



February 24, 2026

**OPEN LETTER**

**To:** His Excellency the Chairperson of the African Union Commission  
Addis Ababa, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

**Subject: From Symbol to Structure: Advancing African Languages as a Foundational Pillar of Continental Integration**

**Your Excellency,**

Please accept my sincere congratulations on your assumption of office as Chairperson of the African Union Commission. The responsibilities entrusted to your esteemed office extend far beyond administrative oversight. They embody a historic mandate to advance Africa's integration in a manner that is structurally transformative, strategically coherent, and authentically inclusive.

Having had the honour and privilege of serving the African Union for over fifteen years, first as Senior Research and Programme Officer, and subsequently as Executive Secretary of the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), I take the liberty of respectfully submitting for Your Excellency's consideration an issue which, in my considered view, remains fundamental to the full and effective realisation of Agenda 2063.

**1.0 The Imperative of Linguistic Inclusion**

Specifically, I refer to the need for the systematic, institutional, and operational integration of African languages into the core functioning of the Union. While significant normative and policy frameworks have been adopted over the years, their practical implementation has yet to match their strategic importance. The integration of African languages should not be confined to symbolic recognition or cultural affirmation. Rather, it must be embedded within the administrative procedures, policy formulation processes, communication strategies, and programmatic delivery mechanisms of the Union.

The African Union is currently navigating a pivotal phase in its institutional and political evolution. The operationalisation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the consolidation of peace and security initiatives across the continent, and Africa's strategic positioning within the Fourth Industrial Revolution collectively demand governance systems that are participatory, accessible, efficient, and structurally coherent. These transformative undertakings require not only sound policy frameworks but also administrative cultures capable of fostering broad ownership among African citizens.

During my experience at ACALAN, it became increasingly evident that while African cultural identity is consistently affirmed in official discourse, institutional practice often reflects a different reality. The functioning of the African Union and many of its Member States remains largely anchored in inherited colonial linguistic frameworks. While

these languages continue to serve as working tools of administration and diplomacy, their predominance has structural implications that extend beyond symbolism.

Language shapes access to information, participation in public life, and the legitimacy of institutions. When governance processes are conducted primarily in languages not widely spoken or mastered by the majority of citizens, barriers to meaningful engagement inevitably arise. This can affect policy dissemination, civic education, public consultation processes, and even the effective implementation of continental frameworks such as the AfCFTA. In this context, linguistic choices influence not only communication, but also efficiency, inclusivity, and democratic participation.

Aspiration 5 of Agenda 2063 envisions an Africa grounded in a shared sense of identity, heritage, and values. Yet, for this vision to be fully realised, it must be built upon a foundation that reflects the continent's rich cultural and linguistic diversity. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is the primary medium through which citizens comprehend policy, access economic opportunity, engage in meaningful innovation, and assert their rights within the civic space. When the processes of continental integration are conducted predominantly in non-African languages, there is a tangible risk of limiting broad-based participation, inadvertently creating a distance between the institutions of the Union and the people they serve.

## **2.0 The Strategic Choice Before the Union**

In this context, the question before the new leadership is not rhetorical but deeply strategic. It is a choice between maintaining current linguistic practices, which may perpetuate these gaps, and progressively aligning the institutional culture of the African Union with the living linguistic realities of the African continent. This is a choice about the very nature of the Union's relationship with its citizens and the depth of its democratic legitimacy.

The normative instruments necessary for this transformation already exist. The Language Plan of Action for Africa (1984, revised 2006) and subsequent resolutions by the Union's policy organs provide a robust framework. What has been lacking is not vision, but rather the coordinated implementation, sustainable financing, and sustained political commitment required to translate that vision into institutional reality. The question before this leadership is therefore one of execution.

Building upon this established framework, a practical path forward could involve the incremental integration of key African languages into the official work of the Union, beginning with the most widely spoken trans-border languages. This could be complemented by a systematic effort to translate essential policy documents, treaties, and communications. Furthermore, investing in technological tools and human capacity for translation and interpretation would empower a new generation of African scholars and professionals, transforming our linguistic heritage from a symbolic asset into a functional pillar of continental governance.

With the utmost respect and in a constructive spirit, I wish to propose a series of concrete measures to begin this vital alignment.

## **3.0 Recommendations for Operationalising Linguistic Integration**

The following recommendations are designed to move the Union from policy declaration to structural implementation. They are presented as interconnected pillars of a comprehensive strategy.

### 3.1 Consolidating Kiswahili as a Fully Operational Working Language

The recognition of Kiswahili as a working language of the African Union, and as a language of wider communication across the continent, marked a historic milestone. However, recognition alone does not guarantee operational effectiveness. To translate this designation into tangible institutional impact, the following measures are required:

**a) Dedicated Budgetary Allocation:** Establish a protected and dedicated budget line to implement the **Dar es Salaam Framework for Action for Kiswahili** (Assembly Decision/AU/Dec796 [XXXIV]). This would provide predictable financial support for translation, interpretation, capacity building, and terminology development.

**b) Institutionalise Interpretation:** Provide simultaneous interpretation in Kiswahili during meetings, particularly at statutory sessions of the Assembly and Executive Council, thereby normalizing its use at all decision-making levels.

**c) Proactive Translation:** Ensure the timely translation of major policy documents, treaties, and reports into Kiswahili and other vehicular cross-border languages prior to their adoption.

**d) Permanent Staffing:** Integrate Kiswahili interpreters, translators, and editors into the regular staffing structure of the Commission, moving beyond ad hoc arrangements toward permanent institutional capacity.

