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# WORKING WITH DISCOURAGED LANGUAGES: A broad approach to literacy challenges in Africa

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## ABSTRACT

Research shows that the upheavals facing literacy and language use in Africa have been widespread in almost every nation. This is particularly so for those nations that historically experienced the use of an international language in this political and educational systems. Bible work in Africa goes on within this context. The success of this work demands that literacy issues must be looked at partly from the perspective of language learning and use since the school is, for the majority of people, the only place where literacy is acquired. Preference to use an international language as the language of instruction has not necessarily enabled most learners to achieve useful levels of literacy. Indigenous languages continue to face serious onslaughts from several quarters to such an extent that cohorts of school leavers cannot read or write in the language they love to speak and listen to. What must be done to facilitate the discouraged languages and language learners in Africa? Specific suggestions are given on the kinds of knowledge and effort relevant to literacy work that needs to be embraced for effectiveness in the communities served by Bible societies. A case is put forward for improved strategies - specific strategies that address, for example, standardization of orthography, quality translations sensitive to the oral nature of most communities, awareness of community rights and practices in the so called 'bilingual classrooms', and facilitation in the provision of literature for literacy work.

## 1. Introduction

Language loss and literacy issues overlap in many respects. In tackling the causes or remedies of either of them, issues about the other must surface. Both areas of study are well debated and in recent years, well documented (Street 1984, 1995; Fishman 1991, 2001; Baker 2001; Francis and Reyhner 2002; Adegbija 1994; Baynham 1995; Parry 2000; Owino 2002). Clearly, neither of them is the core business of Bible Societies. However, since the success of the primary work of

Bible Societies is undisputedly affected by these two factors, this paper seeks to contribute further to this discussion, given the current concerns of literacy, language policy and language practices in the African continent.

Several recent accounts of the state of indigenous languages not only in Africa but also in Asia and Latin America are available (Fishman 1991, 2001; Owino 2002; Adegbija 1994; Wolff 2000; Prah 1998; Bamgbose 2000; Parry 2000). Languages are shown to be experiencing domination from other languages, widespread diminished functions, threats and/or even death and these happenings are not peculiar to any one part of the world. Fortunately, many of these accounts also capture the ‘stirrings’ among communities who in the last few decades are paying more attention to their indigenous languages for varied reasons. Perhaps the most celebrated of these volumes is Joshua Fishman’s (2001) *Can Threatened languages be Saved?* which gives accounts of particular threatened languages in the nations of the world; some of these accounts describe efforts to save these languages. Adegbija describes Africa, Asia and Latin America as having

“an unenviable concentration of status-poor, officially inconsequential and functionally emaciated languages. ...Sub-Sahara Africa alone has far more than 1700 languages and very little institutional attention is given to most of them... Over 90% of African languages, therefore exist as if they don’t really exist; they live without being really alive. Living functional blood is being sucked out of them because they are consigned to low level functions in the national scheme of things” (Adegbija 2001:284).

While the main concern of my paper is not so much whether these languages are experiencing death or not, the issues Adegbija raises are important in understanding how to work effectively with discouraged languages. The complex sociolinguistic phenomena which these languages find themselves in contact provide angles from which any interaction or interventions must be considered.

With the exception of a few, African languages have not lost the capacity of transmission; they are still the same languages that the vast majority of people love to speak and listen to in virtually all of Africa’s rural communities and even in cities. Much of Africa’s population is rural and the bulk of urban people are themselves migrants from these rural areas who come to towns in search of employment. To assert like Ager (2001:158) does that many “communities within the state are vociferous in support of their own identity and desire that their language, customs and traditions are not lost” is not to overstate. However, all their languages face what Francis and Reyhner (2002:33) describe as “the actual structure of the languages that ...have progressively ceded, together with domains of use, one grammatical, lexical, and discourse feature after another to the national languages.” The spread and dominance of big languages and cultures is felt because of increasing globalization and its demands. There is not a single exception to this overall tendency toward language displacement by international languages such as English or French. In a few cases the aggressor is not an international language but a local language of wider communication

like Kiswahili in East Africa or Hausa and Yoruba in West Africa. Although the pressure from international languages is at most only a hundred years for many African communities, the effects of this sociolinguistic contact are precipitated more in some contexts than others. For example, those like Ethiopia that were not colonized by western powers did not initially have their languages challenged in this way but are now feeling the same tensions that the “colonized languages” have experienced since five or six decades ago. Furthermore, communities near urban centres and therefore multilingual in composition make more radical decisions about language choices (Muthwii 2002a).

This paper is biased toward literacy within the education sector, firstly, because literacy is still acquired mainly in the school context and, secondly, there are hardly any widespread community (“local or ethnic”) literacies in Africa at the moment.<sup>24</sup> This is not to deny that there are literacy efforts in the non-formal and the informal sectors, but rather to indicate that the main arena of literacy acquisition for most literates in the continent has been the school. In addition, most communities do not have a culture or a history of community literacy. For the most part, the provision of literacy, right from its inception, is seen as a responsibility of mainly governments using the school system or, to a limited extent, through adult literacy education classes. Most communities, especially those in rural areas, have not learnt to be proactive. This is an important point to have in mind as literacy issues are addressed about Africa. An important question would be whether one should work within this framework or whether to encourage the community to be a part of new paradigms, new engagements. Given the length of time that Bible translation work goes on in a community, school literacy and community participation calls for more attention by agencies that work with these communities because of the potential literates the school can produce over a given period and the number of interested parties or stakeholders the school attracts. Other reasons for the focus on literacy in education will become clear as the discussion develops.

A question often raised in Bible Society circles when issues of literacy are discussed is whether revitalization of threatened languages is part of its mandate. In response to this concern, the answer is often, if not always, in the negative. However, the United Bible Societies’ (UBS) fundamental mandate of “providing God’s word to those who need it” means that these recipients are expected to engage with God’s word. The mandate to provide God’s word also relates directly to UBS’ publishing task and goals, at least in the first instance: the products from the print media often form the basis for Scriptures in other kinds of media used to provide God’s word to the people. While the UBS mandate and publishing goals are, indeed, very noble, it is suggested in this paper that the Bible Societies’ desire for a successful Scripture distribution and Scripture use program will be realized more optimally if more attention is given to why literacy levels are ever so low in some parts of the world. How should Bible Societies respond to the poor literacy teaching that is reported to be going on in the school systems in Africa, for example? Some groups working in this region have heard the alarm bells and are putting in place approaches that they think will address the problem albeit from their perspective and goals. Scholars

from the region continue to highlight the issues. Information and perspectives from these others will form our departure point.

