

The Role of Indigenous Languages and New Media in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria

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Abstract

In a bid to arrest social, economic and environmental challenges on a global scale, the United Nations in 2015 came up with the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 initiative. However, existing studies on SDGs have shown that the achievement of these goals in Nigeria has been limited and the contributing factors have been narrowed down to instability, governance and implementation. Little attention has, however, been paid to the role of indigenous languages in ensuring the achievement of the goals. This study analyses the goals using the Desk Review Research Method and establishes how indigenous languages and new media can play a role in ensuring the success of the 2030 goals. It brings to light how these languages as well as social media can be utilised to reach more people, especially the rural majority of African countries and concludes that avenues such as social media influencing, pop culture, adaptation of technology and mass indigenous communication are possible solutions to the slowdown of the success of the developmental goals.

Keywords: Sustainable development goals, new media, indigenous languages, Nigeria

Introduction

In a bid to achieve the goal of arresting social, economic and environmental challenges, among other issues, on a global scale, the United Nations (UN), in 2015, came up with the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 initiative (Kleespies and Dierkes, 2022). All the 193 member-countries of the UN signed the historic pact and set out to achieve the seventeen (17) goals.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) initiative was, however, not the first of such step. It was a modification to an existing similar idea, which was the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As a precursor, the MDGs aimed at driving a global development agenda

between 2000 and 2015, with focus spread on eight key areas: poverty, education, gender equality, child mortality, maternal health, disease, the environment and global partnership (Pedersen, 2018).

The SDGs, on the other hand, have 17 thematic areas and they include:

- no poverty;
- zero hunger;
- good health and well-being;
- quality education;
- gender equality;
- clean water and sanitation;
- affordable and clean energy;
- decent work and economic growth;
- industry, innovation and infrastructure;
- reduced inequalities;
- sustainable cities and communities;
- responsible consumption and production;
- climate action;
- life below water;
- life on land;
- peace, justice and strong institutions, and
- partnership for the goals (United Nations, 2015).

There are high hopes concerning the achievability of the SDGs but the preceding MDGs should provide an insight into whether the goals can be achieved or not, especially in Africa. Concerning this, Okon and Ukwai (2012) submit that:

“More than half-way into these ambitious targets, most nations, especially in Africa, are unlikely to meet these goals unless some extra-ordinary efforts and initiatives are launched and passionately implemented” (p. 121).

According to a report from the United Nations (2010), the UN Secretary-General at the time, Ban Ki-Moon, linked the lack of significant progress to “unmet commitments, inadequate resources, lack of focus and accountability, and insufficient interest in sustainable development.” To corroborate, Clemens *et al.* (2007) also opine that the MDGs could not be fully met because of how the goals were designed. Another study (Oya, 2011) explains that the millennium goals ignored the limited local capacities, with the goals seeming “overambitious” and “unrealistic.” Fukuda-Parr (2010) also sees a missing goal for reducing inequality among countries, especially the developed and the developing.

Bamgbose (2014) also points out the flaws of development goals as they often pay little attention to the significance of language. He argues that development would be impossible without the language of the people and that imported languages such as English and French are

only proficiently commanded by “the educated elite who form only a negligible percentage of the population” (p. 650). Hence, it is an erroneous assumption to say that an official language like English is superior to indigenous languages in efficient communication to the significant African population that dwells in rural areas (Arcand and Grin, 2013).

A pick out from the aforementioned is the unequal gap between advanced and advancing countries as well as limited local capacities. Part of this gap can be linked to linguistic resources, as they can help bridge the gap of inequality and boost local capacities. Although language plays a vital role in ensuring adequate understanding of any agenda, it has been left out in the MDGs. Noteworthy, indigenous languages have not been considered in the conception and execution of the global agenda. Given that research already established the importance of the mother tongue to cognitive development, capacity, creativity and communicative efficiency (Tanugarira, 2009), it is therefore a significant overlook to have not factored in indigenous languages. Likewise, new media tools have not been considered as well, given the prevalence and increasing indispensability of digital technologies in the 21st Century.

As it has been established that the MDGs, which expired in 2015, had their shortcomings, it is important that its successor initiative, SDGs, succeeds where the former failed as the plan of action for people, planet and prosperity is something that should concern everyone.

The concern of this paper, therefore, is to highlight how indigenous languages and new media can play a vital role in the success of the SDGs in Nigeria, while also positioning the 2030 agenda to achieve a greater impact than its precursor in Africa’s most populous country.

