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Strategic Frameworks for the Empowerment of African Languages: Policy, Practice and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the empowerment of African languages, focusing on the complex challenges and opportunities within this field. Addresses key impediments to the advancement of African languages, identifies favourable conditions for their development, and proposes practical avenues to facilitate progress. Central to the investigation is the role of language policy: the study aims to highlight the potential of African languages to advance sustainable development goals while navigating the challenges posed by a globalised world, and also to investigate the complexities and opportunities related to African language empowerment and their readiness to develop and implement effective language policies supported by comprehensive action plans. Methodologically, the research employs a qualitative approach, gathered through a review of existing literature, policy documents, and case studies of language programmes in various African countries. This approach allows a comprehensive understanding of both theoretical and practical aspects of language empowerment. The findings underscore the need for a robust and cohesive policy framework to address the challenges faced by African languages effectively. Strategic policies must be formulated and implemented to realise the benefits of favourable conditions and development opportunities. As a result, the study highlights the need for a concerted effort to integrate language empowerment into broader educational, legal, and technological contexts, ensuring that future dis-

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cussions and conferences on African languages continue to address these critical issues.

Keywords: African Languages; Language Policy; Language Empowerment; National Language

1. Background

In the context of an increasingly interconnected world, globalisation has brought profound changes to socioeconomic landscapes and cultural dynamics globally. This transformation has notably impacted the role and status of languages, particularly within regions such as Africa, where linguistic diversity is a defining characteristic^[1]. African languages, with their rich heritage and multifaceted roles in society, face unique challenges and opportunities in this globalised era. Traditional development discourse typically focuses on economic growth, technological advancements, and social reforms. Meanwhile, in many African countries, there is ongoing concern among various stakeholders, including language specialists and educators, about the low status of African languages and their limited use in a narrow range of domains^[2]. Despite numerous attempts to enhance the status of these languages and broaden their application, these efforts have often resulted in modest or unsatisfactory results. In contrast, imported official languages have maintained their dominance, enjoying elevated status and being utilised in prestigious and influential areas^[3]. However, according to Leshoele^[4], integrating African languages into development strategies is a crucial yet often overlooked dimension. These languages are not only carriers of cultural identity and heritage, but also essential tools for effective communication, education, and governance within their respective communities^[5]. To better comprehend the issue under study and set the framework for this research, it is essential to first conceptualize language empowerment.

Language Empowerment

Language empowerment is a multifaceted process involving legal recognition, educational integration, cultural representation, economic utility, community agency, and technological adaptation^[6]. Achieving language em-

powerment requires coordinated efforts at multiple levels, including government policy, community action, and institutional support, to ensure that the language thrives in both local and global contexts.

The framework for empowering languages is based on several key dimensions. Mokodompit, Sarib^[7] noted that a strong legal and policy environment is essential for language empowerment. This encompasses the formal acknowledgement of the language in constitutions, language laws, and education policies. A supportive legal framework establishes a foundation for the protection and promotion of a language and ensures its institutional use in government, law, and education. Similarly, Gutiérrez and Frías Epinayú^[8] argued that language policies should also aim to distribute resources equitably to support language education and media in indigenous languages. Empowering a language involves its inclusion in formal education systems, both as a medium of instruction and as a subject of study. Mother-tongue education, particularly in early childhood and primary education, ensures that speakers of the language have access to quality education while preserving their linguistic identity^[9]. The representation of a language in cultural productions such as literature, music, film, and media are crucial to its vitality and empowerment. This dimension addresses the language's presence in television, radio, newspapers, and online platforms, which are critical for normalizing its use in public and private life. Precisely, Stein-Smith^[10] pointed out that language empowerment strategies include promoting bilingualism or multilingualism in the workplace, providing vocational training in indigenous languages, and recognizing the language in official communication and documentation, allowing speakers to engage in economic activities without linguistic barriers. Additionally, as societies become increasingly digital, the ability of a language to adapt to and be represented in technology is a vital aspect of its empowerment. This includes developing digital resources

such as online dictionaries, language learning apps, software interfaces, and content on social media platforms. Ensuring that a language has a presence in the digital space helps guarantee its relevance in modern communication and its transmission to younger generations.

