



Respecting communities in International Development: languages and cultural understanding

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Respecting communities in International Development: languages and cultural understanding

This report details the conclusions and recommendations of a three year project (2015–2018), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), on the role which languages and cultural understanding play in International Development. The starting point for the research was the observation that ‘listening’ is key to the relationships which International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) seek to form with communities across the world.

In order to investigate the contribution of languages and culture to listening, the project (based at the Universities of Reading and Portsmouth) brought together researchers from International Development, Modern Languages and Translation Studies, with colleagues from INTRAC, in order to work with UK-based INGOs, and with NGOs and development workers in Kyrgyzstan, Malawi and Peru.

The research has addressed three key questions:

- what is the role of languages in power relations in development work?
- how much organisational awareness is there of languages/language policy?
- what is the provision of language/cultural mediation including translators/interpreters?

This report, jointly authored by Professor Hilary Footitt, Dr Angela Crack and Dr Wine Tesseur, has benefited from the expert contributions of a wide range of NGO and language practitioners. We would particularly like to thank Christian Aid, Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK, and Tearfund for their support and sustained interest in the research.

Quotations have been translated from Russian and Kyrgyz into English by Cholpon Ismailovna Akmatova and from Spanish by Hilary Footitt.

The report is available in PDF format (www.reading.ac.uk/listening-zones-ngos/) in Chichewa, English, French, Kyrgyz, Quechua, Russian and Spanish. Please contact us if you would like to read it in other languages.

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Terminology used

International NGO (INGO) refers to an NGO originating from the global North that has a wide network of national affiliates and partners.

Southern NGO (SNGO) refers to a local or national NGO originating from one of the case study countries. The term 'partner' is used to denote an SNGO that has entered a formal partnership with an INGO which usually involves the transfer of funds.

When the term 'NGO' is used, the report is referring to both INGOs and SNGOs

DFID Department for International Development (UK)

Executive summary

This study was conducted between June 2015 and June 2018 and comprised:

- Research in the archives of Christian Aid, Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK, and DFID's predecessors
- Document analysis of current policy material
- 30 semi-structured interviews with INGO staff working in and outside the UK
- 9 interviews with DFID officials
- 88 interviews and discussions with international NGO staff and staff from SNGOs in Kyrgyzstan, Malawi and Peru
- Feedback workshops with NGO practitioners and with translators working with NGOs.
- Comments on draft report from respondents.

The project addressed three key questions:

- What is the role of languages in power relations in development work?
- How much organisational awareness is there of languages/language policy?
- What is the provision of language/cultural mediation including translators/interpreters?

Summary of key findings

Languages have a generally low priority in development work

DFID and INGOs in the UK do not give overt consideration to the role of languages in development and to their potential contribution to development relationships.

"We sort of assume that the NGOs have taken care of [language needs]."

Senior DFID official 2

The assumption is that colleagues further down the development chain will take responsibility for this if and when necessary.

Cultural awareness is recognised by INGOs as being important at the staff recruitment stage

"... in job descriptions in development, you always get "Oh, the ability to work with people from other cultures", ...but it is a specific skillset...I think that, yeah, it's not that explicitly talked about and it probably should be."

INGO Advisory Officer, UK

"...the kind of relationship you can establish with people at long distance....that's something that comes up in recruitment quite a lot, ...somebody's ability to work with a dispersed team. And in a very multicultural context."

INGO Policy Advisor, UK

Staff outside the UK consistently describe languages as being vital in establishing relationships of trust

Paying close attention to languages is seen as contributing to successful development programmes in which communities can both access and contribute information, understand objectives, and take full ownership of development projects.

"International donor representatives must be motivated to learn the local language ... local people will see their efforts and their attitude will be different. There will be more trust, because language serves as a bridge of trust."

Director of national SNGO network

"The whole concept of beneficiary feedback would be based on the ability to actually understand the feedback from the beneficiaries so a coherent level of appropriate and different language knowledge would be something that would be assumed."

Senior DFID official 1

"It's much more enriching to have a dialogue in the same language, because the information you get is much richer, and secondly, you get to understand what they [the community] actually want, or how they want it, or which way to go."

Coordinator of national SNGO network

“How you convey the message, around communication, there has to be a separate budget for that, because usually if you don't, you end up midway through the project and you're looking for money to translate and that has been problematic, so that should be, I think, a programming issue. Language should become a programming issue, right from the design throughout the project.
Manager, national office of INGO”

“International donors hold pre-programme meetings where they inform about the programme goals and approaches, where the language issue is also raised. It's a sensitive area. The issue of language is a barrier for organisations who want to participate in the programme.
Director of national SNGO network”

“In terms of challenges, I think like Chichewa, it's a good language but it's got very limited vocabulary, so in most cases instead of giving a particular name to a concept, let's say 'resilience', you just have to describe resilience. So that takes long, or sometimes may change the meaning...let me also say that Chichewa as a language is not standard on its own, I think it has got dialect, several dialects...So if you do the translation to try and standardise it, it becomes very difficult.
Director of SNGO”

“The challenge which I've seen over time is that most of the English words - like in the case of Malawi - you can't just translate them, even if it's a correct translation, because they have a negative connotation. So, like, in Chichewa you may not easily just say "I'm here to talk about sex". Ok? Because that word automatically would lead some people to withdraw.
Former senior official in Malawi country office of an INGO”

Invisibility of languages in the development cycle

INGO staff in Southern country offices and SNGO staff argue that languages are not generally integrated into the development cycle and budgeted for in advance in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and feedback stages of projects. *"I have never put in the budget resources for translation....What we do is we just put a budget for communication, but without specifying for translation...That means, we are blind and we take Malawi as if everybody speaks English, but we're implementing in districts where one district speaks a different language from the other two districts. So, in Nsanje, they speak Sena, in Mchinji here they speak Chichewa, but all we have done is to categorize them as if all of Malawi is one language: English."*
Projects Officer, Southern country office of INGO

Negative effects on community participation and the establishment of relations of mutual respect

The failure to integrate languages into development initiatives leads to certain groups being excluded, unable to apply for funding and to participate fully in project design. *"...if we speak about access to programme funding, in general, from the point of view of the language problem, the people who speak languages are a must for organisations. Organisations in cities such as Bishkek, Karakol, Osh, very rarely Jalalabad, Batken, can afford such people. Organisations who don't have paid staff, most of the staff are volunteers, 90% of them don't have access to such programmes. They have to hire someone to write an application, but they cannot check the quality of the application. I met people who said they had feedback about why their application was rejected because there were a lot of critical comments that there were no goals, no mission, no logical sequence, although in the Kyrgyz or Russian version, all this was written."*
Director of national SNGO network)

Untranslatability of concepts

Many words commonly used in the anglophone development world are not directly translatable into other languages: examples given include 'gender', 'accountability', 'resilience', and 'sustainability'. Fieldworkers often have no clear guidance as to how to translate these concepts, and so invent ad hoc solutions that may not convey the INGO message effectively. Conversely, languages may contain words and phrases that are not directly translatable into English: examples given include 'acompañamiento' and 'horizontalidad'. This mutual untranslatability can make it difficult for fieldworkers to explain to HQ or donors how communities describe their local reality, and for communities to understand the nature of development projects. *"Issues like rights-based approaches, issues like power, political economy analysis, empowerment - it's a simple word in English, but if you want to translate it to Chichewa, it's a bit tricky...interesting for me are issues around climate change, resilience, those kind of words, technical words, which are very difficult to translate. So, I think generally the NGO buzzwords are problematic for a local person to understand, for someone outside."*
Senior official at a Malawi country office of an INGO

Translating can be even more problematic when words are culturally sensitive. Fieldworkers often have no clear guidance and support from HQ about how to contextualise messages so that they are appropriate to the specific cultural context. Community resistance to open discussion of taboo subjects means that fieldworkers use euphemisms, which can lead to confusion.