Literature Review

Sustainable Development Goals

The MDGs despite the lofty hopes of the United Nations did not meet expectations (Bamgbose, 2014). This then made member states of the United Nations acknowledge the need for a more comprehensive framework that would build upon the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and address a broader range of sustainable development challenges, especially in the areas of struggle of the MDGs. The SDGs were officially adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015, as part of the resolution titled "Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (United Nations, 2015). The study explains that this marked a significant milestone in global efforts to tackle interconnected social, economic, and environmental issues and establish a roadmap for a more sustainable future.

State of the SDGs and the Impact of COVID-19

The SDGs were launched in 2015 with a 15-year tenure that would lapse in 2030. Following the commencement of the agenda, research has been carried out to measure and track its success rate. Sianes et al., (2022) submit that in terms of academic research between 2015 and 2020:

“the SDGs have proven the ability to mobilize the scientific community and offer an opportunity for researchers to bring interdisciplinary knowledge to facilitate the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda.”

In terms of the political impact of the SDGs, Biermann *et al.* (2022), analyse over three thousand (3,000) scientific studies on SDGs between 2016 and 2021 and come to a conclusion that, while the goals have had some political impact on policies across the globe, the overall “transformative political impact” remains limited.

It is noteworthy that when the SDG pact was signed in 2015, hardly could the United Nations have foreseen a pandemic surge, but that was exactly what happened in 2020 which is now popular as the pandemic year. The onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that efforts towards the SDGs took a backseat as scientists and scholars alike, across the globe, sought a solution to an unprecedented health crisis. Inevitably, the SDGs were affected and actions slowed down. Elvarasan *et al.* (2022) carry out an assessment of the impact of the pandemic on the SDGs and discover that the goals were significantly impacted, with SDGs 1 and 8 (no poverty; decent work and economic growth) the most affected. In addition, Fagbemi (2021) investigates the effect of the coronavirus pandemic on SDGs in Nigeria and reveals that the country has become preoccupied with COVID-19 while issues such as education and infrastructural development have been neglected. The consequence is that unemployment rate has increased in Nigeria while the country continues to compound its debt profile, among other issues. Ultimately, achieving SDGs will take longer than the designed timeline.

Indigenous Languages and their Impact

According to Emeka-Nwobia (2015), Nigeria is linguistically the richest country in the world, boasting of over 500 indigenous languages. Three out of these hundreds of languages have been designated as national languages and they are Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo (National Policy on Education, 2004). Emeka-Nwobia (*ibid*) further acknowledges the tripartite classification of Nigerian indigenous languages and they are Class A, Class B and Class C. Class A languages have not less than six million native speakers and are used extensively well outside the state they originated from. Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa easily fall under this category. Class B languages are popular as well but unlike the Class A ones, they do not have many users outside their state of origin. Some of the languages under this category include Kanuri, Edo, Efik, Tiv, Ijo, etc. Class C languages are usually perceived as minor languages that hardly have users outside their native communities. They stand the risk of endangerment the most.

Akindele, Olatundun and Akano (2022), sample the opinion of Nigerians on their national language preference and approximately 65 per cent of respondents prefer English language while about 29 per cent had Yoruba as their choice. Hausa was the option for 27.5 per cent of people while only a meagre 2.5 per cent chose Igbo. This suggests that indigenous languages are not atop the desire of Nigerians who want English to be Nigeria’s foremost language of communication and official purposes.

Oloruntoba-Oju and van Pinxteren (2022), review the complex linguistic landscape of Nigeria and suggest the factors and steps to be taken that could facilitate the introduction of indigenous languages into the educational system of Nigeria and the success desired by stakeholders.

The study of Vogelzang, Tsimpli and Panda (2022) substantiates the hypothesis that proficiency in the mother tongue and bilingualism help children’s cognitive abilities. They establish that there is a correlation between literacy development and cognitive capacity.

New Media and Communication

Yujie, Alsagoff and Hoon (2022) describe new media as the process of utilising electronic devices and advanced technologies to share information. Emails, messaging applications, social media platforms, instant messaging are the most popular instances of new media communication tools. These tools simplify communication processes and ensure that information sharing procedures are faster and more efficient. The result of this is that the world has become a global village as information travels at the speed of light from one end of the world to another. Geographical locations now have little effect on the quality of communication, thanks to new media technologies. Similarly, new media also engenders worldwide dialogue on global issues as multitudes across the globe can come together to work together without having to leave their comfort zone. The convenience, efficiency and speed that characterise new media tools and processes make them indispensable in the present dispensation (Tomin, 2020).

