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Special Focus

Research Focus: Governance and Ethics Pillar

Revitalizing Kiswahili language use policy in Eastern Africa Community (EAC)

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In brief...

The brief opines that there exists an opportunity for increased socio-economic development and advancement of strategic interests in Eastern Africa through increased adoption of Kiswahili language use policy and culture in the Africa continent. The over 100 million Kiswahili-speaking people in Africa have the potential to revitalize intra and inter-Africa regional trade. Yet only 30 % of African countries use Kiswahili as lingua franca. Therefore, there is a need for the EAC bloc to take advantage of its growing membership to promote the use of Kiswahili language as the continental lingua franca. The brief recommends the amendment of standing orders of conducting house business at the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) to make Kiswahili a working language of the assembly and the mobilization of resources to install language translation infrastructure in the chambers of the assembly.

In Full...

The increasing membership in the East Africa Community (EAC) economic bloc underscores the pivotal role of the Kiswahili language in forging a sense of Pan-Africanism and unity for an integrated East Africa. During the 23rd ordinary summit of heads of state held in Arusha, Tanzania, Somalia became the 8th member in the EAC bloc. Similarly, discussions are ongoing to allow the accession of Ethiopia into the bloc, expanding the community membership to nine.

Historically, there has been an under-appreciation of the official use of the Kiswahili language and culture in EAC and on the African Continent. Approximately 29.6% of African countries use Kiswahili. This is due to the negative spillover effects of the colonial powers. Most countries in Africa were conditioned on the use of English as the superior language compared to Kiswahili. Consequently, domestic and regional efforts were not seriously undertaken to promote Kiswahili use in the region, making the language to be perceived as inferior. Yet over 100 million people in Africa



Photo Credit: East African Community

speak Swahili, thus becoming one of the most widely spoken languages.

Enhanced collaboration and mutual benefit among East African nations as envisaged in the EAC treaty, could be hampered by language barrier given that not all member states use English as their official and working language. This would impede effective participation of delegates from countries where English is not an official language. Promoting Kiswahili language use could address the issue of language barrier, given its wider use in most of the



informal spaces across Eastern Africa and the African Continent. The use of the language is bound to increase the participation of the people in the affairs of the Community as well as promote African culture. It will also boost the principle of a people-centered Community as citizens will be able to effectively follow assembly proceedings. This aligns with the bloc's mandate of fostering economic, social, and political cooperation among its members.

However, legislative and policy deficits at member state and regional levels impede the realization of the noble initiative. EAC lacks a policy framework on Kiswahili to make it mandatory in all the eight partner states. The organ's treaty only acknowledges English as the official language of the community while providing for the development of Kiswahili as a lingua franca under Article 119 (d) and 137 (2). Similarly, the standing orders of the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) only provide for the use of English as the working language in the chambers of the assembly, yet Kiswahili is one of the three official languages of the bloc. In addition, the treaty recognizes English as the only official language under Articles 46 and 137. As such the usage of the popular language has not been given the priority it deserves by the established regional organs and institutions. With increased membership of French-speaking nations in the bloc, Kiswahili prioritization will be threatened by the usage of French. Compounding the situation is that some of the incoming partner states have large populations that do not speak Swahili.

With Kiswahili language use policy and culture significantly gaining traction in the continent, there are prospects to use it as a tool for enhanced collaboration. Specific member countries and



regional trade organizations are formulating national and regional Kiswahili language policies respectively to enhance the use of the language in official domains. Facilitating the adoption of the language has been touted as key in deepening and widening regional integration. Its use has the potential to increase the participation of the people in the affairs of the continent.

There are increasing efforts on the usage of Kiswahili in the African continent. In December 2021, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated July 7th as World Kiswahili Language Day. The Africa Union officially adopted Kiswahili as an official working language in February 2022. On July 4th 2022, Uganda adopted the EAC resolution to make Kiswahili an official language.

Some of the key regional efforts by the East Africa Community (EAC) to institutionalize Kiswahili include the establishment of National Kiswahili Councils and National Kiswahili Associations. Further, there is the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) and the East African Kiswahili Commission (Kamisheni ya Kiswahili Afrika Mashariki - KAKAMA). The institutes are involved in the coordination, promotion, development, and use of Kiswahili for regional integration. Nonetheless, the institution's vision for the usage and promotion of Kiswahili remains unrealized. The member states and the region, therefore, have an opportunity to mainstream Kiswahili use policy in the bloc and across other countries in the continent. This is crucial in tapping the trade opportunities offered by the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).



