Do NGOs Need a Languages Policy?

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Workshop Report

Workshop Convenors

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Workshop Aims

This workshop was organised to explore possible gaps in knowledge on the use of languages by NGOs, with a view to submit a substantial research bid to appropriate research funders. It was attended by a small group of representatives from a variety of NGOs, including: Save the Children, SIL International, World Society for Protection of Animals, Family for Every Child, Tearfund and the Geneva In-Zone Project.

The workshop convenors were keen to listen to the opinions and experiences of the practitioners in order to acquire a better understanding of the challenges faced by the NGO sector in using foreign languages in their work, particularly in terms of the issues involved in monitoring and evaluation, quality assurance, communication with beneficiaries, working with local partners and the recruitment of local translators and interpreters. Preliminary research revealed that language issues do not tend to have a high-profile within organisations, that formal language policies are often not in place, and that translation and interpretation needs are often under-funded. The workshop aimed to investigate the extent to which the sector reflects upon these challenges, and ways in which practitioners and academics could benefit from developing research collaboration on these issues.

Session 1: Identifying the Pressing Issues

This session was based on a participatory exercise to elicit views on the most important issues relating to NGOs and languages.

The participants identified a variety of topics that they believed needed further investigation. These were categorised as follows, in no particular order:

1) Translator and interpreter skills: What are the skills expected of translators and interpreters? How are they trained? How are NGO staff trained to work with them? Do NGOs fully consider the risks of overdependence on key individuals within organisations, and during operations, due to the limited pool of skilled staff?

2) Quality assurance: How can the competence and skills of translators and interpreters working with NGOs be adequately assessed?

3) Translating terminology: How can concepts and development terminology be effectively translated into different languages and across cultures?[1]

4) Technology and tools: How can electronic tools (e.g. Google Translate) be effectively harnessed to meet the needs of NGOs?

5) Recruitment: How are translators and interpreters recruited and selected? How can NGOs deal with the challenge of selecting the right people amongst a small pool of applicants?

6) Power dynamics: How can NGOs address the ways in which the use of language can deepen the power inequalities between NGOs/partners and people and communities? Can languages be used to empower aid recipients? Is language included in analyses of partnership quality? Languages also present challenges for NGOs in negotiating their relationships with powerful stakeholders: to what extent can NGOs develop a counter-discourse to mainstream perspectives?

7) Policy-Related Issues: Does the sector need to consider establishing clear policies and procedures in place for language issues, and how they might they ensure that consistent support is provided throughout the organisation? How does the sector honour its duty of care to translators and interpreters?

8) Dominant Languages (English): What values/implicit judgements does English as a language convey in humanitarian and development assistance? To what extent do key organisational decision-makers miss out on a genuinely international perspective due to poor access to language resources?

9) Marginalisation: How to ensure the full participation of minorities in development discourse and programmes, particularly from the non-Anglophone world? How may NGOs deliver adequate downwards accountability, and how may language issues prevent/enable them to do so? How can NGOs achieve maximal cultural and linguistic inclusivity?

10) Finance and Resourcing: How may NGOs acquire and maintain high-quality language support in difficult economic times?

11) Prioritising Language: How can awareness be raised of the importance and use of linguistic services at all levels of the organisation?

Session 2: The Practices of Languages in NGO Activity

Several participants delivered short presentations on key language issues within their organisation; the summaries of each are below.

[1] For more information on translating concepts please see: http://www.intrac.org/data/files/resources/634/Whatever-Happened-to-Civil-Society-INTRAC-Conference-Report-2008.pdf (pages 4-5)

Languages in Reaching Key Audiences: Alice Keen, Publications Editor, Tearfund

Tearfund operates in 40 countries worldwide through local Christian partners. They are centrally concerned with issues involved in communications with partners and the recruitment and training of translators and interpreters. They publish magazines and a series of development and capacity building guides for grassroots organisations (which are primarily translated into French, Portuguese, English, Spanish and sometimes Hindi) and attempt to access other languages in a variety of ways to help them reach their target audiences. There are two main challenges for Tearfund staff involved in publications, and they have attempted to address these issues in various ways.

The first challenge is the difficulty of embedding a culture of multilingualism in a UK-based organisation. There is a tendency for Anglophone organisations to see language issues as an 'added extra', and it can be difficult to raise awareness of the multiple complexities involved in the process of translation and quality assurance. Contributors tend not to 'write for translation' and can use colloquialisms and idioms that are unique to English. Tearfund have appointed a Translations Editor to meet this challenge, who selects and coaches translators, proof-reads key documents and acts as an internal champion for language issues within the organisation.