"We can't talk about sensitive issues directly because it will cause offence. We can use similes, metaphors and proverbs to describe sexual intercourse and the like. But this is the way that the older people speak, so the problem is the younger generation will not understand these words."
Translator for an SNGO

“... there would be perhaps a communications bid and within that, we will use some of that for translation, but what we face a lot of the time is that we will write a report or a strategy, and then people in other places are like “can we have a translation?” and we are like, “oh, we need a budget for that”, so it’s kind of an afterthought.

INGO officer, UK ”

Translation and language mediation are often an afterthought in the development cycle

Whilst key institutional documents relating to risk or INGO self-branding are generally translated centrally by professional translators, the potential need for translation within development projects is often an afterthought, with ad hoc arrangements being made normally in-country. In this situation, bilingual/multilingual staff members can assume an additional burden outside their agreed job descriptions.

“We’ve seen some challenges with translation when we have documents that have to do with our NGO’s position or policy because a lot of times we have that document in English and the translations are done much later. So, in many cases, we’ve had to translate in the country office or at least have a summary translated in the country office to be able to share any information with the partners. So that has been quite a challenge and yes, quite often, I’ve had to do that by myself basically.”

In-country officer

Discussions on sustainability/supporting local capacity rarely include building on and nurturing the linguistic potential of communities in order to contribute to future development strategies

It is unusual to find examples of INGOs and SNGOs either seeking to develop glossaries of key terms in the languages of the communities which could be widely shared in future development initiatives, helping to compile registers of interpreters, offering skills training in an appropriate language, or supporting English language acquisition.

“You have a lot of [manuals] that are produced in English, but we don’t have translation of the kind of materials that we use in the local language. So what we go through is basically each of the field workers translating in the way they understand what they’re looking at... Can we have a translation of some of the common jargons that we use and how they prefer them in the local language? It would be an easy to use handbook for the field workers.”

Director of a national office of an INGO

“It would be very good if organisations could provide some opportunities for staff like me to learn English either locally or to go abroad for a couple of months specifically to learn English. Because so far, I haven’t seen such opportunities offered to NGO staff.

INGO in-country officer ”

INGO staff in-country and partners often feel at a disadvantage working in a predominantly anglophone organisation

Staff whose first language is not English see their level of English, particularly in written skills, as having a negative impact on career advancement and curtailing their ability to convey the dynamism of community activities through report and feedback mechanisms.

“Actually, we are on our own to be frank. I mean, this is something that is challenging.... We struggle more to give the required quality to our report compared to those from English-speaking countries. To have access to local English courses here you know and to motivate them to be fluent in English.”

INGO in-country manager

“This is something I have been observing in many organisations, because some people are failing even to get jobs because they are not fluent in English.

INGO in-country officer ”

There are examples of highly innovative practice in the sector from which others could learn

Examples (see Section on *Innovative Practice*) include: using translation to foster empowerment, adopting a communications strategy which includes languages and cultural awareness, and providing language support for projects at specific stages in the field in order to enhance the active participation of communities.

“...this idea of actually we all speak different languages is definitely something that I don't put enough emphasis on....because I do talk to the students about valuing knowledge, but then I haven't really been explicit.
Development Studies tutor, UK”

Higher Education courses in development are largely language-silent

Undergraduate and postgraduate university courses in development usually omit mention of/give a low profile to the role of languages and cultural understanding.

“As regards the academic environment: I think we've left the work, this work, to linguists, and obviously, they're going to study it from the point of view of morphology and grammar,... but if the organisations and the institutions which work on the theme of development would realise the opportunities which they are missing, they could incorporate in their theories of development...the theme of the customs of groups, and within the customs and local knowledges, there's all this about language. There's an important theme here”

Recent university graduate, SNGO staff member.

Recommendations

Recommendations for international NGOs

Recognise the importance of languages within their own organisations

- Ensure that the multilingualism of the organisation is seen by staff to be institutionally valued, and integral to an understanding of cultural contexts. One way of achieving this is to actively encourage the acquisition of additional language skills within the organisation.
- Recognise the 'burden of bilingualism' carried by some staff in the INGOs, i.e. the informal work of language mediation undertaken by bilingual/multilingual personnel in addition to their normal work and outside agreed job descriptions.
- Address some of the discomfort felt by staff working for the INGO about their level of English, especially the written language, and their perception that because of this the institutional playing field is not level.
- Ensure translators and translation coordinators in the organisation are given visibility on staff web pages to raise awareness of translation services.

When planning projects

- Think about language at the design phase of a project. Listen to the words that the community uses in the needs assessment stage.
- Provide language support during early discussions with communities, helping to facilitate a dialogue, and to create relationships of trust.
- Include a budget line for translation and interpreting.

When starting a project and during monitoring and evaluation

- Translate successful project applications into local languages so that partners and communities can have an in-depth understanding of what is planned. This will give them access to the information and knowledge needed to increase involvement and local ownership.
- Feedback regularly to the community to check that the project is meeting original expectations, and make necessary amendments.
- Work with local interpreters wherever possible and seek to establish a register of translators and interpreters who have worked in and have an understanding of development. This register, and good practice in interpreting, could be shared with partners and communities.
- Translate reports into local languages and feed back to partners in their first languages.

To support SNGOs and communities in developing local capacity

- Work together with SNGOs to produce glossaries of key terms in languages of the communities that can be a common resource.
- Share learning on the place of languages in communication strategies with other NGOs in pre-existing NGO networks.
- Consider providing skills training in a language that is accessible to SNGOs.
- Consider providing access to English language training.

Recommendations for donors

Donors should reflect on how to improve current practices in order to foster linguistic inclusivity and greater respect for local cultures.

When issuing a Call for Applications

- Ensure that the style of language used and the format of the application form is simple and straightforward.
- Let applicants apply in their first language or in a lingua franca in which they have capacity.
- Translate the Call for Applications and the accompanying instructions into local languages, and provide glossaries on key terminology.

- Reimburse translation costs of successful applicants.
- Explicitly state that applicants should indicate how they plan to ensure communication with local communities.
- Invite applicants to include interpreting and translation costs in their budget.
- Explicitly note inadequacies in communicating with communities and respecting them culturally in feedback on failed applications.