## 2. The Genesis of Literacy Dilemmas

Increasingly more scholars and some governments in Africa see language policies as the genesis of the challenges in language practices in most countries (Prah 1998; Owino 2002; Parry 2000; Adebija 1994; Alexander 2000; Bamgbose 2000; Muthwii 2002b). How have language policies created the dilemmas? Most nations emerged from colonial rule to find they needed to deal with a paradox: a new nation needed to decide on a local national language that would enhance her newfound identity, but at the same time she was determined to participate in what hitherto was the colonizer's world. To resolve this initial dilemma, some nations adopted a bilingual policy. In school, the child's home language (henceforth referred to as mother tongue in this paper) was used as the language of instruction in the first three years of education and an official language (usually a foreign one) was used for the higher levels of education. Others took on a foreign language as the language of instruction throughout the school system and also in government. A few, like Tanzania, adopted an African lingua franca, that is, Kiswahili, for public domain and education. In a way, this last option resembles that already adopted by "non-colonized" countries that had a sense of nationhood like Ethiopia that continued using Amharic in education. Unfortunately, though languages like Kiswahili or Amharic were "indigenous", they nevertheless were foreign to the many language communities that were expected to use them.

Broadly, these three types of language policies adopted in Africa have been inundated with many problems as far as principle and implementation are concerned. In Kaplan's words (Kaplan, 1997:135), this has been one of the "intractable problems in language education" because education agencies are willing "to articulate complex and effective plans, but ...fail at the level of implementation by withholding the resources necessary for the achievement of the plan". Especially when policy favours the mother tongue (MT), these languages are treated without the seriousness they deserve in most countries, in some more so than others. The policies make a number of general assumptions and take their correctness for granted. For example, they tend to assume that the situations on the ground are conducive for the implementation of the language policy. They assume their correctness as far as fair play and equitable educational opportunity is concerned. In addition, the banning or restricted use of the indigenous languages in the school system coupled with the vigorous efforts by teachers to improve the children's English by 'beating out the mother tongues' is tantamount to the suppression and eradication of the indigenous languages. Cumulatively, the effect of these factors, inevitably, takes a very serious toll on the languages and its speakers, sometimes within a very short time period. Even 50 years is enough to damage a language severely. The history of the indigenous Native American languages of the United States, especially in the period 1880 to 1934 when the United States government worked towards

the elimination of these languages, gives a clear warning (cf. Francis and Reyhner, 2002). Alongside this, the changes in the political, economic, social, and cultural situations in the continent over the last several decades have also brought on their own type of challenges and new struggles to grapple with.

How is Africa responding to this reality and how do these policy issues affect literacy acquisition? In some of the cases, the language policies have had to be redefined to suit the new realities but many nations have stayed on with their old policies and instead forced the new realities to operate within the old policies. The step taken by South Africa recently to have nine of the indigenous languages as national languages and thus putting them at par with Afrikaans and English is a new happening in the continent and is generating a whole new paradigm for the indigenous languages. This move in status planning enables researchers to observe and experiment with new possibilities of language use (Slabbert and Finlayson 1999; Finlayson and Slabbert to appear 2003; Banda 2000, to appear 2003). For example, in the case of African indigenous languages the issue of standards translates to the choice of the variety to be used, since several dialects of the same language often exist. Finlayson and Slabbert (to appear 2003) describe a pilot literary competition aimed at encouraging urban learners to use the languages they speak every day in the creation of literature and to facilitate the recognition of these urban varieties for use in the curricula of both schools and universities. These are efforts to create standards that are acceptable to the users. It is expected that such efforts will result in an increase in the interest of learners in studying and using more relevant forms of the African languages in their day-to-day activities in the urban economic sector. It is now “normal” to believe and even expect creativity and expression from the use of a South African indigenous language in formal contexts. What this means is that although many people will still want to chase after international languages, the majority that fail to make the race will still have their own languages to fall back on.

### **3. The Power of Attitudes**

In virtually no place in Africa do you not find a foreign language that has dueled with the indigenous languages to produce an array of attitudinal dispositions in the users of those languages. Of the many factors that influence attitudes, there are two leading ones. First is the peoples’ aspiration for international languages and ownership of languages associated with socio-economic power. Second, is the ‘bottom of the pile’ position given to African languages in national/public matters. Given the universal pursuit for white-collar jobs, the use of an international language is seen as crucial to the achievement of such goals. Qualifications for jobs include proficiency in an international language. Most technologies come dressed up in foreign languages. In spite of all the rhetoric about providing quality education that is relevant to the community and local development, governments provide most resources for the teaching of international languages in schools. And this is largely because they get support funding from donor communities, some of whom are reluctant to support the

teaching of the MT. A donor like the British Council, in fact, is explicitly charged with the responsibility of promoting English. There is, therefore, an enormous pressure exerted by these indicators for youngsters to learn an international language.

The advantage given by policy to foreign languages as languages of instruction, especially from the upper primary school level, and languages of examination undermines the MT languages in terms of the respect and attention they deserve as vehicles of knowledge and information (Owino 2002; Stroud 2001). The people perceive their indigenous languages (IL) as inferior. Even when the IL is given some role in the school system, there are a number of unresolved contradictions that a child has to wrestle with all the time at school. For example, there is often a contradiction between the policy of encouraging a child's MT as the language of instruction (LOI) in lower primary school and the reality as the child progresses through the education system where English or French completely dominates over the IL. MT is virtually excluded from the syllabus or relegated to a less important role after lower primary school. While MT is designated the LOI in lower school, the textbooks for content subjects like mathematics, science, social studies and so forth are in English and the examinations on these subject areas are in English as well. This is not helped at all by the practice of punishing a child when s/he speaks her/his MT at school, an act which itself is a grave violation of her/his rights.

In addition, for most of these second language learners, their fundamental right to feel secure and confident when learning and using a given language in education and in the public domain is threatened by norms such as those propagated in school (Alexander 2000; Stroud 2001; Muthwii and Kioko 2002). While they are not confident to participate in the world of English, they are not allowed to use their MT either, which has not been developed in any way in the school; their teachers are not trained in the use of MT as LOI. All these, coupled with the dominant use of English in all school books, produce a population who say they cannot perceive or conceive of education in any other language but English. Many come to sincerely believe that their languages do not have the capacity to deal with "complex situations" or advanced/abstract concepts. What learners see in the public domain, where in most cases the MT does not feature at all, is reinforced by what they see in education. Indeed as Adegbija says, indigenous languages have "acquired an inferiority syndrome and complex associated with them" (2001:286). They are discouraged and sometimes despised by their speakers. It is no wonder, then, that aspirations for English are almost fanatical in some instances.