Characteristics of New Media

New media technology exhibits numerous features, including communication, collaboration, convergence, creativity, and community. Communication is a primary focus of new media technologies, with platforms like blogs enabling users to publish content on their own web pages. Blogs serve as an alternative communication method, allowing for the transmission of information to a large audience. Moreover, blog posts encourage interaction and engagement by inviting readers to comment and share their opinions, fostering a two-way interactive communication process (Peskov, 2022).

In the age of rapid networking, the term "viral" is used to describe the swift transmission of content, such as viral videos, viral marketing, viral branding, and viral posts. Participants in new media technology communication play dual roles as senders and receivers, and they can readily express their opinions and provide feedback through computer-mediated communication processes.

It is also noteworthy that new media technologies are unable to function optimally without the internet. While email collaboration was the trend in the past, facilities like Google Docs have made collaboration possible by allowing users to share and work together on the same document at the same time. The same applies to other digital media platforms like Google Meet, Facebook, Zoom, and WhatsApp, as they foster collaboration through virtual communication. Consequently, with this level of sophistication, new media then becomes capable of engendering a sense of community. New media technologies are also known for their convergence with other forms of media, technology, and web-based communication platforms. Additionally, digitised texts, multi-faceted communication, and the smooth flow of information are further characteristics associated with new media (Smorgunov, 2014).

Existing Research on Language, New Media and SDGs

Existing research has shown that the defunct MDGs, and the African Union's New Partnership for African Development (NEDAD) by extension, paid little attention to language and its possible impact on the success of the developmental goals (Bamgbose, 2014). After a perusal of the SDGs, this study also discovers that the 2030 agenda also paid little attention to language and the roles it could possibly play in facilitating the success of the SDGs. Tesseur (2017) also

quizzes the absence of languages from the SDGs. The 8-point agenda of the MDGs were expanded to become 17 in the transition but the role of language and indigenous languages alike is excluded. This implies that alongside the onslaught of the pandemic, the continued exclusion of language from the global developmental agenda would further dent the possibility of achieving significant success with the goals.

The SDGs were drafted in globally recognised languages such as English and French but research has questioned the assumption that English and French are superior languages that can engender development (Arcand and Grin, 2013). Therefore, if the developmental goals are meant for and are to be observed by peoples all over the world, then the goals should be communicated in indigenous languages, and for a country like Nigeria, indigenous languages will appeal to the population's overwhelming majority (Bamgbose, 2014).

A number of studies have paid attention to the role of language in achieving the SDGs (Traore, 2017; Gertrude and Obiageli, 2020). Wagh (2019) examined the role of new media in achieving SDGs in India, paying attention to new media platforms such as print media, television, radio, and digital media, in promoting awareness, education, and engagement around sustainable development issues. Also, Kayal and Saha (2019) investigated the role social media could play in helping to create awareness for SDGs in higher education.

Despite the plethora of studies on SDGs and new media, none has beamed light on how indigenous languages and new media can combine to facilitate the success of the global agenda. This is where this study comes in, which is to highlight ways indigenous languages and new media tools can boost the success rate of the SDGs and go farther than where the MDGs lagged.

Materials and Method

Data

The primary data for this study are the seventeen (17) goals that make up the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda.

The secondary data for this study comprises the internet, journal articles, webpages and textbooks.

Theoretical Framework

The framework that guides the analysis of data for this study is Desk Review Research method. Desk research is a type of research method that is based on existing data and research that are publicly available either in print or on the internet. In other words, information on a research topic is gathered and analysed. It involves gathering and analysing existing information and data. It does not involve direct interaction with subjects or the collection of new data. Instead, researchers rely on existing sources, such as books, articles and reports (Creswell and Creswell, 2022).

The concept of desk research has been a fundamental part of research methodologies, with no specific human attribution for its proposition, but researchers and academics across various disciplines have employed desk research as a valuable method to review and synthesise existing literature and data (Kothari, 2019).

The steps involved in carrying out a desk research - otherwise known as secondary research - revolves around identifying the research interest, identifying the sources of the

research, collect existing data, scrutinise the data and proffer possible solutions. The framework does not involve engaging participants, rather it is about gathering, analysing and interpreting extant data available on public platforms such as internet forms, newspaper articles, magazines, market intelligence, government reports, databases, statistics, and data sets. For this study, an extensive of literature - conceptual and empirical - is conducted on the SDGs, their success rate or otherwise, the loopholes in the agenda, the place of language and new media in the agenda and how indigenous languages can help facilitate its success via digital technology.

