Study Group on Language and the United Nations

Symposium on

Language, the Sustainable Development Goals, and Vulnerable Populations

New York, 11-12 May 2017

FINAL REPORT

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1. Introduction

The Study Group on Language and the United Nations, an independent group of scholars and practitioners on matters related to the international use of language, convened a symposium on *Language, the Sustainable Development Goals, and Vulnerable Populations* at the Church Center for the United Nations, 777 United Nations Plaza, New York, on 11 and 12 May 2017. Its goal was to examine the implications of language for the treatment of vulnerable populations and their centrality in the development, implementation, and successful completion of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs were established by the United Nations General Assembly as the basis for the UN's development agenda for the period 2015-2030.

The symposium was attended by some 110 academics, diplomats, NGO representatives and UN officials, and sponsored by a number of organizations, including the Center for Applied Linguistics, the Centre for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems and its journal *Language Problems and Language Planning*, and the Universal Esperanto Association (an organization in consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council and associated with the UN Department of Public Information). Financial support was provided by the Center for Applied Linguistics and the Esperantic Studies Foundation.

2. Attendance and Programme

The symposium featured two keynote addresses: the first by Christine Hélot, Professor of English in the Teacher Education Department at the University of Strasbourg, France; the second by François Grin, Professor of Economics in the Faculty of Translation at the University of Geneva. The opening panel, led by Humphrey Tonkin, University Professor of the Humanities and President Emeritus at the University of Hartford, was followed by six panel sessions, each highlighting a specific facet of the discussion on language, sustainable development, and vulnerable populations. A closing discussion sought to highlight fruitful directions and directives for a more multilateral, democratic, and sustainable mechanism for research and policy on linguistic aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals.

3. Purpose and Overview

The Study Group's symposium in 2016, entitled *Symposium on Language and the Sustainable Development Goals*, addressed the fact that the SDGs fall short in their lack of attention to language largely due to a more general failure to recognize the consequences, both positive and negative, of linguistic diversity. Although the rhetoric surrounding the SDGs stresses inclusiveness, multidirectional communication, and reaching the world's least advantaged

citizens, policy efforts often disregard the very essence of human communication – language – easily undermining such efforts, and ultimately hindering progress toward the achievement of the SDGs.

This year's symposium highlighted the reality that the failure to account for language and language diversity during the formulation and implementation of policy has disproportionate effects on vulnerable populations, the primary stakeholders in the successful achievement of the SDGs. Many NGOs represent themselves as facilitators of multidirectional communication. However, the local languages of vulnerable populations through which NGOs listen and operationalize policy "are often given no prominence in project design or in feedback and accountability mechanisms" [9]. This type of institutional infrastructure exacerbates the "growing disconnect between those who have the knowledge to make progress toward sustainable development goals and those who directly benefit from this progress" [13].

In order to bridge this gap, it is the first responsibility of the members of the development community to understand the lives, experiences, and goals of the primary stakeholders in development. In doing so, the development community may come to understand that populations are not inherently vulnerable; rather, specific aspects of geo-politics and language policies have actively rendered populations vulnerable [31]. Identifying the root causes of this engendered vulnerability in each affected population may lead to more effective, more democratic, and more sustainable development policy and practice. By seeking to remove the geo-political, educational, and linguistic barriers that have disempowered and continue to disempower communities, the wider development effort more effectively enlists "vulnerable and marginalized communities to advocate for specific actions to realize improvements in their livelihoods and economic opportunity, personal and professional circumstances, and to raise awareness of social issues" [22].

The symposium's presenters, many of them language professionals and experts who have devoted their life's work to the understanding of the role of language in society, examined individual communities, development projects, and best practices. They highlighted the crucial role language plays in facilitating or hindering sustainable development, especially in regard to vulnerable populations, a largely heterogeneous group of primary stakeholders in the achievement of the SDGs. As we note below, vulnerability is itself a term difficult to describe and delimit: the aged are inherently vulnerable, the sick are vulnerable, children are vulnerable. These and other groups all have their linguistic needs. Three types of vulnerable populations were the primary foci of the symposium: permanently settled refugees/migrants, temporarily settled refugees/migrants, and indigenous or heritage language minorities. Within these three groups, adults and children were shown to experience significantly different language-related challenges, demonstrating that, even broadly speaking, at least six distinct types of vulnerable populations require individualized sustainable development solutions, each devised through inclusive, multi-directional communication.

For permanently settled refugees/migrants, as well as speakers of heritage migrant languages, it is the socio-political subordination and enforced illegitimacy of migrant languages in educational systems that renders the ever growing populations of young speakers of minority migrant languages vulnerable [6]. Under current conditions such individuals are commonly forced into linguistic and cultural assimilation under the guise of successful integration, effectively nullifying social and cultural capital, and often exacerbating existing inequalities.

