



Research Article

# Reclaiming the Tongue of Leadership: Indigenous Language Systems as Catalysts for Societal Transformation in Post-2030 Africa

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## Abstract

Africa's development trajectory into and beyond 2030 hinges on an underexplored resource: its indigenous language systems. While global sustainability frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union's Agenda 2063 champion inclusive governance and cultural heritage, their implementation strategies consistently overlook the communicative power embedded in Africa's over 2,000 indigenous languages. The primary argument is that indigenous language systems are not merely heritage artefacts but dynamic tools for leadership communication. Their deliberate integration into governance, institutional policy, and community mobilisation can catalyse transformative societal change across the continent. Using a multi-sited applied linguistics framework, data were collected across multilingual Kenyan communities, including data from 364 participants in an investigation of Dholuo-mediated health communication in Homa Bay County and data on indigenous language use in economic transactions in Kisii and Migori counties. The findings showed an association between mother-tongue communication and higher levels of civic engagement, greater policy compliance, and stronger collective agency. Dholuo oral leadership registers, corporate naming practices in indigenous languages, and multilingual institutional communication policies were also examined to determine how they reinforced or eroded community authority structures. Theoretically anchored in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's decolonisation of the mind, Hymes' ethnography of communication, and African Ubuntu philosophy, the Sustainable Indigenous Leadership Communication (SILC) Model is proposed as a framework that positions mother-tongue-led discourse as foundational to post-2030 African governance. The model integrates language revitalisation with digital innovation, including natural language processing (NLP) infrastructure for low-resource African languages, to support inclusive, artificial intelligence (AI)-driven leadership communication. Reimagining Africa's sustainable future requires centring indigenous voices, moving beyond the translation of external frameworks into local languages to the reclamation of indigenous epistemic systems as the medium and message of leadership. Policy recommendations target universities, governments, and regional bodies committed to language-inclusive development agendas.

**Keywords:** indigenous language systems, leadership communication, societal transformation, Dholuo, decolonisation, Africa 2063, sustainable development

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## Introduction

The governance and leadership architecture of post-colonial Africa has long been built on inherited epistemic frameworks that privilege foreign language systems, primarily English, French, and Portuguese, as the legitimate media of public authority, institutional policy, and civic engagement. This linguistic hegemony, a direct legacy of colonial governance structures, has produced a profound communicative disjuncture between Africa's leaders and the communities they serve. In the specific context of Kenya, where over 68 indigenous languages are spoken across 47 counties (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2019), governance communication routinely bypasses the very languages through which communities construct meaning, exercise authority, and transmit collective wisdom across generations.

The urgency of this disjuncture is heightened by the continental development commitments embedded in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015) and the African Union's Agenda 2063 (African Union Commission, 2015). Both frameworks foreground inclusive governance, cultural heritage preservation, and community-driven development as foundational pillars of sustainable transformation. Yet neither has produced implementation strategies that centre the communicative capacities of indigenous language systems. As Awuor (2019) argued in her examination of language policy in education, the marginalisation of mother tongues from institutional frameworks is not merely a pedagogical oversight; it is a governance failure with deep consequences for civic participation, social cohesion, and community-led development.

This paper interrogates the interface between language, leadership, and societal transformation in the African context. It proceeds from a foundational claim: that indigenous language systems are not merely heritage artefacts deserving preservation, but active, dynamic instruments of leadership communication. Their integration into governance, institutional policy, and community mobilisation can catalyse transformative change. This claim is grounded in empirical evidence gathered across multilingual Kenyan communities, specifically a 364-participant study on Dholuo-mediated health communication in Homa Bay County and a cross-county analysis of indigenous language use in economic transactions across Kisii and Migori counties.

## Literature Review

### Indigenous Languages and Governance in Africa

The relationship between language and political authority in Africa is deeply historical. Before colonisation, indigenous languages served not only as media of daily communication but also as the primary instruments of governance, diplomacy, conflict resolution, and communal decision-making. Oral traditions, praise poetry, and indigenous deliberative assemblies, such as the Luo Council of Elders (*Ker mar jo onagi*), constituted sophisticated leadership communication systems whose authority derived precisely from their grounding in mother-tongue epistemic traditions (Ochieng', 2014).

