LILIEMA

Language-independent literacies for inclusive education in multilingual areas

Executive summary. West and Central Africa (WCA) is the region of the world with the largest percentage of young people (32% of the population; UNFPA 2016). In Senegal, 81% of children are enrolled in primary school, but only 51% complete the primary cycle (UNESCO 2016). Primary education does not lead to literacy and numeracy skills relevant for daily life, nor does it result in proficiency levels in French, the official language and medium of instruction, needed for formal employment. Mother tongue education faces great political and operational obstacles and is not a realistic option in highly multilingual areas. A high proportion of adults are functional illiterates. We present LILIEMA, an innovative teaching method pioneered in the Crossroads research project that teaches letters and their sound values to write all languages in an individual's repertoire. We are currently piloting LILIEMA in two villages in Casamance and report here on the advantages of this method for overcoming linguistic inclusion and teaching locally grounded literacy skills relevant for daily interaction and cultural validation in Casamance and other multilingual societies.

The Casamance context. Located in the South of Senegal, the natural region of Casamance comprises the three provinces of Ziguinchor, Kolda and Sédhiou. The area has 1,664,000 inhabitants who speak ca. 30 languages on a surface area of 29,000km^2 (RGPHAE 2013). The Casamance is separated from the rest of Senegal by the country of The Gambia, and shares another border with Guinea Bissau. It forms part of a zone that is for climatic, historical, political and cultural reasons very different from the North of Senegal and has suffered from a longstanding secessionist conflict led by the MFDC (*Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques*) demanding the independence of

this region since 1982 (WANEP 2015). In particular the Lower Casamance area that forms the province of Ziguinchor is characterised by the following factors:

- Its status as a cross-border region shaped by three different colonial powers and a legacy of three different official languages (French in Senegal, English in The Gambia, and Portuguese in Guinea Bissau).
- Its high concentration of Frontier communities, that is, of small-scale, clan-based settlements spanning national borders and populated by inhabitants with high mobility and intense social ties to neighbouring villages.
- Its high incidence of internal and external migration, for reasons ranging from social exchanges through child fostering and marriage exchanges to economic mobility and seeking refuge from conflict (the Casamance conflict and the Guinea Bissau independence war being the most recent).

Multilingualism and its role in society. Casamance is the home of over 30 indigenous languages. Many of the smaller languages have only one village or a group of villages as their nominal home base; these languages include Baïnounk, Joola and Bayot languages. Larger languages and language clusters such as Balant, Mankanya, Manjak, Pepel and Fula co-exist with a Portuguese-based Creole, Wolof and Mandinka, which are also used as languages of wider communication. Every inhabitant of Casamance is multilingual, either through internal and external migration and the languages acquired during personal trajectories, or because of deeply rooted social exchanges resulting in small-scale multilingualism (Lüpke 2016a and b). Marriage links often transcend

linguistic and national borders, child fostering is widespread and brings children with very different linguistic repertoires together in one household, and ritual and religious mobility is pervasive. Formulating an efficient and inclusive language policy for multilingual areas like Casamance poses a challenge for language-based approaches. It is unrealistic to develop mother tongue teaching materials, train teachers, create a stable learning environment and provide the literacy materials needed to make literacy sustainable for the many small languages with speaker numbers ranging in the thousands. SIL, the only major language development actor in the region, has ended all literacy activities and is withdrawing from the area. Any language choice results in the exclusion of a part of the local population: if the patrimonial language of a place is selected, in addition to the high costs for a small target group, many of its inhabitants will be excluded, since they do not speak this language, do not identify with it, or are still learning it. If a larger language is chosen, the local languages become invisible, and local culture is completely marginalised. Local opinions are divided on which indigenous languages could be used in mother tongue teaching: while the most liberal respondents are open to teaching in Wolof, there is also vocal opposition to this choice, since it invokes the threats of Northern domination and Wolofisation that have played a central role in the Casamance conflict. In addition, and as observed in other WCA contexts (Brock-Utne & Skattum 2009), parents and learners often make rhetorical commitments to initiatives involving literacy in indigenous languages but do not follow suit in practice, because proficiency and literacy in the official language are seen as the main learning goals of formal education.