When selecting projects and during monitoring and evaluation (M&E)

- Ask organisations to demonstrate their 'language and cultural policies' and value those NGOs that can articulate these policies.
- Provide resources to pilot communication materials in advance, using the appropriate local language or dialect.
- Ensure that M&E frameworks encourage NGOs to reflect on how language issues affect project outcomes.
- Encourage INGOs to translate successful project proposals into local languages, so that SNGOs and communities can have an in-depth understanding of what is planned.
- Provide opportunities to implementing organisations to give feedback in their first language about whether projects are having the desired effect.

To support local capacity building and sustainability

- Make available resources for SNGOs without English language capacity to translate information on their organisation into English so that they can share their knowledge and work. This would support SNGOs in having a voice and having impact.
- Consider funding civil society support groups to set up English language courses for SNGOs.

Recommendations for Higher Education

- Undergraduate and postgraduate university courses in development should give a greater emphasis to languages and cultural understanding.

During curriculum review

- Address the importance of languages and cultural knowledge in delivering projects that are respectful to communities, drawing on the database of cases presented by this project.
- Investigate the possibilities of setting up support networks of student volunteers who would work with an SNGO for a short time to assist in their language/ translation needs.



Introduction

Do NGOs need a languages policy?

The genesis of the project was a Workshop with practitioners, *Do NGOs need a languages policy?*, held in the University of Reading on 20 January 2014 (<http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/modern-languages-and-european-studies/DO-NGOs-Need-a-Languages-Policy-Workshop-Report-Feb.2014.pdf>). A major discussion point was the central role of language in the exercise of power, and in decisions on what 'counts' as voices which can be heard. Languages were seen as being key to NGOs' accountability to the communities with whom they worked. Despite considerable efforts in the sector, NGO practitioners felt that there was still a relatively low awareness of the need to be culturally sensitive, and very little understanding of how unequal power relationships can be magnified through languages.

Practitioners called for:

- evidence-based research which could raise awareness of the issues, and contribute to policy change.
- case studies of relevant practices and experiences which could be shared across the sector.

Research aims

The research undertaken aimed to explore the role that languages and cultural knowledge play in the policies and practices of development NGOs, examining three main questions:

- what is the role of languages in power relations in the development process?
- how much organisational awareness is there of languages/language policy?
- what is the provision of language/cultural mediation including translators/interpreters?

Research methodology

The project used a mixed methods approach:

- archival research (archives of Christian Aid, Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK, and DFID predecessors)
- document analysis of current policy material
- semi-structured interviews (30 with INGOs, half with staff working outside the UK; 9 interviews with DFID personnel)
- fieldwork in 3 contrasting locales (Kyrgyzstan, Malawi and Peru) chosen on the basis of the status of English and the length of NGO involvement in the areas (88 interviews and discussions with SNGO staff as well as people working in the national offices of INGOs). Interviews and discussions were conducted in English in Malawi, in Spanish in Peru, and in English or Kyrgyz/Russian with the help of an interpreter in the case of Kyrgyzstan.
- ongoing feedback and contributions from NGO practitioners (Workshop: *Language, Power and Inclusion*, 2 November 2016: http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/modern-languages-and-european-studies/LZ_workshop_report_SOAS_-_final.pdf) and from translators working with NGOs (Workshop: *Translating Development*, 12 October 2017: http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/modern-languages-and-european-studies/ITI_report_translating_development.pdf).
- comments on draft report from respondents.

Perspectives of INGOs

Between 2016 and 2017, 30 INGO staff members were interviewed, 18 currently working in the UK, 12 outside the UK (interviewed by Skype and based all round the world), 17 female, 13 male.

They held a variety of positions in the organisations including senior manager, desk advisor, policy officer, in-country manager, and translation officer, and had worked in the sector for between one and thirty years. Practitioners were invited to comment on ongoing results in workshops in November 2016 and October 2017.

“ I see language is not given that much importance out there....language is very sensitive and you have to give it a high priority, but in the day-to-day implementation for NGOs, it's not that much being emphasised.
INGO in-country manager ”

“ [Language] plays a very significant role in developing relationships.
INGO in-country manager ”

“ ...the context in the different countries...it's really important for me to know how the people feel in a very dangerous environment ...not only the technical issues related to the programme.
INGO in-country manager ”

1. In general, languages are not perceived as an institutional priority

Staff suggest that languages are given a low priority within the day-to-day operations of INGOs, and that attempts to raise their profile are often dependent on individual initiatives.

“Even when I was providing the assistance to the country offices, I never got asked...by my employer to use the other language. I was always the one offering to the countries...”Look, I can actually provide the training in your language if you want”...but if I didn't want to do that, no one would force me.”

INGO policy officer, UK

2. Depending on the geographical location of the staff member, languages can be viewed as both a negative and a positive factor in development

Staff within the UK tend to frame the multilingualism of development areas as potentially problematic, a possible limiting factor in the successful implementation of a project, impacting on the quality of data, and the pattern of results.

Those outside the UK consistently describe languages in positive terms, emphasising the role they are seen to play in establishing relationships of trust.

“...important to speak the language for trust...speaking a language breaks down barriers a translation can't.”

INGO in-country manager

3. Cultural knowledge is perceived as vital by those working outside the UK

Whilst staff generally note the implications of culture for their listening relationships with communities, those working outside the UK particularly stress the importance of this cultural context for the success of their work.

“So whereas [the organisation] is... a British charity...having a very British identity...it needs to leverage its presence across the world...And I think that's the key to a very important role in actually us securing significant levels of funding at the regional level, and it is because we were perceived to be very, very immersed within the local context.”

INGO in-country manager

4. The default position of English in the organisation presents problems for those outside the UK whose first language is not English

For those based in the UK, the English language is generally seen as unproblematic, an accepted feature of working in an international organisation, advancing to senior positions in the INGO, applying for major funding, and communicating with donors.

Those working outside the UK indicate considerable discomfort with the anglophone domination of the institution, seeing it as a brake on their own career progression, and a possible barrier to conveying the dynamism and richness of in-country projects.

“ I think that [there's a general] perception of assuming that in Tanzania or in Kenya [people] should speak perfect English like a person from the UK... INGO in-country manager ”

“ If we didn't have the resources, someone in the country office would end up doing the translation...I would ask country offices, like "Do you have someone that can do the translation? INGO Advisory Officer, UK ”

“...there's an assumption that everyone is able to communicate well in English, when clearly that's not the case...And so we get annoyed and frustrated at people who submit reports but...they could probably write circles around you if they wrote in their native tongue.” INGO Programme Head, UK

5. Language mediation is largely seen as an add-on extra in the organisation

Few staff are aware of an institutional language policy in their INGO.

Whilst key institutional documents associated with risk assessment or INGO self-branding are usually being sent to professional translators, the potential need for language mediation at other stages of the programmes is seldom budgeted for.

Translation is normally an afterthought with ad hoc arrangements in-country. In this situation, a considerable additional burden can be placed upon bilingual/multilingual staff members.

“... you need either a local partner or a member of staff that speaks the local language to act as an interpreter....it tends not to be the primary focus of their role; it's sort of an add-on. So, some of them are naturally very good at it, others less so, through no fault of their own, it's not the main reason they were hired in some cases, it's not a specific part of their job, it's just that they are the ones taking international staff around and therefore they're called upon to translate...it's not the main reason they were hired...it's not a specific part of their job.”

