

Broken in Uganda

Uganda's National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC)



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The meeting description asks a number of important questions. Of those, I do not think that there is a problem with “capacity building among researchers [of African languages] to enhance research output”. Strained as finances may currently be, technology helps overcome this. Rather, there is often a problem with the “language, cultural and linguistic *realities* of contemporary Africa”, in that politicians tend to put up some window-dressing, claiming to want to empower indigenous languages, but wholly failing to do so *in reality*. This may be a bold claim, and this paper is also not for the faint-hearted.

As a case study, I detail the workings of the ‘Literature Bureau’ and the ‘Directorate of Curriculum & Instructional Materials Development’, both part of Uganda’s National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC). More in particular, I will focus on the attempts of three native language devotees of Lusoga to produce teaching materials for primary, secondary and tertiary education. No matter that two of these colleagues obtained a PhD in African languages (one in literature/culture, the other in linguistics), no matter that all three of them funded literally years of literature/culture and language research in Busoga from their own pockets, no matter that one of them frequently publishes research on Lusoga in top linguistics journals, no matter that all three went as far as producing and actually having their teaching materials published at own cost, ... – whenever their books are submitted for ‘evaluation’ to the NCDC, they are rejected.

This state of affairs is, at the very least, surprising. Lusoga (Bantu, JE16) is one of the nine regional indigenous languages of Uganda passed as mediums of instruction in 2002 (enacted into law in 2005). Now a full decade later, apart from some primers at the most basic level, not a single textbook on Lusoga has been selected for use in Uganda’s education system. And this despite one of the NCDC’s explicit missions of “Evaluating academic materials from the public and writing recommendations on their suitability for use in Uganda’s educational institutions” (<https://www.ncdc.go.ug/management>). That, indeed, seems to be the only activity they are engaged in, but not for the stated purpose. For the latest evaluation of three textbooks on and in Lusoga, in August 2012, the NCDC requested ‘processing fees’ of no less than 24 million Ugandan Shillings. This is equivalent to a staggering 6500 USD. (For comparison: a lecturer at a Ugandan tertiary education takes home only a few million Shillings per month.) Following a complaint, the processing fees not only seemed ‘negotiable’ (!), but when a breakdown was

requested, the items listed included stays and food at Kampala's top hotels down to stationary and even toilet paper for the evaluators. Even so, the books were submitted for evaluation, but eventually turned down as they scored barely more than 50%. Their advice: "Aim to improve this score as much as possible as advised by the evaluators and through self-reflection." To add insult to injury, seeing the names of the evaluators reveals that none of them has any background in Lusoga language studies, which is also clear from several ridiculous comments in the reports. Getting Lusoga language materials vetted for use in Ugandan schools, then, seems neigh impossible, as the workings at the NCDC are clearly broken. One cannot empower African languages when those with a say in their very empowerment behave in this way.

This paper deals with all of the following THEMES from the call:

- Language and Community Empowerment
- Language Acquisition and Learning
- Language in Education
- Language Teacher Education
- Language Curriculum Development
- Language and Technology
- Vocabulary and Lexical Studies
- Dialectology
- Lexicology & Lexicography
- Language Documentation and Description
- Text/Corpus Linguistics

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