Indigenous grassroots writing as a model for language-independent literacy. In the light of literacy activities that remain unsuccessful or are not cost-effective in multilingual areas, we have turned to existing literacy practices for inspiration. In WCA, so-called Ajami writing (the writing of languages other than Arabic in the Arabic script) is a widely attested pre-colonial writing culture that exists till today. Just like present-day informal writing practices, this type of literacy is language-independent: letter-sound associations are applied

in the same way across language borders, following the orthographic conventions of a lead language, which usually is the language of the first or main literacy. For Ajami writing, the lead is Arabic, in West African localised writing tradition; for writing in Roman characters, the official language is used. This writing practice, together with the division it causes in cross-border contexts, can be illustrated through the different spellings of a name:

> The family name /ɟamɛ/ is attested in The Gambia, Senegal, and Guinea Bissau, and spelled according to the rules of official languages of these countries, English, French and Portuguese respectively, giving *<Jammeh>* for the former Gambian president, Yahya Jammeh, and *<Diamé>* for the French footballer of Senegalese origin Mohamed Diamé. In Guinea Bissau, this name is spelled <Jame>.

Grassroots writing practices making use of the Latin alphabet in language-independent fashion are widespread in text messages, social media, written signs and personal literacy. They can inform literacy activities built on a conception of literacy as a social practice (UNESCO UIL 2016) and be seized for locally grounded, bottom-up development strategies.

Multilingual Facebook chat using French spelling as the lead:
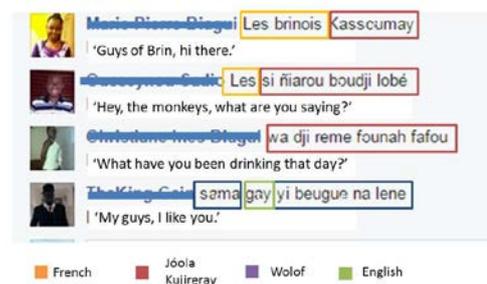
Piloting language-independent literacies: LILIEMA. LILIEMA is a method for the learning and teaching of basic literacy skills in highly multilingual areas that has been developed by Friederike Lüpke and her local transcriber team based on her longstanding research on West African multilingualism, in particular within the on-going Crossroads Project funded by the Leverhulme

Trust. LILIEMA is based on the teaching of sound-letter associations that can be applied to entire repertoires rather than being taught for a particular language. It allows inclusive literacy teaching in areas where participants are highly multilingual, particularly in small languages. LILIEMA is inspired by the acknowledged need to develop inclusive and multilingual literacy strategies (UNESCO UIL 2017) in order to reach the Sustainable Development Goals in the domain of education.

SDGs addressed by LILIEMA:
- SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,
- SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls,
- SDG 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all,
- SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Benefits of LILIEMA. LILIEMA reflects the linguistic realities of learners in highly multilingual settings. These learners are socialised into speaking different languages based on their trajectories. The prescriptive monolingual context of the school is at odds with learners' lived multilingualism. Mother tongue programmes complementing the official language context can only cater for a limited number of languages and always exclude parts of the intended audience, particularly in highly multilingual contexts where many small and locally confined languages co-exist. LILIEMA allows teachers to flexibly integrate the repertoires of all learners. By using the official alphabet of Senegal (compatible with most official alphabets for indigenous languages of WCA), LILIEMA is compatible with more resource-intensive standard literacies developed and sometimes taught for larger West African languages. It creates cultural and linguistic awareness based on actual practices. It recognises African languages regardless of their speaker numbers as a central form of cultural expression and an important part of intangible cultural heritage. Through this, LILIEMA increases consciousness of the lived multilingualism in heterogeneous societies. By valorising diversity, it

provides strategies for conflict prevention and resilience building in Frontier societies.