Colonial language policies systematically dismantled these traditions. The imposition of European languages as the exclusive media of formal governance, education, and legal proceedings created what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) famously termed a colonisation of the mind, a process in which the devaluation of indigenous languages produced internalised linguistic hierarchies that continue to structure postcolonial institutions. The consequences for governance are profound: policy directives formulated in English rarely achieve the depth of community uptake that communications in indigenous languages do, not because communities lack comprehension, but because the communicative act itself lacks the cultural authority and relational resonance that mother-tongue leadership commands.

Recent scholarship has begun to quantify this deficit. Studies in sub-Saharan Africa have consistently shown that health communication, agricultural extension messaging, and electoral education delivered in community languages yield significantly higher levels of behavioural compliance and civic participation than equivalent messages delivered in English or French (Trudell, 2016). In the Kenyan context, Awuor (2019) documented how language policy frameworks at the primary education level, which mandate English and Kiswahili as media of instruction while marginalising mother tongues, produce epistemological disconnects that impede not only academic achievement but also community-level agency and self-governance.

### Dholuo as a Leadership Communication Resource

Dholuo, a Western Nilotic language spoken by approximately four million people in Kenya and Tanzania, holds a particularly significant place

in this study. As a language with rich oral leadership registers, complex age-graded authority systems, and a robust tradition of deliberative rhetoric, Dholuo offers an exceptionally illuminating case study for understanding how indigenous languages encode and transmit leadership authority.

Dholuo oral artistic traditions, including the deliberative registers of elder councils and the social commentary embedded in Ohangla musical performance, carry leadership communication functions that operate through cultural authority rather than formal institutional position. These traditions demonstrate that Dholuo is not merely a vernacular medium but a sophisticated epistemic system through which community power, accountability, and collective identity are negotiated and maintained across generations (Ochieng', 2014). The communicative weight these registers carry within Luo communities far exceeds that of any equivalent message delivered in English or Kiswahili.

In digital language technology, the underrepresentation of Dholuo in natural language processing (NLP) systems is a critical barrier to extending indigenous language leadership communication into digital governance spaces. Awuor (2025) reported on the design and preliminary findings of a Dholuo-English parallel corpus comprising 20,000 translated sentence pairs and 30 hours of transcribed speech data, providing the foundational NLP infrastructure upon which AI-driven leadership communication platforms for Dholuo-speaking communities can be built, a development with direct implications for digital governance inclusion across the region.

## Theoretical Framework

This paper is theoretically grounded in three complementary frameworks. First, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) decolonisation of the mind provides the critical political economy of language within which indigenous language revitalisation is situated not as sentiment but as structural transformation. For Ngũgĩ, the reclamation of indigenous languages as media of education, governance, and cultural production is inseparable from the decolonisation of African institutional life. This insight grounds the paper's central argument: that language-inclusive governance is not a cultural concession but a structural necessity for sustainable African development.

Second, Dell Hymes' (1974) ethnography of communication provides the methodological vocabulary for analysing language-in-use across situated social contexts. Hymes' SPEAKING model, which attends to the Setting, Participants, Ends, Act sequence, Key,

Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre of communicative events, offers a framework for documenting how specific communicative contexts, including community health meetings, economic deliberations, and institutional policy forums, are constituted through language choice. This framework underpins the multi-sited data collection design of the present study.

Third, Ubuntu philosophy, captured in the Bantu aphorism *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other persons), provides the ethical and communitarian grounding for the paper's vision of indigenous language leadership. Ubuntu's emphasis on relational personhood, communal decision-making, and the inseparability of individual and collective well-being resonates directly with the deliberative functions of indigenous language registers in African governance contexts (Metz, 2011). Leadership, from an Ubuntu perspective, is not an individualised exercise of authority but a relational, dialogic practice constituted through the shared language and cultural frameworks of the community.

## Methodology

### Research Design

A multi-sited applied linguistics research design integrating qualitative and quantitative methods within an interpretivist paradigm was employed. The choice of a multi-sited design enabled the investigation of the contextual variability of indigenous language use in leadership and governance across diverse community settings, economic contexts, and institutional environments. The interpretivist paradigm privileged the meaning that participants attached to their communicative practices, recognising that language choice in governance contexts is not a neutral or purely technical act but a socially situated, culturally mediated behaviour whose significance can only be understood from within the epistemic frameworks of the communities under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The multi-site design, based on Marcus (1995), allowed for the tracing of communicative patterns, authority structures, and language ideologies across geographically and institutionally distinct sites, thereby producing a richer and more ecologically valid account of indigenous language use in Kenyan governance contexts than a single-site study could yield.

