

Language rights: the way forward

Lubbe, J., Du Plessis, T., Truter, E. & Wiegand, C. 2011. South African Language Rights Monitor 2001: first report on the South African Language Rights Monitor Project. Bloemfontein: Sun Press. 130 p. Price: R175,00. ISBN: 978-1-920383-29-9.

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The Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) commissioned the Unit for Language Facilitation and Empowerment at the University of the Free State to assist with the creation of the South African Language Rights Monitor (SALRM). This came about to help foster PanSALB's intention of raising awareness of language rights issues in South Africa. It also attempts to cultivate a proactive language rights culture that can contribute toward the transformation of society by taking issue with linguistic discrimination. An important pro-active step in this regard is the dissemination of information on language rights in South Africa.

Since extensive information on the language rights situation in South Africa is not readily available, especially as regard the public at large, SALRM came into being as a coherent information dissemination instrument. Its task is to compile and make available to a larger readership an annual comprehensive report on language rights. SALRM 2002 is the first report in this regard and covers five focus areas considered to be of fundamental importance for the fostering of a language rights culture. The investigations in the five areas are preceded by a discussion of theoretical considerations concurrent with language rights issues. These concerns centre around linguistic rights as essentially basic human rights, what constitutes a minority language, in an international and national sense, guaranteeing linguistic rights with recourse to litigation, and the attitude toward language rights in Belgium, Canada, Paraguay and South Africa.

The first focus area considers media coverage on language issues in general. Media coverage is regarded as an important instrument of language rights activism, particularly the printed media, which is a valuable source of information for the public.

An analysis of language rights complaints in the printed media is undertaken in the second focus area in order to investigate which language rights incidents have received preferred representation and been lodged with PanSALB, and to determine the identity of the complainants. Disconcertingly it appears that the primary perpetrator of language rights violations is the State.

The third focus area covers an analysis of other instruments of language rights activism, as covered by the printed media. The language rights struggle is regarded as an important commitment to democracy and can be understood as a type of activism in which active role-players effect change in belief systems, social practices and structures concerned with language communities. The discussion is conducted under the headings of language rights complaint versus language rights activism, an analysis of language rights activism as reported in the printed media, and finally an analysis and interpretation of the data gleaned.

Linguistic rights litigation constitutes the fourth focus area of reportage. Litigation is seen as one of the most vital instruments of language activism which, unfortunately, in South Africa is not maximised to its potential. The matters touched upon here are the importance of litigation, language rights litigation in the context of an instrument of change, a review of linguistic rights litigation during the

periods 1994 to 2001 and 2002, and the role of PanSALB in the initiation of litigation.

The final focus area concerns an overview of research on linguistic rights in South Africa in which the following are identified: linguistic rights as a fundamental human right, the necessity of statutory provisions for linguistic rights, the spread of monolingualism and the decreased status of Afrikaans.

The compilers of the 2002 report present a number of recommendations regarding methodology and the role of PanSALB. Some of the conclusions drawn include the following:

- Linguistic human rights must be guaranteed as language rights by the state and not depend on the whims and largess of the authorities.
- Media coverage on language issues constitutes a vital contribution toward the cultivation of language rights activism.
- The largest number of complaints regarding language rights violations was lodged against state institutions and especially against the first level of government.
- PanSALB, as an official “language watchdog”, does not successfully resolve language rights problems lodged with it.
- Community mobilisation is an effective activist technique not adequately employed.
- The same applies to language litigation.
- By not respecting minority language rights the government is short-sighted and alienating a large portion of its citizens.
- What is urgently required to defuse language tensions is the establishment of an environment that encourages mutual respect, dialogue and proactive actions.

This publication can play an important role in the debate on language rights issues. Its collation of information, interpretation of data and conclusions are valuable for interested readers and defenders of minority language rights. The South African Language Rights Monitor constitutes a constructive contribution by academics to the struggle for language rights in particular, and to the broader socio-political rights of minorities in general.