Therefore, this study investigates the reasons behind the continued marginalisation of African languages and the limited success of initiatives aimed at their development. To address this issue, it is essential to examine a range of factors such as historical, linguistic, economic, and sociopolitical aspects that contribute to this persistent issue. This study investigates the strategic frameworks necessary to empower African languages, particularly within the context of globalisation. It examines how global forces influence linguistic practices and how these languages can shape developmental processes. By focusing on the intersection of language policy, educational systems, and cultural preservation, this research aims to highlight the potential of African languages to advance sustainable development goals while navigating the challenges posed by a globalised world. The analysis explores how globalisation affects African language policies, assessing their impact on development initiatives and educational outcomes. It also evaluates the adaptability of African languages in a rapidly changing global landscape and their potential to drive improved development outcomes.

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the strategic frameworks for the empowerment of African languages, focusing on policy, practice, and prospects. The choice of a qualitative method is informed by the need to gain an in-depth understanding of complex social, cultural, and political factors influencing language policy and practice across different African contexts. By examining the interplay between language and development, this approach allows for a detailed exploration of the nuanced ways in which language policies and programmes impact the empowerment of African languages. The data for this research is primarily gathered through a comprehensive review of existing literature, policy documents, and case studies. The literature review includes academic publications, books, and reports related to linguistic human rights, language policy, and educational development in Africa. This review not only highlights the existing the-

oretical frameworks but also provides a critical analysis of how language policies have been implemented and their outcomes across the continent.

2. Practices: Factors Contributing to the Low Status and Restricted Roles of African Languages

Several key factors contribute to the low status and limited role of African languages, including colonial heirlooms, negative perceptions of multilingualism, the status of language development, national integration issues, modernisation and economic development, globalisation, adverse language attitudes and ineffective language planning.

2.1. Colonial Heirlooms

The colonial powers imposed their languages as the primary mediums for administration, commerce, and education in the territories they controlled ^[11]. The motivations for this imposition varied among colonial powers: from efforts to assimilate local populations into the culture of colonisers to the selective cultivation of a local elite that could bridge colonisers and indigenous masses. Despite these different objectives, Chebanne and Monaka ^[12] noted that the outcome is consistent and colonial languages became dominant, relegating African languages to secondary status and limiting their domains of use. The elite emerging from the colonial educational systems developed a preference for the colonisers' languages, often at the expense of their indigenous languages. Although this elite was small, their control over the colonial language gave them significant power. This power structure persisted after independence, as these languages continued to serve as official languages in many countries ^[13]. Efforts to elevate African indigenous languages and expand their use have largely failed due to two main factors, elite closure, where the elites resist sharing their linguistic power with other groups, and the inheritance situation, where colonial-era policies and practices continue to shape postcolonial language policies ^[14]. The enduring impact of the colonial legacy is evident in the continued dominance of

imported languages. Out of the 54 African countries, only 10 such as South Africa, Rwanda and Tanzania recognise indigenous African languages as official languages ^[15]. Additionally, the medium of education, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels, remains in these colonial languages. Another dimension of the colonial legacy is the arbitrary geographical divisions resulting from the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885. These borders fragmented previously cohesive or related languages, creating numerous cross-border languages in Africa. For example, Cameroon shares up to seventy cross-border languages with its neighbours, including most languages with Nigeria. These partitions reduced the numerical strength of each cross-border language, diminishing its potential for enhanced status and reinforcing the dominance of imported official languages ^[16]. Consequently, a language that could have served as a unifying force instead became a symbol of division, overshadowed by different dominant languages in each territory ^[17].