### Study Sites and Participants

Data were collected across three primary sites in Kenya: Homa Bay County (health communication), Kisii County (economic transactions), and Migori County (institutional communication). The three counties were selected through criterion-based purposive



sampling on the grounds that they represent distinct but geographically proximate linguistic communities, namely Luo, Abagusii, and Kuria speaking populations, in which indigenous language governance communication practices could be studied in meaningful contrast and comparison. The proximity of the counties also facilitated the logistical requirements of the multi-sited fieldwork design while maintaining adequate linguistic and contextual diversity.

A total of 364 participants took part in the health communication component of the study conducted in Homa Bay County. They were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure representation across age, gender, and civic roles. This sample comprised 182 participants assigned to the Dholuo communication group, 120 to the Kiswahili communication group, and 62 to the English communication group, reflecting the natural distribution of language use in county governance communication in the study area.

In Kisii and Migori counties, participants included 48 market traders, 23 local government officials, and 19 community leaders, selected to capture diverse registers of indigenous language use in economic and governance contexts. Additionally, Dholuo oral leadership registers were documented through structured observations of 14 community deliberative sessions and elder council meetings across Migori County, with a total of 87 observed participants.

## Data Collection

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), structured observations, and documentary analysis of institutional communication policies. Each method was selected to address a distinct dimension of the research problem and to triangulate evidence across qualitative and quantitative data streams, thereby enhancing the overall validity and comprehensiveness of the findings (Denzin, 1978).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 38 key informants drawn from across the three study sites, including community health workers, county government communication officers, market association leaders, and indigenous language advocates. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was guided by a protocol developed iteratively through a pilot phase involving five community members in Kisumu County, whose feedback was incorporated into the final instrument. Interviews were conducted primarily in Dholuo and Ekegusii, with English used only where participants explicitly preferred it. All interviews were conducted by trained research assistants who were native speakers of the respective commu-

nity languages, a methodological choice grounded in the recognition that the researcher's language is itself a positioning statement in fieldwork involving indigenous language communities (Chilisa, 2012).

Focus group discussions were conducted in 12 sessions, each comprising between six and ten participants, for a total of 94 FGD participants across the three counties. FGDs were stratified by county, gender, and civic role, with separate sessions held for community health workers, local government officials, market traders, and community elders. Each FGD lasted approximately 90 minutes and was facilitated using a guide that prompted discussion on three thematic areas: participants' experiences of governance communication in indigenous and non-indigenous languages, their perceptions of the authority and effectiveness of different languages in governance contexts, and their views on the structural conditions that enabled or constrained indigenous language use in institutional settings. Sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed and translated by trained bilingual research assistants.

Structured observations were conducted during 14 community deliberative sessions and elder council meetings in Migori County, covering approximately 42 hours in total. Observations were guided by a protocol operationalising Hymes' (1974) SPEAKING model, with observers documenting the Setting, Participants, communicative Ends, Act sequences, Key features of speech, Instrumentalities (languages and registers used), communicative Norms, and Genre of each deliberative event. Field notes were recorded in real time and supplemented with audio recordings where consent was granted. Structured observation enabled the systematic documentation of indigenous oral leadership registers in naturalistic governance contexts, capturing communicative phenomena that interview and FGD methods alone could not fully access.

Documentary analysis was applied to a purposively selected corpus of 47 institutional communication policies drawn from health facilities, county government offices, and educational institutions across the three study counties. Policies were obtained through formal requests to institutional administrations and covered the domains of official correspondence, community engagement protocols, public information dissemination, and staff communication guidelines. Each policy document was analysed against a coding framework that identified explicit provisions for, references to, or exclusions of indigenous language use in institutional communication, with codes assigned collaboratively by two members of

the research team to ensure inter-rater consistency.

Finally, the structured inventory of corporate naming practices comprised a systematic survey of 218 business names documented from market signage, trade registers, and commercial branding materials across Kisii and Migori counties. Each business name was coded by language of origin (indigenous, Kiswahili, English, or mixed), economic sector, and geographic location within the county. Coding was conducted by three native-speaker research assistants, with disagreements resolved through discussion and consensus, yielding an inter-rater agreement of 91.4% prior to consensus resolution.

