

# Globalization, Linguistic Diversity, and Information Dissemination in Malawi

Gregory H. Kamwendo

Department of Languages & Social Sciences Education, University of Botswana

Email: kamwendog@mopipi.ub.bw

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## Abstract

In a linguistically heterogeneous country, one of the critical challenges is to make information accessible to all people. Various communication media can be used: television, radio, telephone, the Internet and others. Malawi needs to embrace Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in order to achieve development in all spheres of human life. Malawi's use of ICTs ranks low. The critical challenge, therefore, is to promote an increased use of ICTs with the aim of improving people's access to information. Given that only a minority of Malawians have access to ICTs, that television has not significantly penetrated into rural areas where 80 % of the population lives, and that there is also a high illiteracy rate, the radio becomes the most accessible form of technology for information dissemination in Malawi.

## Keywords

Malawi, information dissemination, communication media, information communication technologies, literacy, radio

## Introduction

In this analysis of information dissemination in Malawi, the discussion is situated within the context of globalization and Malawi's linguistic diversity. It is undisputed that information is power. Hence, barriers preventing access to information disempower people. Such people, for example, are unable to make informed decisions. In a linguistically heterogeneous country, one of the greatest challenges is to make information most accessible to all people. Various communication media can be utilized: the print media, radio, television, telephone, the Internet, and others. According to the Human Development Index, Malawi, with an estimated population of 12 million, is one of the poorest countries in the world. Like other developing countries, Malawi appreciates the need to have and embrace Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). In its national vision (Vision 2020), Malawi acknowledges that its

use of ICTs is very low (Malawi Government 1997). This is evidenced, for example, by the fact that between 2004 and 2005, Malawi dropped from position 88 to 93 on the Network Readiness Index. This index measures the propensity of countries to exploit opportunities that are offered by ICTs. The critical challenge for Malawi, therefore, is to promote an increased use of ICTs with the aim of widening its people's access to information.

In view of the situation described above, what are the alternative and more effective media for information dissemination in Malawi? The paper sets out to answer this crucial question. The discussion takes the following format. First, since globalization is the concept that lies at the center of the paper, the discussion begins by defining and exemplifying the notion of globalization. Next is an overview of Malawi in terms of its linguistic and demographic trends, poverty levels, education and literacy levels. This is followed by a discussion on how information dissemination is conducted in Malawi through technologies such as the radio, television, and the print media. Essentially, the information dissemination processes are discussed critically in relation to the linguistic diversity factor.

### **Globalization: Definitions and Examples**

Globalization is one of the most widely and hotly debated concepts in the world today. The concept remains slippery and defies a single watertight definition. For example, Giddens (1990) defines globalization as "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (p. 64). Mazrui (2004) provides a closely related definition of globalization. He defines globalization as the "process by which regions of the world become linked, at various levels of society, through an expanding network of exchange of peoples, goods, services, ideas, traditions, etc. across vast distances" (Mazrui 2004:1). While there is an agreement by various scholars that we live in a globalized world, there are, however, certain aspects of globalization that are highly contested (see Block 2004; Sklair 1999). Agreement on such controversial issues is not in sight, and probably will never be. One contested issue of globalization has to do with the time when globalization actually started. Another contested issue is that for some people, globalization is hegemonically Western, and "an extension of American imperialism," while others "see the process as more egalitarian, and reject discussion in terms of Western dominance over 'the rest'" (Block 2004:75).

Globalization has different meanings and implications for different people. For example, globalization has been associated with such factors as advances in

information technologies, international mobility of labor, and increased capital flows across the borders. Clearly, advances in communication technologies have significantly assisted in the promotion of globalization. The new and advanced travel and information technologies, for example, have brought about the time-space compression of the globe. As a consequence, the new information technologies have exponentially increased the ease, economy, and rapidity of communications. In turn, these developments have given unprecedented access across the world to the global flow of ideas, information, and cultural products. The so-called information highway has also not left the education sector untouched. This information highway has created new media for teaching and learning. Technologies such as the Internet, e-mail, video conferencing, and others now enable those who have access to such technologies to be part of the virtual school.