The ultimate verdict for the MT, therefore, is the same in all members of the community in spite of the fact that monolingual communities are radically different in language practices from multilingual ones even in the same nation (Muthwii 2002a; Adegbija 1994). In Kenya and Uganda, for example, a number of schools are able to abrogate the stated language policy and implement their dream for English as LOI throughout the curriculum. Often, the ability to make such a move also means they have the resources to support their decision and

to get fairly good learning results without MT featuring at all. Such schools are in the minority. The other schools, often without such “muscle”, have very limited resources. They appear to languish in the confusions brought about by paradoxes inherent in the language of education issue. In Muthwii 2002a these perplexities in the East African situation are described as follows:

“...the burdens the teacher and child have to carry in the use of three languages is tremendous. They have to sort out the acquisition of the new skills of reading and writing in three different languages, simultaneously. We have observed how the curriculum content is written in English and then translated into the vernacular for the pupils to understand. It is incumbent upon each individual teacher to render the materials into MT where possible or simply teach by ‘interpretation and translation.’ And the effectiveness of this teaching by interpretation and translation vary from teacher to teacher and from school to school. In other words due to this limitation, pupils cannot access the instructional materials on their own. In some instances the teachers claimed to teach in English, but to make the children understand what is taught, MT is used to ‘instruct.’ Although it is intriguing to imagine how the two terms “instruct” and “teach” are considered two different notions ... their dilemmas and concerns in implementing the policy need to be given the serious attention they deserve”. (pp. 43-44).

The immense presence of code-switching phenomena in the teaching/learning process is a direct outcome of a lack of instructional materials written in the MT. While the teacher is constantly struggling to translate what is written in English books into the children’s language, the children on their part are learning the “wrong” language habits from the only English language model they will ever have (cf. Kioko and Muthwii 2001; Banda 2000; Alexander 2000). The absence of “acceptable” role models, strongly suggests that the knowledge of the English language in most learners is not well developed. While it is okay for the teacher to use code-switching in the teaching process, the child does not have the same leeway especially in examinations. All there is really, is that the child is confronted with an English that is unassailable but “unattainable” (Alexander 2000) at school. S/he acquires an imperfect English, which is not improved upon at home and in the community. The child’s MT knowledge or skills are not developed or nurtured at school. There are simply no reciprocal learning environments between school and home, at least, in the sense that is normally taken for granted. Consequently, pupils from disadvantaged contexts end up neither performing well in national examinations nor having any useful development in their understanding and use of international languages, relative to those from more resourced and ‘aggressive’ schools. From all these tensions, we see how what goes on in the realm of attitudes is reflected in the practices of a community. If there is confusion and conflict in attitudes, the practices will show the same traits (Parry 2000; Muthwii, 2002).

At another level, conflicts in attitudes from group to group can portend a more serious problem in a community. The various groups in a community

or nation, holding onto different attitudes and practices, may not have the ability to understand the issues and struggles of one another. They cannot use unity as strength. Not surprisingly, in one nation, this polarization in attitudes and practices produces a “first world” that continues to move on with the international community and literacy, and a “third world” that languishes in its semi-literacy and illiteracy. From a different perspective, Adegbiya associates these two sides of the linguistic/literacy tensions of Africa with issues of language shift. He says that “a positive attitudinal stake in a language is a dominant factor in its maintenance both at the individual and societal level. Conversely, attitudinal doldrums with respect to a particular language constitute the principal precipitator of language shift” (2001:288).

While variations and conflicts in attitudes may depict the struggles of a people in trying to come to terms with linguistic situations that are often riddled with paradoxes, they also signal areas of need for intervention. Many communities that Bible Societies work with fall in the “disadvantaged” category. These are communities whose schools experience the struggles and confusions brought about by the language policies and attendant attitudinal dispositions.

#### **4. Approaches to Literacy**

Definitions and approaches to literacy will be looked at in this section for two reasons. First, the kind of definition one works with directly bears on the approach to literacy one adopts. Besides, “each approach has different expectations about bilingual children that pervade literacy policies, curriculum provision and classroom practices” (Baker 2001:338). Second, since virtually all communities in Africa acquire literacy in the school system, what kind of literacy approaches are generally found in the schools? Given the various definitions and approaches to literacy, what do these systems want to do with the learner and, more importantly, what are the learners expected to be able to do during and after interacting with the learning process? These distinctions are deemed important in this paper in assessing ways to work with discouraged languages, whatever the goals of one’s involvement are, whether they have mainstream school education in focus or, as in the case of Bible Societies, Scripture distribution and Scripture use. A lot of the discussion in this section closely follows that of Baker (2001).

Baker observes that the term “literacy” is commonly used but what is precisely meant by it is “neither simple nor uncontroversial” (2001:319). He identifies three kinds of definitions for this term: 1) the functional skills, 2) the construction of meaning, and 3) socio-cultural definitions. A functional skills characterization is typically that used by UNESCO which expects that a person is literate if s/he can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his (or her) group and also for enabling him (or her) to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his (or her) own and the community’s development (UNESCO 1995). A construction of meaning definition, instead of focusing on the skills of reading and writing, looks at

literacy as a person's ability to construct meaning. Hudelson (1994:130 cited in Baker 2001:322) says that it is

“a language process in which an individual constructs meaning through a transaction with written text that has been created by symbols that represent language. The transaction involves the reader's acting upon or interpreting the text, and the interpretation is influenced by the reader's past experiences, language background, and cultural framework, as well as the reader's purpose of reading”.

A socio-cultural definition identifies a literate person as one with the “disposition to engage appropriately with texts of different types in order to empower action, thinking, and feeling in the context of purposeful social activity” (Wells and Chang-Wells 1992:147 quoted in Baker 2001:322).

Similarly, Baker (2001:323-338) discusses what he calls five “educational approaches to literacy”:

- (1) the skills approach,
- (2) the whole language approach,
- (3) the construction of meaning approach,
- (4) the socio-cultural approach,
- (5) and the critical literacy approach.

In looking at these approaches, we conflate Baker's (3) and (4) and examine how the approaches relate to the definitions, what they imply about the individuals it produces and how the definitions and approaches have a bearing on the nature of Scripture use.