INGO manager, UK

Perspectives of DFID

Between 2016 and 2017, 9 senior DFID officials (5 female, 4 male) agreed to be interviewed on condition of anonymity. These included 3 current/former Heads of Country Offices, four social development advisors, 1 researcher, and 1 involved with policy and programmes.

All apart from one had been with DFID for several years. The interviews were semi-structured, and carried out either face-to-face or over the telephone. The interviewees spoke in a private capacity, and not as representatives of DFID.

“Beneficiary feedback is ‘fundamentally part of good development’.
Head of DFID country office”

“My assumption is that...the international NGO community have the right staffing in terms of language
Head of DFID country office”

“We should ask some questions, really, because some NGOs do it better than others.
Senior DFID official”

“The challenge for NGOs is thinking about things that are good enough and that are achievable within a restricted cost base.
Head of DFID country office”

1. ‘Listening’ is primarily understood within DFID in terms of beneficiary feedback

However, DFID does not ‘listen’ to beneficiaries directly, but rather through project implementers. They depend on NGOs to relay feedback from the communities.

“Listening to beneficiaries is ‘part of the selling point of NGOs, right?’
Senior DFID official

2. DFID tends to assume that NGOs have appropriate language capacity to conduct their projects

DFID does not tend to ask NGOs questions about *how* they listen, particularly in terms of the use of language and language intermediaries.

“A member of the DFID shortlisting panel describing how funding applications were assessed: ‘it was more about “what are you achieving and how will you achieve this?” rather than the methods they used to get their information... I guess the assumption is that people are listening and talking to the communities – if it’s going to work that’s what they have to do...’
Senior DFID official

3. Staff suggest that there is room for improvement in the way that DFID evaluates the role of language in development, and the way in which NGOs listen to communities

“We don’t have, as far as I am aware, a framework within which to systematically evaluate the quality of the listening. So it’s pretty amateurish and ad hoc”
Head of DFID country office

4. There is concern that DFID’s focus on financial/risk management distracts attention from the importance of listening

“I think that the problem is that listening – building knowledge and understanding over communities – is hard to quantify. It’s difficult to demonstrate that listening contributes to value for money”
Senior DFID official

5. There is a recognition that the ability of NGOs to devote time to issues of language and listening is circumscribed by the pressures imposed by a tough funding environment and short project cycles

“And there is such a rush – especially for donor-driven projects – there is such a rush to report back within timeframes, sometimes rather difficult timeframes I admit...and most crucial bit of the translation actually gets completely lost in the urgency to transcribe it into English”
Senior DFID official

Perspectives of Translation Practitioners working in INGOs

Between 2016 and 2017, 8 interviews were conducted with translation and communication managers and staff in INGOs (6 female, 2 male). Practitioners, including INGO staff, as well as freelance translators and interpreters working for the development sector, were invited to comment on current challenges during a workshop on 'Translating Development' in October 2017.

Official language and translation policies

Some INGOs have implemented an institutional language and translation policy, usually focused on a group of official or strategic languages such as English, French, Spanish, Arabic, and in some cases Portuguese. INGOs, including Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK and Tearfund, have an internal translation service that provides translation in these languages, with English being the main source language. In some INGOs, these services operate on an agency model, where all language combinations are handled by outsourcing them to freelancers. Other INGOs who do not have an internal language service often work through translation agencies when they need professional translation. Professional interpreting in INGO contexts tends to be provided at high-level meetings, for example when INGOs meet with government officials or have annual board or member meetings.

Current translation challenges in UK headquarters

1. INGO staff generally have a limited understanding of professional translation services

The amount of time required for professional translation and the reason why a professional language service is important are seen by internal translators/translation coordinators as issues that are poorly understood by many of their colleagues, a fact which presents challenges in providing the required language support. For that reason, informing colleagues on the process of translation is seen as a central part of the translator's role.

"Anyone working with my team normally if it's, especially ongoing working relationships, we always meet and sit down for half an hour and explain how everything works and what we need from them in order to work effectively and meet their needs."

INGO translation manager

2. Translation is overlooked in budget and project planning

INGOs seldom have a central budget for translation, so that separate teams within the INGO have to plan for their own translation needs. Translation is in many cases described as an afterthought. When translation is budgeted for, the cost and time needed to provide the work is often not properly quantified. Furthermore, translation is often excluded from restricted funding.

"... then they [in INGO office, UK] suddenly say 'We need this translated to the languages for the country representatives'. So they haven't written it with translation in mind and what I'd like to see is that they planned earlier that they were going to translate it and had more awareness of the problematics of translation."

INGO translation manager

"... part of telling people about how translation works does involve allowing sufficient time to do a good quality job and managing people's expectations, yes
INGO translation manager

"Overtly it [translation] is occasionally included [in project bids], but it is not necessarily well quantified. It's just a stab in the dark usually
INGO translation manager

3. Translation is excluded from feedback loops

Feedback processes on the translation and interpreting provided by internal language services in the INGO are not highly developed.

"... we don't actually get much feedback either positive or negative on the translations."

INGO translation manager

4. Some INGO translation practitioners would like a greater connection with the field

In some INGOs, translators feel their role would be enhanced by more contact with local teams and with the end-users of their translations.

"There is a certain distance with the reality in the field. It would be great to have a more direct connection with the local teams and people who are actually using the final materials." INGO translation manager

Perspectives from three countries

In early 2018, researchers worked in three countries, Kyrgyzstan, Malawi and Peru. These countries were chosen a) as ones in which the status of the English language differed, from official language, to most widely taught foreign language, to rarely spoken language, and b) as ones in which the length and involvement of UK-based INGOs varied.

Language situation

In Malawi, English is the official language, and Chichewa is the national language. There is a close link between language and ethnic identity. Several minority languages exist, including Chinyanja, Chiyao, Chitumbuka, Nyakyusa-Ngonde and Sena, among others.

In Peru, English has no official status but is the most widely taught foreign language. The official language is Spanish. Quechua and Aymara are official where these languages predominate. In addition, there are over forty languages in the Amazon region.

In Kyrgyzstan, English is spoken by approximately 1% of the population. Kyrgyz is the state language, while Russian is the official language. The last few years have seen a push for the use of Kyrgyz. The language is widely spoken in rural areas, and since 2010 the language is expected to be used in official settings. However, Russian continues to be the dominant language in the capital and is still spoken in many rural areas in the north of the country.

The NGO sector

The three countries chosen present very different NGO sector profiles.

Historically, since independence in 1964, NGOs have been of considerable importance to development activities in Malawi. Malawi ranks among the world's most densely populated and least developed countries. Foreign aid accounts for a significant proportion of government expenditure due to low tax revenues and the country's susceptibility to shocks in domestic supply and international demand. Dozens of multilateral and bilateral partners have contributed as much as 40% of the national budget during the last decade; albeit development assistance has declined in recent years. NGOs are the recipients of an increasing proportion of this funding and are therefore plentiful in Malawi. National NGOs receive half the amount of disbursements (8.8%) that are received by international NGOs (17.8%). Relations between NGOs and the government have long been acrimonious, particularly where organisations have been deemed to be hostile to the authorities. The current government is attempting to revise a NGO Act and NGO Policy that will increase the capacity of the intelligence services to monitor NGO activity and raise registration fees. These proposals have been met with stiff opposition from civil society advocates at home and abroad. There are concerns that these measures could have particularly negative consequences for human rights organisations.

