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## Legitimizing the development and use of Cameroon's national languages: Lessons from COVID-19

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### Abstract

The advent of COVID-19 has revealed the inability of the Cameroonian Government to provide information to all its citizens in the languages they understand best since a majority of the languages are neither developed for use nor empowered by the language policy of the country. Based on data from online and secondary sources this study highlights and insists on the necessity to develop and use national languages in official communication particularly when transmitting health related information. If this is done, it will become possible to easily reach out to all Cameroonians with vital information for their wellbeing whenever need be. Other sectors of the country such as education and agriculture would benefit squarely from a language policy that incorporates the language of each and every Cameroonian.

**Keywords:** Legitimize, development, use, national languages, Cameroon, COVID-19

### Résumé

L'avènement du COVID-19 a révélé l'incapacité du gouvernement camerounais à informer ses citoyens dans les langues qu'ils comprennent puisqu'une majorité de ces langues ne sont ni développées pour être utilisées ni habilitées par la politique linguistique du pays. Sur la base de données provenant de sources en ligne et secondaires, cette contribution souligne et insiste sur la nécessité de développer et d'utiliser les langues nationales dans la communication officielle, en particulier lorsqu'il s'agit de transmettre des informations liées à la santé. Si cela est fait, il deviendra possible de tendre facilement la main à tous les Camerounais chaque fois qu'il sera nécessaire de leur transmettre des informations vitales pour leur bien-être. D'autres secteurs du pays, tels que l'éducation et l'agriculture, bénéficieraient aussi d'une politique linguistique qui intègre la langue de chaque Camerounais.

**Mots clés :** Légitimer, développement, utilisation, langues nationales, Cameroun, COVID-19

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## 1. Introduction

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in Cameroon in March 2020 ushered in the need for the government to inform and sensitize its citizens in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the country. It has been necessary not only to disseminate information about preventive measures but also to counter misinformation about the spread and prevention of the pandemic. This means that the government should reach out to all Cameroonians, including its citizens in remote areas who are either illiterate or semi-literate. However, as a country that has promoted and implemented the use of French and English as its official languages, the government has resorted to using these two languages to the exclusion of its over 250 national languages to transmit COVID-19 related information. In this regard communication by the Head of State, Prime Minister, Minister of Public Health, Governors of Regions, and Regional Delegates of Health have been in French and/or English. One of the unfortunate outcomes of the use of these two official languages is that the intended sensitization information and call to action directly reach only the 40 per cent to 85 per cent literate Cameroonians. Statistics from 2018 (<http://uis.unesco.org/country/CM>) show that up to 15 per cent of Cameroonians aged 15-24, 23 per cent aged 25-65, and 60 per cent above 65 years are illiterate. As Chumbow (2013) has pointed out, at least 60 per cent of the population in most African countries are not literate in the official languages such as English and French and are, therefore, marginalized and excluded from knowledge on health and development. He states that

*even the knowledge they need to reduce infant and maternal mortality, hunger and poverty, etc., is available – but not accessible – to the majority because it is hoarded in the minority official language... The majority of the population therefore lives in ignorance despite the availability of knowledge (p. 41-42).*

The advent of COVID-19 has revealed the inability of the Cameroonian Government to provide information to all its citizens in the languages they understand best since a majority of the languages are neither developed for use nor empowered by the language policy of the country. Based on data from online and secondary sources this study highlights and insists on the necessity to develop and use national languages in official communication particularly when transmitting health related information. If this is done, it will become possible to easily reach out to all Cameroonians with vital information for their wellbeing whenever need be. Other sectors of the country such as education and agriculture would benefit squarely from a language policy that incorporates the language of each and every Cameroonian. The communiques and press releases on which the discussion is based have been collected from WhatsApp and/or Twitter from March 1 - May 31, 2020. During these three months I found communiques and press releases from the Prime Minister, Head of Government; Minister of State, Secretary General of the Presidency of the Republic; Ministers of Public Health, Territorial Administration, Communication; Governors of the North-West and South-West Regions, and the North-West Regional Delegate of Public Health. The study is organized as follows. The next section is dedicated to the review of literature on Cameroon's language policy, and on the use of mother tongues or minority languages in communication during COVID-19. Evidence is provided in section 3 that official communication on COVID-19 in Cameroon has been limited to the official languages. As demonstrated in section 4, the burden has been shifted to individuals and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) that have taken upon themselves to create and disseminate awareness information and preventive measures in national languages. Section 5 contains suggestions for a language policy formulation and

implementation that will enhance national integration and enable Cameroon to attain its development objectives. A conclusion is provided in section 6.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Cameroon's Language Policy