In the functional skills approach the learner is given the technical skills necessary to read and write through activities such as learning vocabulary, grammar and composition. S/he is tested on how well s/he understood or comprehended information in the printed word. In the whole language approach, reading and writing is seen as communication. This approach stresses the purpose for learning. A student or adult learns to read or write for meaningful communication and for inherent pleasure because it is relevant to him/her. The focus is not the form of language but the use of language for communication. As Baker (2001:325) argues,

“part of the whole language approach is to stimulate the creative imagination and sheer enjoyment in reading ...[it] is thus to develop aesthetic appreciation and interpersonal sensitivity which is a more empowering view of the ...student than a functional approach.”

It is an approach often used eclectically with the functional approach by many teachers.

Several criticisms have been raised against these two approaches. The functional skills approach is said to be “unable to prepare the learner or adult to achieve other desirable literacy skills like critical thinking, abstract thought, logic, and a balanced and detached awareness”(Baker 2001: 322; see also Francis and

Reyhner 2002). By its definition and application in many contexts it does not imply the development of abilities that go beyond the mere decoding of texts by a student. At best it “implies that the student or adult will contribute in a collaborative, constructive and non-critical manner to the smooth running of the local and national community” (Baker 2001: 323). Moreover, it does not enable an individual to handle complex tasks either, such as responding to “bureaucratic forms and written instruction which demand more advanced literacy skills” (ibid.). Since the whole language approach has features that overlap with the functional approach, it too can produce an uncritical, accepting attitude in the learner (Baker 2001).

A basic premise of the constructivist approach is that the learner comes into the reading and writing task with his/her own meaning of the topic/issue at hand. Since reading and writing is essentially a construction and reconstruction of meaning, the student or adult makes sense of the text from previously acquired knowledge. It allows room for “different students of varying backgrounds [to]... make different interpretations of the text” (Baker 2001: 327). In addition, such an approach presupposes that the learner, in constructing and reconstructing meaning, will be guided by culturally bound ways of thinking. Socio-cultural literacy, therefore, is the ability to construct appropriate cultural meaning when reading. When applied to writing, which is the act of sharing meaning, literacy is seen as the developing of thinking that is appropriate within a culture, a social context; literacy is socially and culturally embedded. In a school context, the role of the teacher is to mediate in the construction of meaning by learners who are becoming literate. Finally, literacy that liberates or which acts as a means of opening doors to empowerment advocates for an approach that makes people aware of their socio-cultural context and their political environment. Baker argues that this critical literacy approach, necessarily, goes beyond the basic skills of reading and writing and requires the learners to have a critical reflection on texts, information and propaganda. It means offering learners the encouragement and opportunity to offer their own interpretation and evaluation of a text. Since the learner has something to contribute to the learning process, the teachers’ role is one of facilitator rather than transmitter of authoritative knowledge. According to Baker (2001:336),

“literacy development becomes a joint developmental and cooperative event between student and teacher rather than duplicating the dominant-subservient relationship that often occurs in classrooms and which mirrors political domination and subservience.”

Given these definitions and approaches, we next ask the question, “What kinds of literacies are going on in the African continent including those facilitated by Bible Societies?” Literature on educational practice in most African schools shows that the predominant approach to literacy is the functional skills type with its attendant emphasis on tests and examinations (Owino 2002, Schmieid 1991; Muthwii 2002; Banda to appear 2003; Parry 2000). The examinations often “tend to assess decomposed and decontextualized language skills, eliciting superficial comprehension rather than deeper language thinking and

understanding” (Baker 2001:323). They also often do not take into account the variety of English or the innovations in the language that the pupils are exposed to (Kioko and Muthwii 2001, 2002). Such innovations/deviations have for a long time been viewed as errors especially by educators who are preoccupied with getting students to speak, read and write “correct language” (Kioko and Muthwii 2001). Textbooks, like the examinations, target external norms, while the teachers and pupils have limited access to that norm. Children without the “correct language”, therefore, end up being labelled failures; they are the dominated.

Clearly, the definitions and approaches to literacy in Africa have often been based not only on perceptions from outside the continent but also mapped onto uses and purposes that are not relevant to most people in their day-to-day living. Consequently, the roles that literacy has played in many communities have also been shaped according to these definitions. Many have learnt that a person learns to read and write in order to get a job. A foreign language, education and social upward mobility have become associated. S/he never goes to school in order to be able to critically respond to a story they hear or make deductive judgements on events they witness, for example. Skills required to enable people to participate successfully in such events have usually not been seen, at least overtly, as part of literacies. So, although some of these skills traditionally existed in most oral communities, the advent of school literacies has made them irrelevant, lost or despised. A narrow definition of literacy does not see these skills as resources. Any literacy intervention measures, therefore, should give consideration to these factors because a people’s perception of what counts as literacy plays an important role in determining their approach to literacy. It should of necessity be one of the aspects not to lose sight of in addressing literacy problems in a community, albeit at the same time acknowledging that cultures differ from each other in their uses and purposes for literacy (Baker 2001).

It would seem that agencies interested in issues of literacy in the continent would need to pay attention to important points raised by Baker. In particular, this paper notes his assessment of the functional skills approach to literacy. He says that the functional view of literacy “as evidenced in the UNESCO definition ...often involves a kind of restricted literacy that, at its worst, can maintain oppression, a distance between elites and the subservient, and not focus on the empowering and ‘critical consciousness’ possibilities of literacy” (2001: 334). Those working within studies in New Literacies echo his criticisms of literacy approaches. Scholars in this field have emphasized the need to include ethnographic and anthropological techniques in studying literacy practices in communities (Street 1984, 1995; Banda 2000, to appear 2003; Slabbert and Finlayson 1999; to appear 2003). How is meaning constructed around literacy events in a given community? Banda (to appear 2003) argues that such an approach views

“literacy practices as socio-culturally determined ways of thinking and doing reading and writing in different cultural contexts. Such a definition

implies the development of pedagogic and didactic programmes that take into account the socio-cultural context of literacy practices.”

If the criticisms and observations of these scholars are accurate, then their appraisals could be taken as damning to those nations and organizations that promote a functional view of literacy. It means encouraging intervention strategies that encompass broader definitions of literacy in order that literacy might serve more purposes in the community. Kaplan and Baldauf (1997:149) aptly sum this up when they say that

“in formulating literacy policy, it is important for planners to recognize what literacy is – a technology –to recognize the way in which literacy is defined, to understand that the definition changes as the society changes (yesterday’s literacy definition is of no use in today’s society), and to recognize the role of the education sector in the dissemination of an appropriate literacy through the society.”