In Kyrgyzstan, large-scale INGO involvement began much later, after the fall of the Soviet Union, with huge investments of international development donors to promote civil society development in the 1990s. Donor priorities changed in the 2000s and Kyrgyzstan has seen the closure of many civil society programmes and cuts to grants. Concerns have been raised about the sustainability of the civil society sector because of these cuts and the lack of local governmental funding, partly due to

corruption and misappropriation of funds. Currently, the majority of Kyrgyz civil society organisations rely on the limited international funding available, thus creating an extremely competitive working environment. In addition, efforts to place restrictions on foreign assistance have further impeded NGOs' working space. For example, under the influence of Russia's 'foreign agent' law, Kyrgyz parliamentarians have undertaken efforts to pass a similar law in Kyrgyzstan. Although this has not been successful, many NGOs reported that local communities often distrust them and question whether ulterior motives are at play ('Why would anyone do anything for nothing?'). Despite these setbacks, the civil society sector in Kyrgyzstan has been described as one of the strongest in Central Asia.

In Peru, the situation is very different, with the presence of UK-based INGOs much reduced over the past decade. Latin America's recent economic growth has resulted in the re-labelling of most of its countries as 'middle income', with the consequent withdrawal of official development assistance and NGO funding. OECD figures suggest that whilst there was a 37% increase in contributions to NGOs in Latin America between 2005–8, the increase was just 3% between 2008–11, and is subsequently falling.

During this project, two views were expressed by SNGOs in Peru about the 'middle income' effect.

On the one hand, the loss of INGOs has worsened the local situation. The NGO employment sector has become demonstrably more fragile, with fewer jobs, and good staff migrating to government agencies. The government has not however replaced former INGO activity in the poorer rural areas (in the Andes and the jungle), and there are concerns about government operations, particularly in relation to political corruption, and the perceived tendency of government agencies to offer quick-fix technical solutions without the type of community involvement and consultations which INGOs had encouraged.

On the other hand, the withdrawal of large UK-based INGOs provides new opportunities, with the possibility of a wide range of other foreign donors, and the chance to do things in an independent way, to establish an *espacio de encuentro* which is clearly Peruvian-driven and could operate as an example to other countries outside Latin America.



Perspectives from Kyrgyzstan

Fieldwork was conducted in January 2018 in the capital Bishkek and in Osh, Kyrgyzstan's second city. Discussions and interviews (33) were held with SNGOs, INGOs, coordinators of national networks, development consultants, and language mediators (23 female, 10 male). 17 of these interviews were conducted in English, while 16 were held with the help of an interpreter: 13 in Russian and 3 in Kyrgyz. SNGOs included those involved in advocacy (human rights, women's and girls' rights), peacebuilding and community relations, health issues and people with disabilities, and supporting civil society.

Languages and cultural understanding

Communication with anglophone donors

1. Writing applications in English is a huge challenge. Many SNGOs use Google Translate to translate their applications into English.

"And of course they [donors] don't pay for translation. If we can afford it, then we hire a translator, but if we cannot afford it, then we just do it the stupid way, which is Google translation. And it's not just my organisation. Many organisations they just do Google translation."

Director of SNGO

2. SNGOs express their frustration with the fact that the results of international projects are not shared with them. Final reports and evaluations are usually not translated into locally used languages, and thus cannot contribute to local capacity building.

"All international monitors and evaluators... their working language is only English. Reports of local monitoring groups are all translated into English. Not all final monitoring reports are translated [into Russian or Kyrgyz]. The wider public does not have access to them. We have very little understanding of what's going on there."

Director of national SNGO network

"[Donors], for example, they want to hire an expert from an NGO sector, but they want this person to speak very good English... I have all the other skills that the donors want for a certain job, but because I don't speak English... I am not eligible for some of their jobs. And, so, in this sense... there is a mismatch between international donors and local NGOs."

SNGO staff member

3. In INGOs' recruitment processes in Kyrgyzstan, English language skills were described as often being the sole selection criterion. Staff in SNGOs saw this as having negative implications on local NGO capacity and career advancement. It created a disconnect between INGO offices and rural development realities.

"when you go to international organisations' offices, then you find yourself on another planet. Sometimes, their only requirement for candidates for vacancies is English language."

Director of SNGO

"We do hire English-speaking staff in our organisation, but they spend two or three years in our organisation. We build their capacity, and then they go off to work for the donors. And in reality, I don't understand the donor policy. Like why they do this kind of thing, like why they lure away our staff members. In reality, it's the civil society organisations who prepare staff for international donor organisations."

SNGO staff member

"... most of our library [in the NGO], we have very amazing books in English ... and that's why I started to read in English ... It was my own efforts, and trying, ambition and motivation, because it's really the desire to get knowledge, it made me go forward... you start to see it's an international language, you cannot always speak Russian or Kyrgyz, you need to try."

SNGO staff member

4. Many SNGO workers express a desire to learn English, as this would help them to access information, knowledge and funding, and would allow them to share their own learning with others internationally. Participating in international meetings can be done through an interpreter, but respondents argued that this often lessened their capacity to contribute.

"... when we have group discussions [during international meetings], by the time the interpreter translates, by the time I think about it, and for example I want to react and express my opinion, but by the time I am ready to speak, someone else, who speaks English, is already speaking the same thing that I wanted to say, and all I have to do is, like, I agree with what has been said."

Director of SNGO

Communicating with Kyrgyz and Uzbek speakers in communities: the experience of local Russian-speaking groups

1. In Kyrgyzstan, NGO workers based in urban areas such as Bishkek tend to be Russian speakers, and in some cases speak little Kyrgyz. At the same time, the need to work in Kyrgyz is increasing, especially for rural areas. Finding professional trainers and consultants with Kyrgyz language skills is described as challenging.

"... we work across our country, when we go to the regions, it's very important to conduct all round tables, seminars in Kyrgyz language. But the problem for us, is that not so many trainers can conduct trainings on our topics in Kyrgyz language. They are just 1, 2, 3, that's it, and sometimes they are very busy. Because so many years in the Soviet

Union and after the collapse of the Soviet Union it was just Russian, that is why Kyrgyz... you can meet a lot of Kyrgyz people who don't know Kyrgyz language, Here [in Bishkek], it's a paradox, but it's like this."

SNGO staff member

2. One of the main challenges when providing translations of training materials, handbooks and guidelines in Kyrgyz that communities can work with is the fact that Kyrgyz is composed of different dialects.

"We produced special instruction for police officers for this project, and we started trainings in all regions of our country, and we translated our presentation into Kyrgyz language... our trainer, he was... from Bishkek... and when we go to the regions, people are listening and listening and they say: 'who translated this?' They are very angry, because in our country, we have 7 regions, and we can say that we have 7 dialects of the language, and they said 'we don't understand!'"

Director of SNGO

3. A further challenge related to delivering workshops to communities is that certain concepts are either not known or are considered as Western, in particular in the areas of sexual health or human rights.