Since independence Cameroonian scholars have called for a language policy that recognizes and integrates national languages in official affairs. The initial call for a language policy that incorporates a national language dates back to Ngijol (1964). His proposal was that in addition to the official languages, one mother tongue should be used at the national level since it will act as a unifying factor and reduce the threat of tribalism. Considering the difficulties involved in the use of a single national language, Ngijol (1987) suggests the use of a number of national, provincial or regional languages. Bot Ba Njock (1966) proposes a more inclusive policy where all mother tongues are used in the early years of education. Due to the technical difficulties of implementing this policy, e.g. lack of trained linguists, low level of language development, he recommends the use of zonal languages resulting in the selection of one or more languages per region. Towa (1987), following Ngijol (1964, 1987) suggests the use of one national mother tongue and 12 vehicular languages. The 12 vehicular languages will be used in schools and endowed with the status of national languages. The remaining languages will be used in adult literacy in order to prevent their extinction.

As noted by Mba (2013: 21), Tadadjeu's (1977) extensive trilingualism envisages that Cameroonians of the future will have the capacity to communicate in at least three languages among which one would certainly be a native Cameroonian language (preferably a mother tongue), the second will be an official language (French for Francophones and English for

Anglophones), and the third would be, for some, a Cameroonian vehicular language and, for others, the second official language. The extensive nature of the proposed model captures the fact that the number of languages one can use is unlimited and depends on the individual's linguistic needs and context. The extensive trilingualism model has a twofold communicational linguistic make-up. The vertical dimension is fulfilled by national languages, ideally each person's mother tongue, while the horizontal one is materialized through vehicular and official languages. This vision establishes the functional complementary relation among languages as specific domains of activities require specific languages. For example, traditional and cultural activities are best described by native Cameroonian languages than French or English. In the same vein, school activities may both be conducted in official and local languages. Cameroonians with two separate mother tongues would refer to official languages or an adequate local vehicular language to communicate with each other.

Tabi Manga (2000) recommends quadrilingualism based on a functional taxonomy of national or foreign languages used by Cameroonians. His proposal is to give national languages greater consideration and highlight their functional use and geographic area of communicational vitality and relevance. He proposes the following four language strata:

- 1) Maternal languages used at the level of individual families and which cannot serve educational purposes because of their very limited geographical coverage.
- 2) Communitarian languages spoken within the limits of an administrative division but which, due to the important number of speakers could feature among languages having a national dimension.

3) Vehicular languages that go beyond their natural geographical area and are used regionally by speakers of some other languages as their regional lingua franca. These are languages which normally could be termed national languages and therefore have a national destiny.

4) Official languages (English and French) that are state and international languages and are used widely. They function as working languages in all aspects of national life.

Chiatoh and Akumbu (2013) observe that more than 50 years after reunification of the two Cameroons in 1961, and despite its linguistic diversity, Cameroon still operates an exoglossic language policy that allows only the use of French and English in education and other domains. Moving from the position that such a policy is neither integrative nor representative and so cannot fully respond to the needs of Cameroonians, they strongly advocate for a total overhaul of present educational practices. In the guise of providing guidelines on the procedures and ingredients for adoption of an appropriate language policy, they propose general and specific principles to be considered in language policy elaboration, outline the qualities of an appropriate policy as well as the steps in policy formulation. They conclude their submission with a fervent appeal for the diagnosis and treatment of language issues in Cameroon to be informed by scientific and inclusive approaches.

Since the above proposals have hardly been taken into consideration, English and French have continued to survive as the official languages justifying the need for the present study that draws lessons from communication deficiencies during the COVID-19 pandemic to reiterate the call for Cameroon to integrate its national languages in its language policy.