This strategy has a number of benefits that are crucial for reaching SDGs:

- LILIEMA makes all of the languages in an individual's repertoire usable for personal literacy, thus contributing to personal autonomy and development relevant to local economy, the scope of SDG 4.
- LILIEMA reaches groups excluded from language-focused literacy activities. All language-centred literacy programmes struggle to cope with mobility. Through reaching these marginalized groups, LILIEMA contributes to SDG 16.
- By reaching women, who often marry into different linguistic environments and are excluded from formal education, it is central to the achievement of SDG 5.
- LILIEMA uses local means and is training and employing local teachers, relevant to SDG 8.

The LILIEMA method explained. LILIEMA is based on sound-letter correspondences codified in the official National Alphabet of Languages of Senegal. Rather than teaching this alphabet based on a specific language, as in most mother tongue literacy programmes, LILIEMA introduces the sound values of letters based on examples from all languages present in the class room. LILIEMA learners learn to recognise letters and their sound values and to read and write words and short texts not just in one language, but in all the languages in their repertoires. LILIEMA is based on official alphabets, but not on official orthographies. It does not introduce standard version of a language or insist on standard spellings. Variation is tolerated, and it is expected that conventions will develop through use over time, as they have in indigenous writing in other contexts in Africa, for instance in Ajami writing or digital writing practices.

The word for 'house' in Creole and Baïnounk Gujaher, illustrating the letter <a>:

LILIEMA sites. LILIEMA is currently being piloted in two villages in the Lower Casamance area of Senegal. In Djibonker, a weekly class has been integrated into the primary school curriculum at the level of CP and CE on the request of local teachers. In Agnack, weekly classes are taught to primary school children as part of the supplementary curriculum coordinated by local school teachers, and separate classes are taught to adults. The classes have ca. 40 participants each. All classes are developed and taught by community members familiar with the multilingual environments of their villages. Teachers in both sites have participated in a one-week training workshop. During the workshop, they have learned the official alphabet of Senegal, experienced language-independent writing and have developed their own learning resources.

A gap text featuring words in Wolof, Creole and Joola:
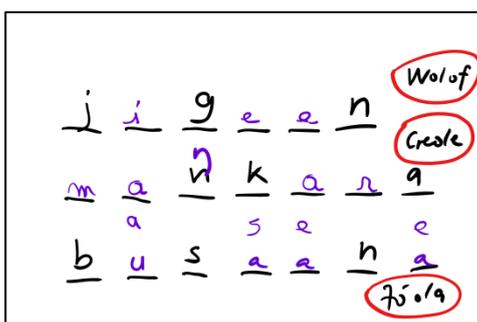
During the pilot, the local teachers are supervised by two experienced multilingual transcribers of the Crossroads research team.

Potential of LILIEMA and policy recommendations. LILIEMA teaching is not based on generic materials but on site-specific resources created by local teachers and learners themselves. It valorises all languages in an individual's repertoire and allows acquiring basic personal literacy in languages familiar to learners, removing linguistic barriers to accessing knowledge. LILIEMA can be transferred at low cost to other multilingual contexts in Africa and beyond.

> Possible contexts of use for LILIEMA include
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> - Hotspots of rural multilingualism and linguistic diversity such as Western and Northwestern Cameroon, Nigeria, the Horn of Africa, the entire Upper Guinea Coast of West Africa, South Africa
> - Hotspots of urban multilingualism: cities throughout Africa
> - Hotspots of mobility: border regions, refugee settlements and diaspora communities

We recommend investment in piloting and further developing the LILIEMA method as an alternative to mother-tongue based literacy in highly multilingual areas that is compatible with standard literacies but that is adaptive to every linguistic context and entirely reliant on local resources.

Sources

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Authors: Ekaterina Golovko & Friederike Lüpke
Contact: Prof. Friederike Lüpke
Crossroads Project
SOAS, University of London
Russell Square, Thornhaugh Street
London WC1H 0XG, United Kingdom of Great Britain
SOAS web page **|** Crossroads blog **|**fl2@soas.ac.uk