

**Listening, Power and Inclusion:
Languages in Development NGOs**

2nd November 2016, 13:30 – 16:30

School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London

Workshop Report

Convenors

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Workshop Aims

How does language affect relationships between NGO workers and the people and communities with whom they work? What challenges are NGO workers confronted with when attempting to listen to people from different cultural backgrounds? Does the dominance of English in organisations influence power relationships on the ground? How is language embedded into NGO approaches to listening in different contexts - listening to local communities, listening to children, listening with other development actors?

As part of the [Listening Zones project](#)¹, on 2nd November 2016 the [University of Reading](#), the [University of Portsmouth](#) and [INTRAC](#) held a participatory workshop for practitioners. The workshop aimed to provide participants with an opportunity to:

- Hear about the research so far, drawing on historic examples;
- Reflect on what we can learn from this for current practice;
- Make an input to the next steps of the research process;
- Ensure outputs from the project are relevant and useful.

¹ The Listening Zones of NGOs is a 3 year (2015-18) research project that aims to raise the profile and importance of languages and cultural knowledge in the policies and practices of development NGOs.

The workshop was attended by representatives from a variety of UK-based NGOs and agencies, including: the Amsterdam Institute for International Development, the British Red Cross, Christian Aid, Conciliation Resources, Creative Social Change, Mothers' Union, Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK, Stars Foundation, Tearfund, Taysha Consulting, The Brooke, and an independent consultant.

This report provides a summary of key discussions and outlines next steps in the process. The team hopes that it will feed into general debate on language and cultural knowledge in NGOs.

Setting the scene: the Listening Zones of NGOs

Introduction to the research project

Listening is recognised as very important by development NGOs and donors. Much has been said about the importance of listening, the need to empower beneficiaries by giving them a voice, and ways in which listening can be built into the design of interventions.² But the role that language and cultural knowledge plays in the ways in which we listen has been under investigated.

In 2014, Professor Hilary Footitt and Dr Angela Crack together with INTRAC held a [workshop](#) with a range of participants from different NGOs, and interpreters. The workshop generated some research questions, and as a result the team put together a bid with INTRAC to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (one of the prime research councils of the UK), which was successful.

The Listening Zones of NGOs is an independent project (2015-18), and focuses on four case study UK-based NGOs: Christian Aid, Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK and Tearfund. During the first year of *The Listening Zones of NGOs* project (2015-2016), the research team consulted the archives of NGOs, the Department for International Development (DFID) and its predecessors (the Overseas Development Ministry and the Overseas Development Administration), and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). Whilst the project is about contemporary practice, it is vital to understand how cultures of listening and language have evolved over time, and influenced relationships with partners and beneficiaries on the ground. Donors and their preferences shape to a large degree what NGOs do, so this is a crucial part of the jigsaw. The material from the archives informed this workshop.

Stage two of the project (2016-2017) will involve semi-structured interviews with NGO workers both within and outside the UK, and ethnographic research in Malawi, Peru and Kyrgyzstan. There are three reasons for selecting these case study areas: the different status

² See for example the CDA Collaborative Learning Project, 2012. [“Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid”](#).

of English, the approximate chronology of NGO interventions, and the accessibility afforded by INTRAC. English is the unavoidable focus of this project as it is the hegemonic language of development. For example, in Malawi, English is the official language. In Peru, English has no official status, but is the most widely taught second language. In Kyrgyzstan, English has no official status, and only a tiny minority of the population speak English.

With this project, the research team seeks to produce practical advice for NGOs. The workshop was an opportunity to exchange ideas on what would be most relevant for NGO workers, so the team can take these ideas on board when designing and disseminating outputs. The team also aims to produce a 'lessons learned' paper for DFID, to publish a book, and to organise a conference at the end of the project (2018) to which participants of this workshop are all invited, as well as others in the sector with an interest in languages.

The role of INTRAC in the project

Vicky Brehm (INTRAC Research Associate), set out the role of INTRAC in the project. Vicky Brehm has been working for and with INGOs for over 20 years, both as a practitioner and as a researcher and advisor. She has a personal interest in the combination of languages and development. Personally, her first job in the development world came from the fact that she was a social scientist who spoke French and Portuguese.

All of us who have worked across cultures recognise that listening is intensely personal, but also affects organisations. Yet there is very little research on the state of current practice and what actually happens, particularly when contrasted to other areas such as M&E.

In this project, INTRAC's role is to act as a bridge between the practitioner and academic communities. INTRAC hopes to be able to steer the research and interpret the findings so that they are as relevant as possible to NGOs. INTRAC will help to examine the implications for practice in partnerships, accountability and quality assurance in the provision of language services.