## 2.2 COVID-19 and Communication in Mother Tongues or Minority Languages

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic various agencies around the world have expressed the need to communicate relevant information to people in their mother tongues which, in many countries, are minority languages. The NGO Translators Without Borders has highlighted the importance of language for effective communication in the fight against COVID-19. In its March 2020 policy brief ([https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/TWB\\_PolicyBrief-COVID19.pdf](https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/TWB_PolicyBrief-COVID19.pdf)) they have answered the question “Do you speak COVID-19?”. Among other things they have pointed out that communicating in international lingua francas or national languages makes marginalized people more vulnerable and that misinformation and mistrust flourish when communication does not clearly answer people’s questions. They insist that relevant information should be communicated to everyone in the language they understand best, i.e. their mother tongue.

SIL International has embarked on the translation and distribution of relevant COVID-19 related information into lesser-known local languages around the world. As the pandemic continues to threaten communities worldwide, various actions are being taken to stop the spread and save lives. Individuals are able to take actions to protect themselves and families based on access to clear and relevant information and preventive measures. Unfortunately, SIL International estimates that 30% of people everywhere cannot find basic health information in their first language to protect themselves and their communities from the pandemic. For this reason, the NGO has launched a COVID-19 Fund [https://www.sil.org/covid-fund?fbclid=IwAR3G6o0\\_w5S09Bk5cUSRrlcnxPIASdvcKHUwBe67U99d3LuHtDSuJVJ8c3o](https://www.sil.org/covid-fund?fbclid=IwAR3G6o0_w5S09Bk5cUSRrlcnxPIASdvcKHUwBe67U99d3LuHtDSuJVJ8c3o) soliciting donations to fund the planned translation and distribution.

A report of April 3, 2020 by RFI (<http://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20200403-grassroots-solidarity-as-covid-19-information-translated-into-african-local-languages>) titled

“Grassroots solidarity as Covid-19 information is translated into African local languages” presents grassroots efforts to translate information on how to prevent coronavirus – washing hands, keeping a distance from others, coughing into your elbow – into various African languages. Grassroots efforts of this nature have involved languages of Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, South Africa, Morocco Ethiopia, and Eritrea while many others are still underway.

Building on the power of community and the service of volunteer translators from across the continent, the Engage Africa Foundation (<http://www.engageafricafoundation.org/covid-19>) has initiated a crowdsourced project to translate evidence-based preventive guidelines primarily from the World Health Organization (WHO) into several African languages to make them accessible, informative and easy to understand.

The Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) has conducted an online survey on the use of minority languages under the COVID-19 outbreak between March and April 2020 (<https://www.fuen.org/en/article/Do-You-Speak-Corona-Many-European-countries-do-not-offer-information-on-the-pandemic-in-minority-languages>). The questionnaire focused on the availability of information related to COVID-19 in general, healthcare information related to the outbreak, the existence of an emergency hotline operated in minority languages and the availability of online education in mother tongue. The survey results presented on May 11, 2020 show that “key general information on the coronavirus outbreak is available in the language of minority communities and language groups in slightly more than half of the cases (52%), provided most often by regional government, minority organizations as well as minority press. Similar to the general COVID-19 related information, key health related information in minority languages is available in slightly more than half of the cases (52% again). In case of health related information, local and regional governments are more active.”

With only half of the users of minority speakers across Europe having access to vital information

on the pandemic the need to step up efforts and make information available in all minority languages of the continent is obvious. The rest of the world should implement similar communication strategies to successfully combat the spread of COVID-19.

### 3. The Language of COVID-19 Related Official Communication in Cameroon

Since the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Cameroon on March 6, 2020 the government shouldered the responsibility of constantly informing and updating the public on the evolution of the situation. One positive aspect of government’s communication on the pandemic has been the use of the two official languages, i.e. English and French. Beginning from the Minister of Public Health to the Prime Minister, Head of Government, and eventually the Head of State most communication has been bilingual. The Governors of each Region have used either English or French depending on whether the Region is English- or French-speaking.