The second challenge relates to translating within regions. The selection and training of local translators can be a difficult process, particularly in the context of tight budgets. To respond to these challenges, Tearfund have been piloting a new way of working, adapting their practices in a number of ways, including the introduction of tests to establish the competence of translators, and the implementation of a final 'sign-off' procedure before publication. Working closely with local translators has brought a number of benefits to regional teams, including the ability to add important contextualisation to the text that better reflects local realities.

Languages in Working with Partner Organisations: Amanda Griffith, Family for Every Child

Family for Every Child is a new organisation that serves as a global network of national organisations involved in child care and protection. Its initial strategy was to ensure that key documents online were translated into Arabic, Russian, Spanish and English, but it has since found that its translation needs are far more extensive, and it now endeavours to factor in translation across all key activities. It has invested in translators and uses the same people to build mutual knowledge, understanding and trust. Google Translate is used regularly for emails.

Nevertheless, it has become evident that understanding the complexity and nuances of language is absolutely crucial, and so human translators are regarded as indispensable. Thus, the organisation now spends 7% of its budget on translation.

There are multiple challenges involved with the use of language in the work of Family for Every Child. Firstly, translation of English concepts and terms can be difficult (e.g. there is no adequate translation in Spanish for 'child protection'; 'adoption' does not exist in Islamic contexts). In addition, most research is usually conducted in the local language but the analysis and report is often, although not always, in English or one of the organisation's other three languages. Building common understandings is therefore a challenging prospect and 'lost in translation/authenticity' becomes a danger. English dominates the discourse in ways that prohibit alternative cultural understandings to be articulated and heard, much less drive knowledge and policy. Secondly, it is extremely difficult to locate technically strong staff who are also fluent in languages other than English, which forces the organisation to make tough decisions about what to prioritise. Thirdly, interpreter fatigue is a troubling issue given the excessive demands on a small number of staff. The organisation cannot afford to rotate and 'rest' interpreters in line with best practice, and yet meetings can be long and information-dense.

Language in Relationships with Partners and Grantees: Richard Cunningham, World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA)

WSPA have offices in 14 countries, and work in many more. They face similar issues to Family for Every Child in the translation of core concepts such as 'animal welfare', which does not have a direct equivalent in languages such as Chinese and Vietnamese. The organisation's internal language policy is English in oral and written communication, and partner organisations are also generally expected to communicate in English, at least in communications with WSPA's International office. This is not always problematic, since the centrality of English is assumed in the NGO world. This does mean that organisations that have English competence tend to have better access to major funding. These issues are rarely given deep consideration in the sector.

Staff have reported occasional issues relating to culture and language in working with partners over the years. An example is English-speaking members of partner organisations being replaced by non-English speakers. There have been attempts to address these issues by producing documents in the local language even if staff within the partner organisation speak English. Technical terms and unnecessary 'jargon' must be avoided as much as possible before translation. The interpreter must be central to the team, because misunderstandings can impact trust.

In recruiting staff it is rare for advertised posts to have foreign language competency attached, because it is often so difficult to predict future language needs. Partners, strategies and campaigns change, and language needs change with them. Moreover, it may take a long time for a member of staff to acquire the language competence needed to reach a functional and operational level, and it may not be relevant to their work by the time they do.

Languages in Monitoring and Evaluation: André Clark, Save the Children

Save the Children run an early intervention programme in some UK schools, which has grappled with a number of issues in monitoring and evaluation. The evaluation team is supposed to be representative of the local community, but this is not always possible to deliver. Questionnaires are distributed to the parents and teachers before and after the programme, in schools with high ethnic and linguistic diversity. The survey can be time-consuming for the parents to complete, and sometimes questions have been phrased in colloquial terms that do not translate well and can easily be misunderstood. However, the evaluation team have found that care must be taken when assisting respondents to translate the questions, as the power dynamics are important. If respondents are not treated sensitively, such assistance can be perceived as patronising, or guiding/leading. All these factors pose problems for the validity and reliability of data. It is crucial to establish preliminary research on the demographics before designing M&E strategies. The question is how to maximise quality assurance and how to engage local community while maximising the output for the beneficiaries. Problems are exacerbated when poor literacy issues are taken into account, which is frequently the case with marginalised communities. Possible solutions include using voluntary organisations with relevant language competence, and using cluster-training teams to support such groups.

Languages in Research/Data Collection: Rachel Hayman, INTRAC

INTRAC's research is often action-oriented, where there is a purpose beyond the research itself. Examples include capacity-building of civil society organisations, advocacy outputs, the production of toolkits, facilitating collaborative networks, and so on. This presents particular issues in regard to the use of local languages. An example of how these issues come into play is a recent project in Cyprus which focussed on the interaction between NGOs on the Greek Cypriot side and on the Turkish Cypriot side. Language was an extremely sensitive issue in this environment: serious thought needed to be given as to what languages would be used, who the researchers should be and how meetings should be conducted. Part of the objective of the research was to explore what processes needed to be in place to facilitate the building of trust and to promote peace-building. The senior researcher was external (Northern Irish) and did not speak Greek or Turkish, and local researchers were used to amass data in their own communities. Meetings were interpreted to the extent possible, and were held in neutral places. Key outputs were produced in three different languages, which posed challenges as this had not been sufficiently budgeted for. The need to be culturally and politically sensitive was so vital, however, that it was appropriate to provide the translations despite the resource constraints.

