

# Language in the Process towards Sustainable Development: From a Means of Communication to a Tool for Social Construction

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**Abstract:** Sustainable development is a global orientation aimed at balancing economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection. As a medium of communication that holds a repository of knowledge, language plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions, preserving culture, and promoting intercultural dialogue. This article explores how language contributes to sustainable development through the protection of indigenous languages, raising community awareness, and building inclusive societies. By analyzing case studies from Vietnam and around the world, along with theories from humanistic linguistics, we affirm that language is a central element that both reflects and shapes the transition to a sustainable future, serving as a foundation for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

**Keywords:** Cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, education for sustainable development, language, indigenous languages, sustainable development.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of sustainable development emerged in the late 20th century as a response to global crises: the environmental crisis, poverty, social inequality, and cultural conflicts. The Brundtland Report (1987) provided a classic definition: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". However, most current approaches to sustainable development still lean towards economic and technical aspects, while language—as the foundation of communication, thought, and social knowledge—is often overlooked. This is a serious omission, as it is impossible to build a just, inclusive, and developed society without effective and equal participation in linguistic terms.

## 2. Content

### 2.1. Overview of Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals

#### 2.1.1. Sustainable Development

According to the Brundtland Report by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), sustainable development is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

Sustainable development consists of three main pillars:

- **Economic Sustainability:** Stable and efficient economic growth that does not harm the environment or society.
- **Social Sustainability:** Ensuring justice, equality, and improving the quality of life for everyone.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** Protecting natural resources, reducing pollution, and adapting to climate change.

For instance, an eco-tourism resort in a mountainous region built with environmentally friendly materials, using solar energy, creating jobs for local people, and promoting forest protection is a model of sustainable development. It combines economic (income generation), social (job creation), and environmental (nature conservation) factors.

#### 2.1.2. The Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 global goals established by the United Nations to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. Specifically, the SDGs include:

- No Poverty (1)
- Zero Hunger (2)
- Good Health and Well-being (3)

- Quality Education (4)
- Gender Equality (5)
- Clean Water and Sanitation (6)
- Affordable and Clean Energy (7)
- Decent Work and Economic Growth (8)
- Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (9)
- Reduced Inequalities (10)
- Sustainable Cities and Communities (11)
- Responsible Consumption and Production (12)
- Climate Action (13)
- Life Below Water (14)
- Life on Land (15)
- Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (16)
- Partnerships for the Goals (17)

The overarching objective of the SDGs is to create a more just and sustainable world where economic development goes hand in hand with social equity and environmental protection.

## **2.2. The Role of Language in the Process of Sustainable Development**

In the context of globalization, climate change, and the decline of cultural diversity, language and culture are recognized as crucial pillars for achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Language is not merely a tool for communication but also a repository of cultural, historical, and social knowledge. According to Sapir (1921), language is a "symbolic guide to culture," reflecting how people perceive and interact with the world. Sustainable development is not just an economic or environmental issue; it also encompasses social justice, education, and the preservation of cultural heritage—all of which require language for implementation and maintenance.

### **2.2.1. Language Preserves Indigenous Knowledge**

Many indigenous communities possess a rich body of knowledge related to traditional medicine, sustainable agriculture, and natural resource management. This knowledge is preserved and transmitted orally through language. When a language disappears, that knowledge is also at risk of being lost. For example, indigenous people in the Amazon have specific words to describe the properties of hundreds of plant species, enabling them to sustainably harvest from the forest without causing environmental destruction.

Indigenous languages often contain complex concepts about the relationship between humans and nature. For instance, the Navajo language in North America uses words and oral stories to convey rules for resource management, such as protecting water and land resources (Fishman, 1991). Bilingual education programs in the Navajo Nation have helped preserve the language while promoting sustainable agricultural practices like chemical-free farming and crop rotation.

Similarly, the Quechua language in the Andes of South America holds indigenous knowledge about high-altitude agriculture. Words in Quechua describe farming techniques adapted to harsh climate conditions, such as traditional irrigation systems and soil conservation (Hinton, 2013). Initiatives to preserve the Quechua language, including its use in education and media, have helped local communities maintain sustainable farming methods, thereby mitigating the impacts of climate change.

Linguistic diversity is an inseparable part of cultural diversity, which UNESCO recognizes as an essential factor for achieving sustainable development (UNESCO, 2001). With approximately 7,000 languages in the world, over 40% are at risk of disappearing by the end of this century (Crystal, 2000). The decline of languages not only results in the loss of cultural identity but also erases traditional knowledge about the environment, agriculture, medicine, and resource management.