"Let's take the simple phrase human rights. So human rights for Europeans ... they learned what human rights means from school, from early childhood... but the same two words in Russian and in Kyrgyz, for a lot of people in the country, if you say human rights, these are just two empty words for them. And normally ... they think that, it's not here, it's somewhere else, and some people will say: "ah, human rights, it's there! These are European values". And let alone the concepts like sexual rights or reproductive rights... So if you want to have a dialogue with someone about these concepts, then you have to unpack these words for this person. You need to explain exactly what is meant by that."

Director of SNGO

“ So the preference is given to those who speak three languages ideally, Kyrgyz, Russian and English, and if you can speak, here [in Osh], four languages, Uzbek, then you are a perfect candidate.

INGO staff member ”

4. Particularly for international and Southern NGOs in Osh, being multilingual is seen as a necessity. Knowledge of Russian and Kyrgyz is considered by many to be the bare minimum. Knowledge of English and Uzbek are sought after, but are harder to come by. While English is important for international work, Uzbek is key to establishing close relationships with local Uzbek-speaking communities.

"When you talk to them [Uzbek-speaking communities in the South] in Uzbek, or understand them when they speak Uzbek, they feel more comfortable speaking to you."

Programme director, INGO



Perspectives from Malawi

Organisations were visited in Lilongwe, Blantyre and Zomba in December 2017/January 2018. Interviews (35) were held in English with managers and fieldworkers from INGOs and SNGOs; language mediators, and staff-members from donor agencies with professional experience of the NGO sector (29 male, 6 female). SNGOs included those involved in sexual/reproductive health, human rights, agriculture, civic education and communications.

Languages and cultural understanding

Communicating with anglophone donors

1. Donors active in Malawi do not invite applications in Chichewa or any other local language, so local organisations without English language capacity do not have access to funding opportunities.

"You get a local community-based organisation that has got brilliant ideas. And you listen to them in their language that they are using to tell you what they can do to move from A to B. But because they cannot present what they are saying in English, they cannot get any funding. The people never access grants. Because they are not able to get someone like me who can put pen to paper in English so that they can submit their proposal in English."

ex-official of a donor organisation

“...the issue of certain words that are typically offensive in the local language – I have experienced a lot of that and sometimes it does affect the impact of the project ... We do certain things not because you believe in it, but because you wrote in the proposal and you said it should be done.
ex-programme manager of INGO ”

“Budgets should be flexible. There are moments where donors would say ‘Why this item? Why this item? Why this item? This should not be part of...’ you know? When actually, as implementers, we know that putting that would be strategic for the delivery of the project and the outcomes that the donors expect. So, a little flexibility in that regard, if it proposed by an applicant, to say ‘We need the resources for translation, etc.’ Let that be considered, if it’s well justified.
Programme coordinator, INGO ”

2. NGOs describe project objectives in terms that meet donor preferences. However, project outcomes can be adversely affected if communities do not fully understand these terms, because they will not be able to participate in a meaningful way. NGOs generally focus on appeasing the donor so they tend to avoid drawing attention to these issues.

“Resources are becoming scarce and NGOs are really having to look for resources to fund their projects. So, the pressure that the NGOs have – that there’s little attention to small things like this or languages and then everybody wants to... understand the donor as much as possible and what the donor wants. So, ‘don’t tell the donor very much about how you make sure communities are participating but tell them about what you have achieved and what you are capable of achieving with this money’.”

Programme coordinator, INGO

3. Some donors are inflexible about project delivery and reporting requirements, leaving NGOs little space to adapt to unanticipated language/cultural issues that arise and affect the delivery of a project.

“[Some donors] don’t expect that you can think. So, people like me, whose mind is liberated, I would’ve wanted to have engagement, you need to engage and say, “this can’t work”... Most of us that are working for these international organisations and funded by these projects, it limits your level – if you are religious about following what they – it limits your level of thinking ... It’s good that you have to follow what they’re looking for, but also the donors must expect that things change, as you’re implementing the project. As long as you report back to them that there is this change that we need to put across, then they should give you room to innovate, so that you can deliver.”

Projects officer, INGO

Communicating with Chichewa and other speakers in the communities: the experience of English-speaking NGOs

1. Many of the NGO ‘buzzwords’ that are taken for granted in the anglophone world have no direct equivalent in Chichewa or any other local language. Fieldworkers find it challenging to communicate these concepts in a way that retains the essence of the meaning. An interpretation that works for one community may not work for another, because of the different dialects and cultural norms.

“The Chichewa from Blantyre is not the Chichewa from Zomba, is not the Chichewa for the central region, it’s not the Chichewa for Lilongwe, it’s not the Chichewa for Dedza... [Development] concepts are very English and to translate that into Chichewa becomes very, very difficult, and we try to find an equivalent, and in most cases you lose the meaning.”

Director of SNGO

2. Listening to the words that the community uses to describe taboo subjects is seen as absolutely essential during the needs-assessment stage to design a culturally sensitive project.

“Start from the people’s own understanding. I believe that people have some kind of sense on how certain things can be easily understood. Terms that we had difficulties, that have related to taboo, maybe if we had asked the communities how they want that communicated to them easily, that is culturally fitting, we could take that and use it in our project document. That makes sure that when you go back to them, they’ll accept it easily.”

Programme coordinator, INGO

3. Project delivery can be undermined if not enough attention is paid to the quality of communication between NGO and communities throughout the project cycle.

“The issue of miscommunication between what we are doing and what the communities think we are doing is very, very big... I’ve never done any project where we really do an assessment of whether communities have understood what we are now doing... It’s part of this language issue... what are the key terms, how [are communities] communicating and understanding those words?... Sometimes we assume that people understand; there was a time when we had a certain project and I discovered that half of the project staff members in my institution didn’t understand it, and they were busy running up and down, always busy, busy, busy, and later on we discovered that these people didn’t know exactly

“ There’s some areas where if you are talking about issues of reproduction for example, you have to be very aware of the culture and don’t use terms that will offend them and spoil the message that is trying to help them. Telling them about natural family planning for instance, it sounds so much easier and light to tell these terms in English. It’s neutral. But when it gets to the language, in terms of the gender dynamics, you may need to be very very careful in what you are saying. For a term that is neutral in English, when it gets to Chichewa, you may find you need to use different terms for men and for women.

National secretary of INGO ”

what this project was about. So the communities have to be assessed for four, three, two months down the line, about how they understand it, about the project.”
Chairperson, SNGO

4. It is often advisable to separate men and women when discussing sexually taboo topics, and craft a different message appropriate for each group.
5. English signifies a high social status. Fieldworkers should think carefully about the consequences of speaking English in the village before doing so, because they may create a ‘barrier’ between themselves and the community if it is perceived as being disrespectful.

“If you look on the positive side, [English] does bring in some prestige. People trust someone who fluently speaks English, and if they go into the community they will trust someone because they will say: “I think he knows what he’s doing. He seems to be learned because he fluently speaks English”. On the other hand, if project officers go into the field and part of the conversation with the community has some English words, the community might look at that as a way of showing off, and that they are being demeaned. So that’s the two-sidedness of English.”