Temporarily settled refugees/migrants are caught in a struggle between hopes of repatriation (requiring reintegration into the educational system and civil society of their home countries) and the possibility of permanent displacement. This tension challenges the clarity and success of development efforts both for the population itself and for policy makers. In these contexts, an environment which celebrates diversity, valuing refugees' linguistic and cultural capital while providing language and vocational tools, may alleviate this struggle [24].

For indigenous or heritage language minorities, especially speakers of low-prestige languages, inequality is reinforced through the institutionalization of legal, economic, educational, and social discrimination in the form of languages of education and government that are inaccessible or difficult to access. For some, cultural differences expressed through language use, such as a linguistic tradition of allusions, proverbs, and riddles, may also result in misperceptions of untrustworthiness among those outside the group or lack of confidence among those within it, potentially further disenfranchising such populations [14].

In the formulation and implementation of sustainable development policy, the individual circumstances of each of these and other vulnerable populations must be addressed – indeed must constitute the guiding principle in development efforts. By uncovering the root causes of their vulnerability, a task which requires linguistically-aware efforts at multilateral communication, the wider development community may facilitate individual, community, and state ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals.

In the following sections we provide a summary of the ideas and topics presented at the 2017 symposium.

4. Defining the Issues

The scope and scale of the SDGs are truly ambitious. Their aims encompass global economic, environmental, and cultural sustainability for all individuals, peoples, and states. Inherent in their formulation, however, is a focus on vulnerable groups and states [3], such that individuals most vulnerable to economic, environmental, or political crises are primary stakeholders in the success

of the SDGs. The word *vulnerable* itself is used extensively in the SDG targets (1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 2.1, 4.5, 6.2, 11.2, and 11.5) as well as their indicators.

Understanding the definition of vulnerability, therefore, is a core requirement for those working toward the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The heterogeneity of vulnerable populations, however, makes defining the concept of vulnerability difficult. Perhaps the only appropriate definition of vulnerability is the lack of the contrary: resilience. Vulnerability is the lack of resilience, the ability to withstand shock and crisis [24]. Vulnerability, if defined in this manner, is not the default or inherent state of individuals or populations, but an engendered state created when resilience is undermined [31].

One such factor in the lack of resilience, language, the very essence of human communication, is frequently overlooked. Various metaphors have been used to describe often erroneous assumptions about the lack of attention to language in contemporary discussions on sustainable development: it is taken for granted much as plumbing is taken for granted [4]: it is merely instrumental [28]; it is a window that policy makers look through but never look at [30].

Multilingualism, in the development community, is often seen as a translation process which occurs in the background [2]. There is an implicit assumption that the appropriate language channels will be used to disseminate the correct and relevant information to the target populations, but little conscious consideration is given to enhancing two-way linguistic communication in the decision-making process to avoid misunderstandings or communication failures [3].

This lack of attention to language and multilingualism undermines successful, multilateral, well informed negotiation, a requirement in the development community, where all parties must have access to relevant and reliable information as well as the ability to freely express themselves [1]. The question, then, is how to change development perspectives on language so that multilingualism is effectively leveraged. While there are efforts to emphasize multilingualism as a conscious and deliberate choice with a focus on the creation of measurable targets and indicators for international organizations such as the United Nations [2], more work in this regard is needed by large international organizations, individual national governments, non-governmental organizations, private businesses, research organizations, and local communities to ensure an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development outcome.

The complex interactions between language and vulnerability, and therefore the SDGs, were the central concern of this symposium. Individual issues, case studies, and theoretical concerns were raised, each demonstrating unique facets of the task at hand. The following overarching questions encompass some of the major threads of discussion.

How should research on the relationship between language and sustainable development be conducted? Such research has usually taken the form of using linguistic data in economic analyses or using economics in linguistic analyses. Either method risks introducing oversimplifications of the secondary field. Ideological biases, inexact methods of quantifying linguistic data, and misleading equations such as language diversity = fragmentation = low GDP per capita, are frequent and problematic. Successful research on language, economics, and development requires true multidisciplinarity with mutual familiarity among the various fields of research involved [20].

How should vulnerable populations retain or regain power and agency in negotiations, especially in negotiations with large international development organizations? Effective communication is a prerequisite for effective negotiation. However, those in extreme conditions may find it difficult to express themselves in others' terms. Without verbalizing experienced injustices, vulnerable populations may not be given an appropriate opportunity to express themselves freely for a fair chance at negotiation [22].

How should language rights, both individual and collective, be protected? Internationally, neither would be effective or plausibly implemented on its own [8]. Nationally, language rights frequently pit the freedoms of parents, children, schools, teachers, and states against one another, especially in the context of Goal 4, which aims to ensure "inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" [29]. What are the obligations and limitations of national or local governments in this regard, and how do they weigh the often competing claims of individual and collective language rights?