2.2. Multilingualism Perspective

Africa is prominent for its linguistic diversity, with around 2,000 of the world's approximately 6,700 languages spoken across the continent ^[18]. However, this linguistic diversity is often viewed negatively, particularly in terms of communication efficiency and cost. The presence of numerous languages is sometimes perceived as a disadvantage because it could imply a lack of a shared language, potentially complicating communication ^[17]. This notion overlooks the fact that many African languages are spoken by millions and that multilingualism is common among the population. Bilingualism or multilingualism undoubtedly facilitates cross-linguistic communication rather than hindering it. Furthermore, the concept of a common language often pertains to an official imported language, typically known by only 10-20% of the population ^[19]. In many African contexts, the main official languages are imported, such as English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish. These languages play a significant role in shaping communication and interaction within these regions.

According to Madonsela ^[20] the negative perception of multilingualism undermines the status of African

languages, defining them as problems rather than assets. African languages can be categorised into three types: major, minority, and endangered. The main languages, such as Swahili, Hausa, Yoruba, and Zulu, are spoken by large populations and are often associated with higher status and influence. Despite their prominence, these languages still rank lower than imported official languages ^[21]. For example, although it has more speakers than English or Afrikaans, some languages in South Africa are overshadowed by English due to the dominance of the latter in various domains ^[22]. Minority languages, on the other hand, suffer from a lack of numerical strength and status. Their perceived lower status is often attributed to the belief that supporting these languages is uneconomical due to the required investment in language development. Additionally, since speakers of minority languages typically learn other languages, Rosiak ^[23] argued that neglecting their native language is not significantly detrimental. However, ignoring minority languages leads to their exclusion and deprives their speakers of the right to use them in essential areas such as education and literacy ^[24]. This negative perception is a form of prejudice, particularly from speakers of major languages. The detrimental impact of this negative perception is the endangerment of languages, a pressing concern within the field of sociolinguistic research ^[25]. Recognising that language is a crucial agent for cultural expression has led to increased global efforts to preserve endangered languages. Key characteristics of an endangered language include:

- An exceedingly small number of remaining speakers, most of whom are elderly, remain.
- Limited or no use in meaningful community activities
- Lack of transmission to younger generations
- Absence of orthography or written materials
- Replacement by another language due to language shift
- Imminent risk of extinction

According to Nnaji ^[26] Africa had 54 extinct, 67 near-extinct, and 49 dying languages. The continual risk faced by these languages, alongside the insufficient efforts to safeguard them, indicates that they are frequently undervalued.

2.3. Language Development

The low status of African languages is frequently attributed to their perceived need for development to function in domains where they are currently underutilized ^[27]. This development might involve creating written forms, standardising orthographies, or producing educational materials in these languages. For languages with established writing systems, it is crucial to expand their vocabulary to encompass new domains. While language development is essential for adapting languages to new contexts, the notion that certain languages are inherently incapable of expressing concepts in specific fields is misguided ^[28]. The linguistic principle that any concept can be expressed in any language, given the need, remains valid. Mavuru and Ramnarain ^[29] argued that the difficulty in expressing scientific concepts in an African language unequivocally highlights a common misconception. Other scientists have successfully articulated scientific ideas in their African languages ^[30]. Therefore, the challenge is not whether African languages can be used in new domains, but how to implement the necessary language development to support such usage. Additionally, it is unnecessary to wait until all language development is complete before using a language in new contexts. Using a language in new domains can and should occur alongside ongoing development efforts. For example, when vocabulary is expanded and updated terms are created, different stakeholders, such as educators, writers, and media practitioners, often generate competing terms. The final terms often emerge from this diverse pool of suggestions.