Efforts to redefine literacy in education are seen in the actions of the British Council, for example, whereby in the last two or so decades, they have either initiated or partnered with others in projects aimed at the improved teaching of the English language. Notable in these efforts is their commitment to re-train teachers of English in many parts of Africa to adopt the communicative approach to language teaching. There has also been massive support of primary school programmes in some nations in Africa by this organization and other donor agencies. The goal has been to encourage the development of children who can read “the world” and not just “the word”. Of course much could be said in criticism of the British Council’s agenda for the spread of the English language and the concomitant agenda to promote their own culture in Africa. It is highly unlikely that such a group would support MT programmes or invest much in developing critical literacy skills among those they give ‘aid’ to since their agenda may conflict with the very nature and purpose of developing these skills.

Others like the Rockefeller Foundation have either initiated or supported research into various aspects of education in parts of Africa, more recently in Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe. They are looking for ways to encourage quality education in response to indications from their research and reviews that show “...strong misgivings and conflicting opinions ...being expressed regarding the relevance of the curriculum to the development and mastery of basic competencies such as literacy” (Namuddu<sup>25</sup> in Muthwii, 2002a: iii). An important point to note here, though not surprising, is that after seeing the deplorable state of literacy in the various countries, the Rockefeller Foundation has opted to support research and intervention measures with regard to the English language, in spite of the results showing clearly that MT suffered as a result of lack of resources which made its users discouraged about it (cf. Muthwii 2002a; see also Banda to appear 2003). How much of their intervention will reach the disadvantaged rural communities is yet to be seen. Their total disregard to arguments about MTs being effective media of learning puts them in the same category as all those who propagate an elitist type of

education achieved through competence in the former colonizers' language, a elitism which they are keen to protect through language policies and language in the classroom.

The situation in South Africa gives a lot of hope to its nine national IL because these languages, though struggling, now have a better position than a decade ago. New paradigms of literacy are clearly being tried out in this country (Slabbert and Finlayson 1999; Banda 2000; Finlayson and Slabbert to appear 2003). African communities, with those who are on their side, must do what the donor community is unwilling to do, support MT programmes in their communities.

## 5. Which Literacy Statistics?

There seem to be two main ways of arriving at statistics on literacy. The first kind is one where data is culled from population censuses, which in essence depicts responses to questions posed to individuals when the census is being taken. They are "self reports" on whether an individual considers himself/herself a literate person. Earlier literacy rates used by many organizations were of this kind. In each country there is usually a Bureau of Statistics that does the census and thus might have solid data of this kind. A second approach makes an extrapolation of literacy using cross sectional data on gross and net school enrolment. This is a more recent trend. Completion rates for primary schools are seen as the major indicator. A link is made between literacy and completion rates, as we shall see shortly. A small problem with using primary school completion rates is that primary education cycles differ from one country to another. So it sometimes becomes difficult to meaningfully compare literacy rates from one country to another. Given the limitations of self-reports in any field of study, compounded by the fact that most people anywhere in the world do not want to be associated with the stigma of illiteracy, it would look preferable to work with literacy statistics extrapolated from completion rates of primary education, more so since literacy in Africa is predominantly a school system phenomenon.

Recently in parts of Africa, there has been research to understand the magnitude of the literacy concern in order to put in place appropriate intervention measures (Namuddu in Muthwii 2002a: ii-iii; UNESCO 2001; Slabbert and Finlayson 1999; Jansen and Christie (ed) 1999). While keeping in mind comments made earlier on the limitations of a functional skills approach to literacy, we briefly report the findings of one such study, namely, the UNESCO 2001 report on literacy levels in Kenya and Zimbabwe. This study, popularly known as the SACMEQ report,<sup>26</sup> carried out a criterion-referenced test to measure the level of mastery of English reading in the 1998 Standard 6 pupils in the two countries. It aimed to measure two levels of mastery, *minimum* and *desirable*. The minimum level was deemed to be the mastery necessary for recognition of basic linguistic building stones, for example, the alphabet and simple words; the desirable level was deemed to be the mastery necessary for successful learning

in Standard 7. A similar study carried out in Uganda in 1999 focused on the mastery of reading and writing by Primary 6 pupils. It measured the *adequate* and *advanced level*, these two terms sharing more or less the same definitions as those of *minimum* and *desirable*, respectively.<sup>27</sup> Makau sums up the comments in this report as follows

“Over three quarters and about two thirds of grade 6 pupils in Kenya and Zimbabwe respectively fail to achieve the mastery necessary for successfully using the language as the medium of learning in grade 7. At P6 in Uganda 98% of pupils fail to achieve the *advanced grade*, presumably mastery that would enable them to comfortably pursue further education. Respectively, in Uganda, Zimbabwe and Kenya 35%, 54% and 87% fail to achieve the minimum acceptable level of competency, as indication that these pupils are virtually illiterate in English. In all three countries, the data shows that pupils in urban schools (Nairobi, Harare and the urban sub-sample in Uganda) have a distinct advantage over their peers in rural schools. Equally important, ...mastery is characterized by large disparities among rural provinces (2001:12).

One notes, of course, that the usefulness of such test results can be criticized because they appear to be based on a functional skills definition/approach to literacy. However, in the absence of better criteria, they offer useful assessment of literacy in the relevant communities. Often this is the most reliable kind of information one finds on literacy levels in the continent. If performance tests were anything to go by, therefore, we would be inclined to agree with Makau that these performance tests reveal a bleak pattern of achievement in English in the three countries. A comparison of this with that of Nigeria reveals the same kind of bleakness as indicated by Simire (to appear 2003). Although Simire does not indicate the source of his statistics, he explains that about 33% of the total population of Nigeria are literate in English (the official language) but only 15 % of these can really use English effectively in professional and administrative activities. From this, one could say 85% of Nigerians have no meaningful knowledge of the official language, a situation very similar to that just indicated about Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. There is no special reason to believe that the situation is any better in other parts of Africa. These statistics show the gravity of the challenges of literacy in these nations. Literacy levels are too low even for the commonly stated 40% literacy rate required for economic take off (Baker 2001: 319; Matsuura 2002). Education in the foreign languages has become an education of a minority and therefore the majority are locked out of any benefits that the kind of literacy available in these communities might bring.