Quality assurance of interpreters is a perennial issue. It is also problematic to translate jargon that tends to be prevalent in development discourse. Moreover, it is extremely rare that a monitoring and evaluation project will factor in sufficient time and resources for high quality translation and robust quality assurance. It is often seen as an 'add on', but it needs to be properly budgeted. These resource issues are important to negotiate at the outset.

Post-Presentation Discussion: The discussion after the presentations centred on issues of **power**, particularly the power involved in decisions about what 'counts' as a language and thus whose voice is heard. Participants agreed that it was important to **raise awareness** of how to work with interpreters, so that organisations can be better partners to interpreters and know how to use them. There was an extended discussion on issues involved in **gender and language**, particularly in development practice. Interpreters in the field are largely male (even though females are well represented in interpretation services in general) and this can have significant implications for human rights law and the conduct of human rights investigations (e.g. particularly in cases of gender-based violence). The issue is that such problems are often not anticipated at the outset, and pre-planning is not in place to deal with them as they arise.

Session 3: Providing Linguistic Support: The Issues for Language Providers

Training and Supporting Interpreters in the Field: Barbara Moser-Mercer, In Zone Project, Geneva

The In Zone Project is an initiative based at the University of Geneva that trains interpreters who work in conflict zones and refugee camps. They primarily train humanitarian interpreters, although they recognise that the distinction between humanitarian and development workers is becoming increasingly blurred. They offer free online courses, and UNHCR and the ICRC are important partners. In Zone have found that interpreters need to be keenly aware of the power angles that are implicated in their work (such as the difficulties in communicating information through a gendered lens), and the psychological challenges of the profession. To this end, they have developed a 'tough cases' database that records diverse experiences of fieldworkers and is a valuable reference tool in organisational learning and the development of expertise. The database is used to develop recommendations and is included as part of their training programmes. It has helped to promote the key aims of the In Zone Project, which are to share strategies and to help build a community of professionals.

Sustainability and Welfare Concerns: Hilary Footitt, University of Reading, Languages at War Project

The AHRC-funded Languages at War Project investigated the language policies of the military. In response to claims that the UK military had undergone a 'cultural turn', the Project explored the extent to which the military perceived their area of operations as a 'communicative space' as well as a geographical and cultural space. It found that the military maintain a database of language skills, and are making attempts to naturalise language in briefing documents. However, there is little evidence of a self-reflective approach towards the use of language, particularly in terms of the linguistic effects of the military's presence in the country (e.g. how 'naming the space' within which they operate affects their perceptions of the space and their behaviour). There was little evidence that linguistic support was planned on paper and in practice. It was generally not a central part of logistics, nor specifically funded, and therefore there is little recognition that it needs to be monitored and evaluated. Recruitment of language intermediaries in the early stages of an operation tends to bead hoc and reliant on non-specialists. In later stages of an operation, the MoD tends to outsource recruitment without a developed view of language expectations. Linguists are not always seen as professionals in their own right. There is little rest time for linguists, and few (if any) staff development or career progression opportunities. Most problematically, there is not a strong sense of duty of care, even towards those who are most at risk because of their close military involvement. Further, language operations that have been built up locally by the military are not seen as potentially sustainable resources for which they have some continued (or post-operation) responsibility. The Project may provide interesting comparisons with the NGO world, despite the important differences in context.

The ICRC and Training Interpreters in Humanitarian Work: Leila Kherbiche, Geneva In Zone Project

The ICRC is distinct from other NGOs due to its status in international law and strong legal framework, and therefore it has distinct language and interpreting needs. Most interpreters used by the ICRC are expatriates, which helps to mitigate protection issues, since they are generally not seen by the local population as 'traitors' because they come from outside. Recruitment can be challenging because of the combination of skills that are required in the field. 'Rare' languages such as Farsi, Urdu, Pashtun, Swahili, Kurdish and Burmese are the kind of languages in demand. It is difficult to recruit an appropriate person with the right skill-set. The ideal recruit would be competent in the local language and interpret well, but would not be from the country itself, so the beneficiaries would be less likely to see him/her as partial (expatriates may be suitable). The ideal recruit would also speak good English and/or French, and be willing to work in a war zone for an extended period. The recruitment policy is based upon language tests and motivation interviews, in order to evaluate the linguistic skills and the ethics of the candidate. Interpreters have typically not received training, and so did not tend to perceive themselves as professional (and nor were they perceived so by others). In Zone now aims to fill that gap.