On March 6, 2020 Cameroon’s Minister of Public Health issued a press release in French confirming the first case in the country. He (@Manaouda) later tweeted:

**The Government reassures that everything is being done to contain this case of importation of the coronavirus. There is no reason to panic. The situation remains under control. The populations must simply continue to observe the usual rules of hygiene.**

***Le Gouvernement rassure que tout est mis en oeuvre pour confiner ce cas d’importation du coronavirus. Il y a aucune raison de céder à la panique. La situation reste sous contrôle. Les populations doivent simplement continuer à observer les règles usuelles d’hygiène.***

On March 9, 2020 he issued another press release in French informing the general public that after the second case was confirmed he held a meeting with various stake holders to discuss ways to fight back the pandemic. As usual, he commented on the meeting in his Twitter account. On March 14 the Minister sent out a third press release in both French and English to announce that the third case of COVID-19 had been confirmed in Cameroon. On March 19, another press release in the two official languages informed the public that the two first cases had been tested negative after 14 days of treatment. The Minister further admonished Cameroonians to continue respecting hygiene measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic. On March 30, 2020 the Minister also granted a press conference in French during which he encouraged Cameroonians to observe all the preventive measures prescribed by the government.

Apart from the press releases, the Minister's Twitter account has been a major outlet of information and updates during this period. There have been tweets on a daily basis and interestingly, they have been in both French and English. An example is his tweet of May 25, 2020:

**It is important to note that we are entering a complicated phase of the pandemic. Therefore, more than ever, we must protect ourselves, protect our families and protect others by observing barrier gestures. Wear a mask when going out and wash your hands regularly.**

*Il est important de noter que nous entrons dans une phase compliquée de la pandémie. Nous devons donc, plus que jamais, nous protéger, protéger nos familles et protéger les autres en observant les gestes-barrières. Portez un masque en sortant et lavez-vous régulièrement les mains.*

While this is a laudable attitude that indicates a clear instance of the respect of the constitution and official language policy of Cameroon it has obviously been to the disadvantage of those Cameroonians who are not literate in any of the two official languages.

Other ministers have also issued COVID-19 related communiqués in the official languages. The Minister of Territorial Administration signed order N° 000012/A/MINAT on March 17, 2020 regulating the exercise of freedom of movement of persons and goods and limiting the exercise of sociocultural and profit-making activities as part of the plan to fight against the coronavirus pandemic. The Minister of State, Secretary General of the Presidency of the Republic sent out a communiqué on April 22, 2020 to inform the public of the cancellation of Labour Day and National Day celebrations to ensure respect of the social distancing measures prescribed by the government to fight COVID-19. On May 13, 2020 the Minister of Communication issued a statement on preventive measures and support to the country's economy within the framework of the national efforts to fight against the pandemic.

Cameroon's Prime Minister, Head of Government has been responsible for informing the public about government's response strategy to the coronavirus pandemic. On March 17, 2020 he issued a special statement in both English and French outlining the preventive measures to be observed from March 18, 2020. Another statement in the two official languages followed a week later on March 24, 2020 reminding and calling for reinforcement and respect of the measures prescribed on 17 March, 2020. On April 30, 2020 another statement to relax some of the measures of March 17 and to insist on the strict respect of the measures still in force was issued in English and French. On May 15, 2020 a new statement came from the Prime Minister updating and authorizing

the reopening of schools from June 1, 2020. The statement was in both official languages. As with the communications from the Minister of Health those from the Prime Minister have not reached directly to those Cameroonians who are not literate in the official languages of the country.

Regional governors have also sent out announcements on the pandemic in the official languages. For example, on April 20, 2020 the governor of the North-West region's press release N° 008/L/E/GO/GS announced that the region had recorded its first case of COVID-19 and invited the inhabitants of the region to respect all measures prescribed by the government against the pandemic. This was followed by release N° 009/L/E/GO/GS on April 23, 2020 confirming the second case in the region. On March 31, 2020 the governor of the South-West Region issued release N° 0283/L/G/GSW/19/GRS prohibiting eating and drinking in public places throughout the region. This was followed by a communique on March 4, 2020 instituting the obligatory wearing of face masks by all those visiting public services in the Region.