Looking forward, some of the key strategic options to consider include, first, the use of Kiswahili for capacity-building programs in the region and the continent. Countries such as Kenya and Tanzania have the first-mover advantage to roll out this initiative in other countries within EAC and scale it further to other countries in Africa. For instance, Kenya's cultural diplomacy strategy released in 2016 alludes to the establishment of Kiswahili institutions in the region as tools for cultural diplomacy. This could be emulated by countries within EAC such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, and Uganda as South Africa, Ghana, and Ethiopia follow suit once their awareness creation on the use of Kiswahili is complete. There are prospects for the region to pilot Kiswahili language development in EAC schools through developing a relevant curriculum and deploying teachers. Further, pursuing partnerships for offering scholarships to trainers of Kiswahili in the said countries will generate more training opportunities for the member states. The capacity-building collaborations will boost region's soft power in the continent and globally like the public diplomacy strategies of France (Alliance Francaise) and China (Confucius institutes). Besides, the pilot scheme will offer experiences for large-scale introduction of the language's capacity-building programs in other countries globally.

Secondly, establishing Kiswahili training institutes in the region and across the continent will leverage the region's and the member states' prospects to shape, deepen, and spread widely their strategic interests regionally and globally. This will promote an understanding of the trade philosophy across the member states. Further, it will help to advance the existing friendly bilateral relations and expand socio-economic and cultural ties. For years, there have been widespread negative perceptions about undue economic competition among the member states in the EAC trading bloc. As such, this has created simmering bilateral and multilateral trade relations among the regional trade partners. It impedes region's ability to optimally benefit from the EAC trade pact, while influencing trade with other economic blocs globally and in the continent. While there exist trade agreements to provide fair trading opportunities among the member states, some countries are seen as dominant

trade partners. The never-ending trade wars particularly freezing of import and export permits and the frequent closure of trade borders attest to this phenomenon.

Finally, with Somalia and DRC being some of the newest entrants in the bloc, promoting the use of Kiswahili will forge strong cross-boundary trade ties between the Somalia (who predominantly use Somali and Arabic languages), DRC (which mainly use French, Lingala, and Kituba) and the other countries in the bloc which use Swahili or English. Failure to resolve the absence of a common trade language within the region will continuously impose barriers to economic integration. This will emasculate the region's capacity to fully exploit the trade opportunities offered by Somalia and DRC. Therefore, spreading the use of Kiswahili widely in these countries and across the continent will help to break the language barriers imposed on the people by the colonial masters. Further, it will encourage good neighborliness as witnessed in Tanzania under the regime of President Julius Nyerere's regime in the 1960's.



Conclusion

The increasing traction of the Kiswahili language use policy in the continent presents abundant opportunities for advancing the region's strategic goals within the member states, the Africa continent, and globally. Particularly, the adoption of the Swahili language has the potential to revitalize the region's socio-economic potential to competitively trade with other regional and global economic blocs. Kiswahili offers the region opportunities for enhanced collaboration for mutual benefits among East African nations as envisaged in the EAC treaty.



Recommendations

The brief recommends that;

1. The East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) should amend;
 - a) standing orders of conducting house business to make Kiswahili a working language of the assembly;
 - b) EAC Treaty in Article 46 and 137 to accommodate Kiswahili as one of the bloc's official and working language;
 - c) mobilize resources through a supplementary budget to install language translation infrastructure in the chambers of the assembly.
2. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the member states should;
 - a) establish regional bilateral Memorandum of Understanding to initiate Kiswahili promotion partnerships;
 - b) lobby for establish Kiswahili Learning Centres in strategic cities in the bloc and in Africa;
3. The Ministry of Education in the member states should;
 - a) establish international organization of Kiswahili that brings together countries in Africa and globally that use Kiswahili as a medium of cooperation;
 - b) plan regional Kiswahili language conference to promote awareness on use of Kiswahili;
 - c) pursue partnerships for offering scholarships to trainers of Kiswahili and lobby the Somalia, Ugandan and DRC Parliaments to legislate an enabling framework for language promotion collaborations;
 - d) develop capacity-building programs in Kiswahili for civil servants in Somalia, Uganda, and DRC and select countries in Africa.



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