Language and sustainability

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Reflecting on the place of language in the design of development strategies to meet global standards of sustainability as defined e.g. by the Rio conference in 1992 for ecological purposes, and maintained under the provision of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), I shall present a couple of key notions relevant to this question, as developed in the LAGSUS research framework (www.lagsus.de), and show their relevance drawing on a case study from Ivory Coast and supporting evidence from other parts of the world.

Communicative sustainability (CS) - the capacity of a community to reconstruct innovative messages independently of their original source - draws on local resources of conceptualization, systemic reasoning consonant with local experience, and inclusive modes of negotiation (Bearth & Fan 2006). Recourse to local language as a natural means of optimizing such resources while keeping loss of impact through social attrition low requires strategic decisions of agencies participating in the promotion of ecological management of natural resources.

*Communicative dependency (*CD), the negative correlate of CS, reflects unequal distribution of language competences, typically matched by asymmetries of power and influence and economic marginalization. Irreducible to the latter, CD – as experienced by local constituencies - constitutes an independent factor in a self-reproducing cycle of exclusion of those very same players in the global arena on whom falls a disproportionately high share of ultimate responsibility for attaining consensual objectives of global sustainable development. Given the interplay between communicative and economic factors, a viable strategy of poverty reduction must recognize CD as a challenge of its own and address in its own terms, among which the role of local language in helping local populations advance from CD to CS ranks highest.

The paper will close with a discussion of methodological implications and a plea for development issues as a research focus in African linguistics.