Historical examples and current practice – working groups

Participants split into themed working groups: listening to adults and children, and listening as a global organisation. Quotes from the archival research conducted during the first year of the project were anonymised and fictionalised and displayed on posters (see Annex 1).

Three questions guided discussions:

1. How do languages influence relationships between NGO workers and the people and communities with whom they work?
2. What challenges do languages represent for NGOs in their work?
3. What are the problems and opportunities in having English as the dominant language?

Participants generally agreed that although the poster material was historical and in some ways practice has moved on, NGOs are still struggling with lots of the same issues. The following summarises the main points and questions that arose from the discussions.

Listening and communication

- We need to think about what listening means and define it
- Should we define/distinguish between different levels of listening? Particularly when engaging at a community level, a researcher or NGO staff member might hear what a community member is saying but that is not the same as taking action based on what the community are saying.
- There is a spectrum of listening, from hearing but not paying attention to active listening where you want to take action based on what you have heard.
- Is language and listening about working 'with' or 'for' communities?
- The question of effective communication is about the role of language in how we work, and is broader than the specific question of interpreting and translating.
- Different cultures and groups have different ways of consuming information, e.g. oral culture, pictorial for children.
- Body language is also an important factor, as well as the use of different types of English between country staff.
- What is a 'natural' language to use on the ground in relationships? How do we define this?
- What does 'local' language mean?

Power dynamics and relationships

- Language plays a key role in partnerships, yet not much attention has been paid to it.
- Staff recruitment and organisational structures: Many NGOs are moving towards a focus on technical expertise rather than regional/country-specific expertise. The types of competencies required are different, and there is an issue with language and cultural nuances being lost.
- The power of English also poses challenges in relationships with local communities. One participant remarked that very often if you use a local person who speaks English, they may be distant from their local community just by having gone to University and studied English. They may not have sufficient community credibility to challenge the intervention that the donor is suggesting.
- Translators and interpreters can function as gatekeepers. Often they are the educated elites so power dynamics come into play. When interpreters try to explain viewpoints it can be value-laden, with discussions being led down particular lines of enquiry.
- The neutrality of the NGO worker: Like the interpreter/translator, the NGO worker is presumed to be neutral. How is this neutrality affected, if at all, by language transmission?

- Trust is integral to building relationships with people on the ground, and language and respect for different cultures is integral to this.
- It is important to consider power dynamics between the partner organisation and the local community.
- Unequal power dynamics can often be established early on in an intervention, as many start out as humanitarian interventions. The NGO enters the territory under emergency conditions, and needs to appoint people and issue instructions quickly. English is the default language, meaning that people of other languages are barred from participating in decisions. Over time, the humanitarian effort becomes a development programme, and by then English has already acquired dominance.
- We need to be sensitive to the fact that communities are not homogenous.
- The power of DFID language and the language of development.
- Donor language is often inaccessible. At community level, this is not just the language of a donor document, but also the fact that concepts might not be easily understood.

Language provision

- The donor material from the archives suggests that local language was considered ill-adapted to modernisation.
- There are different layers of complexity within countries. For example, often it is not just an issue of translating from English into one other language. There might be three or four different languages each with their own socio-economic implications. This highlights the complexity of choosing which languages to operate in.
- Certain languages are sometimes prioritised in development programmes for (national and international) political reasons. For example, in situations where there are high ethnic tensions, and prioritising a certain language is part of a move to marginalise a certain group.
- For all of the issues discussed, in relation to children the challenges are amplified and are more complex, e.g. translating documents does not work for children.
- Organisations have done work on how children want to feedback information (e.g. through a suggestion box or hotline). Are they asked which language they want to feed back in? How is communication passed upwards through the feedback mechanism?
- What languages are used for complaints and response mechanisms?
- Reports to donors are not translated for the community. The information is often not in the right format and there is the question of cost.

Language policy, translation and interpreting

- Guidelines for translation and language policies often go into a black hole in organisations. The issue is not often whether they exist, but how to make staff aware

they exist and encourage them to use them. It would be good to make staff aware of guidelines during their induction processes.