## Data Analysis

Qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and structured observations were analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). Phase one involved familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes. Phase two involved the systematic generation of initial codes across the entire dataset, with codes assigned inductively from the data and deductively from the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study. Phase three involved the collation of codes into candidate themes, with Hymes' SPEAKING model serving as an organising analytical scaffold that directed attention to Setting, Participation structures, communicative Ends, speech Acts, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre across the observed and reported communicative events. Phase four entailed the review and refinement of themes in relation to the coded extracts and the full dataset, ensuring that each theme reflected a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data rather than an artefact of coding decisions. Phases five and six involved the definition, naming, and final reporting of themes, with representative quotations selected to illustrate each theme's scope and internal logic.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, the study employed four strategies drawn from Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility (through member checking, in which preliminary findings were shared with a subsample of 18 participants across the three sites for verification), transferability (through thick description of each study site and its sociolinguistic context), dependability (through an audit trail of all data collection and analytical decisions), and confirmability (through peer debriefing with two applied linguistics colleagues not involved in the study).

Quantitative data from the Homa Bay health communication survey were analysed descriptively

and inferentially using SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations, were computed for all survey variables. The primary inferential test was the Pearson chi-square test of independence, which was used to assess whether there was a statistically significant association between the language of health communication (Dholuo, Kiswahili, or English) and the level of civic engagement reported by participants (high, moderate, or low). The chi-square test was appropriate for this analysis because both variables were categorical, the data consisted of independent observations, and the expected cell frequencies met the minimum threshold of five required for the test's validity (Field, 2018).

The chi-square statistic was computed using the formula:  $\chi^2 = \sum [(O - E)^2 \div E]$ , where  $O$  denoted the observed frequency in each cell of the contingency table,  $E$  denoted the expected frequency for that cell under the null hypothesis of no association, and the summation ( $\Sigma$ ) was taken across all cells of the table. The expected frequency for each cell was calculated as  $E = (\text{Row Total} \times \text{Column Total}) \div \text{Grand Total}$ , reflecting the frequency that would be predicted if the two variables were statistically independent. Degrees of freedom were calculated as  $df = (r - 1) \times (c - 1)$ , where  $r$  is the number of rows and  $c$  is the number of columns in the contingency table. For the present analysis, with three language groups (rows) and three civic engagement levels (columns),  $df = (3 - 1) \times (3 - 1) = 2 \times 2 = 4$ . The obtained chi-square value was compared against the critical value at the  $p < .05$  significance threshold; however, as the results showed, the obtained value far exceeded this threshold, yielding a significance level of  $p < .001$ . Effect size was assessed using Cramér's  $V$ , calculated as  $V = \sqrt{[\chi^2 \div (N \times (k - 1))]}$ , where  $N$  is the total sample size and  $k$  is the smaller of the number of rows or columns. A value of  $V = .26$  was obtained, indicating a small to moderate practical effect, which was substantively meaningful given the large and representative sample.

## Findings and Discussion

### Mother-Tongue Communication and Civic Engagement

Homa Bay health communication data revealed a statistically significant association between Dholuo-mediated health messaging and civic engagement indicators, including attendance at community health meetings, uptake of maternal and child health services, and voluntary participation in community health worker programmes ( $\chi^2 = 47.3$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Participants consistently attributed their responsiveness to health interventions to the use of

Dholuo as the medium of communication, articulating this in terms that invoked cultural authority, relational trust, and epistemic recognition.

To fully appreciate the significance of this result, it is necessary to understand the structure of the chi-square test as applied to the present data. The 364 participants were distributed across three language of communication groups, namely Dholuo ( $n = 182$ ), Kiswahili ( $n = 120$ ), and English ( $n = 62$ ), and their civic engagement levels were classified as high, moderate, or low on the basis of a composite index comprising attendance records, service utilisation data, and self-reported participation. The resulting  $3 \times 3$  contingency table is presented in Table 1. The expected frequency for each cell was derived from the formula  $E = (\text{Row Total} \times \text{Column Total}) \div \text{Grand Total}$ , which calculated the cell count predicted by the null hypothesis that language of communication bears no relationship to civic engagement. For example, the expected frequency for the Dholuo, High Engagement cell was computed as  $(182 \times 238) \div 364 = 119.0$ , compared with the observed frequency of 149, yielding a cell contribution of  $(149 - 119.0)^2 \div 119.0 = 7.56$  to the overall chi-square statistic. Across all nine cells of the table, these contributions summed to  $\chi^2 = 47.3$ , a value that, with four degrees of freedom, corresponded to  $p < .001$ , indicating that the probability of observing a discrepancy of this magnitude between observed and expected frequencies under the null hypothesis was less than one in one thousand. The effect size, Cramér's  $V = .26$ , confirmed that this association was not only statistically significant but also substantively meaningful, reflecting a consistent and practically important relationship between the language of health communication and the level of civic engagement among study participants.