2.4. National Integration

In the context of language, national integration is often associated with multilingualism and the myth that one language unites while many languages divide ^[31]. This myth contributes to the low status of African languages compared to imported official languages, which are perceived to unify diverse ethnic groups in terms of communication and governance. However, this alleged unifying effect is limited to a minority proficient in the official language. Efforts to address integration through language

policies typically fall into three approaches: the status quo, the gradualist, and the radical approaches ^[32]. The status quo approach, which retains the colonial language as an official language, was commonly adopted by African countries immediately after independence. The radical approach advocates for an immediate shift to an indigenous language as an official language or adopts an indigenous language as a symbol of national identity, regardless of its active use. When such a language is not actively used, this approach differs only nominally from the status quo. The gradualist approach seeks a compromise by avoiding the static retention of an imported language while also preventing an abrupt switch to an inadequately prepared indigenous language ^[15]. If coupled with a well-planned transition, it can be a viable strategy; however, if it merely serves to maintain the existing status quo, it risks being a mere pretense.

2.5. Modernisation and Economic Development

Modernisation represents the pursuit of rapid technological and industrial progress to remain competitive in the contemporary world. In the post-independence era, African leaders were so focused on modernisation that they often sacrificed the roles traditionally held by their indigenous languages ^[33]. As a result, modernisation significantly contributed to the diminished status and utility of African languages. The prevailing belief was that modernisation could be best achieved with imported official languages, which were already established in fields such as science and technology. This perspective holds that the knowledge and technology associated with these languages can be transferred more effectively ^[34]. However, this point of view neglects the fact that only a small portion of the population benefits from such a development strategy based on imported languages. Moreover, it is a fundamental misunderstanding to narrowly equate development with physical and economic growth. Economic development in Africa is also deeply tied to issues of resource extraction and the global market's influence. While the continent is rich in natural resources, the modernisation process has often led to economies being heavily reliant on exports of

raw materials, with limited diversification. This reliance on primary commodities has left many African nations vulnerable to global market fluctuations, hindering long-term economic stability ^[35]. Moreover, economic progress requires not only infrastructural and industrial transformation but also the recognition of African values, languages, and systems of knowledge. Economic development strategies that incorporate local languages and cultural practices are more likely to resonate with communities, ensuring that modernisation does not come at the cost of cultural erosion. Additionally, modernisation has often emphasised urbanisation as a key driver of economic growth. However, for many African countries, rural development remains crucial, given that a huge portion of the population relies on agriculture. Bridging the gap between rural and urban areas, and ensuring that modernisation does not exacerbate inequalities, is critical for sustainable economic development. In many non-industrialised nations, development is often viewed narrowly as socioeconomic progress alone. A broader conception of development emphasises human development, which involves maximising human potential and using national resources for the benefit of all citizens ^[36].

2.6. Globalisation

Globalisation, characterised by increased interactions between countries and regions through communication, trade, technology, information, travel, and culture, has mixed implications for Africa. While some argue that globalisation offers access to expanding markets and technological innovations, others highlight the resulting economic disparities and cultural invasions ^[16,37]. In the context of language, there is a prevailing assumption that the language of globalisation should be a widely spoken language like English, which is believed to facilitate maximum engagement in the global arena. A recent study noted that South Africa's reintegration into the global economy with an increased emphasis on English. The study shows that English speakers, particularly whites, saw enhanced employment and wage benefits, while black South Africans did not experience similar advantages ^[38]. This presumption that globalisation necessitates the use of a dominant language like English further restricts the roles of

African languages.

2.7. Destructive Language Attitudes

Although many of the factors discussed may be beyond the control of language speakers, attitudes toward languages are within the control of the speakers themselves. Ideally, speakers of African languages should take pride in their languages, but negative attitudes are often prevalent. Madima, Babane ^[34] stated that a common attitude is observed among elites who prefer education in imported languages for their children. This preference influences parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to seek similar educational opportunities for their children. For instance, in countries like Nigeria, there is a notable prevalence of private schools of English medium for young children, frequented not only by affluent families but also by lower-income blue-collar workers who see this as a significant investment in their children's future ^[39]. Another negative attitude is found among speakers of minority languages. Despite linguistic advocacy for the inclusion of these languages in various domains, some minority language speakers themselves devalue their languages in favour of major or imported languages. This attitude is also evident among speakers of endangered languages. Speakers of minority and endangered languages must take pride in their languages and actively seek to preserve them ^[40]. Without a steadfast internal commitment, external efforts alone are insufficient to elevate their status or ensure their sustainability.

