



ANC Parliamentary Caucus
Social Transformation Cluster
Debate on International Mother Language Day
Tuesday, 04 March 2025
Comrade W.T. Letsie

Honourable Chairperson,

The former ANC President, Nelson Mandela, once said, *“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”* These words encapsulate the profound significance of language in shaping our connection to one another, our heritage, and our communities.

Let me remind all gathered here today that one of the injustices of the past that we should recognise is the oppression of the South African Indigenous people and their languages. English and Afrikaans were made dominant languages of education and economy in this country and were used as tools for the separate development agenda of different cultural and language groups. South Africa was divided into homelands, and people of the same languages were forced to stay in the same areas, meant to break the unity of Africans.



In line with these sentiments, the African National Congress, as part of its historic mission, has long championed the values of unity, social justice, and cultural preservation in our country. The ANC has a standing history of appreciating and prioritizing the status and use of South African Indigenous languages. This fight is deeply rooted in our organisation's vision for a unified, non-racial, prosperous South Africa.

His Excellency, President Cyril Ramaphosa, carried this baton forward in the sixth administration when he took a bold step by signing the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Bill into law. This legislation includes provisions for revising language policies in our education system to better support educational outcomes and create a more inclusive environment for our learners.

The President did this despite the serious pushback on the amendments relating to admissions and language policy. We have all seen the fights that African parents and their children engage in to access education in the communities they reside in because those schools made Afrikaans a dominant language of teaching and learning which excludes children who speak other languages but Afrikaans.

Despite the tremendous progress made by the ANC-led government over the past 30 years towards social transformation, languages remain contested. Some, such as



AfriForum, seek to maintain the divisive and exclusionary status quo that undermines multilingual efforts to ensure equitable use of South African languages. Our country still grapples with these ongoing battles, which have historical roots that led to the 1976 Soweto uprising, where learners protested against unjust and discriminatory language policies.

Let me assure this house and indeed the country that South African indigenous languages cannot be promoted and developed at the expense of Afrikaans. This is not the intention of the state as people were made to believe that the BELA Bill is a weapon for the demise of Afrikaans. The Constitution is very clear, in section 29(2)

In this regard, the ANC is resolved to spearhead its commitments to forging unity in diversity as outlined in our Constitution. The ANC is committed to realising a just and equitable society as envisioned in the Freedom Charter, where people shall have equal rights to use their languages.

One of the primary tasks to achieve these ideals includes challenging and debunking negative perceptions of mother tongue use and education. As this debate demonstrates, mother



tongue education is vital in improving literacy and cognitive development, which are crucial for learners' academic success in schools.

/To this end, we call for more dialogues to discuss the significance of our indigenous languages, promote their use, and instil pride in their speakers. More must be done to attach economic value to our Indigenous languages by opening more work opportunities and recognising artists, programs, and other platforms where Indigenous languages can prevail. This will not happen by chance but through deliberate and adequately resourced interventions.

Language is critical to the ANC's transformation project of reversing the oppressive and divisive structural and systematic inequities created by the colonial and apartheid governments. These barriers promoted separate development and continue to manifest themselves today. The persistence of these challenges requires a strong developmental and ethical state, active and progressive participation of civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders

This impresses the urgency of having the National Dialogue to foster collective deliberations with all sectors of society on addressing our society's pressing needs. The National Dialogue is also instrumental in building on our nation's hard-fought democratic gains over the past 30 years. The ANC envisages the



national dialogue to promote national cohesion and inclusivity. We anticipate the dialogue will result in the development of a social compact and the pulling of our collective resources towards driving socio-economic development.

We must commend institutions of higher learning that have demonstrated exemplary leadership in implementing language policies that reflect our nation's linguistic diversity, such as UKZN, which has isiZulu as a compulsory course. At Rhodes University, students enrolled in Journalism must pass isiXhosa as a language subject. At the same time, the University of Limpopo offers a course in Multilingual Studies in both English and Sepedi. UNISA has also begun offering its programmes in both English and African languages, including translating some of its courses from English into African languages.

These institutions have shown that fostering and integrating Indigenous languages into higher education is feasible and necessary to create a truly equitable and welcoming learning environment. They have taken significant measures to guarantee that our nation's rich linguistic legacy is not only preserved but also incorporated into the fundamental structure of our educational system.

However, more remains to be done. We call on these institutions to build on the work done and for all universities to develop and implement language policies that advance South African



Indigenous languages in knowledge production, research and science, as outlined in the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions.

Such initiatives are also tied to improving service delivery by ensuring that our higher education institutions produce graduates who are not only experts in their respective fields but also multilingual to best serve our people and nation. This is particularly important in frontline services that serve our people, such as doctors, nurses, teachers, police officers, and public servants.

Honourable Chairperson,

For the ANC, language is central to the transformation agenda, appreciating that language is not just communication and merely words but instruments linked to power, knowledge, identity, and culture.

To this end, the importance of language rights in promoting unity in diversity cannot be overstated as we move forward. It remains our collective responsibility to dismantle these obstacles and build a more equitable future for all, one where Indigenous people can fully participate and succeed in every aspect of society. In recognising and respecting linguistic diversity, we can build a more just and equitable society for all South Africans.

Thank you.