The Regional Delegate of Public Health for the North-West Region has also sent out several press releases on the pandemic in English. For example, press release N° 003/A/NWR/RDPH was issued on March 20, 2020 to counter information that had earlier been circulated to the effect that a case of COVID-19 had been recorded in the region. He, however, called on the population to be vigilant, respect all prevention measures and avoid taking any unprescribed medication or buying hand sanitizers from unknown sources. Press release N° 003/PR/NWR/RDPH of April 25, 2020 notified the community that the third, fourth, and fifth cases had been confirmed and called on everyone to strictly respect prescribed preventive measures and to report any suspected cases by calling numbers that were provided. On May 1, 2020 the Regional Delegate again issued

press release N° 004/A/NWR/RDPH announcing that the region already had 11 confirmed cases. He further called on the population to be vigilant and to expose any suspected cases. Press release N° 006/A/NWR/RDPH of May 19, 2020 specified that there were already 44 COVID-19 cases and 09 deaths in the region and that everyone should be extremely alert and report any suspected cases immediately by calling the numbers he indicated. On May 25, 2020, press release N° 007/A/NWR/RDPH revealed that systematic testing of corpses for COVID-19 is being done to identify those that might have died of it and advise mourners to take precautionary measures to protect themselves. The Regional Delegate has also publicized, through various social media outlets, a North West Regional Call center for COVID-19 available 24/7. He has provided both landline and mobile phone numbers that can be called if any person in the community is suspected to have COVID-19 symptoms. He explains that using the call center numbers will enable proximity communication around the pandemic and decongest the original number (1510) which is rather highly solicited. It should be noted that all these information and press releases have been in English, directly excluding the uneducated inhabitants of the region from understanding and implementing the recommendations provided.

The most relevant and highly awaited communication regarding COVID-19 was the Head of State's address to the nation on 19 May, 2020. The unusual address was necessitated by the pandemic which had forced the government to cancel the annual celebration of its national day which always takes place on May 20. The Head of State found it necessary to address the nation and add his personal voice to the fight against COVID-19. As expected, his message was in French followed by a translation in English. Needless to point out that a majority of



Cameroonians who do not understand any of the two official languages either received only second hand interpretations or missed out completely on the President's input.

#### 4. COVID-19 Related Communication in national Languages

Since many individuals and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) are aware of the fact that government's communication does not reach the uneducated masses due to the language barrier they have taken upon themselves to create and disseminate awareness information and preventive measures in national languages. WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube have been flooded with messages from medical doctors and lay persons to their fellow villagers in their mother tongues in a bid to reach out to them directly with information on the prevention of COVID-19. Various community radios have also graciously communicated information in national languages. Some have been translations of WHO's messages while others have simply been personal understanding and experiences that have been shared.

Beyond the individual initiatives that have witnessed the production and dissemination of video and audio messages, numerous national and international organizations have embarked on efforts to sensitize Cameroonians. At the national level the Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy (CABTAL) has produced a booklet *What you need to know about the Coronavirus or COVID-19*. The booklet which is based on information from the WHO is meant to highlight preventive measures and attitudes that people need to adopt. The Director of CABTAL has stated in an interview with the Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) on April 14, 2020 that the book summarizes basic ideas about COVID-19, defines some key words and answers the following questions: "What is coronavirus?,"

Which categories of persons are vulnerable?," What are the symptoms?," What are the channels of transmission?," How can someone be protected?," What can someone do if they are infected?" By April 14, 2020 the booklet had been translated into 21 languages and work was still going on to complete the translation into 19 other languages and bring the total to 40. Responding to the question of how the message gets to the masses, the Director pointed to three channels. First, he said printed materials are distributed by mother tongue literacy teachers. Secondly, he explained that CABTAL also uses various social media platforms to share the messages which are also found on CABTAL's website <https://www.cabtal.org/en/welcome-cabtal>. Finally, he added that some community radios participate in sharing the information during dedicated slots. CABTAL's Director justified the action of the organization by stating that "with efforts like this from CABTAL, it is clear that those in the suburbs with no mastery of Cameroon's official languages will certainly have information on how to combat the deadly COVID-19." According to him, since the official languages are not always understood by people in the grassroots, CABTAL is specialized in working with local communities to translate relevant messages into their languages. He concludes that "having this material in the mother tongue is our contribution to fight the COVID-19 pandemic."

The Cameroon Academy of Young Scientists (CAYS) also produced a video with sensitization information for the fight against COVID-19 in Cameroon Pidgin, Duala, Tupuri, Babanki, Medumba, Akoose, Lamnso', Bazou, Basaa, Yemba, Mubako, Ghomala', Mbo'o, and Ngemba. CAYS has noted that their gesture is crucial because most information about COVID-19, including prevention strategies have been disseminated chiefly in the official languages, to the disadvantage of those who cannot find basic

health information in their first language to protect themselves and their communities from the pandemic. This video has been distributed widely and it has certainly reached a greater audience particularly those Cameroonians who understand their community languages more than the official English and French.