Vietnam, with its 54 ethnic groups, is a prime example of the role of language in sustainable development. The Tày language contains traditional knowledge about natural resource management. Tày folk songs, proverbs, and legends convey rules about forest protection, water management, and sustainable farming. For example, the proverb,

*"Rừng xanh thì nước chảy, rừng khô thì lũ về"* (Green forests mean flowing water; dry forests bring floods), emphasizes the importance of protecting forests to prevent floods (Nguyen Van Huy, 2015). Bilingual education programs in provinces like Lào Cai and Yên Bái have used the Tày language to teach students about environmental protection and sustainable agriculture. These programs not only help preserve the language but also encourage behaviors such as tree planting, recycling, and using organic fertilizers (Tran Hong Van, 2020).

Despite these achievements, the preservation of indigenous languages in Vietnam still faces many challenges. Specifically, among the more than 50 minority languages, many are endangered due to a lack of standardized materials, no official place in the education system, being marginalized in public communication, a shortage of financial and human resources to implement bilingual education programs, and a declining number of speakers (especially among the younger generation, due to the influence of Vietnamese and English). The gradual loss of these languages means that knowledge about sustainable agriculture, herbal medicine, and indigenous beliefs is also disappearing. However, opportunities still exist, such as using technology to record and teach indigenous languages, as well as support from international organizations like UNESCO (Hinton, 2013). The preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages are not just cultural tasks but are also part of sustainable development, because only when communities can speak their own languages can they effectively participate in decisions affecting their future.

### **2.2.2. Language as a Tool to Promote Quality and Equitable Education**

Language plays a central role in the educational process, serving not only as a medium for transmitting knowledge but also as a bridge between individuals and their community, and between learners and the treasure trove of human culture and knowledge. In the context of sustainable development, particularly in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4: Quality Education) and Goal 5 (SDG 5: Gender Equality), language is not merely a technical tool but also carries profound social, cultural, and political significance.

### **Language and Access to Quality Education**

Language is a key factor in knowledge acquisition and cognitive development in learners. Access to quality education largely depends on a learner's ability to understand and use language. According to UNESCO (2003), children learn more effectively when taught in their mother tongue during their early years. Research shows that students who learn in a familiar language achieve higher academic results, have better reading comprehension, express themselves more effectively, and are less likely to drop out compared to those learning in a second language. In its report "Education in a Multilingual World," UNESCO recommends that nations integrate mother tongues into their education systems to ensure the right to learn and to improve educational quality. Teaching in the language students use daily not only helps them grasp knowledge more easily but also boosts their self-confidence and active participation in the learning process.

Bilingual education programs, which use both indigenous and national languages, not only help preserve languages but also raise awareness of sustainability issues. In New Zealand, the "language nests" (Te Kōhanga Reo) school model has helped preserve the Māori language while teaching students about their responsibility to protect the environment and respect cultural diversity (May, 2005). Thus, bilingual education models have begun to prove their effectiveness: children understand lessons better, connect more deeply with their community and indigenous culture, and can access modern knowledge in a common language. This confirms that language should not be seen as a barrier but as a bridge in education for sustainable development.

In Vietnam, many ethnic minority students (accounting for about 14.6% of the population according to the 2019 Population and Housing Census) do not use Vietnamese as their mother tongue, leading to difficulties in accessing the formal curriculum. The "Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education" project, implemented by the Ministry of Education and Training in collaboration with UNICEF in Gia Lai and Trà Vinh provinces, has shown promising results: students in the program demonstrated better Vietnamese literacy skills while preserving their ethnic cultural identity (UNICEF Vietnam, 2014). Bilingual education programs in the Northwest region, using the Tày and Nùng languages, have integrated lessons on forest protection, water management, and sustainable agriculture. These programs not only help students maintain their cultural identity but also encourage environmentally friendly behaviors (Tran Hong Van, 2020).

In education, literature and oral traditions are powerful means of conveying sustainability values. In Bhutan, traditional poems and stories are used in education to teach the concept of Gross National Happiness, which emphasizes harmony between humans and nature (Thinley, 2009). Similarly, in Vietnam, Tày folk songs such as "*Chặt cây đầu nguồn, nước khô cạn dòng*" (Cut the trees at the source, and the stream will run dry) convey messages about environmental protection in an accessible and memorable way (Nguyen Van Huy, 2015). It is evident that in many developing countries, including Vietnam, children from ethnic minorities often have to learn in the official language (such as Vietnamese), which is not their mother tongue. This creates a major barrier to accessing education, leading to low academic performance and high dropout rates. Developing multilingual education policies that recognize and use mother tongues in primary education is a crucial step towards comprehensive and equitable education.

### **Language and Equality in Education**

Language is not only related to access to education but also directly to social equality and justice. When an education system uses only one official language, it can inadvertently exclude groups that use other languages—often ethnic minorities, migrants, or people with disabilities. The failure to recognize and integrate linguistic diversity increases the risk of identity loss, reduces learning opportunities, and limits the ability of disadvantaged groups to participate in society.

