

Why the EU should support minority languages as part of its international development

Written by Leonardo González Dellán on 30 July 2018 in Opinion Plus
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Funding programmes in minority languages would increase representation of those who have never had an equal voice, writes Leonardo González Dellán.



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Strong nation states have historically sought a strong national language. Regional and minority languages threatened power because they threatened unity, and therefore linguistic oppression has been used to exercise control by the state.

This makes the success of the EU's multilingual governance impressive. Not only has no single language dominated the Union, but the EU has made concerted efforts to actively assist speakers of minority languages.

Using the success of this approach, the EU's efforts should be replicated in its development programmes around the world. When working with governments in developing nations, the EU should promote the values of inclusivity and social cohesion that it has championed at home, to support those minority language speakers who are least likely to be represented in democratic processes.

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The 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages promotes and protects the use of minority languages in Europe. The EU has long funded projects to ensure that the language someone speaks does not exclude them from political discourse.

This includes translations into the 24 official and countless semi-official languages as well as smaller programmes to encourage interactions with lesser-spoken languages.

Initiatives in the University of Wales have promoted Welsh as a language of study, conferences have been held in Frisian, and youth organisations set up in Basque.

Programmes like these have served to stabilise the number of speakers of languages such as Scottish Gaelic and increase the number of Catalan speakers.

There is now a great opportunity to use the successes of the EU's multilingual democracy to improve its development policies around the globe. The issues the 1992 Charter was founded to solve are certainly not exclusive to Europe.

Many countries in the developing world discriminate and marginalise based on language. Education policies which prevent children speaking their own language are commonplace. Governments which enforce the use of certain languages in politics are pervasive.

Democratic exclusion often begins with a lack of political recognition of a language, or the disparaging categorisation of a language as a 'dialect', 'patois' or 'pidgin'. It is this exclusionary side of 'one country, one language' politics which the EU has so successfully fought against.

Top-down support for multilingual representation engenders trust and understanding, rather than the dog-whistle nationalism or populism which is unfortunately becoming so common. The EU could increase democratic representation and foster sustainable and representative local governance by applying these ideas abroad.

The European Commission's DG for international cooperation and development has done extensive and commendable work in alleviating poverty, but there is a notable lack of investments towards the 'softer', and more overtly political issues contributing to disenfranchisement from society and democracy.

Experts such as US diplomat Donald J. Planty have commented that the EU is by far the biggest aid-giver to the developing world, but that its focus on economic programmes, unlike USAID's softer approach to diplomacy and cultural changes, limits the effectiveness of its budget.

Funding school programmes in indigenous and minority languages and working with governments to institute projects which include marginalised people in society, would increase representation of those who have never had an equal voice.

Language is one of many ways to denote difference, and protecting minorities in whatever form they appear, is certainly a function of healthy democracy. Given that one of the EU's development aims is the promotion of democracy around the world, these projects which give minorities a voice should certainly complement the suite of otherwise economic and infrastructural programmes the EU development agency is involved in.

About the author

Leonardo González Dellán is a Venezuelan entrepreneur and philanthropist

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