**Table 1**

*Observed and Expected Frequencies of Civic Engagement Levels by Language of Health Communication*

| Language of Communication | High Engagement                | Moderate Engagement          | Low Engagement               | Row Total |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------|
| Dholuo                    | 149 (81.9%)<br>[ $E = 119.0$ ] | 25 (13.7%)<br>[ $E = 42.0$ ] | 8 (4.4%)<br>[ $E = 21.0$ ]   | 182       |
| Kiswahili                 | 61 (50.8%)<br>[ $E = 78.6$ ]   | 40 (33.3%)<br>[ $E = 27.7$ ] | 19 (15.8%)<br>[ $E = 13.8$ ] | 120       |
| English                   | 28 (45.2%)<br>[ $E = 40.6$ ]   | 19 (30.6%)<br>[ $E = 14.3$ ] | 15 (24.2%)<br>[ $E = 7.1$ ]  | 62        |
| Column Total              | 238                            | 84                           | 42                           | 364       |

*Note.* Expected frequencies (E) are shown in brackets.  $\chi^2(4, N = 364) = 47.3$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramér's  $V = .26$ .

The data in Table 1 revealed a striking and consistent pattern across all three language groups. Among participants in the Dholuo communication group, 81.9%

registered high civic engagement, compared with 50.8% in the Kiswahili group and 45.2% in the English group, a difference of more than 36 percentage points between the Dholuo and English conditions. Conversely, low civic engagement was reported by only 4.4% of Dholuo group participants, compared with 15.8% and 24.2% in the Kiswahili and English groups, respectively, indicating that the proportion of participants reporting low civic engagement was approximately five and a half times greater when health communication was conducted in English than when it was conducted in Dholuo. These patterns were consistent across all four civic engagement sub-indicators measured in the study, including attendance at community health meetings, uptake of maternal and child health services, voluntary participation in community health worker programmes, and self-reported intention to comply with public health directives; thus, the conclusion that the association between mother-tongue communication and civic engagement is robust, multi-dimensional, and unlikely to reflect measurement artefact.

One community health worker articulated this dynamic with particular clarity during an individual interview:

When public health messages are delivered in Dholuo by someone from within the community, the message carries the weight of communal responsibility; it is not external instruction but internal counsel. When a community health worker speaks to us in our own language, we know they are not reading from a government paper — they are speaking from the same world we live in. That is why we listen. That is why we go to the clinic. (*Community health worker, female, age 34, Homa Bay County, Interview 06, translated from Dholuo, October 2*)

This qualitative insight aligned with the broader literature on culturally embedded health communication in sub-Saharan Africa, which consistently documents that mother-tongue messaging activates relational trust and communal obligation in ways that cross-linguistic communication cannot replicate (Trudell, 2016). The distinction between instruction and counsel that the participant drew is theoretically significant: it points to the constitutive role of language in governance communication, which is to say that the language of a governance message does not merely carry that message but shapes the social relationship within which it is received, and therefore its potential to generate authoritative, binding community action.

These findings extend beyond the health domain to policy compliance more broadly. Across all three study sites, participants reported a greater willingness to comply with governance directives, including health regulations, economic policies, and environmental conservation orders, when these directives were communicated through indigenous-language



channels and by community-embedded communicators. This pattern suggested that a communicative medium is not merely instrumental but constitutive: it shapes not only the transmission of governance messages but also the legitimacy of the authority from which those messages derive.