Session 4: Addressing Common Problems and Planning Next Steps

This session was based upon a participatory exercise. The participants drew up priority lists of areas most in need of further research based upon the presentations and group discussion. They also identified a series of practical outputs that they hoped such research could contribute to in the future.

The participants remarked upon the similarities of their concerns, despite their diverse professional and organisational backgrounds. They acknowledged that the key insight of the workshop was that language is not neutral; it is centrally implicated in the exercise of power, so it has to be high on the agenda of NGOs that claim to aspire to be organisations that are fully accountable to beneficiaries. Despite the serious efforts that have been made in the sector in recent years to build greater awareness of the need to be culturally sensitive, it is surprising that there is such poor awareness of the ways in which disproportionate power relations can be magnified through language. The workshop had elicited many examples of how a lack of awareness can lead to unintentional consequences. There was consensus that there is a pressing need across the sector for well-informed and evidence-based policies. It is imperative to share lessons and experiences in order to accumulate a knowledge base that will help to improve standards of performance. The participants were encouraged that this workshop indicated a real appetite for sharing such knowledge.

Gaps in Knowledge

- *Beneficiaries*
- Whose 'voices' are heard in M&E exercises, and in which language(s)? How is beneficiary feedback translated across different contexts, and what meanings might be lost?
- There needs to be more understanding of the issues involved in the use of language in children-centred work. How can language be harnessed to enable better accountability to children? To enable them to play a meaningful role in project design and evaluation?
- How does language and the choice of interpreters impact the way in which the voices of survivors of gender-based violence are 'heard'?
- Language is a central component of accountability. There are opportunities for future research projects to achieve policy impact by 'catching people in their own rhetoric' (e.g. by posing questions such as: how can the buzzwords of 'empowerment', 'listening' and 'participation' be realised without full consideration of the language issues?)

- *The use of local versus external interpreters/translators*
- What is current practice regarding the choices that NGOs make about the use of local versus external interpreters/translators? Who is used for what purpose? How do NGOs differentiate between the different roles of interpreters, and the context in which they use them? A mapping exercise would be useful.
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of using local versus external interpreters/translators? Local interpreters can be too embedded to provide objective, neutral accounts. However, external interpreters are not as well placed as locals to build the types of relationships with the community that facilitate meaningful feedback.
- There is a need to know more about the 'costs' of bad interpretation and translation, versus the return on investment when the right decisions are made. These costs may not just be financial, but also involve a loss of time and trust.

- *Partners and partnerships*
- In what ways are the power dynamics in the NGO-partner relationships affected if one language dominates all communications?
- To what extent and in what ways does language disempower partners and aid recipients?
- How often are staff in partner organisations used for translation and interpretation in exercises for which they have a stake in the outcome? And how much reflection is given to these issues?

- *Monitoring and evaluation*
- Is it possible for beneficiaries to have a meaningful input in programme design if language issues are not in the project proposal?
- Evaluation is often designed around strategic objectives that are donor-driven. How (in)frequently are linguistic needs mentioned in donor-designed log-frames?

To further explore the above, there is a need to gather cases from NGO and the translators/ interpreters working with them. It would also be useful to learn from the theoretical frameworks and empirical work developed in community interpreting.

Possible Practical Outputs

- **The development of minimum standards** for translating/interpreting, particularly in terms of monitoring and evaluation. It would be valuable to have guidelines for policy change within organisations, as that raise the profile of the issue and establish aspirations. Quality and Assurance initiatives can be useful mechanisms for change (although these should be framed in terms of what is 'good enough', given the difficult and varied operating contexts of NGOs).
- **A database of case study examples to help with practical dilemmas**. For example, in terms of 'voice' and accountability, it would be useful to construct a database of historical and contemporary case studies of NGOs that were (un)successful in giving voice to beneficiaries.
- **The building of a network of NGOs actors interested in sharing learning and knowledge**, which is underpinned by a willingness to learn from failure.
- **Awareness-raising** at all different levels of an organisation, from Chief Executives to field-workers. Donors must also be aware of the need to fund translation and interpretation sufficiently. Any initiatives that promote an attitudinal shift in the sector will be welcome.

Outcomes of the Workshop

- The workshop convenors will reflect upon the day's discussion, and refine possible research questions into a feasible project, with a view to **submitting a substantial funding bid to appropriate research funders**.

- An **email list** of participants and other interested parties has been created to disseminate information on the latest developments in regard to the funding bid. **Feedback will be most welcome.** This list represents the beginnings of a knowledge-sharing network.

This report has been produced for the information of participants and other interested parties. Comments, questions and observations are welcome. The workshop convenors would like to warmly thank the participants for generously donating their time and sharing their experiences. Their insights have been invaluable.

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