There is also a linguistic dimension to globalization. Some languages make national borders porous. Here, reference is to the world's major *lingua francas* such as English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, Chinese, and others. As a result, "local languages are no longer useful beyond the specific territory of the nation States, while other languages are needed. Nations realize this situation and demand that their residents acquire a variety of additional languages that will be useful for such international and global functions and for economic and academic purposes" (Shohamy 2006:37).

The language factor is critical in the quest for competitiveness in this age of globalization. The key question then becomes: Which language(s) will enable citizens of a country to approach the globalized world economy from a position of linguistic strength? This question was highlighted when Botswana's Minister for Education, Jacob Nkate, speaking at a regional Conference on Mother Tongue Education, confessed his dilemma: "As Minister responsible for Education, should I prioritise mother tongue education, which has the potential for promoting inward-looking, or should I promote languages that will enable Botswana to compete favourably in a global economy?" (Nkate 2005). This linguistic dilemma as voiced by Minister Nkate is not restricted to Botswana. Malawi is also sailing in the same boat, and so are other developing countries that are dependent on a former colonizer's language as their official language. In the case of Malawi, English is the most sought language. English is the language in which the bulk of the critical information Malawians need is stored. However, only a minority of the population has competence in the English language. The majority, therefore, cannot access information that is packaged in the English language.

### **Linguistic and Demographic Trends in Malawi**

African countries are generally multilingual, and Malawi is no exception. According to the 1998 population census report (Government of Malawi 1998), the following were recorded as the main languages of household communication: Chichewa (70 %), Yao (10.1 %), Tumbuka (9.5 %), Sena (2.7 %), Lomwe (2.4 %), Tonga (1.7 %), and other languages (3.6 %). Chichewa is the undisputed national lingua franca. As mentioned earlier, English has been the official language of Malawi since the British colonial times. As such, Malawi is classified as an English-speaking country. However, the English-speaking designation is far from depicting the country's true linguistic picture. In reality, English is not the language of communication for the vast majority of Malawians.

The 1998 population census report put Malawi's population at 9.9 million. However, recent population estimates put the figure at 12 million. Of the total population enumerated in 1998, 14 % lived in urban areas, while the remainder (86 %) lived in the rural areas. It was found that 11 % of the population lived in four urban centres, namely, the cities of Blantyre, Lilongwe, and Mzuzu, and the municipality of Zomba, while only 3 % lived in the remaining urban centers. The urban population had grown from around 850,000 in 1987 to around 1.4 million in 1998. This statistic represents a yearly urban population growth rate of 4.7 % and an increase of 68 % for the period 1987-1998 (Government of Malawi 1998). The above cited situation means that the bulk of Malawi's population lives in rural areas.

### **Poverty and Inequality in Malawi**

As has been noted, Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world. The first post-independence government of President Banda did not, however, admit this fact. Unfortunately, President Banda painted a rosy but inaccurate picture of Malawi's economy. Despite the President's rhetoric, however, a situational analysis of living standards, which was jointly conducted by the Government of Malawi and the United Nations, registered that 60 % of the rural and 65 % of the urban populations, respectively, lived below the poverty line (Government of Malawi & United Nations 1993). When Bakili Muluzi and his United Democratic Front (UDF) formed the first post-Banda government in 1994, poverty alleviation was identified as the main pillar of the national economic policy. The new government opted for a free-market economy and promised to create an environment in which people would generate income through businesses. However, the poverty alleviation program did not

benefit the majority poor. High-level corruption was partly to blame for the failure of the poverty alleviation program.

The link between poverty and the capacity to own or access information technologies must be highlighted. Significant inequalities in access to and/or ownership of the information technologies clearly exist. These inequalities are created by differences in affluence and/or poverty levels. As such, the industrialized world has supremacy in access to or ownership of information technologies while the developing world is on the lower end (see James 1999). The developing world does not yet enjoy the telecommunication services that are regarded as commonplace in the developed nations of the world. Even within the developing world, such inequalities exist, for example, between the rich and the poor, or between the urban and the rural dwellers. This situation prevails in Malawi. Modern ICTs are beyond the reach of the rural people in Malawi. Even in urban areas, it is only the affluent minority that have access to modern ICTs. For example, television is basically an urban information technology.

