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Predominant use of English denies speakers of African languages access to privileges in South Africa

The increased economic benefits associated with English-language usage continues to undermine efforts to elevate African languages' status, and this linguistic hegemony has created a situation where speakers of the nine official African languages are denied access to social, economic and political developments in the country, a clear violation of the language rights enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa.

These are some of the findings of a University of Cape Town (UCT) PhD thesis by Ms Ncebakazi Saliwa-Mogale, one of the graduands to be conferred her PhD degree in African Languages and Literature during the virtual graduation ceremonies taking place from 12 to 19 July 2021.

Saliwa-Mogale's thesis interrogates the role played by various language bodies in South Africa in the implementation of the country's national language policies, particularly the development and empowerment of South Africa's previously marginalised African languages.

Although an enabling environment has been created for the African languages to be developed, they remain languages of communication primarily within communities of their speakers. In pursuing the role of developing these languages, these bodies are faced by some bottlenecks in the system that hinder the development of these languages.

Saliwa-Mogale says: "African languages are just not a priority to the South African government. The fact that the majority of South Africans do not understand English or Afrikaans is not taken seriously by our government and the implications thereof. The overt implications are that they are left out in anything that is being communicated in English to the citizens, including crucial information as the one contained, for example, in their life policies and funeral covers, communication from municipality, information from banks, to name just a few.

"The bigger implication is that they are left out in socio-economic developments of the country as important information such as funding information is only available in English or Afrikaans. Bank forms, funding forms from financing institutions such as Land Bank are in English. So, democracy and individual development favour only those that understand and speak English. The poor must survive with informal economy where vendors and buyers communicate in their home languages."

She believes there will never be a Batho Pele implementation when government is speaking above the heads of the majority of South Africans by addressing them in English. She says it

is only when government takes African languages seriously that the majority of lives of South Africans will change for the better.

“That day will see an increase in the pass rate of learners, that day will see growth in opportunities, that day every South African will feel that they are part and parcel of this country. That day the justice system will favour everyone unlike now where the official language of the courts is English and one needs an interpreter even where the accused and the plaintiff and the magistrate and the judge are all African language speakers. That will be the day where everyone will be able to access all information in their language of choice, that will be the end of exclusion of majority of South Africans who fought for the freedom that is now benefiting the elite and the middle class,” she said.

Saliwa-Mogale has worked for government, the language services of national Parliament, the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) where she also served in one of its bodies, and the Department of Arts and Culture structures. This is where she says she picked up that government is not bothered by the fact that those that cannot speak English are left out in socio-economic developments of the country.

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

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