Another factor that relates closely to literacy statistics, especially used by the World Bank in working out literacy estimates, is that of school dropouts. According to the SACMEQ report, for example, over 50% of pupils who enroll in primary Grade One never complete the primary cycle in the countries they investigated (see also Schroeder 2001; Anyang' Nyongo 2002). Out of those who complete the primary cycle, less than

50% enter into the secondary education cycle. If 50% of the cohort drops out before completion of the primary cycle, it is unlikely that 50% will be literate in such countries. Schroeder (2001:9) is more optimistic when she says that “if we accept research studies which suggest that an average of four to five years of education are needed in developing countries to ensure lifelong literacy, then we may calculate that only 55% of Kenya’s rural population are gaining lifelong benefit from the existing educational system.” Her optimism must be taken with caution, however, given that language in education in the first four years is inundated with many problems (Muthwii, 2002). Indeed, in many parts of Africa, the situation is not really any better, given the dominance of foreign languages in the school system and the poor funding in education. Hence, lessons from these observations can be summed up as follows:

- (1) Where an international language is the preferred language of instruction, as is the case in Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe, it is not necessarily the case that using it is successful in enabling school children to achieve useful levels of literacy;
- (2) Given the negligence there is in the use and development of MT in the school system, many dropouts can not read meaningfully in their mother tongue either;
- (3) Those who acquire some measure of literacy in primary school but do not proceed to secondary school education, run the high risk of losing any literacy they may have acquired in the primary cycle, especially when virtually all of it was in a foreign language that they barely understood.

For the purposes of Bible work, a people would see any language that is not so well understood by members of its community whether this is English or an indigenous language of wider communication as “distant” or “secret”. It is unsuitable not only for purposes of worship, study and prayer, but also for the desired outcomes of these activities, namely spiritual liberation and empowerment. An object associated with a distant language in time takes on the same connotations. The importance of literacy, especially in a language well understood, explains why many have argued that learners will gain more cognitively and linguistically if instructed through their mother tongue and literacy in these languages will create a tradition of writing in them.

## **6. Indicators of health in language and literacy**

So far in our discussion, the threat to indigenous languages brought about by policy and literacy practices in the school system has been stated; the link between literacy acquisition; the language of education and language loss has also been highlighted. This means that literacy practices in the school system, among other factors, can be taken as a useful indicator of the vigor in a community’s language. Fishman (1991), for example, provides detailed and elaborate criteria for determining the state of a language. He identifies eight categories (or “stages”) with respect to language loss. Francis and Reyhner

(2001:34-35) have reduced these to four “stages” or what they prefer to call “levels or contexts” in which languages find themselves. These contexts are not just those in the school but also what happens outside the school like in the media, community, government services and so forth. In view of the publishing mandate of Bible Societies, Sterk and Muthwii suggest a much simpler criterion to determine the state of languages to publish in. Information such as “how many people in a given language group are literate in the MT and/or in an international language; how well the MT is taught in its schools; what the drop-out rate is and whether the drop-outs can read the MT or can be taught to do so with minimum effort” (2002: 11) is considered to play a crucial role in the decisions made for the publishing task. They propose three simple language scenarios for the African region. For each scenario they also provide diagnostic criteria and practical policy suggestions. Interestingly, their three scenarios and the diagnostic criteria proposed have a lot of similarities to that set up by Francis and Reyhner (2002:34-35) with regard to the Native American languages of the United States.

Borrowing from Francis and Reyhner (2002) and Sterk and Muthwii (2002) and keeping to the three scenarios, diagnostic criteria are worked out for Africa as shown in Table 1 below. The first of Francis and Reyhner’s categories would hardly apply to African languages. With an exception of a few, most of them have not lost the capacity of transmission. Languages that fall in Scenario 1 include languages of wider communication like Hausa, Yoruba, Kiswahili, Kinyarwanda and Xhosa, for example. Though still threatened, they are not as discouraged as other languages in the region. There are some literacy challenges with respect to these languages, but there is adequate support and motivation from the community and even nationally to develop and use them. They are fairly well resourced and all kinds of translation/media projects can be started for such communities without having to worry much about literacy concerns. The danger is that the situation in these languages could easily blind one to the actual situation in other language communities. It could get us to operate with assumptions based on these wider communication language situations.

Table 1: Scenario 1-3 Language Diagnostic Criteria and Policy Suggestions

	Diagnostic criteria	Practical policy suggestions
Scenario 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spoken by many</li> <li>• Taught in school at least at the first two levels</li> <li>• Books and newspapers available</li> <li>• High enrolment in primary school and low level of dropouts</li> <li>• Used in government services</li> <li>• Introduction into the mass media (print, electronic)</li> <li>• Used in higher education as object of study and/or as LOI</li> <li>• Some records kept/ proceedings carried out in the language</li> <li>• Used in workplace</li> <li>• Has high status nationally</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publish freely and abundantly</li> <li>• Encourage Common Language translations of high quality</li> <li>• Provide a concordance and a Study Bible</li> <li>• Encourage and support the continued teaching of the language in primary schools</li> </ul> <p>Examples of languages in this category include:</p> <p>Hausa, Yoruba, Kiswahili, Kinyarwanda, Xhosa</p>

	Diagnostic criteria	Practical policy suggestions
Scenario 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spoken by many</li> <li>• Hardly taught in schools and only at the lower levels</li> <li>• No books and newspapers available</li> <li>• Average level of literacy in the language is low</li> <li>• Used as medium of communication among students but unofficially with teachers</li> <li>• Has 'bottom of the pile' status</li> <li>• Used limitedly in written functions outside the school (e.g. by community organizations, and interpersonal communication)</li> <li>• Limited reading (e.g. religious literature), national language literacy still predominates in all domains</li> </ul>	<p><u>Publish only if the following is done:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do solid research into literacy and language use</li> <li>• Ensure the language is taught in primary schools</li> <li>• Provide widespread transitional literacy classes</li> <li>• Monitor carefully the publication of portions</li> <li>• Provide Common Language translations of high quality</li> <li>• Ensure churches are aware of their rights and responsibilities</li> <li>• Encourage and support frequent varied events that celebrate the use of the language</li> </ul> <p>Examples of these languages include:</p> <p>Many languages in the continent especially the languages of the large ethnic groups</p>

	Diagnostic criteria	Practical policy suggestions
Scenario 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spoken by a significantly low number</li> <li>• Used mainly by older members of the community (e.g. in elders meetings)</li> <li>• Young adults are mostly monolingual in the national languages or passive bilinguals</li> <li>• Not taught in schools, even at lower levels</li> <li>• No books and newspapers available</li> <li>• Quite low level of literacy in the language</li> <li>• Limited use of language at home</li> </ul>	<p><u>Publish only if the following is done:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do solid research into literacy and language use</li> <li>• Encourage and support the teaching of the language in primary schools</li> <li>• Provide widespread adult education classes and/or transitional literacy classes</li> <li>• Ensure that the churches are aware of their rights and responsibilities</li> <li>• Ensure the language is used in church and at home</li> <li>• Monitor carefully the publication of portions</li> <li>• Provide Common Language translations of high quality</li> <li>• Encourage and support frequent varied events that celebrate the use of the language</li> </ul>

Adapted from Sterk and Muthwii (2002) and Francis and Reyhner (2002).

