Role of language in climate policy awareness

February 15, 2016 on Newsday

THE use of local language in local communities by speakers of that speech community, for climate change awareness is essentially fundamental in development work. Many NGOs, the government and implementing partners alike always find their development programmes failing simply because they would want to sound sophisticated and knowledgeable — to the detriment of achieving results.

Our local communities cannot cope up with the vices of technically related discourse of climate science yet they are expected to be important stakeholders in this case.

For climate change awareness and adaptation to succeed, the language of local people becomes critical, therefore it needs to be carefully harnessed and utilised for effective climate change mainstreaming activities. Due to the living fact that local communities are quite diverse, ethnically and religiously, there is need to reach out to them in the medium they all understand better. African communities are not a homogenous group like their European counterparts but they are linguistically and culturally diverse. As such, a linguistically-gifted polyglot may be introduced or utilised to make the local people feel wanted, accommodated and accepted as well as feeling at home. In the development literature crafted for them to implement, there is need for it to be harmonised in terms of being sustainably user-friendly.

Cross-cultural linguistic competence is the current missing link as we speak. Missing link in attempts to integrate the locals into meaningful development work. This nature of competence is critical for successful communication to take place between the development practitioners and the often despised locals. Climate science discourse is not even a favourite with the educated laypersons,
who can hardly interpret it, what more, the downtrodden and vulnerable local people who face the challenges of hunger, discrimination, neglect and failure to read.

The local person is forced to exercise the split-personality syndrome through reading or listening to the technical discourse, think in vernacular whilst at the same time trying to translate as well as struggling to make sense in English, without any marked form of success. Usually, as is always the case, the local person, achieves none of the above and as a result development work and adaptation initiatives suffer.

If language use consists of the expression and communication of thoughts, then surely the mind-set of the local communities is already affected. For they are forced to think in a particular way against the background that climate change adaptation need the local voices for sustainable development and resilience purposes.

It is also quite clear, that the constituency of language is an adaptation phenomenon in that, it enables the acquisition of linguistic competence, which translates to verbal communication techniques. As such, verbal communication can be used in many ways possible, climate change adaptation included.

Language use, especially vernacular is regarded as being in the great interest of the local knowledge of knowing, which some people refer to as indigenous knowledge systems or rather traditional or scientific knowledge deeply rooted in culture. Therefore, for comprehension to take place, there should be a recognition by the hearer- connected to the speaker’s frame of reference and meaning. As such, listening is not just decoding, but an essentially active process.

This would also act as sustainable evidence from which the audience can make generalisations as well as inferences. To that effect, the local language of knowing has such intrinsic and assertive illocutionary force of reason that also contribute to unmasking ambiguities.
This indeed, is not about language acquisition but critical thought and application. Through the role playing of life experiences, fellow members of the communities will be able to relate that to climate change scenarios. This kind of role-playing appeals to the values that communities cherish so much and as a result this kind of communication becomes potentially empowering. In this regard, everyone takes part in communication as compared to passive and unproductive hearing, which can be safely described as climate noise.

All in all, local languages afford people a chance to be involved in dialogues which facilitate long lasting understanding. By conversing in the language they all know and understand, we can the safely say people will exhibit a permanent change of behaviour, otherwise known as eco-consciousness.