Regarding gender equality, language plays a role in shaping social perceptions of male and female roles. Studies have shown that textbooks, if not carefully designed, can reflect or reinforce gender stereotypes, such as portraying men as leaders and women in caregiving or domestic roles (Blumberg, 2008). Therefore, using gender-neutral language and promoting diverse and equal representation in teaching materials is essential.

### **2.2.3. Language Raises Community Awareness**

Language is not just a tool for communication but also a means of shaping thought, disseminating knowledge, and building community awareness. In the journey towards sustainable development, raising public awareness of global issues such as climate change, gender equality, environmental protection, and responsible consumption largely depends on the methods of communication and education through language. Therefore, language not only reflects reality but also acts upon it to change social perceptions and behaviors.

### **Language as a Tool for Conveying Information and Changing Mindsets**

Language shapes how people perceive and address social issues. According to Whorf's theory of linguistic relativity (1956), language influences thought and behavior. For example, in Japanese, the concept of *mottainai* (a sense of regret concerning waste) encourages environmentally friendly behaviors such as recycling, energy conservation, and waste reduction (Gumperz & Levinson, 1996).

Language is the primary means of disseminating information in society. Public communication campaigns, educational materials, policy slogans, journalism, and social media all use language to spread knowledge and call for action. The choice of words, sentence structure, and style of expression can be highly persuasive, affecting the emotions and reasoning of the audience. For instance, using the phrase "sustainable development" instead of "economic growth," or "climate change" instead of "extreme weather," reflects a shift in global policy thinking, emphasizing the connection between humanity and the environment. Small changes in language—such as shifting from "victim" to "survivor"—can also alter society's perception of vulnerable groups.

### **Language Helps Form a Sense of Responsibility and Community Action**

At the community level, indigenous languages are often used in campaigns to raise awareness about social and environmental issues. For example, in Africa, campaigns using the Swahili language to educate communities about rainforest protection have been highly effective due to their cultural relevance (Appiah, 2006). Through language, values such as social responsibility, solidarity, environmental protection, and resource conservation are evoked and reinforced in the collective consciousness.

In Vietnam, communication programs on disease prevention (like COVID-19), environmental protection, and disaster response have used simple, community-friendly language, thereby raising awareness and encouraging active public participation. For example, slogans like

"*Không xả rác ra đường – giữ gìn thành phố xanh sạch đẹp*" (Don't litter on the streets – keep the city green, clean, and beautiful) or "*Tiết kiệm điện là tiết kiệm tiền cho gia đình bạn và tài nguyên cho đất nước*" (Saving electricity saves money for your family and resources for the country) not only convey information but also serve to educate on ethics and build positive behaviors. Phrases like "green zone," "5K," "green living," and "plastic waste" have become familiar and contribute to a more responsible community lifestyle.

### **Language Shapes Discourse and Social Power**

Language is not neutral; every word choice conceals a system of values, perspectives, and power. Language is a tool for creating and maintaining social discourses within institutions—that is, the way society understands and talks about an issue. Discourse is where language and power intersect, creating socially accepted "truths". Who has the right to speak, what they say, and how they say it are all socio-political issues. For example, titles like *doctor*, *parent*, *director*, *lawyer*, *teacher* used in communication establish a social order, defining the duties and rights of each individual in different institutions. Similarly, in the legal system, the difference between *defendant*, *defense lawyer*, and *judge* lies not only in their functions but also in their legal discourse—each role uses language differently, creating structures of power and justice.

Social power lies not only in who speaks but also in what form of speech is considered correct; academic, scientific, or neutral language is often seen as more credible than colloquial or emotional speech. For example,

in healthcare, patients often cannot describe their symptoms in medical terminology and are completely dependent on how the doctor "interprets" them—creating an asymmetrical power relationship. Therefore, the use of neutral, inclusive, accurate, and scientific language is crucial. It ensures a diversity of perspectives, fair access to information, and allows the community to form its own correct views and behaviors regarding development issues.

Discourse and power are not fixed but are reproduced through daily linguistic behavior. How we talk about gender, ethnicity, class, and disability gradually forms social norms, and these norms determine who has a voice and who is silenced. For instance, whether society calls a person with a disability "crippled" (with negative connotations) or a "person with different abilities" (with a humanistic tone) reflects the discourse on human value and inclusive policies.

#### **2.2.4. Language Promotes Dialogue and Peace**

In a world increasingly fragmented by ethnic, religious, economic, and political conflicts, dialogue and peace are not just moral goals but also essential conditions for sustainable development. In this context, language plays a central role as a means for people to understand each other, resolve disagreements, and build a culture of peace. Language is not just a tool for transmitting information but also a space for consensus, listening, and accepting differences.

