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Language-in-education reform to improve foundational learning in The Gambia: Design and implementation

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Program objective

The **objective** of this government-led program was to design and implement a language-in-education reform that improves foundational learning by enabling early-grade instruction in languages that learners better understand, and at the same time strengthening the transition to English in later grades.

This objective was addressed through a **sequenced, evidence-based approach** that linked system diagnostics, pilot implementation, and policy development.

Three sources of diagnostic data were used to shape solutions

1. A national-level school language mapping activity which provided detailed data on:

- which Gambian language(s) would be appropriate LoI in each school context,
- how many children speak each of the Gambian languages and where they live, and
- teachers' levels of fluency in the languages of the communities where they are assigned.





2. The *Mainstreaming Effective Intervention Strategies in Schools (MEISS)* pilot which is being carried out in Wolof-speaking classrooms.

MEISS adapted a successful Gambian model of after-school learning into a structured pedagogy approach, delivered in both English and Wolof for Grades 1-3. Treatment and control schools were selected using language mapping data.

A midline assessment has generated early evidence on implementation progress, learning outcomes, and scalability.

3. A series of national stakeholder engagement workshops which examined the academic, social and personal aspects of various language of instruction choices.

Stakeholder input revealed:

- largely positive attitudes about the use of Gambian languages in Gambian classrooms,
- concerns about the use of English as the primary Lol, and
- solutions that are seen as appropriate for supporting the nation's identity as well as enhancing student learning outcomes.



Findings and Implications

Nationwide school language mapping

- Confirmed the strong relevance of using of national languages of instruction in early grades.
- Demonstrated that, in most schools, a dominant local language could be identified for use as the language of instruction.
- Highlighted the operational complexity of implementation, including variation across regions and misalignment between *teacher language proficiency* and *school needs*.
- This shifted the policy discussion from theoretical concerns to practical questions of feasibility, sequencing, and system alignment.

National stakeholder engagement workshops

- Revealed widely-held positive attitudes about the use of Gambian languages in primary-grade classrooms.
- Although English remains a language of prestige and power in The Gambia, the importance of community language use in primary-grade schools was affirmed by the participants' own classroom experiences.

MEISS pilot

- Provided early evidence that structured pedagogy can be effectively delivered in both English and a national language within the public system.
- Highlighted the importance (and the challenges) of teacher support, quality instructional materials, and fidelity of implementation.

Results



These findings informed the development of a national language-in-education policy which was drafted by Gambian experts, refined in a national validation workshop and approved by the Cabinet in March 2026 as the *Language in Education Policy 2025-2030*.

The policy reflects key trade-offs that were identified in the evidence, including the number of languages to be supported, the sequencing of language transition, and the pace of rollout.

The Gambian Government is now integrating national languages into a structured pedagogy format, developing teaching and learning materials in seven national languages alongside English, and implementing a phased rollout across early childhood education and Grades 1–3, supported by targeted teacher training and deployment strategies.



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