An international volunteer-run project that has invested and dedicated much energy to produce and distribute COVID-19 related messages in Cameroon's national languages is virALLanguages. This project has been made possible by the joint efforts between the Key Pluridisciplinary Advances on African Multilingualism – Cameroon (KPAAM-CAM) project (University at Buffalo, SUNY, USA), the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) World Language Institute (UK), and the Community for Global Health Equity (University at Buffalo, SUNY, USA). It is stated on their website <https://virallanguages.org/> that their aim is to “reach as many people as possible sharing reliable and memorable information so people know what to do to stop the spread of coronavirus. We focus on endangered languages starting from those spoken in Cameroon, thanks to our existing network of collaborators. But we want the project to go global and provide culturally-appropriate translations of WHO advice in as many “tiny” languages as possible. The principal output of virALLanguages are video and audio recordings in minority, endangered, or otherwise marginalized languages of the world.”

It happens that Cameroon is privileged to have been the starting point for virALLanguages. As of April 29, 2020, information from the WHO on COVID-19 had been translated into Aghem, Ajumbu, Babanki, Bafut, Buu, Giziga, Mafa, Masa, Mendanwke, Moloko, Mundabli, Munken, Noni, Obang, Oshie, and Zaah-Biyah. Efforts to translate into more national languages were still

going on. As stated in virALLanguages' website giving out memorable information is vital. “Communicating information that people can understand and will trust is only possible through native speakers who are able not only to translate from a major language to a local one, but also to adapt features of the translated text in ways that make it more appropriate to the environment, customs, and speech style that are most relevant to each language community. Proverbs, metaphors, and diverse rhetorical strategies are key to get the information across in a way that will enable behavioral change necessary to save lives. It is also important for any specific examples to be tailored to local ways of living. For example, recommendations to disinfect doorknobs will be meaningless in places where doorknobs are hardly found.”

This is crucial in the context of COVID-19 where a lot of information is circulating – some more reliable than others. It can be stressful to sort through differing messages especially when they are not in someone's mother tongue.

## **5. COVID-19 and Cameroon's Language Policy**

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of marginalized people around the world lack access to basic information about how to keep themselves and their communities safe and well. They include people who do not speak the dominant language where they live, people with no or low literacy, and people without access to different forms of communication. Many minority groups within a country may not have a good command of the official language and therefore may misunderstand the message in the official language. The spread of the pandemic and the measures to tackle it has challenged monolingual or bilingual ideologies and practices of governments because the degree of success in fighting the outbreak depends substantially on the

dissemination of correct information in different languages. The government of Cameroon has taken recourse to its official languages – English and French – to spread awareness about the pandemic. However, the hygiene and health information should be made available in all its 250 national languages in order to reach out to everyone and slow down the spread of the disease. The availability of knowledge in the languages of the people not only ensures that the message is understood but also creates trust, which increases the likelihood of acceptance.

Despite Cameroon's rich linguistic diversity, the country has continued to implement a language policy that is based on foreign languages, i.e. English and French, and which falls short of responding adequately to the needs and aspirations of its citizens. At this critical moment when COVID-19 is spreading exponentially and claiming lives, the demand of a thorough review of this policy is compelling. The need for an integrative policy, in fact, one that carefully considers the country's socio-cultural and political landscape is not only real but extremely urgent.

Since 1996 there have been significant reforms on Cameroon's language policy. The constitution of 1996 recognizes national languages as the sources of national cultures that deserve promotion. Article 3 of section one of the constitution states that the state shall "endeavour to protect and promote national languages" (p 8). While the constitution stipulates that the official languages of Cameroon shall be English and French, it is practically silent on the status of national languages. Neither in the constitution nor anywhere else is there a specific articulation on how precisely national languages should be promoted. With this inherent loophole, there is no doubt that this constitutional provision has not been implemented.