- Some organisations at the workshop had a language policy that had different tiers: one was largely based on translation (for example, the organisation will translate into three languages); one had little clarity with regard to local languages (for example we will translate into these three languages but other languages are the responsibility of country offices- budgetary provision for this?)
- Language is often treated as a low priority. For many NGOs, it is a blind-spot, but it's important to recognise that this is not the same for all NGOs. Tearfund, for example, are sensitive to language issues and have produced useful guides and learning about the issues, e.g. through encouraging translation of their 'PILLARS' book into local languages.
- Investment in language issues takes time and resources, which can be challenging especially when the donor doesn't expect it to be resourced. DFID for example say that they want NGOs to communicate meaningfully with local populations, but they are perceived by some as placing emphasis on value for money and often not providing resources for language needs.
- Language intermediaries: Resource limitations (money/time) mean that non-professional translators and interpreters are often used. There is a lot of pressure on these people, as they are in high demand. This raises issues around quality assurance.
- There is an issue with replies of speakers that are possibly filtered by translators and interpreters. Bias and filtering can occur in practice.
- Impact evaluation reports need to be written after an intervention. But these reports usually only ask questions relating to ethnicity, not language.
- Translating concepts into other languages can be an issue. The discussion on the difficulty of translating concepts revealed that we are thinking from the point of view of English and not thinking about how to help people in their language.
- What part of the translation budget is spent on translating *from* English? Are we listening if the majority of material is produced in English? How can we collect data to see who is actually using the translations?
- A lot of the documents from the archives present a view of bottom-up and top-down, but there is less on the view of partners and communities working on the ground.
- Country offices produce a lot of interesting material but this does not make it to headquarters because of language. There was a recognition that the balance was shifting with, for example regional offices taking more of a lead, but more encouragement is needed.

Reliance on English

- The problems that result from the dominance of English stretch beyond the NGO world. For example, most high-quality academic research (that would be useful in development programmes) is only available in English.
- 'English-centricity' is a real problem for the development sector. It is exacerbated by standardised reporting requirements (and the obligation to 'report' can fuel an 'us/them' dynamic). Too much jargon is used in the sector, leading to confusion about the meaning of commonly-used words. There is a 'communication power dynamic' at play in development work, which can foster community antagonism.
- The way in which English questions are shaped automatically means that some stories will not be included on forms.
- English plays a key role when selecting partners and in job promotion within the organisation. There was a feeling that in NGOs today, English language ability conferred benefits in terms of career opportunities. The route to seniority is often shaped by English language ability. For example, managers may progress up the organisation by virtue of their English language skills rather than 'soft skills' important to development work (e.g. empathy with ordinary people, etc.). A lot of the training that is necessary for promotion is provided in English. Those who do not speak English (or do not speak it fluently) can face barriers to progression.
- English competency for local people is sometimes seen by donors as 'part and parcel' of development.
- Why do we automatically organise workshops in English, even when we know it will only be people's 2nd or 3rd language? Adequate resources for language provision are rarely put aside even though we *know* about the problem. Interpreting often goes wrong during workshops, because of reliance on local staff who are not trained in interpreting. One participant's approach is to ask what people's first language is, then second, and then third. From there they make a decision as to which language to run the workshop in.

Suggestions on next steps in the research project

Ethnographic observations

The *Listening Zones of NGOs* research project will include case studies (ethnographic observations) in three countries: Malawi, Peru and Kyrgyzstan. Over the course of one month, the researchers plan to observe the interactions between a UK NGO, their in-country partners and the communities they are working with. The focus will be on listening within the complexity of language and cultural barriers, observing what happens in practice.

The research team sought participants' input on the focus of the ethnographic observations. Suggestions included:

Partners

- Speak to partners who do a lot of work in communities, as they may not have the same/a language policy. Do language policies trickle down? Do they have different views?

Communities

- What languages do people use in their own lives and how does that relate to the language NGOs operate in?
- When in communities, interview local leaders and youth to draw out generational differences. Views on power and inclusion might be very different across these groups.
- Look at social norms and the role they play in language, e.g. are children allowed to have a voice?

Donors

- How do DFID's counter-parts in the three countries relate to DFID?

Listening and accountability

- A lot of agencies are doing experiments in listening (e.g. using feedback mechanisms). Asking questions around those activities would be valuable, for example what are people's experiences of being listened to? What does it feel like to raise a complaint? What role does language play e.g. if I make a written complaint in English does it go further?

Practicalities

- When writing to NGOs in their own language in these three countries, pay attention to the language of their response
- Speak to freelance translators and interpreters to get an in-country perspective. As they travel around NGOs, they should be able to provide insights. Observe how they are recruited. Visit local research organisations.
- Speak to drivers working for NGOs. They will have valuable insights.
- Organise a workshop on language in-country.
- Compare urban vs. rural, and include two types of rural, e.g. semi-rural and very rural.

Education system

- Examine the education systems in countries, e.g. are people brought up to critically assess and analyse documents?
- Look at the language policy of the countries. What pedagogic approach is used? What esteem do local languages have in comparison to English?

Outputs

Participants provided valuable feedback on the design and dissemination of outputs from the project. This included:

- Toolkits need to be brief if they are to be useful.
- Resources on languages do exist but they are often not mainstreamed within organisations.
- Guidelines or tips on working with people for whom English is their 2nd or 3rd language could be useful.