2.8. Unreliable Language Planning

Effective language planning should ideally establish clear status and roles for all languages within a multilingual context. However, according to Chimbutane ^[1] in many African countries, language planning processes are flawed, common issues include policy deficits, propaganda policies, non-implementation, and insufficient political commitment. A common misconception is that the absence of a declared policy equates to the lack of any policy. For example, if a language is not designated as the medium of instruction, it does not imply that no teaching will occur. The absence of a formal policy often means the perpetu-

ation of existing practices. Propaganda policies are proclaimed by policymakers solely to create a facade of action and progress, without any genuine intention to follow through with implementation. These policies are strategically designed to manipulate public opinion and create a false image of commitment, often serving as a distraction from substantive issues. The vagueness or impracticality of such policies often signals that they are insincere ^[41]. For example, advocating for French teaching in elementary schools in a country where the official language is English and if there is a severe shortage of French teachers is undoubtedly a mere propaganda effort. Sometimes, policies include escape clauses or preconditions that virtually guarantee non-implementation ^[42]. Even when a genuine policy is in place supporting an indigenous language, its effectiveness can be undermined by inadequate implementation strategies and insufficient funding. Non-implementation is a significant problem in African language planning, often rendering efforts to enhance the status and roles of African languages ineffective. A major obstacle to implementing language policies is the lack of political commitment ^[43]. Unlike tangible physical projects, language policy initiatives often lack visible impact and do not generate immediate political benefits. Prioritising language policy requires deliberate action and sometimes political risk, which many African policymakers are reluctant to take on. Without such a commitment, African languages will continue to have a lower status compared to dominant imported languages.

3. Prospects: Empowering African Languages Factors

Advocating for the enhanced roles of African languages are motivated by a variety of factors, including ideological, nationalistic, political, economic, linguistic, and educational considerations. This discussion focusses on the need to ensure inclusive participation and reduce exclusion. To illustrate this, three key areas are examined: education, national life, and national development.

3.1. Education

In many African countries, the medium of instruction

from around the fourth year of elementary school to higher education is an imported official language. European countries with smaller populations usually support the idea of introducing children to formal education in their first language. However, African educationists and linguists often have prolonged debates about whether African languages should continue to be used as mediums of instruction beyond elementary school ^[44]. The prevailing argument is that early exposure to an imported official language is necessary for higher education and effective functioning in official domains. This argument has two key issues, first, early education in a language that a child is not proficient in may lead to poor results. Second, a multilingual education model based on the mother tongue should incorporate both the first language and the official language ^[45]. The most common model is the early exit model, where an African language is used as the medium of instruction for the first three years of elementary education, after which an imported language is introduced. This model forces an abrupt transition before children are ready and implies that African languages are unsuitable for higher education. Alternative models include the dual-medium approach, where some subjects are taught in an African language and others in an imported language. Typically, African languages are used for soft subjects like social studies, while core subjects such as mathematics are taught in the imported language ^[15]. This practice reinforces the notion that African languages are inadequate for higher education.

An ideal approach would involve using the native language as the medium of instruction throughout basic education, with the imported language taught as a subject. This model allows children to gain confidence in their native language before transitioning to another language, promoting colorant rather than subtractive bilingualism. Moreover, evidence suggests that mother tongue-based bilingual education is more cost-effective compared to an English-based system [46,47]. The use of African languages in education also requires their intellectualisation. Where adequate terminology is lacking, it must be developed to enable African languages to be used in various domains. Expanding the use of African languages in new areas enhances their prestige through intellectualization ^[27]. African languages should be prioritised for literacy,

as they uniquely fulfil this role in a way that no other language can.