**e) Operationalise the Pan-African Centre:** Fully operationalise the **Pan African Centre for Interpretation and Translation** under ACALAN, with Kiswahili as a core language of work, to serve as a continental hub for professional training and quality assurance.

Taken together, these measures would transform Kiswahili from a symbolically recognised language into a fully functional instrument of governance, reinforcing Africa's linguistic sovereignty.

### 3.2 Enhancing the Digital Preparedness of African Languages

For Africa to participate effectively in the digital transformation, it must ensure its major languages are not left behind. Linguistic inclusion within digital infrastructures is a developmental imperative. The following measures are proposed:

**a) Pan-African Digital Terminology Project:** Mandate the development of a terminological project, housed within the ACALAN Comprehensive and Interactive Platform for African Languages, to create and standardise vocabulary for science, technology, governance, and artificial intelligence.

**b) Harmonised Scientific Terminology:** Actively support the creation of harmonised scientific and technical terminology, with an initial focus on vehicular cross-border languages, to strengthen the coherence of the digital market.

**c) Open-Source Linguistic Datasets:** Promote the development and open-source release of high-quality linguistic datasets (transcribed speech, translated texts, annotated corpora) to empower African tech entrepreneurs to build local solutions.

**d) Localisation of Digital Services:** Actively encourage the localisation of software applications and the delivery of public digital services in African languages. From e-government portals to mobile health information, this is the ultimate measure of digital inclusion and democratic empowerment.

### 3.3 Strengthening the Policy Impact of African Languages Week and the Decade of African Languages

The annual observance of African Languages Week, considered within the broader context of the Decade of African Languages (2022–2032), represents a strategic framework of immense potential. To harness this potential fully:

- a) **Reform the Observance:** Transform African Languages Week from a ceremonial event into a substantive platform for policy reporting and accountability, dedicating a significant portion of the commemoration to reviewing progress.
- b) **Formal Reporting Mechanism:** Formally request that Member States submit, in conjunction with African Languages Week, concise progress updates on their implementation of the Language Plan of Action for Africa.
- c) **Develop Measurable Indicators:** Establish a clear set of measurable indicators, moving beyond vague commitments to focus on verifiable data, including dedicated budgetary allocations to mother-tongue-based multilingual education.
- d) **Link Commemoration to Reform:** Intentionally align the themes and outcomes of each annual commemoration with specific, actionable policy goals (e.g., use of African languages in justice systems).

### 3.4 Promoting Cross-Border Languages in Education and Governance

Vehicular cross-border languages represent one of Africa's most underutilised assets for continental integration. To harness them strategically:

- a) **Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education:** Encourage Member States to adopt mother-tongue-based multilingual education during the foundational years of schooling, using cross-border languages as mediums of instruction in early primary education.
- b) **Disseminate Policy Information:** Promote the widespread dissemination of public policy information in widely spoken African languages within each economic corridor. This is particularly urgent for AfCFTA-related materials, which must be understood by the traders and entrepreneurs meant to benefit from them.
- c) **Integrate into Public Services:** Systematically integrate cross-border languages into public health campaigns, agricultural extension services, and civic education programmes to ensure development is truly received and understood.

### 3.5 Establishing an African Languages Development Fund

Sustainable progress requires predictable, institutionalised financing mechanisms. The establishment of a dedicated **African Languages Development Fund**, operating under the auspices of ACALAN, would provide precisely such a mechanism.

The Fund would serve as the financial backbone for critical activities, including:

- a) **Orthographic Harmonisation:** Financing work to develop harmonised writing systems for cross-border languages.
- b) **Translation of Legal Instruments:** Facilitating the systematic translation of key continental legal instruments (treaties, protocols, charters) into a growing number of African languages.

- c) **Capacity Building:** Prioritising sustained investment in human capital through programmes like the Pan African Master's and PhD Programme in African Languages and Applied Linguistics (**PANMAPAL**).
- d) **Public Service Broadcasting:** Providing structured support to ACALAN's radio and television initiatives for the production of public service content in African languages.

Structured with clear governance mechanisms and multi-source contributions, the Fund would evolve beyond a mere financial mechanism, becoming a living instrument for the promotion of dignity, inclusion, and empowerment across Africa.

#### **4.0 Conclusion: Building the Africa We envision**

Your Excellency,

The development of African languages should be approached not merely as an exercise in cultural preservation, but as the deliberate construction of strategic infrastructure for governance, innovation, and continental integration. A language policy that excludes the majority from full participation is, in effect, a policy that limits the very integration it seeks to achieve. Conversely, a policy that intentionally and systematically includes African languages in the institutional practice of the Union shapes participation, expands economic inclusion, and deepens democratic legitimacy.

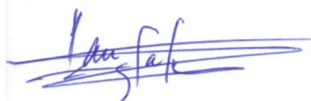
The normative instruments necessary for this transformation already exist. The question before this leadership is one of execution: whether to allow these instruments to remain aspirational or to activate them as operational tools for a more inclusive and effective Union.

By progressively embedding African languages into the daily work of the Union, the Commission would enhance the inclusivity of continental programmes, strengthen citizen ownership, and deepen the integration project itself. A Union that speaks to its people in their own voices is a Union that is truly theirs.

I respectfully submit these reflections in a spirit of constructive engagement, born of a deep conviction that the African renaissance must be built on African foundations.

Please accept, Your Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration and my sincere wishes for wisdom, strength, and success during your tenure. May your leadership bring us closer to the Africa we envision: integrated, prosperous, and at peace with itself.

With profound respect and an unwavering commitment to the African cause,



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