### Oral Leadership Registers and Community Authority

Analysis of Dholuo oral leadership registers revealed a sophisticated, contextually differentiated repertoire of communicative forms through which authority is articulated, contested, and legitimised within Luo communities. Elder council deliberations were characterised by the deployment of specific prosodic features, including deliberate speech rhythm, proverbs (*ngeche*), and metaphorical language, that signal the speaker's cultural authority and the gravity of the occasion. These features constituted what Hymes (1974) would identify as the Key of leadership communication events: the tone, manner, and register that mark a communicative act as carrying communal authority.

Structured observations of 14 elder council sessions documented a total of 112 instances in which specific Dholuo linguistic features were deployed to enact, contest, or reinforce speaker authority. Of these, 47 (42.0%) involved the use of *ngeche*, which functioned to open or close deliberative sequences and to invoke ancestral legitimacy in support of a speaker's position. A further 33 (29.5%) involved the deployment of deliberate prosodic contrast, in which a speaker's shift to slower, lower-pitched Dholuo marked a transition from informational to authoritative speech. The remaining 32 instances (28.6%) involved the use of direct kinship address terms (for example, *wuoyi*, *nyithindo*) that constituted the deliberative assembly as a community of relational obligation rather than a procedural meeting of individuals. These patterns were directly interpretable through Hymes' SPEAKING framework: the Setting of the elder council compound, the Participants defined by age-graded speaking rights, the communicative Ends of collective consensus, the Act sequence structured around proverb use, the Key of deliberate authoritative rhythm, the Instrumentality of Dholuo as the exclusive legitimate medium, the Norms of elder prerogative, and the Genre of deliberative rhetoric, all worked together to constitute elder council deliberation as an integrated indigenous governance communication system whose authority derives precisely from its linguistic constitution in Dholuo.

Also evident was the marginalisation of these indigenous leadership registers within formal institution-

al contexts, including county government meetings, hospital administrative communications, and school governance bodies, which produces a communicative deficit that neither English nor Kiswahili can fill. Participants repeatedly described formal institutional settings as communicatively alien: spaces where the language of authority was also the language of exclusion. One elder council member in Migori County observed that when he attended a county hospital board meeting conducted in English, he could follow the language well enough but felt that his contributions, made in Dholuo, were received as interruptions rather than as interventions carrying the authority of community experience and leadership. This finding resonates with Awuor's (2019) analysis of language policy in education, which showed that excluding mother tongues from formal learning environments produces not merely linguistic disadvantage but epistemic marginalisation, a systematic devaluation of the knowledge systems through which communities understand and navigate their worlds.

### Corporate Naming and Economic Identity

The cross-county analysis of indigenous language use in economic transactions across Kisii and Migori counties revealed a significant and growing trend of indigenous corporate naming, the use of Ekegusii, Dholuo, and other indigenous language terms in business names, market signage, and commercial branding. Of the 218 business names surveyed, 74 (33.9%, rounded to 34%) incorporated indigenous language terms, 83 (38.1%) used Kiswahili names, 46 (21.1%) used English names, and 15 (6.9%) employed mixed or hybrid naming constructions combining elements from two or more languages. The proportion of indigenous language names was straightforward: 33.9%, confirming that indigenous language naming was the single largest non-Kiswahili naming strategy. When mixed names containing indigenous elements were included, the proportion rose to 40.8% of all surveyed businesses, placing indigenous language use at a level statistically indistinguishable from Kiswahili naming frequency ( $\chi^2 = 0.8$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .37$ ).

The sectoral distribution of indigenous language naming was markedly uneven, with the highest concentrations found in food vending (61.2%), passenger transport associations (54.3%), and community services including tailoring, funeral services, and savings groups (49.1%). In contrast, retail hardware (12.3%), professional services (8.7%), and mobile money agencies (6.1%) had the lowest rates of indigenous language naming, a pattern consistent with the interpretation that indigenous naming functioned as a market signal of community-embeddedness and relational trust in sectors where the customer base was predominantly local, culturally ho-

mogeneous, and sustained by social relationships of reciprocity and obligation. As one Kisii market trader explained during an FGD, an indigenous name tells a customer that you are one of them, that you understand their needs, and that you will honour the relationship, whereas an English name signals that you are transacting with strangers on strangers' terms.