### **Education and Literacy in Malawi**

According to the 1998 population census, Malawi's national literacy rate was at 58 %. In terms of gender, males had a 64 % literacy rate whilst the rate for females was 51 %. The imbalance is a result of the tendency for families to invest in boys' education rather than girls'. In addition, girls have a higher school dropout rate due to early pregnancies and/or marriages, and the demand for them to attend to domestic chores such as cooking and taking care of siblings. In terms of the regions, the highest literacy rates were recorded in the Northern Region during the 1998 population census. The Northern Region recorded a literacy rate of 72 %; the Central Region came second with 57 %; and the lowest rate, 55 %, was recorded in the Southern Region (Government of Malawi 1998).

The implication of these statistics on citizens' ability to access printed information is not difficult to appreciate. It follows naturally that illiterate people cannot access printed information. In addition, even those who are literate have to grapple with the language question. Though the education system in Malawi develops literacy in both Chichewa (the national language) and English, for the vast majority of Malawians, literacy in English is beyond their reach. It then follows that such people cannot access information that is written in English. Thus the English language becomes a barrier to access to information, which amounts to linguistic exclusion.

### Information Dissemination in Malawi

Malawi's Vision 2020 document says that by 2020, Malawi shall be a science and technology-led country (Malawi Government 1997). The Vision, however, identifies the critical challenge to Malawi's aspiration as being how to promote the implementation and use of information technologies. The Vision rightly acknowledges that, as a developing country, Malawi needs to embrace information technologies for national development. However, the Vision laments that Malawi's use of information technologies is too low to meet this objective. The strategic challenge, therefore, is to promote an increased use of ICTs (Malawi Government 1997).

President Banda's autocratic political machinery survived for 30 years partly due to the deliberate policy of keeping the majority (who also happened to be illiterate or semi-literate) in the dark. These illiterate or semi-illiterate people did not have access to progressive and revolutionary political ideas from other countries since they could not understand information written in English. Such people could not tune in to informative international radios such as the Voice of America (VOA), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and others. In the run-up to the 1992 national referendum on whether to adopt a multiparty system of government, political pressure groups started publishing newsletters, newspapers, and other forms of political literature in which English and some indigenous languages were used. The political literature in indigenous languages brought the political messages closer to the citizenry. Here was the power of the indigenous languages to reach a bigger audience than would have been the case had English been the sole medium of information dissemination.

The voice of the Catholic Church bishops of Malawi, through their 1992 pastoral letter, has been described as the first internal open criticism of the Banda autocracy (see Newell 1995). The letter, under the title, *Living Our Faith*, came through three languages—10000 copies in Chichewa, 5000 copies in Tumbuka and 1000 copies in English. The letter was read during all Catholic Church masses on March 8, 1992. The oral dissemination of the letter was crucial, given the low literacy rates in the country. Furthermore, the Bishops reasoned wisely on their language choice. Given that the pastoral letter had its widest circulation in two widely used indigenous languages, it is not surprising therefore that the whole country was quickly engulfed by the letter's messages of political redemption.

### **The National Radio**

Prior to the multiparty political dispensation, the national radio, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, used to broadcast in two languages—English and Chichewa. Since the demise of the one-party state, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation has changed its language policy from a two-language radio broadcast to a seven-language radio broadcast. Five indigenous languages now serve as media of radio newscasts. These languages are Tumbuka, Yao, Lomwe, Sena, and Tonga. At independence, Tumbuka was one of the three languages (the other two being English and Chichewa) that were used on the national radio. Tumbuka, was, however, discontinued in 1968, in line with the then policy of promoting the national language (Chichewa). So 1994 marked the return of Tumbuka to the national radio, which was facilitated by a presidential directive. On November 15, 1996, another government directive led to the introduction of Yao, Sena, and Lomwe as additional languages of newscasts on Malawi Broadcasting Corporation radio. In September 1997, Tonga was introduced on Malawi Broadcasting Corporation radio, following yet another presidential directive (Kamwendo 1998). The linguistic pluralism policy adopted on the national radio is a step in the right direction towards eradicating linguistic barriers to radio broadcasts.