Discussions

How New Media and Indigenous Languages can Boost the Success Rate of the SDGs

1. Targeted Communication

The number of living languages in Africa as of 2021 is pegged at over two thousand (2,000), with over 500 emanating from Nigeria alone (Statista, 2022). To add, according to UNESCO (2021), in Africa,

“over one-fifth of children between the ages of about 6 and 11 are out of school, followed by one-third of youth between the ages of about 12 and 14. Almost 60% of youth between the ages of about 15 and 17 are not in school.”

This suggests that chances are high that a significant portion of Africa’s population do not have a good command of their official language, which is usually either English or French. The high rate of failure among secondary school students in Nigeria is also an established fact (Obiakor and Malu, 2020). It can then be deduced from the foregoing that there is a low command of English among Nigerians and the consequence is that a significant percentage of the population does not possess communicative competence in English. It will then be difficult for them to understand the SDG agenda and the inherent thematic areas.

However, if effective enlightenment of the Sustainable Development Goals will be achieved, then information must be communicated to people in the language they understand. Hence, it will be hugely productive if SDGs were translated into indigenous Nigerian and African languages to achieve a wider understanding of the agenda. Disseminating information to ethnic groups in their local languages will, in turn, affect the chances of achieving the goals by the said year.

Also, statistics from Statista (2023), reveals that over 90 million Nigerians have access to the internet, suggesting that almost half of Nigeria’s population could be reachable via new media. This is further underpinned by another statistics showing that there are over 150 million active internet subscriptions in Nigeria.

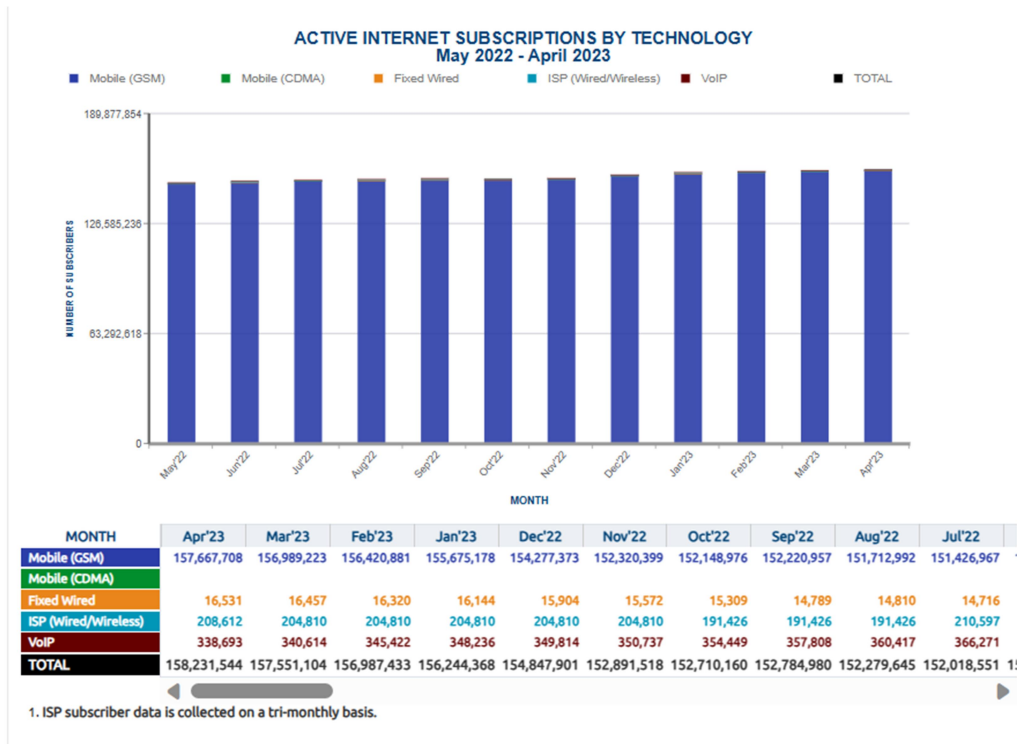


Table 1: Chart and table showing the internet subscriber data in Nigeria. Source: Nigerian Communications Commission website (Industry Statistics (ncc.gov.ng))

The chart and table above imply that the potential reach of new media, coupled with the established efficacy of indigenous languages, would elevate the success chances of the SDGs in Nigeria. Judging by Nigeria’s population slants, youths undoubtedly make up the majority of internet subscribers in Nigeria and this would mean that new media is a juicy avenue to explore in reaching Nigerians. Youths and new media are apparently inseparable because of the level of activities on social media platforms.