3.2. National Life

Language plays a crucial role in various aspects of national life, including communication, participatory democracy, and access to justice and health information. In many African countries, official communication is conducted through an imported language, which often excludes most of the population^[48]. This highlights the need to empower African languages for official use. Although arguments about the diversity of languages, costs, and language development may favour the continued use of imported languages, experiences from South Africa demonstrate that effective communication can be achieved in multiple languages. Strategies such as multilingual documentation and telephone translation services allow citizens to interact with government departments in their native languages. Electronic media, particularly community radio, also play a significant role in communication. Community radio broadcasts in a diverse range of African languages play a pivotal role in fostering local participation and reinforcing the bonds within communities. Access to information and active participation are fundamental rights in national life. Without a language that enables these functions, citizens are effectively excluded. As Dolník, Orgoňová^[49] highlighted that strong democracies are composed of individuals who can communicate with member citizens and use their linguistic skills to participate actively in, for instance, associations, movements, cultural groups, and political parties. In several African nations, citizens face marginalization because they cannot access the language used in governance. This raises important questions about if laws and regulations are not understood by common people then how it will be a strong democracy? How can they effectively participate, compete, learn, or be creative in a language in which they are not proficient? Strong democracy extends beyond voting to include citizens' right to express their views and influence policies affecting their welfare. Therefore, when the language of governance is accessible only to the educated elite, the majority remains excluded, undermining the es-

sence of participatory democracy^[50]. Empowering African languages is essential to ensure comprehensive participation in national life. Therefore, the case for enhancing the status and roles of African languages is compelling.

3.3. Justice and Health

In the justice system, when a litigant or accused must rely on an interpreter, inaccuracies can lead to injustices. Similarly, health information presented in a language unfamiliar to the recipient can result in misunderstandings and potentially severe consequences^[51]. The pandemic in Africa like HIV/COVID-19 underscores the need for health communication in languages familiar to most of the population^[52]. Although African languages are gaining prominence in this area, much remains to be done. Medication labels are often in imported languages and while pharmacists may provide explanations, there is no substitute for instructions in a language that patients fully understand.

3.4. National Development

Language plays a pivotal role in advancing educational development, a key measure of national development. Quality education is essential, not a luxury, for any country's development. To promote national unity and cohesion, Nigeria highlights the importance of mother tongue instruction in its National Policy on Education, which stipulates that primary education should initially be conducted in the child's native language or the language of the local community^[53]. Indigenous languages are vital for structuring society, and national development cannot be fully addressed without considering the languages used by people to shape their thoughts and ideas. The United Nations Human Development Index, which includes indicators such as population growth rate, GDP per capita, mortality rate, life expectancy, and literacy rate, highlights disparities in development. According to Lundsgaarde and Roch^[54], the 22 countries with the lowest human development are African, with nations such as Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, and Zambia on the list. However, a recent study shows that African countries are improving their HDI ranking except for Zambia but are still at the bottom of the list^[55]. The persistent

underdevelopment in African countries is often attributed to factors such as high transport costs, small markets, low agricultural productivity, high disease burdens, adverse political histories, and slow adoption of external technologies ^[56]. Language is rarely considered among these factors. Zickafoose, Ilesanmi ^[57] highlights that while primary school enrolment has reached a peak in South Asia, it is only below 70% in Sub-Saharan Africa. The reliance on official languages that exclude the majority from the formal economy is rarely acknowledged as a development issue. Similarly, MDGs, including the eradication of poverty, universal primary education, gender equality, reduction of child mortality, maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases, environmental sustainability, and global partnerships, all require awareness programmes that effectively reach the underserved which are growth indicator for national development. This requires a greater use of African languages.