### **Private and Community Radios**

One of the significant outcomes of the post-one-party state era in Malawi has been the liberalization of the airwaves, which has led to the establishment of community and private radios. There are no restrictions in terms of the choice of the language(s) of radio broadcasts. It is up to the owners of radio stations to decide on the language(s) of broadcasts. Community radios promote a culture of democracy in the sense that the content of their broadcasts is determined in a bottom-up approach. That is, the relevant community makes significant input into program content. Community radios serve the interests of their respective catchment areas. For example, the Creative Centre for Community Mobilization (CRECCOM) established a community radio station in the Mchinji district in 2006. The radio, known as *Mmudzi Mwatbu* (literally, “in my village”) was initially funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The aim of this radio station is to provide the surrounding community with information on human rights and HIV/AIDS (Masingati 2006).

Some of the private radios belong to religious institutions and are there for evangelization. Private radio stations in this category include Radio Maria

(owned by the Catholic Church), Radio Alinafe (owned by the Catholic Church), Radio Tigawane (owned by the Catholic Church), the African Bible College Radio (owned by the African Bible College), Radio Islam (owned by the Islamic community), Calvary Radio (owned by the Calvary Family Church), Channel for All Nations (owned by the Assemblies of God Church), and the TransWorld Radio (run by a regional African Christian Church).

The mushrooming of private radio stations and the liberalization of the language policy for radio broadcasts are in line with democratic principles of freedom of expression and improved access to information. This development contrasts sharply with the situation that prevailed during the one-party era when the state monopolized radio broadcasting services were restricted to two languages—English and Chichewa. At this time, the situation that obtains in other Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries should also be noted. Some SADC members, such as Zambia, South Africa and Namibia, have also liberalized their radio broadcasting policy as far as the language issue is concerned. In contrast, in some SADC member states, current regulations do not provide for linguistic liberalization of the airwaves.

### **Television**

During the one-party era, Malawi did not have its own television station. The country was then served by satellite television, which only the minority could afford. Television Malawi (TVM) is a product of the post-Banda political dispensation and broadcasts in English and Chichewa, with English broadcasts taking a bigger share of the time. Given the high costs of producing its own programs, the possibility of TVM introducing more indigenous languages is certainly a tall order. TVM has a beaming coverage of at least 70% of Malawi. For the majority of Malawians, television is out of bounds as a medium of information dissemination.

### **The Print Media**

During the one-party era, the print media, just like the electronic media, was government-controlled and heavily censored. The languages of the print media were naturally English and Chichewa. During the transition to the democratic era, there were attempts by the so-called independent newspapers (papers not controlled by the government) to devote some pages to indigenous languages



such as Yao and Tumbuka (Chimombo and Chimombo 1996). This was, however, a rather short experiment. Today one still finds that Chichewa is the only indigenous language that has significant space in the print media. The other indigenous languages are almost nonexistent in the print media. The private print media is mainly targeted at the urban elite, and for socio-economic reasons, there is a high preference to publish in English.

On the side of the government-controlled print media, the picture is not any brighter. There is still a strong preference to publish in English, given that it is the official language. For example, *Weekly News* comes in English while the quarterly magazine, *This is Malawi*, is also published in English. The only indigenous language paper published by the government is *Boma Lathu*, a monthly that is distributed free of charge and has a circulation of 50,000. It is mainly targeted at rural areas. While it is commendable that the government has made efforts to publish *Boma Lathu* in the national language, one realizes that Malawi has some areas where the national language is not widely used. In such areas (for example, the Tumbuka-dominated Northern Malawi), a language other than Chichewa would be the most suitable medium. The Government therefore needs to make deliberate efforts to include more indigenous languages in its print media outlets. But in view of Malawi's economic realities, this is too tall an order since the available meagre resources have to be channelled to more pressing problems, such as hunger and HIV/AIDS, among others.

### **Conclusion**

The Internet, television, and the print media are beyond the reach of the average rural individual in Malawi. It is clear that the average Malawian is actually on the periphery of the so-called information super highway. As far as information for the national development is concerned, the radio remains the most easily available medium of information source for the average rural Malawian. Illiteracy, the lack of a reading culture, and the lack of affordability of the print media make the radio the cheapest and most accessible source of information. The radio removes the information gap created by illiteracy and brings information to the most isolated, remote communities. As this paper has demonstrated, a poor country that has a low use of ICTs does have options when it comes to promoting a wide dissemination of information for national development.

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