Law N° 98/004 of 14 April 1998 provides for the promotion of national languages. But like the constitution, it falls short of specifying practical modalities for the promotion of these languages. Rather, it clearly states the need to institute official language (English-French) bilingualism as a factor of national unity and integration. What the law acknowledges, therefore, is the use of English and French as languages of instruction suggesting that national languages can only be promoted as school subjects. Government's silence on the status of national languages in the classroom significantly reduces the potential for application as it seems to express more of a wish than a national obligation. In this way, the law encourages continuous domination of the school system by the foreign official languages especially given that the law formally admits that these foreign languages are instruments of unification and integration. The lapses observed in this law reflect the unwillingness and unreadiness of public education officials to embrace national languages. This indirectly paves the way for negative attitudes towards these languages leading to their rejection and lack of investment for their development.

Decree N° 2002/004 of 4 January 2002, creates Provincial Pedagogic Inspectorates (PPI) for mother tongues but fails to set up a neutral non-governmental monitoring and evaluation mechanism to oversee activities. The decree sacrifices, a priori, effectiveness given that educational programs are drawn up, harmonized and globally evaluated at the national level. While decentralization in educational planning and implementation is a cherished ideal, it is essential to remark that the absence of a central monitoring mechanism makes of the provisions of this law an affair of the regions that lacks national value. Law N° 2004/019 of July 2004 empowers regions to undertake education and literacy in national languages. Although more explicit than the other

reforms, it still does not establish the relationship between regions and educational institutions. It is not clear whether or not regions have the latitude to adopt their specific language policies and if not, how effectively they can transform national policy into reality at the regional level in a country where the application of legislation, decrees and the constitution is still heavily controlled by the central administration.

As pointed out by Chiatoh (2013), all these legal frameworks share two key things in common. Firstly, they recognize the importance of national languages in development, and secondly, they lack clarity in the specification of the precise scope of promotion of national languages. Each of the reforms addresses the issue of language policy only in part and even considered together, they still fail to elaborately address the major concerns of policy development in the country. This signals the absence of an elaborate language policy document accompanied by a clear definition of goals, strategies, mechanisms of implementation and evaluation and reporting that consider all the languages of the nation without biases of any kind.

COVID-19 has shown that the government is unable to communicate relevant information to all its citizens since it has grossly neglected the national languages of the country in favour of foreign languages. To overcome this shortcoming, the government should consider the recommendations listed below in its language policy formulation and implementation. First and foremost, COVID-19 has demonstrated the need for the government to create units specialized in translating all relevant information into national languages at the relevant ministries. This requires that each ministry concerned should employ at least one translator for each of the 250 national languages. To achieve the government's mission of providing healthcare to all its citizens and

raising their standards of living vital information must be made available in the languages the people understand best. All essential government communication on health, agriculture, etc. should, at least, be translated orally into all national languages. This will be the most effective strategy to reach out to every Cameroonian in their mother tongue or home language. Written translations will follow for those languages whose writing systems have been developed and are in use. The rest of the languages will continue to be developed by linguists and motivated community members.

However, adopting a suitable national language policy for Cameroon entails taking cognizance of the following important general principles of language planning and policy formulation adapted from Chiatoh & Akumbu (2013).

- 1) Standardization of unwritten languages: Such standardization is imperative in improving written communication involving national languages. Many national languages, especially the very minority ones, are not yet written and so cannot serve written communication functions.
- 2) Language as a development resource: Languages should be recognized as cardinal resources in holistic human development. In this light, national languages should be considered in all development planning activities (educational, health, socio-cultural, religious, administrative, etc.).
- 3) Cultivation and strengthening of national integration: Choices and decisions should be guided by the multilingual and multicultural nature of Cameroon. By respecting all these differences and neatly incorporating them into policy, national integration will be strengthened. A clear distinction should be made between national integration and national unity. While the former fits into the Cameroonian situation, the latter is a colonialist option intended to neutralize the

identity and values of the different components of the Cameroonian society.

4) Multilingualism and multiculturalism as a national resource: Cameroon's language policy should embrace and uphold multilingual and multicultural values as indispensable ingredients for constructing a strong and integrated society. It should promote the learning and use in education (media of instruction) of languages other than English and French. In this regard, it should recognize minority languages not as a problem but as development assets (Wolff 2011: 62), indeed, a positive value. This mother tongue-based multilingual policy shall replace the current exclusive and discriminatory foreign official language policy.

5) National languages in education: The use of national languages in education should be mandatory. These languages should serve both as co-media (together with English and French) of instruction and as subjects (disciplines) in the classroom at all levels. This requires significant investments in the development of science and technology resources, including scientific and technical vocabulary. These languages shall also become permanent instruments of lifelong learning.