The study of Omisore, Babarinde, Bakare and Asekun-Olarinmoye (2017), established that the level of awareness of SDGs among Nigerian youths was about 43%, which is below average while only a meagre 4.2 per cent had good knowledge of the development goals. This means that there is a huge gap between youths and knowledge of SDGs. The implementation of SDGs would not be successful without Nigerians having solid awareness and information.

While Nigeria has a huge population and a large number of internet users that run into hundreds of millions, these resources have not been harnessed for the implementation of SDGs. This is where indigenous languages and new media can be the game-changing factors. SDG awareness and campaign can be taken to social media to reach youths. The campaigns can be conducted in numerous indigenous languages to ensure communication effectiveness. The speed and reach of social media ensures that millions of people can be reached in a matter of minutes.

2. Adapting New Media to Nigerian Localities

Communication in the present time is increasingly becoming reliant on technology. Hence, it is imperative that, as a follow-up to the aforementioned point, the technological media of delivery are linguistically configured to match indigenous languages. Nigeria, particularly, is experiencing a boom in ICT, as Nigerian technological startups raised \$3.1 billion in the first quarter of 2022 alone (Jaiyeola, 2022). Since citizens are coming up with technological solutions to sectors such as health, finance and education, among others, technological ideas should be fashioned to appeal to the heterogeneous society. The proliferation of online language learning platforms for African languages also lends credence to the argument that technologies can be adapted to suit information and action purposes of the SDGs.

3. Education and Learning Curriculum

The study by Omisore, Babarinde, Bakare and Asekun-Olarinmoye (2017) shows that the level of awareness and the attitude of Nigerian undergraduates towards the SDGs were just fair, while the level of knowledge was “abysmally low.” Other studies (Bello, Omachi, Adeboye and Adegboye, 2019; Agbi, 2022) also submit that SDGs should be introduced into the learning curriculum across all levels of education, from basic to tertiary. Furthermore, the Federal Government of Nigeria recently passed that elementary education should be conducted in the language of the immediate environment while existing policies on Education rule that elementary education should be in the mother tongue (NPE, 1981). If the SDGs are then introduced in the education and learning curricula, it will be communicated to pupils and students alike in indigenous languages that will easily stick with them. Also, this will ensure that the SDGs are unavoidable for every level of learner, increasing the awareness and attitude of people towards them.

4. Social Media and Influencers

In the present digital dispensation, social media has become an indispensable phenomenon. This has also given rise to social media influencers, people who have a large number of followers on social media platforms and wield a great deal of influence over them. An influencer can be a sports star, a musician, an expert in a field of enterprise or a politician. Because of the influence they, wield over a large number of followers, brands and organisations often seek to leverage this to advertise products and services.

Similarly, these influencers could be helpful in spreading the gospel of the developmental goals. Some of them command as many as 20 million followers and these followers take their word as law. This would provide an avenue to reach a large number of people who would take to heart what their social media icons tell them. These influencers sometimes double as culture icons who can communicate in indigenous languages to their throng of followers.

Also, the digitalised interactive features of social media platforms enable users to feel emotionally tied to their favourite social media influencers as users perceive the influencers as intimate friends in the real world via virtual interactions, including social foci, proximity, interaction frequency, and self-disclosure (Kim and Kim, 2022). Through the social media features, users tend to feel like they develop a solid friendship with their favourite social media influencers and to be satisfied with their real life (Kim and Kim, 2020; Kim and Kim, 2022). This

way, digital media becomes a vehicle for indigenous languages to disseminate the action points of the SDGs.

In the Nigerian social media space, there are many influencers with millions of followers. For instance, on Instagram, the ones with the highest number of followers include popular singer Davido who boasts of over twenty-eight million followers. Yemi Alade, Tiwa Savage, Wizkid, Burna Boy and Olamide also are musicians who have well over ten million followers respectively on the platform. Nigeria's film industry, otherwise known as Nollywood, also boasts of popular faces with Funke Akindele, Ini Edo, Mercy Johnson and Femi Adebayo boasting of tens of millions of followers on social media as well, making them influencers in their own right. In the business of skit making, comedians like Basketmouth, Bovi, Mr Macaroni and Kiekie and Mr Sabinus have equally amassed millions of followers to achieve the status of influencers.