Those in Scenario 2 would include the bulk of languages in the continent. Although used by many people, these languages have the ‘bottom of the pile’

status nationally. Since such languages are not considered to be instrumental in promoting the general socio-economic upward movement of individuals, there is strong pressure on all levels of the society to favor the international language to the detriment of these Scenario 2 languages. Some of their speakers

“have lost faith in the language. The results of this pressure will not be visible so much today, since many adults and especially the older generation continue using and reading the language as before, but in a few years to come there may be an effect, when cohorts of youngsters have become adults and have come to realize that they are much more at ease reading an international language or a regional language than reading their MT” (Sterk and Muthwii, 2002:15).

A few of these languages share some characteristics with Scenario 1 languages while some behave like Scenario 3 languages, which face the greatest challenges. Scenario 3 languages are spoken by a relatively small number of speakers and have virtually no literacy efforts going on in the community either at school or outside the school. Among the younger speakers, these languages rapidly losing value. In some cases they share some characteristics with the Scenario 2 languages.

Sterk and Muthwii (2002) argue that it is nearly certain that all publications done in minority languages like those of Scenarios 2 and 3, especially if those languages are not taught or are poorly taught in school, will face difficulties. Even if the translation is of excellent quality, it cannot be assured that the books will be bought and read. But once information is carefully gathered and informed sociolinguistic profiles of a community are done, then practical measures can be put in place to support literacy issues in the community. Some communities will demand more attention than others, depending on how robust their language is. Such careful assessment of languages will ensure that the resources of a Bible society are strategically engaged to provide Scriptures to the community, and also the particular advocacy moves to be made will be identified on the basis of useful profiles.

## **7. Improved Texts and Orthographies**

A further challenge in the use of African languages is the absence in several languages of well-developed acceptable orthographies for use in the school curriculum, Bible translation projects or any other print media (Kioko 2002; Adegbija 1993, 2001; Fishman 2001). Closer to home, it is not uncommon today to read Bible translation project reports, which indicate certain orthographic problems that need urgent solving even though the translation process is three-quarter way through. Kioko (2002) citing examples from Bantu languages argues that wherever orthographies are available for African languages, many of them are only remotely related to the spoken language because they ignore significant prosodic features such as tone, vowel length and at times vowel quality. Using examples from the Kikamba language, she not only demonstrates how this makes the written material in these languages a challenge to read even for those who

are literate in the languages, but she also suggests definite steps in identifying and representing tone in this and related languages. Kioko's discussion focuses on under representation of features. Sometimes the problem in orthographies is one of over representation of prosodic features. The latter, often based more on phonetic considerations can be equally challenging to readers, if not outright intimidating. Writing systems should be more phonemic based than phonetic; they should satisfy the principle of maximum representation.

Another principle to satisfy is that of compatibility. In trying to improve on the "older missionary-developed orthography" (Crystal 2000:141) or to develop new ones, efforts should be consciously made to develop an orthography that is user-friendly to the child who is also learning another language at school. For example, in the East African nations, most children learn Kiswahili at school. In setting up or reworking the orthography of any one of the Bantu languages in this region, it is advisable to represent a given sound in the same way as is done in Kiswahili, unless there is a special reason not to, such as the differences brought about by language development histories, the strong views of a community against a given representation, and so forth. This is akin to what Francis and Reyhner (2002:132) call "practical alphabets". By making alphabets compatible and designing them to "avoid unnecessary graphic complexity"; it becomes one added incentive in the learning of indigenous languages. Once the child learns the alphabet of either language first, s/he can transfer that knowledge or part of it for use in the second language's alphabet, whichever one is learnt first. Sometimes this phenomenon has been referred to as the "principle of transfer" (Kioko 2002; Baker 2001). It is also important to make every effort to unify criteria among different dialects of each language to arrive at common spelling patterns without losing any significant features of either language (Francis and Reyhner 2002; Kioko 2002).

The Old Testament and to a large extent, the New Testament, contain features that mark them out as texts that were, most likely, meant to be read to audiences. If this was the case, then markers indicating this "listener orientation" should not be "smoothed out" in Bible translation in Africa where, at the moment, the bulk of members of congregations do not read, but rather "hear the word". Features like the use of repetition/rephrasing or discourse markers of various kinds should be retained. Sometimes in a quest to understand and apply the BASE/MODEL approach, translators fail to appreciate this point because the 'model' used in Anglophone Africa (that is, the Good News Bible), tends to 'smooth out' such features for its English audience. Texts should be allowed to retain their 'user-friendliness' as much as is possible.

Another audience related issue is that of Scriptures in non-print media like cassettes and compact disk formats or films. These are expensive technologies that Bible Societies in Africa are already trying to produce Scriptures in; they are the "in-thing". The texts used in these products are often from the 1940-1980 translations since in many African languages there are no Common Language translations available yet. Africans who can afford to buy such products in MT may find the language a bit "stiff" or "old" and in fact, may not be the

group of people that need this “help” the most since they can access Scriptures through products in international languages. Assuming that those who cannot afford to buy or service these products are also the ones who are struggling with problems of illiteracy, then careful decisions need to be made on how to invest resources in Bible Societies. First things first, it looks more prudent to invest also, if not preferably, in approaches and products that enhance literacy acquisition and availability of specialized resources like Primers, New Reader Portions, concordances in MT, Study Bibles and so forth. These will help more African people to study the Bibles in the MT; thus enabling them to access and critically think through information without having to do this through another language or rely mainly on what they listen to. This, surely, bears the signature of liberation and empowerment, perhaps nearly as much in strength as possessing the Bible in one’s MT in the first place.

## 8. Working with the Community

Some would argue that for urban populations in Africa, the language choices made in favour of international languages are as a result of change in values (Adebija 2001). This may be so; however, for the bulk of rural populations, it is hard to clearly demonstrate that language choices are primarily an issue of changed values. Rather, their language choices seem to be necessitated by the circumstances they find themselves in (Adebija 1994, 2001; Muthwii 2002; Muthwii and Kioko to appear 2003). If this premise is correct, then this is a useful starting point in working with communities to bring about increased literacy. Any strategies must of necessity be homegrown since language shift or improved literacy in indigenous languages can never be imposed from without the community. In this regard, three fronts in working with the community are proposed as being of immediate concern: 1) changing community attitudes; 2) being a valuable ally and 3) discovering others of like mind; and identifying and supporting formidable activists. Christian communities are part of the larger language community and, as such, are not singled out in literacy efforts as the only ones to work with. Rather a more holistic approach is preferred. Everyone who is interested or affected by literacy issues is a potential ally and advocate for improved literacy in the community.