This phenomenon pointed to the economic authority of indigenous language systems and to the capacity of mother-tongue branding to signal cultural membership, community-embeddedness, and relational trust in ways that English or Kiswahili branding cannot. In FGDs, traders described indigenous naming practices as deliberate strategies for building community identity and fostering customer loyalty, with several noting that indigenous names served as implicit signals of trust within culturally cohesive market communities. This finding extended the domain of indigenous language leadership communication beyond the political and institutional into the economic, suggesting that the revitalisation of indigenous language systems as tools of community authority has implications across the full spectrum of social life.

## Multilingual Institutional Communication Policies

Documentary analysis of 47 institutional communication policies across health facilities ( $n = 19$ ), county government offices ( $n = 16$ ), and educational institutions ( $n = 12$ ) in the three study counties revealed a near-universal absence of explicit provisions for the use of indigenous languages in official communications. Of the 47 policies analysed, 44 (93.6%) contained no reference whatsoever to indigenous language use in institutional communication. Three policies (6.4%) included brief, non-binding references to the desirability of community-sensitive communication, with one hospital facility policy noting that staff should endeavour to communicate in a language accessible to patients. None of the 47 policies contained binding, enforceable provisions specifically mandating indigenous language use, establishing minimum standards for language accessibility, or providing accountability mechanisms for language-inclusive service delivery.

The distribution of policy silence across institutional sectors revealed an important pattern. In the health sector, where the stakes of miscommunication are potentially life-threatening, 17 of the 19 policies (89.5%) made no reference to language accessibility at all, with the remaining two including the non-binding generic references noted above. In county government offices, all 16 policies were entirely silent on indigenous language provisions, a finding that was

particularly significant given that county government communication is the primary channel through which devolved governance mandates reach communities. In educational institutions, all 12 policies were similarly silent, which was notable given that Kenya's language in education policy at least nominally acknowledges the role of mother tongues at the lower primary level. This policy provision appeared not to have permeated institutional communication frameworks at the school governance level.

This finding supports Awuor's (2019) argument that the challenges to language-inclusive development in Africa are not primarily attitudinal but institutional and structural. Communities and their leaders often possess robust indigenous communication resources; what is lacking is an institutional architecture that legitimises, supports, and mandates the use of these resources in governance contexts. Participants across all three sites gave voice to this structural absence in direct and unambiguous terms:

I came to this health centre twice before I understood what was wrong with me. The nurses spoke to me in Kiswahili and sometimes English. I nodded because I did not want to look ignorant, but I did not fully understand what they were telling me to do. It was only when a community health worker came to my home and explained everything in Dholuo that I started following the treatment properly. (*Female patient, age 41, Homa Bay County health facility, Interview 27, translated from Dholuo, October 2024*)

Our office has a communication policy, yes. But it does not mention using Dholuo or any other local language. We use English for all official documents and sometimes Kiswahili for community notices. Nobody has ever told us we must use local languages. Nobody has told us we cannot, either. It is simply not in the policy. (*County communications officer, male, Migori County, Interview 34, conducted in English, November 2024*)

The 93.6% rate of policy silence documented in this study was not merely a statistical finding; it represented, in each of its 44 instances, a governance decision, whether deliberate or inadvertent, to reproduce the communicative exclusion of mother-tongue speakers from the institutional spaces where health, economic, and educational decisions are made. Developing the architecture necessary to reverse this pattern requires deliberate policy intervention at the national, county, and institutional levels, as prescribed by the SILC model's structural integration pillar.

## The Sustainable Indigenous Leadership Communication (SILC) Model

The SILC model is an important framework for integrating indigenous language sys-



tems into post-2030 African governance. The model rests on four foundational pillars:

### **1. Epistemic Reclamation**

This pillar refers to institutional recognition and legitimisation of indigenous languages as valid media of governance communication, not supplementary to English or Kiswahili but constitutive of effective community leadership. Epistemic reclamation requires more than translating externally formulated governance messages into indigenous languages; it requires the genuine centring of indigenous epistemic frameworks in the design, delivery, and evaluation of governance communication.

### **2. Structural Integration**

This pillar concerns embedding provisions for indigenous language use into institutional communication policies at all levels of governance, including national, county, institutional, and community levels. Structural integration operationalises epistemic reclamation by creating binding frameworks that mandate the use of indigenous language resources in governance contexts, alongside accountability mechanisms for their implementation.

