

Translating development

Marga Burke-Lowe reports on a seminar discussing the role of translators and interpreters at NGOs, part of the Listening Zones project



Marga Burke-Lowe MITI translates from French and Italian to English, specialising in medicine, with a particular focus on clinical research, publications and communications. She also edits English copy.

On 12 October, I joined a group of translators, NGO staff and academics for a discussion on translation in the field of development. This seminar was part of the Listening Zones project, which explores the role that languages and cultural knowledge play in the policies and practices of NGOs. Featuring presentations by NGO translations and communications staff, a talk from freelance translator Patricia Sommer and a panel discussion with researchers and ITI chair Sarah Griffin-Mason, the event had much to offer freelance translators.

The first two talks focused on translation at Oxfam and Save the Children. Both NGOs have a similar set-up, with internal and external translation needs handled by a team of two to four employees. At Oxfam, the translation service covers English, Spanish, French, Arabic and Portuguese, with in-house staff drawing on a small pool of freelancers; departments that need other language pairs make their own arrangements. By contrast, Save the Children operates on an 'agency model', where all language services and combinations are offered and outsourced.

Collaborative working

Despite this model, working for an NGO can be more collaborative than working through an agency, as Patricia highlighted in her talk. Save the Children is one of Patricia's clients, and she described the process

of trying to differentiate between 'protection' and 'safeguarding' when translating into French. Patricia worked closely with staff and other freelancers to find a solution.

By contrast, agencies typically use translation memories to ensure consistency, which can backfire when translators disagree, and a lack of direct contact with the NGO can cause misunderstandings. Interestingly, Save the Children translations manager Verity Leonard Hill listed 'asking the right questions' and 'a collaborative approach' as essential qualities in freelance translators.

Several other features of working with NGOs were discussed during the afternoon. The content can be very diverse; Patricia has been asked to translate everything for a conference, from speaker biographies to dinner menus. A single source text can contain terminology from multiple fields, making good research skills a must; and the content can be harrowing, such as child trafficking or sexual violence.

Some language pairs are needed more than others: at Oxfam and Save the Children, most translations are from English into French or Spanish, with translations into English only accounting for 5-10 per cent. However, at Save the Children, a focus on authenticity has led to a growing need to transcribe interviews into English. Similarly, NGOs that are decentralising, such as Amnesty, require more into-English translation as their members start to produce their own content.

Perhaps the most pertinent theme that emerged from the seminar was funding. Alberto Sanz Martins from Oxfam and Verity Leonard Hill spoke of similar challenges when it comes to their available budgets and human resources. Verity described translation as an afterthought, happening at the end of a project when the money has already run out.

'Restricted funding'

I was surprised to learn during the panel discussion that translation is often excluded from 'restricted funding': when a donor provides funds that are ring-fenced for a specific project, this funding does not cover any translations that are needed, and the NGO has to find that money elsewhere. Smaller NGOs may not be able to afford professional translators at all; although Family for Every Child does have a contract with an agency, it often relies on its employees' language skills, or even on Google Translate for internal emails. In her presentation, communications officer Jessica Matthews described interpreting a webinar with no professional training, an experience she is not in a hurry to repeat!

A lack of funds for translation can marginalise non-English speakers, who are often the very people that NGOs wish to help or involve. One participant who worked for a well-known NGO described a situation where decision makers would only pay attention to evidence in English, ignoring more relevant documents in Portuguese. Similarly, translation is rarely included in the evaluation process for development programmes, suggesting that it is not seen as important. This seems symptomatic of a 'West knows best' culture.

In the final session, chaired by Wine Tisseur and Carmen Delgado Luchner, we discussed practical steps to support translators who work for development NGOs. These included shared glossaries and corpora, internships for MA students, and workshops for translators. However, it is clear that there is still much to be done to raise the profile of translation in development. 

More information about the Listening Zones of NGOs project can be found at www.reading.ac.uk/listening-zones-ngos.