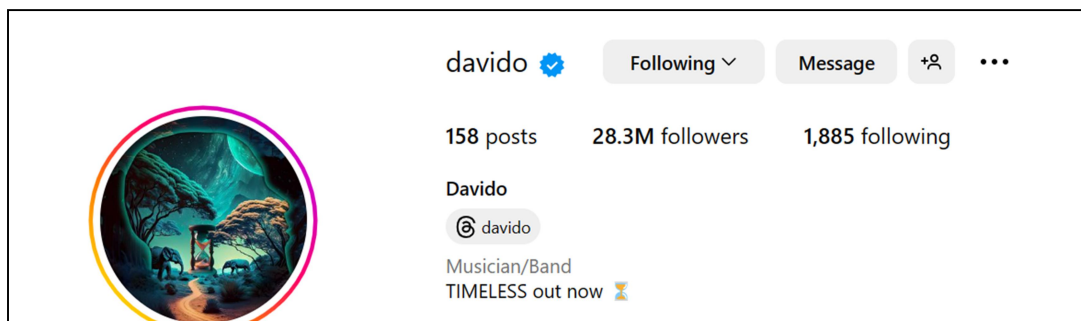


Image 1: The Instagram page of singer Davido showing the number of his followers as of November 2023.

5. Pop Culture

Another resultant effect of the rise of social media is popular culture, otherwise known as pop culture. Popular culture is formed from the interactions of people in their day-to-day events, ranging from slang, dance steps, dress, to greeting rituals, food and songs. Crossman (2017), defines popular culture as a collection of cultural products widely embraced by society. These encompass various forms of media and entertainment, including but not limited to music, new media culture, film, television, fashion, and radio. Importantly, McGaha's (2015), research establishes that popular culture influences the attitude of people towards topical issues.

In other words, pop culture has the capacity to make people have a warm reception towards certain topics and concepts and at the top of the pop culture food chain are influencers, especially entertainers. They often dictate the direction of pop culture per time. Olamide, Wizkid, Portable, Burna Boy, Ayra Star, Naira Marley, Folagade Banks, Funke Akindele, Gorosoekiti are a few of the numerous pop culture icons in Nigeria. Olamide, fondly called Baddo by his fans, is renowned for his slang and street-pop expressions. Wizkid's social media fans pride themselves as being the largest fanbase in Africa. FC, as they love to be addressed, glorify any utterance made by their idol. This has led to the popularity of slang expressions such as *machala* and *smellos*. Olamide, popularly known as Baddoo, dominated the Nigerian

airwaves with his songs and had expressions such as *first of all...introduction, pepper dem gang, shoro niyen* and *who you epp*. Another is Naira Marley who regards himself as the president of Marlians worldwide, people with 'no mannerz'. Pop culture sayings ascribed to him include: *soapy, inside life, ma fo*, and *ko po ke (KPK)*. Expressions such as *e choke, tule* and *who dey breeett* have been credited to Davido while *how is you* is an ungrammatical statement that was popularised by filmmaker Funke Akindele. *Zazu zeh, you dey whine, are you mad or sontin* are another pop culture expression that was introduced by singer PortableFolagade Banks and Gorosoekiti are influencers popular for their use of Yoruba language to amuse their followers. Folagade uses the Ijesa dialect to communicate to his followers while Gorosoekiti uses the Ekiti dialect to create content on social media. These two use indigenous languages to communicate to their fans as their pages inadvertently promote cultural values, particularly through Yoruba dialects.

From the examples in the foregoing, it becomes obvious that pop culture can be used to drive home the importance of SDGs and why everyone must be involved in the fight to 'end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that everyone enjoys peace and prosperity.' Social media and the use of indigenous languages then become important vehicles through which the goals can be achieved.

Conclusion

The study has presented that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and its successor initiative, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have paid little to (indigenous) language(s) in its plan and how new media tools and indigenous languages can be helpful in execution. The implication of this overlook is a low success rate for the global goals. The study has established that language and technology tools are now vital to the success of any human endeavour. Through the deployment of indigenous languages and new media to reach more people, especially the rural majority of Nigeria, the awareness of SDGs and attendant attitude will improve.

Some of the methods that can be used include targeted mass communication to Nigerians in their indigenous languages; adapting new technologies to fit the Nigerian socio-cultural realities, including operational languages of devices; social media and influencers as well as pop culture. Nigerian celebrities double as influencers and pop culture icons mainly because of their huge social media following and this makes them perfect salespeople who can sell SDGs to their devoted followers.

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