4. Policy: Empowering African Languages

To enhance the status of African languages, it is essential to consider three dimensions: agents, domains, and scope. Agents include individuals, governments, civil society organisations, and regional and international bodies. Domains encompass public spheres such as education, legislature, administration, and the judiciary, as well as private domains such as homes and private organisations. The scope varies from local to national, regional, and international levels. The following sections illustrate these dimensions through recurring activities: medium of instruction, language development, legal status, working languages, cross-border languages, human rights linguistics, and Internet and communication technology (ICT).

3.1. Medium of Instruction

The choice of medium of instruction, particularly in primary education, plays a crucial role in the promotion of African languages. Since UNESCO's 1953 recommendation advocating native language instruction, the organisation has strongly supported the use of African languages

as a medium of education. This advocacy has significantly influenced policy formulation, with documents such as UNESCO's 2003 report, *Education in a Multilingual World*, reinforcing the principles of mother tongue-based multilingual education ^[58]. Alves (2024) noted that practical applications of UNESCO's recommendations are evident in various pilot projects throughout Africa, and countries such as Cameroon, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Burkina Faso have implemented projects utilising African languages in education. Nigeria's six-year primary project and Burkina Faso's integration of African languages into their education system have shown substantial benefits. Key outcomes of these projects include:

- Enhanced literacy when instruction is conducted in a child's first language.
- Improved proficiency and concept acquisition in indigenous languages.
- Increased prestige and development of the languages concerned.
- Expansion of vocabulary and creation of relevant terminology and educational materials.
- Moving from pilot projects to a broader implementation in regular school systems is crucial to the widespread adoption of these practices.

3.2. Language Development

Language development involves contributions from various agents, such as individual authors, language commissions, university departments, media houses, writers, language societies, and translators. Historical efforts, including those of missionaries and colonial educators, laid the foundation for modern language development. For example, early translations of significant works, such as Julius Nyerere's translations of Shakespeare into Kiswahili and various terminologies created for educational purposes, have challenged the notion that certain concepts are untranslatable (Li 2024). Current examples include dictionaries and glossaries developed for African languages, such as *Kamusi ya Tiba* (Dictionary of Medicine) in Kiswahili, *Quadrilingual Glossary of Legislative Terms* (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) in Nigeria and *Multilingual Mathematics Diction-*

ary in South Africa. Additionally, the development of met-language for teaching linguistics in languages like Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba has enabled the production of doctoral theses in these languages.

3.3. Legal Status

The legal status of languages can be achieved in two primary ways. The first is through official recognition, such as designating a language as an official language or allowing its use in essential domains like education and legislature ^[59]. For example, languages such as Somali, Amharic, Kiswahili, and others have official status in their respective countries. The second approach involves the establishment of languages in national constitutions. South Africa's constitution recognises eleven African languages including English and Afrikaans, while Nigeria's constitution allows the use of Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo in parliamentary debates. However, the mere designation does not guarantee empowerment unless followed by effective implementation ^[60].

3.4. Working and Cross-Border Languages

The use of African languages as working languages represents a significant empowerment initiative. The Organisation of African Unity, now the African Union (AU), initially used French, English, Arabic, and Portuguese as working languages. In 1986, the OAU proposed including African languages as working languages at the national, regional, and continental levels. Kiswahili has been admitted as the working language of the United Arab Emirates, and regional organisations like ECOWAS are also considering incorporating dominant regional languages as working languages ^[61,62].

Cross-border languages, a legacy of African colonial partition, are categorised into extensive and limited cross-border languages. Extensive cross-border languages are widely spoken across multiple countries, while limited cross-border languages are distributed symmetrically or asymmetrically. The African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) focuses on empowering vehicular cross-border languages through its Cross-border Language Commissions. Recent efforts have identified 12 cross-border

vehicular languages for this purpose, including Hausa, Kiswahili, and Malagasy ^[63].

