

## 4.3. South Sudan

### 4.3.1. Background and current status

The issue of language of instruction is a critical issue in South Sudan, due partly to political reasons and partly to the poor condition of the country's education systems.

The earliest language policies in Sudan's formal education under the British colonial rule included space for local languages in early primary school, followed by transition to English. However from 1956, as part of the newly-independent nation of Sudan, southern Sudan experienced the imposition of Arabic as the only language of instruction throughout the education system. This has been interpreted as part of an effort by the northern Sudanese government to eradicate the distinct cultural, linguistic and religious features of the south (du Toit, 2014, p, 250). Between 1972 and 1983, mother tongue-based education returned to southern Sudan, under the leadership of the Institute for Regional Languages and the Southern Regional Ministry of Education (Marshall, 2012, pp. 188-189).

Upon achieving independence from the Republic of Sudan in 2011, the Government of South Sudan selected English as its official language. This choice is understandable; given the linguistic and political history of the country, the current official English policy is a strong and predictable statement about national autonomy and political alignment. However, the very limited familiarity of the population with the English language does not bode well for its use as the language of instruction from Grade 4.

On the other hand, with such a large proportion of the population speaking only indigenous languages (including Juba Arabic, which is also indigenous to the region), and with such an undeveloped central system for formal learning, a concerted effort to develop Sudanese languages of instruction could be a significant tool for building an effective national education system. As Hammond (2013, p. 20) notes, "education can only be lifesaving, life sustaining and contribute to stability and peace if children and parents can understand the messages and lessons taught."

Constitutional support for the use of Sudanese languages in early primary school indicates that possibilities do exist for supporting and resourcing such a system.

This possible future for South Sudan's education system has its challenges, however. One challenge has to do with the limited degree to which the indigenous languages have been developed so far for written use and formal learning. The number of languages spoken by South Sudanese communities is another challenge, since elevating some of them to more prestigious uses in school and governance risks resentment from those whose languages are not receiving similar attention. A third challenge has to do with the limited national and local capacity for developing and maintaining the infrastructures and resources needed to build an effective multilingual education system.

It is also important to understand the position of Arabic in this context. The choice of English as a medium of instruction has posed significant learning challenges for South Sudanese citizens who have migrated from Sudan (Bredlid, 210, p. 570). Hammond (2013, p. 9) notes that the government of South Sudan has made a policy decision to provide continued learning in Arabic from Grade 4 through secondary school for children returning from the north. Du Toit (2014, p. 364) and others believe that the move from Arabic to English as the language of wider communication will be a gradual process.

The sociolinguistic situation of Juba Arabic (also called Southern Arabic) in South Sudan is different from that of the Arabic spoken in the north. Du Toit (2014, p. 364) notes that Juba Arabic is "still the preferred lingua franca for most South Sudanese." Calderbank (2012) agrees, noting its extensive use in media, commerce and governance. However, at least as of 2012, the South Sudan Ministry of Education had no plans to include Juba Arabic in its language policy.

### 4.3.2. Evidence on language and learning in South Sudan

There has been little documented research on language and learning in South Sudan over

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the years. The poverty and marginalization of the area when it was a part of Sudan resulted in little academic effort directed towards questions of local language-medium learning. At the same time, evidence on the ineffectiveness of English medium instruction in the country has been forthcoming in recent years.

## World Bank 2012 education report

A World Bank report on the status of education in South Sudan (World Bank, 2012) contains several key observations. The report describes a *Service Delivery Study* by the Ministry of Education in 2010. As part of the study, a test of learning achievement in (English) language and mathematics was given to 1,800 primary school students from 107 mostly urban schools, in four states. The test used questions taken from the *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMSS) and *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS) assessment tools. The mean scores for the 1,800 students were 29 per cent in mathematics and 35 per cent in (English) language (World Bank, 2012, p. 67). The report notes a significant rural-urban distinction in education (p. 61). Thus these scores, because they reflect a primarily urban testing cohort, are likely to be higher than what would be found in more rural areas where English is even less familiar to the students.

The World Bank report also indicates that the general profile of education in South Sudan is one of poor education access and low learning achievement; the table below describes some of the access challenges (World Bank, 2012, p. 57).

**Table 4.3.2. Access to Grade 1 and 8 in South Sudan (from World Bank, 2012)**

National average	Boys	Girls
Probability of entering Grade 1	55%	48%
Probability of entering Grade 8	24%	17%

The number of out-of-school children aged 8 to 15 averages 53 per cent nationwide, and up to 58 per cent in rural areas (p. 58). In addition, 69 per cent of citizens aged up to 40 years old are non-literate (p. 60).

## UNICEF education profile

UNICEF's overall profile of education in South Sudan<sup>99</sup> is similarly bleak. It notes that South Sudan's education indicators are among the worst in the world. Only 13 per cent of primary schools in the country offer the full primary cycle, from Grade 1 to Grade 8; the completion rate for primary schooling is less than 10 per cent, one of the lowest in the world.

A UNICEF report of January 2014<sup>100</sup> presented a more graphic picture of the education environment in the capital city; it described hundreds of displaced students in Juba, taking their primary leaving examination within the protection of UN compounds as fighting continued around the city. It is impossible not to be moved by the comment of one 19-year-old finishing his exam: "Not only have I lost four brothers and a friend during the clashes, but I lost all my books when we had to flee our home."

99 <http://www.unicef.org/southsudan/education.html>. Accessed 11 March, 2016.

100 [http://www.unicef.org/southsudan/media\\_school-exams.html](http://www.unicef.org/southsudan/media_school-exams.html). Accessed 11 March, 2016.

## 4.3.3. Issues and challenges

### **Peace, education and local languages**

South Sudan is an vivid example of the way civil conflict creates an extremely inhospitable environment for the growth of effective education systems. Unquestionably, the major cause of the challenging education environment in South Sudan today is the decades-long series of civil wars experienced by its people. The ethnic nature of these conflicts has heightened the challenges of establishing local language-based education systems, since inter-ethnic tension is not a supportive environment for the development of community languages on a national scale. Every effort to bring reconciliation and peace to the communities of this country will enhance the chances of building an education system that delivers strong student learning outcomes.

### **A fertile sociolinguistic context for multilingual education**

Assuming that peace can be achieved and sustained to build strong national education systems, the sociolinguistic and historical environment of South Sudan could be an

excellent basis for building an effective multilingual education system. The languages of South Sudan are very much alive, with many possibilities of institutional support for their written use and development. International agencies involved in helping to build South Sudan's education system could be instrumental in bringing about strong mother tongue-based multilingual education, if they were to unanimously prioritize and support it.

### **Juba Arabic and national identity**

The position of Juba Arabic is sociolinguistically controversial: it is widely used as a lingua franca and even a mother tongue in South Sudan, yet it is ineligible for official recognition in the school system because it is reminiscent of decades of oppression from the north. This clash between pedagogical appropriateness and political unacceptability renders a potentially effective language of instruction useless. Presumably, not until Juba Arabic loses its unfortunate link to the north in the minds of South Sudanese leaders will it have a chance to be seen as the effective language of instruction that it could be.