#### **Language as a Prerequisite for Dialogue**

Dialogue cannot exist without language. But it is more than just talking; dialogue requires the ability to use language in a spirit of openness, listening, respect, and searching for common ground. The language of dialogue is not one of imposition, argument, or winning a debate, but one of understanding and empathy.

For example, during the reconciliation process in post-apartheid South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, used the language of dialogue to replace acts of retaliation. The public hearings were not only a place for victims to tell their stories in their own words but also a space for perpetrators to acknowledge the consequences, creating an opportunity for forgiveness. There, language was a tool for collective healing.

#### **Language Creates a Discourse of Peace Instead of a Discourse of Hatred**

Every society has discourses—ways of speaking, understanding, and shaping reality. When language is politicized, it can become a tool for inciting hatred, discrimination, and violence (e.g., using words like "invader," "foreigner," "heretic"). Conversely, an inclusive, respectful, and non-violent language can help de-escalate tensions and change how society views "the other".

A key component in language that promotes peace is Nonviolent Communication (NVC), developed by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg. This method is based on:

- Observing one's own and others' true feelings and needs.
- Expressing what one wants clearly, without judgment.
- Maintaining respect in dialogue, even when disagreeing.

For example, instead of saying, "You're so selfish for not helping me with the housework," one could say, "I feel tired and would like some help with the chores. Could you lend me a hand?". Thus, this change in language use reduces conflict and opens up space for empathy.

During war or social crisis, the role of journalism, education, and public communication is crucial. Using a language of reconciliation instead of inciting hostility—for example, using "migrants" instead of "a flood of people," or "humanitarian crisis" instead of "national security threat"—can change public attitudes.

#### **Language Helps Build Intercultural Dialogue and Social Cohesion**

Intercultural dialogue, facilitated by language, is key to resolving conflicts and building inclusive communities. According to Habermas (1984), communicative action helps build consensus and promote sustainable solutions. In Africa, intercultural dialogue initiatives use indigenous languages like Swahili and Yoruba to resolve land disputes between communities. These dialogues not only help achieve peace but also encourage cooperation in managing resources like forests and rivers (Appiah, 2006). For instance, in Kenya, elders use Swahili to organize community meetings where parties discuss sharing water sources during droughts. These dialogues have led to sustainable agreements, such as rotating water use and protecting watershed areas (Menkhaus, 2013).

Language also plays a vital role in building solidarity among different cultural groups. In a globalized world, cultural clashes are inevitable. Here, language is not just a means of communication but also the key to understanding other cultures. Learning a new language not only facilitates communication but also broadens

one's ability to see the world through a different lens. This creates the foundation for respecting differences and living together peacefully.

In Canada, education programs use both English and indigenous languages like Cree to teach about indigenous history and culture, thereby promoting mutual understanding and respect between communities (Battiste, 2013). Similarly, the "Bilingualism for Peace" program, initiated by the United Nations in the Middle East, encourages Jewish and Arab children to learn each other's languages from primary school. The results show that students develop more open attitudes, have fewer ethnic prejudices, and are better able to envision a pluralistic society living in peace.

These are the fundamental roles of language in the process towards sustainable development. Language, as a medium for expressing thought, transmitting knowledge, and connecting people, holds a central position in the pursuit of sustainable development. First, language is a repository and vehicle for indigenous knowledge, contributing to the preservation of cultural diversity—a key pillar of sustainable development as defined by UNESCO. Second, language is a tool for promoting quality and equitable education, especially when used appropriately within the socio-cultural context of each community. Third, language plays an essential role in raising public awareness of global issues like climate change, gender equality, and sustainable consumption, thereby fostering responsible and active citizen participation in development goals. Finally, language facilitates intercultural dialogue and peacebuilding, as the capacity for understanding and empathy nurtured through linguistic communication helps resolve differences and prevent conflicts. Thus, language not only reflects reality but also helps create a more just, inclusive, and sustainable world.

### 3. Conclusion

From its original role as a means of communication, language has been, is, and will continue to assume deeper functions in the process of sustainable development. It not only helps people exchange information but is also a repository of indigenous knowledge, a tool for quality and equitable education, a vehicle for raising public awareness, a bridge for intercultural dialogue, and the foundation for the formation of social institutions. In this sense, language not only reflects but also constructs social reality—where thought, power, identity, and behavior are shaped through discourse. The conscious study, teaching, and use of language is an act of building society not just for the present, but for a sustainable future. Furthermore, the recognition of and investment in language cannot be separated from sustainable development policies, because a just, peaceful, and developed society can only be established when language is used as a tool for connection, empowerment, and creation.

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