6) Coexistence of languages: Both foreign and national languages are indispensable in the definition of Cameroon's present linguistic reality. While national languages shall constitute the core of natural existence by ensuring cultural rooting, foreign languages shall fulfil instrumental needs of a global society. Identity and values shall be defined in terms of the coexistence of these two categories of languages.

7) National official languages: Some national languages should be upgraded to the status of official languages. These should be vehicular languages or languages of wider communication. A single national official language would be inappropriate for Cameroon. Rather, at least three languages are needed. Given their vehicular nature, Cameroon Pidgin, Beti-fang and Fulfulde could be selected at this stage.

8) Regional languages: In line with the on-going decentralization process and considering the responsibility of regions in promoting national languages, the adoption of regional languages to serve official functions at the level of the regions should become an imperative.

9) Intellectualization of national languages: Cameroon's national languages notably the ones to be granted official status should be promoted in the areas of science and technology and other fields of higher learning. Sustained research on these languages should thus be encouraged to enable them effectively become instruments for the development and promotion of advanced learning.

More specifically, in formulating a national language policy for Cameroon, measures should be taken to guarantee the respect of the following principles.

1) Explicitness and clarity: The goals of the policy should be explicitly and unambiguously stated. This will facilitate the adoption of strategies, evaluation and feed-back on various stages of implementation. Clear and explicit definition of goals shall help ensure objectivity and so guarantee that security concerns of all the different components of the society are duly taken into considerations.

2) Comprehensive definition of goals: All policy goals should be defined in detail to permit all concerned groups, bodies and institutions to participate freely and actively in the implementation process. Roles of different languages (majority and minority; foreign and national) should also be fully defined.

3) A coordinated approach: Measures should be taken to establish effective and efficient national coordination of activities especially with respect to different organizations, bodies and institutions charged with the enactment of the policy. This coordination shall be ensured by a neutral body made up of members of all the stakeholders.

- 4) Broad spectrum of policy: Policy should be defined in a way as to make it generally applicable across all sectors and languages of the nation. For instance, each language, its size notwithstanding, shall feel concerned by the policy.
- 5) Access to information and services to non-official language speakers: Policy shall guarantee that non-speakers of official languages (foreign and national) shall have free, if not equal, access to all information and services within the nation.
- 6) Texts of application: The practice of texts of application as prerequisites for policy implementation is regressive and should be reconsidered. Authorities should realize that these texts are more of obstructions than facilitators to effective policy implementation and should either be totally scrapped or their speedy elaboration and application should be guaranteed.

Since management is an important aspect of language policy effectiveness and success the policy should be administered in Cameroon by the following agencies.

- 1) *A Language Policy Advisory Board* that will advise government on matters of policy formulation and implementation. Its membership should comprise researchers, practitioners and specialized institutions. Its main goal should be to provide counselling on strategies and techniques of policy implementation.
- 2) *A National Language Policy Board* in charge of the implementation of the country's language policy. It should be a neutral body created and empowered specifically for this purpose. As such, it should enjoy institutional, human resource and financial autonomy. The Board should have regional and local offices.
- 3) *A National Certification and Qualifications Board* responsible for assessment and certification at national level. It should work closely with the National Language Policy Board.

## 6. Conclusion

The intention of this paper was to draw the attention of Cameroon's Government to the weaknesses of its current language policy revealed by the failure to communicate COVID-19 related information to all its citizens in the languages they understand best, i.e. their mother tongues. The pandemic has served as an eye-opener to the reality that using English and French as official languages of communication does not allow messages to reach the entire intended audience particularly the numerous Cameroonians who are not literate in the official languages. For many years now, Cameroon has recognized the need to adopt an alternative language policy to fill the gaps created by the dominant English-French language policy. The current policy has demonstrated its limits by virtue of its exclusive and discriminatory nature and should be revised significantly. As the pandemic continues to spread and claim lives of Cameroonians, the formulation of an appropriate and operational language policy for Cameroon becomes even more compelling. Evidence has been provided and suggestions made to this effect. The health, agricultural, educational, historical, and political implications for urgent action are obvious and should be given serious consideration. To successfully counter the spread of COVID-19, all Cameroonians must be effectively informed in the languages they understand best.

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