### 8.1 Community attitudes

Numerous examples are described in Fishman (2001) of community efforts on literacy and language revitalization that are as a direct result of a shift in language attitudes, some more successful than others.<sup>28</sup> Encouraging people to shift attitudes is not easy but not impossible. Whatever strategy and tactics are used for winning people over toward their MT must take into consideration the nature and dynamics of the prevailing attitudes. As we have indicated, many people reject the MT for several reasons; some of the reasons are due to lack of information or resources. Also, change will only come if the local people lead the way (see comments below on *activists*). External people, like linguists and educators, may come in to facilitate in providing vital information, for example, on the benefits of bilingual education, language in education in

other multilingual contexts, and literacy statistics. The issues presented must be those that matter to the people in liberating them from bondages brought about by a lack of knowledge. But as Crystal says, information on its own is not adequate; the emotions of the people must be involved. Appropriate ways, therefore, that reach both the mind and the heart must be thought out for/by a given community (see Crystal 2000:91-150 on fostering positive community attitudes).

## 8.2 Valuable allies

As “valuable allies” (Crawford 2000:81) would include all those interested in literacy issues in/for a given community. Since literacy affects many facets of a community’s life, there are bound to be other agencies interested in literacy, which also might be seeking allies in order to be of use to that community. Encouraging and even assisting the community toward an organized mobilization of these allies would go a long way in putting in place measures that would enhance literacy in the community. Working together to advocate for and even resource the teaching of MT in lower primary school, for example, would help strengthen bilingual education in the school. If this were well done, it would go a long way in helping the children attain a reasonable level of literacy by the time they leave primary school. An important question is how to work together to influence policy and language rights issues for/with a community.

“How many people in the churches we serve know their linguistic rights as stated in government language policies? How many Christians are aware of the implications of ignoring MT teaching in schools given the socio-educational realities of most communities? Many Christian leaders need to be helped to see the significance of the teaching of MT in schools as it ultimately contributes to the reading and understanding of the Scriptures for the majority of the population” (Sterk and Muthwii 2002:18).

Specific actions to be adopted will require creativity and learning from what other communities have done/are doing to give status and encouragement to their IL (Fishman 2001; Crawford 2000; Crystal 2000).

In most nations there is some discussion about issues of literacy and policy. It is a good principle, as much as is possible, to contribute to these discussions especially as they apply to the community one is working with. Linking with scholars, education officials in the area, influential and knowledgeable individuals in the community would be of immense benefit in joining forces to advocate for the use and teaching of MT in schools. It has been shown that wherever scholars from the community actively participate in writing and debating on their language and its literacy issues that language gets some attention nationally (Crystal 2000; Fishman 2001; Adegbija 2001). Its people begin to feel that after all it is okay to love ones own language. Scholars are generally very valuable allies. Writing short articles for newspaper columns on issues of language and/or translation issues helps, for example, when the launching of a Portion is taking place.

### 8.3 Activists

Identifying a credible language activist in each community where translation is taking place is very vital, usually an educated person respected by the community, preferably an active member of a church; there could be several in a community. Activists are by nature pregnant with ideas (sometimes not so accurate) on how to save their languages, how they should be encouraged in the school system, the nature of language struggles in the community, and so forth. They come in handy in helping change attitudes and in forming “social movements that speak directly to long-suppressed needs and aspirations”(Crawford 2000:78). Identifying such individuals and encouraging them to carefully work out strategies to mobilise the community and put in place specific moves to enhance literacy would be very helpful. It means equipping them with relevant knowledge and information, sharing with them models from similar situations for their consideration, providing them with some resources, training, and encouragement; it means being their allies and willing to keep at it with them.

Working with a community that has committed itself to address literacy problems and is looking for allies, is the least Bible Societies, and especially its translation fraternity, can do to indicate their convictions and sincere desire for a “Christian community that uses the Scriptures in their language for worship, study and prayer.” As Crystal says, it is prudent to “adopt a broader outlook, allowing our knowledge of the long-term linguistic issues involved to justify continued interest in their language and warrant attempts to change their minds?” (Crystal 2000:103). He also argues that “there is no reason why these various activities should not continue simultaneously, in a kind of ‘parallel processing.’ If the metaphor we have to live by is one of battle, then we need to be active on several fronts at once. And we need to be prepared for a long campaign” (Crystal 2000:101).

## 9. Conclusion

Two questions have guided the thesis of this paper. First, how the main factors that threaten languages work to either enhance or diminish literacy in indigenous or international languages. Second, what must be done to facilitate the discouraged languages and language learners in Africa. Major factors discussed included language policies, their application and the concomitant attitudes they have helped to create. A case has been put forward for improved strategies - specific strategies that address, for example, standardization of orthography, quality translations sensitive to the oral nature of most communities, awareness of community rights and practices in the so called “bilingual classrooms”, and facilitation in the provision of literature for literacy work. A natural question from the discussion has also been to ask how Bible Societies’ definitions and approaches to literacy stand up to the opinions and criticisms that have been put forward for various definitions of literacy. Presumably, Bible Societies too, in developing and providing print media products, would find it useful to adopt positions and take actions that go beyond the functional skills approach. It may

mean in some cases going back to the drawing board to see how best the limited resources can be put to use in ways that are in line with a better understanding of a given community and a literacy that is useful to its people.

In a way, all these issues are about planning, strategizing, and revisiting the issue of literacy in the African region, and perhaps also in Asia and Latin America. The exact form that these steps take will depend on prevailing circumstance in each language community. According to Fishman (2001:1), these are the

“development of therapeutic understandings and approaches that can be adjusted so as to tackle essentially the same illness in patient after patient. However, just as the illnesses that have infected so many of the world’s languages constitute a very recognisable syndrome that yet varies in kind and in degree from one infected language to another, so the diagnoses and cures that are required, fundamentally related though they may be, must also vary, depending on the facts of each case”.

The scale of the challenges in literacy are immense but the Bible Societies fraternity has something to contribute to what Matsuura calls the “unmet challenges of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – education for all and those of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – lifelong education for all and the construction of knowledge societies” (2002:1). The paper also affirms the validity of missionary insights “who had long ago discovered the effectiveness of using native languages for both educational and religious purposes” (Crawford 2000:69).

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