Want to find out more or be part of the Listening Zones of NGOs project?

See our webpages on www.reading.ac.uk/listening-zones-ngos and <https://www.intrac.org/projects/listening-zones-ngos/>

For questions and comments, or to sign up to the mailing list, please contact Dr Wine Tesseur at w.tesseur@reading.ac.uk.

Listening as a global organisation

Questions

- How does language affect relationships between NGOs and the people and communities with whom they work?
- What challenges are NGO employees confronted with when attempting to listen to people from different cultural backgrounds?
- Does the dominance of English in organisations influence power relationships on the ground?

International policy

'This NGO is a multilingual organisation with English as the primary language.'

'The organisation has made big assumptions about incoming staff in terms of their understanding and empathy to the work.'

'Many teams did not work in English, and this meant translating the draft plans into English, translating comments on the draft, re-drafting in the original language, working on the document, and then re-translating it.'

'The issue of choosing which language to work in has dogged the NGO for years. While it is a multicultural organisation, English is still the dominant medium, and many field staff are excluded from key debates because they lack proficiency in English.'

In-country

'There is a gulf between policy makers and the reality of our work in the field, rhetoric and reality.'

'To what degree do programmes "triangulate" information? How quickly and efficiently do programmes learn from listening and modify their support accordingly? Translating listening into action, being open to change is essential'.

'It is such a simple matter that I hesitate to raise it' - the case of one would-be applicant for funds who had not applied because he was unable to write in English.

In-programme

Local community worker:

'Unfortunately today national languages are reduced in value. Speaking Lingala or Kikongo is proof that you haven't studied or you're not intelligent. Even if there's just one out of a thousand people who speak French, the normal reaction is to speak French. But, you don't insist that Americans should speak French when you're in a Church in the USA if there are one or two French people out of the 50 Christians there who don't speak English.'

Local fieldworker in correspondence:

'Is there a serious problem in assuming that development can occur in someone else's language? Can sustainable development be achieved at the expense of the people of Africa, or at the expense of their languages?'

Government donors and language

'The teaching of English is a particularly useful sphere for Commonwealth co-operation. It is also to our own interest to see the quality of spoken and written English improved and to link this with education and training in Science.'

'African indigenous languages are ill-adapted to the requirements of modern technological society. Indeed, it is only through possession of a European language that their administrators, businessmen, engineers and technicians can gain access to the knowledge needed for further development and improved living standards.'

Where next?

- How does this resonate with or differ from your own experiences?
- What we can learn from these examples for current practice?

Listening to adults and children

Questions

- How does language affect relationships between NGOs and the people and communities with whom they work?
- What challenges are NGO employees confronted with when attempting to listen to people from different cultural backgrounds?
- Does the dominance of English in organisations influence power relationships on the ground?

International policy

'We will proactively seek to support and involve children in the NGO. This requires us to be better equipped as an organisation, with particular emphasis on processes for effective, two-way communication with children and young people.'

'To establish effective information and communications, we need to:

- enable staff and partners to have the information they need in the right form and when it is required and to be able to best share their knowledge;
- ensure that language is not a barrier to effective communication.'

In-country

'When managers or directors arrive they are often told what the community thinks they would like to hear.'

'In order to communicate effectively we need to listen, yet the willingness to listen to children, to access the voices of people in marginalised communities, to seek the views and opinions of staff at lower level of the programme hierarchy, has often been missing.'

'Report writing often does not capture the feelings of the beneficiaries. Writers just assume that what they think is best. Reports are written in response to requests rather than systematically.'

In-programme

'Form filling and descriptions of personal experiences are more easily communicated in first or preferred language. This point was demonstrated during the study when young people wrote testimonies that were later translated. Their accounts were articulate and vivid, something many found difficult in English, a language they have only been learning for a few months.'

'The organisers of the workshop did not speak Dari. There was one occasion when a representative of the Afghan Fund shouted at a woman in Dari. We asked him to translate what he said and why he talked to her in this way. An interpreter of the Afghan Fund told us that Dari is a rude language, and that the man had merely offered the woman his help. After the workshops we heard that rumours had been circulated that the workshops were organised to turn Afghan people to Christianity even though there was no discussion about religion.'

Government donors and language

'Competency in English is becoming increasingly necessary for a developing country's economy to enable it to interpret offers of aid from English-speaking donor countries, produce development plans, take part in negotiations for aid, obtain and maintain the appropriate capital items and make full use of offers of technical expertise.'

Where next?

- How does this resonate with or differ from your own experiences?
- What we can learn from these examples for current practice?