



Language Endangerment and Sustainable Futures in Solomon Islands

Part 1: Preserving and Promoting Linguistic Diversity

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Since 1953, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) has recommended the use of vernacular languages as a medium of instruction, and the United Nations General Assembly, in cooperation with the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs, has declared 2022–2032 the International Decade of Indigenous Languages: ‘to draw attention to the critical status of many Indigenous languages across the world and encourage action for their preservation, revitalization and promotion’.

Supporting linguistic diversity has been shown on multiple levels to increase the wellbeing of indigenous populations across the globe: languages, according to Csaba Kőrösi, president of the 77th United Nations General Assembly, ‘are vectors of knowledge: With each indigenous language that goes extinct, so too goes the thought: the culture, tradition and knowledge it bears’; see also Kulick (2019) for an eloquent description of what is lost when a language dies. In the context of the threat of rapid climate change in the Pacific, causing loss of homelands and associated subsistence strategies, and subsequent loss of cultural heritage, sustaining linguistic diversity is a key element of keeping indigenous cultures strong.

This In Brief forms the first part of a two-part series looking at language endangerment and loss in Solomon Islands, and ways to mitigate this. Melanesia has some of the most linguistically diverse nations in the world. Amid this massive linguistic diversity, how does Solomon Islands deal with preserving its rich linguistic and cultural heritage? In the context of the new Solomon Islands Education Act, the issue of vernacular languages and mother-tongue education is particularly in focus.

Language endangerment in the Pacific

Language endangerment worldwide has reached a crisis point: ‘Every 40 days a language dies ... If nothing is done, conservative estimates suggest that half of all the 7,000 languages currently spoken will be extinct by the end of the century’ (McVeigh 16/1/2023). In Solomon Islands, vernacular languages are rapidly giving way to the major lingua franca, Solomon Islands Pijin.

Language loss has often been attributed to small speaker populations, particularly in Melanesia where language groups typically have less than 5000 speakers. Population size is only one factor in language endangerment; one of the fastest ways for a language to die is if children are not learning it.

Correspondingly, the best way to preserve linguistic diversity is for children to learn to speak their mother tongue fluently, starting in their early years; see also Part 2 of this In Brief.

PNG’s experience with vernacular language education

Neighbouring Papua New Guinea, with over 800 languages, is the most linguistically diverse nation in the world. Since 1995, PNG has had an official policy of vernacular language as the medium of instruction for the first three years of schooling. PNG’s policy has necessitated substantial support for vernacular languages, in terms of developing literacy materials. There have however been major challenges in implementing the policy, including the practical challenge of producing materials in more than 800 languages, as well as the lack of community support for top-down national policies which do not always reflect the needs of local communities (Volker 2015).

Solomon Islands’ Education Act 2023

In Solomon Islands, as in other post-colonial countries, the colonial language, English, is the language of administration and the medium of instruction in schools. Solomon Islands has a new Education Act, which provides policy guidelines on the language of instruction in schools:¹

- (1) The local vernacular, Pijin, English or sign language should be used individually or in combination to facilitate learning according to the needs of the students.
- (2) A teacher must endeavour to use English as the principle language of instruction from the year level of primary education (or, if the Regulations prescribe some other year level, from that year level onwards) (Part 7, Division 3, Clause 65).

While the Act provides in-principle support for vernacular language use, this is only seen as transitional: the desired outcome is fluency in English — though the Act acknowledges implicitly the difficulties of using English as the language of instruction for many teachers and students.

In Solomon Islands, teachers are rather mobile, and do not necessarily belong to the language group of their students. Teachers also differ in their command of English. Using either a vernacular language or English as the language of instruction is thus often not seen

as practical. As a result, recourse is typically made — informally — to Solomon Islands Pijin, which however is often not deemed suitable for writing, still less for national language status.

In addition to teachers not sharing the same vernacular language as their students, there are other serious difficulties in the way of vernacular language education in Solomon Islands: one commentator finds it ‘totally unfeasible’ due in large part to ethnic and linguistic diversity in urban schools (Jourdan 2013:277). There are further challenges: even the development of a spelling system, the first step to producing literacy materials, is not straightforward, but takes place in a particular social, political and historical context; its implementation does not just require technical and logistical resourcing, but needs to take place in a negotiated, culturally appropriate manner, which may be different for every language group (Terrill and Dunn 2003).

Grassroots developments

There are a number of grassroots developments by NGOs on developing vernacular literacy in PNG, most notably by the Summer Institute of Linguistics/Wycliffe Bible Translators (SIL) and these have played a major role in local, grassroots development of materials and expertise on vernacular literacy in PNG. As a result, as of 2011, more than 400 vernacular languages had been used in PNG schools (Malone and Paraide 2011:714).

SIL also has a presence in Solomon Islands, but as an organisation it is controlled by outsiders, and its agenda is to provide Bible translations in vernacular languages. A different approach is that of the Kulu Institute, which is a prime example of grassroots language education and development, run by and for Solomon Islanders.

Ways forward

While Pacific nations struggle with the climate crisis and increasing urbanisation, Solomon Islands should protect the wealth of its intangible heritage and support stable and sustainable futures for all Solomon Islanders. One way to do this is to support its rich linguistic diversity, by prioritising vernacular education at least in the early years, not just as a means of transition to English, but explicitly to help stem the tide of massive loss of cultural and linguistic diversity seen elsewhere in the Pacific and the world. That may best be achieved by supporting local efforts, which is the topic of Part 2 of this In Brief series.

Author notes

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Endnote

1. The [previous Education Act 2014](#) said only: ‘The language or languages of instruction in all schools and early childhood education centres or particular categories or types of schools and early childhood education centres may be determined by the Permanent Secretary in consultation with the Minister’ (Clause 65(1)).

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