M&E officer, INGO
6. Recruiting local interpreters and cultivating long-term relationships with them is very useful. They are embedded in the daily lives and culture of the communities and can advise on how to nuance messages as appropriate to the local context.

“We try as much as possible, if you don’t know the language of that particular area – to train one or, two, or three people within that community, who can deliver the same material, the same issues to the community within their own language. So that’s what we normally do. For example, if we are going in the north where they speak Tumbuka, we normally have Tumbuka speakers within the community that you train. And those that you train, they are the ones that now end up explaining things better to their colleagues. Without that it is very difficult for you to implement, because you don’t know – language is cultural.”

Programme manager, INGO



Perspectives from Peru

Organisations and projects were visited in Lima, Arequipa and Cusco in January/February 2018. Discussions and interviews (20) were held in Spanish with SNGOs, coordinators of national networks, development consultants, ex-partners of UK-based INGOs, and cultural specialists (15 female, 5 male). SNGOs included those involved in advocacy (gender/ safeguarding children), in working with disadvantaged groups in suburban and rural areas, developing infrastructure, and supporting local cultures.

Languages and cultural understanding

Communicating with anglophone donors

1. SNGOs and partners experience difficulty in communicating with potential anglophone donors. Translation is expensive so that groups rely on volunteers.

"We don't speak English, and that's a limitation, because if you speak English, you can go and convince people, you can sell them your project, but when you can't speak English, it limits you."

Director of SNGO

"We've applied for funding when the application has to be in English...all in English. And in that case, we've had to find help, we've done it with my son, or X's son because they know a bit of English and they helped us with translations."

Director of SNGO

2. There is a problem of 'Englishes' – different sorts of English development terminology, depending on the organisation, which can result in SNGOs using the English words in inverted commas without necessarily understanding the meaning of the terms.

"The problem of language isn't just translating a word. It's how each individual agency understands it. Each agency has its own particular set of concepts.... Of course, it gets confusing.... you've got to learn each term, each word....all the discussions we've had on what exactly "output" means for a particular donor."

SNGO staff member

"The preoccupations and frustrations are more on our side than on the side of those who should be adapting and learning Spanish."

Director of SNGO

3. The problem of language can create a sense of inequality in relationships, and a lack of trust, with an impression that donors may be hiding their real agendas.

"We call it 'hidden agendas' or an agenda lying behind what's said."

Director of national SNGO network

4. The untranslatability of key words is raised as an issue, both from English to Spanish e.g. *empowerment*, *agency*, and from Spanish to English e.g. *acompañamiento*, *horizontalidad*.

"In Peru, I know young people who are studying to be translators, and I ask them: 'How do you translate acompañamiento?' and they say, 'it doesn't exist, in English it doesn't exist'."

SNGO staff member

5. Non-anglophone donors are widely seen to be willing and able to speak Spanish.

"Really you could say that (non-anglophone) European organisations are very respectful about language.... the organisations with whom we have contact speak Spanish very well."

Director of SNGO

Communicating with Quechua and Aymara speakers in the communities: the experience of Spanish-speaking SNGOs

1. Language relations are vital to the success of projects.

"I think that we need to strengthen our work on the culture of the communities, and within that, language is important. It's through language that we interact so that in operationalizing all our projects we should really take account of this."

SNGO staff member

2. There is often a double barrier: firstly translating development English into Spanish, and then from Spanish to Quechua/Aymara.

"So for example, you say "contextualise", and it's a very technical word, or 'transversalism', words that when you translate them into Quechua, you clearly can't find any word that's like it. So what you've got to do as a professional who speaks Quechua... is to find examples and objects which are very close and appropriate so that people can understand what we want to say, or what we're talking about."

SNGO staff member

Suggested solutions include: training SNGO personnel in the languages, taking a local person on the staff (although there are concerns about the level of professional qualifications in this case), and sharing language resources across organisations.

"Our workers [in the Andes] speak Quechua. But it's not easy to recruit them because there aren't that many professionals who speak Quechua."

Director of SNGO

"There's no glossary, there's nothing to support our work...so it would be really good to have guides in Quechua. Why? Well, we would use them, and then we could publish them on the internet, and other institutions could use them."

SNGO staff member

"I feel that development initiatives have been very weak in the jungle because the principal value that these communities have, apart from land and water, is their language, and... development projects almost always fail in the jungle, especially the jungle."

SNGO staff member

“ There’s a lot of talk about endogenous development, about integral development, but none of them consider the cultural theme.
Director of SNGO ”

3. Development relations are affected not only by language but also by cultural conceptualisations, the *cosmovisión* of Quechua and Aymara speakers.

“It isn’t an intercultural problem, it’s not a problem of whether you speak a language or not, it’s whether you understand the world from which they are speaking, and if they understand the world from which you’re speaking...it’s not that scientific knowledge is better, but that these are forms of knowledge, of origins and constructions which are very different.”

Southern development consultant

4. Some staff argue that indigenous knowledges are not recognised as providing potentially alternative and challenging ways of ‘doing development’.

“So in the NGO, you’ve got the project, your conceptual framework, and those who are going to execute the project go in with their own conceptual, instrumental and operational suit of armour...the tendency is to say “I’m going to train you, because you don’t know”, without even listening to the wisdom that the other side already has.”

ex-SNGO worker

Innovative practice

Organisational vision and strategy

Translation as empowerment

Some INGOs, like Tearfund, have an approach to language that is linked to the vision of the organisation as a whole. Part of Tearfund's approach to language and translation has been to involve people at the grassroots level in the translation process. Rather than translating *for* them, workshops and training were set up over the years to translate some of Tearfund's key publications like *Pillars* together *with* people in communities.

"... the "Pillars" process doesn't use translators. ... The plan was always that... people should translate themselves, and you had three levels of check, well, four levels of check in some ways, built in. You'd have, people would always work in twos and threes, in a workshop that was always the first thing. Then their work would always be checked with another small group. Then at the workshop you'd pull out who were obviously the better people, the more skilled in the writing and use of language who would become a little editorial committee, so they would check the final draft. And then there would always be an outside person who would double-check it. So, you had all those levels to check what was being done."

This process was considered as one of empowerment.

"The sort of passion and the empowerment that people would feel when their little, tiny ignored language was taken seriously and they were able to translate it, you know, was so empowering to people. I mean that's not the international languages ... Some of the first languages that we translated, people could not believe that it was possible for them to a) to do translation themselves, which was what "Pillars" was all about, and b) that this could be actually made available and it was, yeah, heart-warming, really."

Although budget restrictions have made the running of these workshops more difficult, Tearfund remains supportive of local communities translating their material and makes an effort to make this work available to others through its online learning platform (<http://learn.tearfund.org>), where it has shared publications in languages ranging from Albanian to Yaka.

Developing a communications plan

One staff member in Kyrgyzstan outlined their INGO's use of communication plans when working with local partners, and how these included language needs at the needs assessment stage before a project proposal was developed.

"So if we find out that if the language is a problem we smooth this out, we try to fill this gap. If they need for example in Tajik language, if there is a Tajik community, we will try to. Because they are a little bit marginalised from the country, so we will try to chat Tajik, and Tajik translation, provide booklets, and 1-page information in Tajik language."

