the ineffective promotion of indigenous languages.*

*The decline in publishing of indigenous literary works as well as the diminishing use of indigenous languages has a potential to retard our effectiveness to promote reading and effectively secure a sustainable literacy development. This also has some adverse effects to our development as a nation as envisioned in the National Development Plan. Most South African communities will not advance into sustainable modernity and innovativeness when its citizens are illiterate, and the languages of the masses are neglected and not granted easy access to publishing.*

# INTRODUCTION

- In this paper, I will be discussing the merits of publishing enhancement and promotion of indigenous languages, with a major focus on existing gaps and how to best close them though I will not go into most underlying details of each. The publishing status as well as the indigenous languages promotion challenges, I will flag out in this paper are by no means an all-inclusive assessment of the problems related to publishing in South Africa, but serves to extract the nature of gaps that would need to be addressed to change the status quo.
- It should however be noted that Publishing is not by itself a master key that will create conditions for the development of indigenous languages in South Africa, however an investment by governments towards its enhancement at government level may yield greater dividends. Environments should be created in our communities where the indigenous languages gain access to publishing and wider use. This initiative should be supported by all spheres of government and institutions of higher learning.

# BACKGROUND

Michel Foucault ([1969] 2002) notes that our world, including the power relations in it, is constructed by the language we use. To expand on Foucault's point about language use, I wish to note that most South African communities will not advance into sustainable development and innovativeness when its citizens are illiterate, and the languages of the masses are neglected and not granted easy access to publishing. It will undoubtedly not be possible to attain the much desired development if publishing and the language/languages of literacy and education are only within the intellectual ambit of small minorities as it is currently the case in South Africa. We therefore need to have as part of the solution to address this challenge. We need a viable and sustainable approach to encourage accelerated publishing coupled with a sustainable promotion of the reading culture.

My principal focus will be on what retards publishing efforts in our country as such is interlinked to low literacies and poor reading culture. This will be discussed with a hint on what could be the best possible practices that could be studied to enhance publishing, promote and secure a sustainable reading and literacy improvement in our society.

# BACKGROUND CONT.

- The role of literacy in the National Development Plan (NDP) Vision 2030, the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) as well as the agenda 2063 of the African Union, to improve literacy in Africa will influence my arguments to a greater extent. As a point of departure, there will be a careful examination on what has been achieved and what could be done to attain an acceptable level of improvement, and this will be made through exploration of issues and insights on reading practices in South Africa, on the African continent and globally.

# NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENT FROM A HISTORIC POINT OF VIEW

- The Publishers' Association of South Africa annual industry surveys ( 2011) indicates that the local publishing industry is dominated by the sale of English-language books ( $\pm 70\%$ ), followed by the sale of books published in Afrikaans ( $\pm 18\%$ ) with books published in the nine African languages combined accounting for an average of nine percent (9%) of Net Turnover. According to this PASA(2011) survey, of an average of four hundred and fifty (450) original and new edition trade fiction titles published per annum by participating publishers, an average of forty percent (40%) is (in) English, forty seven percent (47%) Afrikaans and six percent (6%) in the rest of the indigenous languages.
- This reveals that books published are not enough and that there should be an enhanced means to accelerate this production coupled with initiatives to encourage consumption of those products. The status quo does not appear to have shifted greatly to date. The only change experienced since then has been an upsurge in the number of publishing houses with no meaningful change of the publishing landscape.

# CONT.

- The 2019-2020 Publishers' Association (2022) survey further reveals that a total number of active publishers in South Africa is unknown but thought to be between 150 and 200. The industry is said to be heavily dominated by the elite, conglomerates of big publishers, who according to the Pasa survey (2022) together represent more than 80% of all production and revenue.
- It is however encouraging to note from some small scale publishers that, there is an attempt to get into the market regardless of the fact that it is highly contested market and into which they fail to make sustainable inputs given the fact that they suffocate financially along the way. Part of the contributing factors to the suffocation is the poor reading culture.



# CONT.

- In a bid to address this anomaly, we need to create sustainable reading clubs and even stage some vigorous reading campaign. Given the fact that as South Africans, we still rely heavily on extrinsic motivation, it will be important to have incentives or awards as we inculcate the culture of reading.
- Another root cause for the suffocation of the publishing markets, is the most commonly cited one, that of commercialized publishing markets that are not keen to operate beyond the school market and particularly in the publishing of indigenous languages.
- As we encourage reading, we must equally lobby for sustainable funding and engage on debates which are geared to create sustainable markets.
- Most of the publishers we have in South Africa, are educational in nature. While most educational publishers are dependent on state and provincial government departments for the vast majority of orders, they should be assisted into exploring ways of distributing their products through a variety of other sales channels. For the State and Provincial Departments, publishers provide provide sales and supplies in response to the department's call for submission.

# CONT.

- The decline of publishing in indigenous languages is a recipe for the decline of those languages. This has a potential to retard our effectiveness and development as a nation. This also undercuts our human rights as guaranteed and enshrined in the Constitution.
- Apart from the issue of rights, language and literacy remain very pivotal for societal development in all facets of life, be it personal, economical or any form of development. A society will not advance into sustainable development and modernity when its citizens are illiterate, and the languages of the masses are neglected. In other words, it is not possible to reach sustainable development if the language/languages of literacy and education are only within the Intellectual ambit of small minorities.
- We therefore need to have as part of the solution to address this challenge an enhanced and accessible publishing options in South Africa which will have programmes that support the efforts by organizations and organs of state to promote indigenous languages.

# CONCLUSION

- It is my argument that, with an enabling Constitution, the PanSALB ACT and the Use of official languages ACT 12 of 2012, all of us as role players inclusive of the National library, institutions of higher learning and PanSALB, have a basis to avoid the decline of languages some of which are already facing extinction. With languages being amongst the most underfunded sectors by government, more funding needs to be lobbied for us to save these languages by way of preserving them, especially through securing a publishing channel that is accessible to all.
- Practically, this can be brought about by creating conditions for self-publishing as well as capacitating emerging publishers in African indigenous languages since there are prevailing marginalisation trends of African indigenous languages in the mainstream publishing channels.
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- The idea of state publishing once mooted by Basic Education department can also be a viable option and may if well-structured and purposed alter the not so good narratives always told about the highly commercialised nature of our publishing industry in South Africa. I am not arguing for the eradication of elite mainstream publishing sources, just their downgrade on issues of marginalisation.

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