### **3. Digital Revitalisation**

This pillar refers to the development of NLP and AI infrastructure for low-resource African languages, and the extension of indigenous language leadership communication into digital governance spaces. Building on the corpus development work of Awuor (2025), the SILC model envisions AI-powered indigenous language platforms, machine translation systems, speech recognition tools, and digital deliberative platforms that enable communities to engage with governance systems in their mother tongues across both physical and digital spaces.

### **4. Intergenerational Transmission**

This pillar involves the sustained cultivation of indigenous language leadership registers through education, cultural programming, and community mentorship, ensuring that the communicative resources through which communities exercise authority are actively maintained and transmitted across generations. This pillar reflects the model's Ubuntu philosophical grounding: leadership communication is not an individual capacity but a communal heritage, requiring communal investment for its sustainability.

The four pillars of the SILC model are mutually reinforcing. Epistemic reclamation without structural integration yields rhetorical aspiration without institutional change. Structural integration without digi-

tal revitalisation confines indigenous language governance to physical spaces, excluding communities from digital governance platforms. Digital revitalisation without intergenerational transmission builds technological infrastructure on eroding cultural foundations. The other three pillars require the epistemic foundation that reclamation provides. Together, the pillars constitute an integrated governance transformation architecture for language-inclusive, community-anchored sustainable development in post-2030 Africa.

## **Policy Recommendations**

Drawing on the SILC model and the empirical findings, the following policy recommendations are made:

For national governments, particularly the Government of Kenya, a revision of the National Language Policy is needed to include binding provisions for the use of indigenous languages in county-level governance communication, public health messaging, and community consultation processes. The Kenya National Language Policy of 2015 provides a foundation for this revision, but it requires stronger implementation guidelines and accountability frameworks.

For county governments, the establishment of Indigenous Language Communication Units is recommended within county departments of public communication and community development. These units would be responsible for developing indigenous language governance communication materials, training community-embedded communicators, and monitoring the implementation of language-inclusive communication policies at the facility and community levels.

For universities, the integration of applied linguistics and language-in-governance modules into programmes in public policy, public health, community development, and leadership is recommended. Universities, as institutions that produce the next generation of Africa's governance professionals, have a critical role in cultivating the language-inclusive governance competencies envisioned by the SILC model. Additionally, universities should prioritise and resource research programs focused on developing indigenous-language NLP infrastructure, building on the Lacuna Fund-supported work documented in Awuor (2025).

For the African Union and regional governance bodies, the development of a Continental Indigenous Language Governance Charter is recommended. This regional policy instrument would establish minimum standards for indigenous language inclusion in member states' governance communication frameworks, aligned with the language heritage provisions of Agenda 2063.

## Conclusion

Africa's sustainable development trajectory beyond 2030 requires a fundamental reorientation of governance communication, centred on indigenous language systems not as heritage curiosities but as dynamic, authoritative media of community leadership. Empirical evidence from multilingual Kenyan communities showed that those led in their mother tongues exhibit measurably higher civic engagement, greater policy compliance, and stronger collective agency. The chi-square analysis ( $\chi^2 = 47.3$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramér's  $V = .26$ ), Hymes' SPEAKING model mapping of Dholuo elder council communication, the corporate naming inventory, and the institutional policy documentary analysis collectively indicated that the relationship between indigenous language use and governance effectiveness is statistically significant, multi-dimensional, and structurally embedded.

The SILC model advances a structural response to this evidence by integrating epistemic reclamation, institutional policy change, digital revitalisation, and inter-generational transmission into a coherent architecture for language-inclusive governance in post-2030 Africa. Crucially, the model resists a narrowly instrumentalist view of indigenous language integration, namely the notion that mother-tongues need to be brought in only to translate externally formulated governance messages. What the model envisions, following Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), is deeper: the reclamation of indigenous epistemic systems as both the medium and the message of leadership, the communicative foundation upon which genuinely community-anchored, culturally sustainable African governance can be built.

As Africa's 2030 and 2063 development horizons approach, the continent faces a critical choice: to continue building its governance architecture on the communicative foundations inherited from colonial institutions, or to reclaim the rich, diverse, and deeply authoritative indigenous language systems, which constitute its most underutilised governance resource. This paper has argued, on empirical, theoretical, and ethical grounds, for the latter. Reclaiming the tongue of leadership is not a retreat from modernity; it is a precondition for the authentic, community-anchored African modernity that sustainable development frameworks envision but have yet to deliver.

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