These kinds of language needs and how they will be dealt with are then consolidated into a communications plan.

"When it comes to communication, we usually develop a communication plan with the local partner, which we will sign and then we start the partnership. So, which person will contact, and in which language, and how they do reporting, particularly narrative and financial reporting, so we clarify in the beginning, so... if they ask us to do in Kyrgyz, we do translation in Kyrgyz."

Final reporting is translated by the INGO into English for submission. This particular INGO, which has language capacity in English, Russian, Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek, thus often functions as a language service provider to their local partners and as a language mediator between the international, national and local level.

Providing language support in the field to develop mutually respectful relationships and increase effectiveness

These examples are drawn from interviews conducted in the UK, Kyrgyzstan, Malawi and Peru with INGOs and SNGOs.

Negotiating terms

When designing a project, an INGO Programme Director in the UK related the process of negotiating the meaning of specific English key terms in the project, which ensured that everyone involved would interpret these in the same way. In this particular example, an Arabic-speaking project partner had written a project proposal in English, in which they talked about creating 'safe spaces'.

"We don't know what they mean by that. Because it's the kind of terminology that humanitarian actors have started to use. And we think that they may have just picked up (the term) and we don't know if what they mean by ... – so a "safe space" could apply to women survivors of gender-based violence. That kind of terminology is used often in ... that kind of programming... In the [particular] context, what does a safe space mean?"

To address this, the UK-based manager would hold a Skype conversation in Arabic to discuss the meaning of the term, and see if the English term should be retained or adapted.

"We might then have to reinterpret that into some NGO speak and it may end up still saying "safe spaces"... But we might know what it means."

Volunteers sharing their learning about concepts with communities

A senior SNGO official explained the process by which learning about language is shared between volunteers working with different communities.

"So first of all you start with the volunteers themselves, when the volunteers are oriented on the concept that you're bringing they also give feedback, they're given a lot of time to interact with the concepts, to interact amongst themselves, interact with ex-pats. [Our organisation] speaks a lot with consultants, so consultants come in, they interact with the officers and volunteers, and then slowly the terms evolve over time and then they get established. So that's what has happened over the years with a lot of the concepts that [our organisation] uses. So in the same way, to make sure that people understand [our organisation] volunteers collect terms from the communities they work in. So for example, if they go to a village they talk about the responsibilities of local councillors and MPs, what are the differences, where do they work together and so on. So they pick on the words that people are using in the village; when they go to another village they also try to use the same terms that the community members were using, and if people understand things differently in this community then they also pick out some words in there, and later on the officers bring all those variations together in a series of workshops and they come up with agreed upon terms. So whenever there's a new concept that is being introduced, they will go through a similar process."

Working with volunteers to increase language learning and access to knowledge

In Kyrgyzstan, three organisations mentioned how the use of volunteers, and particularly Peace Corps volunteers, had helped their NGO and the sector at large to learn English and to gain access to information and knowledge.

"There should be access to English and I think now we have some kind of progress, but mainly in the larger cities... A lot of progress was made with learning English through the Peace Corps Volunteers. They have been here now more I think than 20 years... It's been very good, I think that made a lot of impact, especially in the regions, because they have been working in very remote villages, volunteers there, and that made an impact for sort

of people coming from sort of remote village, and study abroad or in the best schools here, in the best universities."

Programme coordinator, INGO

"We are very thankful to international organisations and donors for all their support. Without their support, we wouldn't be able to operate ... But ... there is a language barrier between us and international donors. At the beginning, we worked with Peace Corps volunteers. In our office, we had four Peace Corps volunteers and thanks to them also, we developed a lot. We were able to speak Russian with Peace Corps volunteers, because when they arrive, they are given language courses."

Director of SNGO

"The working language is Russian for the organisation. We encourage our staff to learn both English and Kyrgyz. That's why we work with Peace Corps volunteers. We had Peace Corps volunteers in some of our regional offices, and thanks to Peace Corps volunteers some of the staff in Karakol they learned English."

Director of national network

Developing glossaries

An NGO policy advisor in the UK explained how they started to develop glossaries as part of the language challenges encountered during a recent project in Kenya. While the project team and enumerators recruited for this project were fluent in English, this was not the case for beneficiaries. All the tools needed to be translated into Somali, the main language spoken in the area, and the team decided they did not want enumerators to translate on the spot, because,

"...it was a randomised controlled trial, so it was as rigorous as possible, we wanted to ensure that they were asking the questions in the exact same way and not, you know, creative interpretations of what we wanted to know from them."

Therefore, the team decided to translate the survey into the language. However, this was not as easy as expected.

"Somali, at least in that part of the world, it's not a written language, just a spoken language. So we had endless, ah, sessions trying to phonetically write Somali and getting this group of enumerators and project staff to agree on how to write things and how to represent the sounds in phonetics... to at the end come up with this survey that had the Somali written phonetically and the English as well to ensure that people would all be asking the questions in the same way. ...So we came up with a glossary. We identified the key words for us, like 'You can't interpret this word or this sentence or this expression in any other way; this is the way you translate'."

The practice of developing glossaries was also used in Bhutan, where the communities that the NGO was working with spoke five different dialects. In this case, there was no time or funding to translate the entire survey into these dialects, but the team identified key words, and composed a,

"...glossary page that had different columns for the different dialects, including these words. Everything else, they would translate on the spot. But we did a lot of training with them so that you would see two enumerators who spoke the same dialect, they would be interviewing and changing roles... and one person would be, hopefully, actively listening to see whether they were translating things correctly and then give a feedback... to make sure that they would be consistent with the translation."

Providing back translations

An SNGO director in Kyrgyzstan related how an international organisation they had worked with had requested them to provide 'back translations' of some of their material to ensure consistency. The SNGO had participated in an international research project and received some of the working instruments, including a questionnaire, in English, and had to translate the questionnaire into Russian and Kyrgyz for their respondents. The international organisation had then asked them to check everything again, by translating,

"...from the Kyrgyz to English, from the Russian to English... it's like triangulation. Double-check."

The process of back-translation was a requirement of the international organisation. The SNGO was free to use the material, but needed to adhere to this procedure to ensure consistency. They used back-translation to double check the contents of the questionnaire and of their report.

Developing handbooks in local languages

One INGO staff member in Kyrgyzstan related how the INGO had produced guidelines for local carpenters in Kyrgyz in the aftermath of an earthquake in one of the districts in which they were working. The handbook was about (safety) construction norms and how to behave in emergency situations. It was the first of its kind to be available in the Kyrgyz language and was seen as a key publication to make this knowledge available for Kyrgyz people. The international donor then asked to have the book developed in Russian too because it was difficult to find this kind of handbook in the language.

The INGO staff member explained that,

"...all the books we developed, first we develop for the local beneficiaries, in order to be more understandable our work. And if it is needed for second level of the beneficiaries, who want to have it in Russian, so if we have budget for that, we usually recruit a translation company, and we review ourselves, and we do it in Russian language. Later we will translate it to English."

A project like this thus intentionally sets out to produce knowledge in the local language, embedded in the local culture and context, and contributes to developing terminology of key development topics in the local languages.

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