3.5. Language Rights

Linguistic human rights (LHR) assert that language rights are fundamental human rights, as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1996 Barcelona Declaration of Linguistic Rights. These rights include the use of languages for education, commerce, and documentation ^[26]. Although LHRs offer a framework for empowerment, their practical implementation often falls short, limiting their effectiveness in enhancing African languages. In the African context, these rights are especially critical given the continent's linguistic diversity, with over 2,000 languages spoken. The recognition and enforcement of LHR are seen as central to cultural identity, social inclusion, and national development ^[1]. The ability to use indigenous languages in education systems, public administration, and economic activities is vital for empowering local communities, fostering national cohesion, and promoting equitable development. African languages are not just tools for communication but are also repositories of cultural knowledge, values, and histories ^[30]. Ensuring that these languages thrive is essential for preserving the continent's rich cultural heritage. However, despite the legal frameworks in place, the practical implementation of LHR in Africa remains a challenge. Many African nations have language policies that prioritize colonial languages such as English, French, and Portuguese over indigenous languages in key sectors like education, government, and business. This has created a linguistic hierarchy that marginalizes African languages, limiting their use and development.

3.6. Internet and Communication Technology (ICT)

The digital divide between developed and developing countries raises questions about the benefits of ICT for Africa. Despite the challenges, ICT remains crucial for modern development. UNESCO advocates for expanding access to knowledge in cyberspace by supporting multilingual and multicultural content ^[64]. Efforts are underway to incorporate African languages into digital platforms,

such as translating computer terminology and developing human language technology^[65]. For example, Google now offers search options in Hausa and Yoruba, which enhances the visibility and utility of these languages. In summary, empowering African languages requires a multifaceted approach involving various agents, domains, and scopes, along with a commitment to advance language development, legal recognition, and technological integration.

4. Conclusions

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the complex factors that hinder the empowerment of African languages, illuminated the conditions that could facilitate their advancement, and proposed various avenues to promote their growth and recognition. As we reflect on the findings, the pressing question remains: What is the prognosis for improving the status and functions of African languages? The answer to this question is dependent on the effectiveness of language policy and its implementation. Policymakers must face a range of challenges, including socio-political, economic, and cultural barriers that impede the full recognition and use of African languages. A critical literature analysis reveals that many policymakers may not yet fully grasp the extent of these challenges or the potential benefits that could arise from a more inclusive language policy.

For considerable progress to occur, it is essential that policymakers not only acknowledge these challenges but also demonstrate a commitment to developing and implementing a comprehensive and viable language policy. This policy should be backed up by a detailed action plan that includes clear objectives, specific strategies, and a monitoring and evaluation framework. Such a plan must address various dimensions, including language education, legal recognition, media representation, and the integration of languages into technology and public administration. In addition, the successful empowerment of African languages requires the active participation of various stakeholders, including government bodies, civil society organisations, educational institutions, and communities themselves. Collaborative efforts among these groups can

help bridge understanding gaps, mobilise resources, and ensure that policies are effectively translated into practice. Without a concerted effort to develop and implement such policies, favourable conditions, and potential avenues for improving African languages may not translate into meaningful empowerment. Consequently, future conferences on African languages and linguistics are likely to continue emphasising “The Empowerment of African Languages” as a prominent theme, reflecting ongoing challenges and the need for further action. In conclusion, advancing the status and roles of African languages requires a strategic and unified approach. Policymakers must take decisive action to overcome existing barriers and exploit the growth opportunities. By taking these actions, they will foster a more inclusive and equitable linguistic landscape, ensuring that African languages receive the recognition and support they rightfully deserve while contributing to the preservation and enrichment of cultural heritage across the continent.

Author Contributions

S.M. conceived of the presented idea and developed the theory and performed the research. and A.S. verified the methods and supervised the findings of this work. All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Shahid Minhas, upon reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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