How should governments or international organizations invest in language resources? In the United States, Title VI of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA, 1958) and now the Higher Education Act (HEA) uses national security as a rationale to fund language programs. However, the dearth of cooperation between academics and government officials results in ineffective, inefficient, and/or insufficient use of language resources. Frequent casualties of similar systems elsewhere are non-state languages, many of which are spoken by vulnerable populations. Resources in these often strategically useful languages are frequently disproportionately underfunded because of their unofficial status [11].

How are de facto language policies created through social rhetoric [21] and linguistic landscapes [15]? Toxic rhetoric surrounding refugees and migrants, undocumented or otherwise, hinders pluralistic dialogue and may strip individuals of their fundamental dignity and rights. Large infrastructural systems of education, transportation, and media, among others, may yield de facto policies which are counterproductive to the achievement of the SDGs.

These were some of the issues defined and discussed through the case studies, best policy practices, and proposals described below, as related to non-state language communities,

heritage language communities, permanently settled migrant communities, and transient migrant communities.

5. Non-State Language Communities

As noted above, the rhetoric surrounding the SDGs stresses inclusiveness and multidirectional communication. Unfortunately, many international organizations and development projects stop short of listening and communicating in local languages. This is especially true when local communities speak non-state languages [9]. In fact, even languages of wider communication are often neglected. Thus, only 2.59% of World Bank publications related to SDG sectors in French-speaking Africa were translated into French over the last five years. Across all international institutions, only 10% of publications on this region were available in French. The original content, written in English, is rarely translated into French, let alone local non-state languages [13].

Donors to international aid organizations may not be aware of the large-scale benefits of engaging through local languages and, therefore, tend not to require a change from the status quo. Decreasing internal fragmentation in international organizations, increasing trust with local communities [9], increasing readership and improved information among all stakeholders leading to better informed project staff and better public awareness of business development opportunities [13] are all benefits of engaging in development efforts through local languages.

Two concrete methods of moving away from an English-only or state-language-only mode of operation are: (a) partnering with local organizations, which may aid in increasing cultural and linguistic access to local communities, and (b) highlighting best practices so that donors of international NGOs pressure projects into employing local languages [9]. These steps may also decrease miscommunication and prejudice due to differences in communicative and linguistic style. The use of symbolism, riddles, proverbs, and silence in cultures where indirect communication is valued may be misinterpreted by cultures where direct communication is expected. Without a cultural understanding, governments or international negotiators approach the table with a set of paralinguistic expectations that are prejudicial to the achievement of the SDGs [14].

The speakers of non-state languages are vulnerable not only in an international development context but in other ways too. The languages of instruction in local educational systems may, themselves, be counterproductive toward the achievement of the SDGs. Goal 4 target 4.5 aims to "eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations" [7]. However, speakers of non-state languages may be immediately disadvantaged if the language of instruction is not their mother tongue. In these

cases, the language(s) of instruction may not allow the learner to access initial and continuing literacy [7].

In Mozambique, only 10% of the population speaks the state language (which is the language of instruction), Portuguese, as their mother tongue. Only 26% of teachers are literate in Portuguese [16]. Similarly, in Pakistan, only 8% of the population speaks Urdu as a native language [10]. Although, as is well known, in 1953 UNESCO stated, in *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education,* that "[w]e take it as axiomatic […] that the best medium for teaching is the mother tongue of the pupil" [7], the language of instruction used in Mozambique is Portuguese while in Pakistan the languages of instruction are Urdu and English, despite the far more complicated local linguistic situation.

Knowledge of how to better this situation already exists: multilingual education (MLE) or mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE). Field experiments have shown the effectiveness of using one's mother tongue for learning, critical thinking, and general wellbeing in the classroom [23]. Problems arise at the implementation stage since governments and local communities often do not accept MLE as a plausible alternative to state-language instruction [7]. Teachers may not be comfortable teaching in local languages. There may be no standardized tests, materials, or curricula in these languages, which are seen solely as a bridge to state or instructional languages [16]. Parents may not want their children to be disadvantaged in the state language, afraid that an educational emphasis on the mother tongue will detract from the students' abilities to engage with the more prestigious state languages.

To solve these issues, the creation of local literacy steering committees, a process of decentralizing education, may help. A three-stage development process could include: 1) the introduction of the concept of elementary schooling in unrecognized community languages, 2) the implementation of an integrated community language teaching and materials development program, and 3) the identification of ways to expand the program into higher grades or neighbouring communities [17]. By harnessing and investing in the cultural capital of local communities and local languages as well as by utilizing cheap and readily available technology [10], NGOs may provide the technical assistance necessary to implement MLE effectively [7].

Even in societies where multilingualism is valued, speakers of migrant languages may be made vulnerable. In Europe, for example, educational language policies reinforce multilingualism, and prestigious indigenous or other European languages are prized, maintained, and regarded as assets, yet migrant languages are often treated as liabilities. Systems of early childhood education and care may be responsible for this discrepancy in treatment. All languages should be valued as resources and sustained through the educational system. A re-analysis and reformulation of educational policy is required to end these unbalanced educational practices [6].

6. Permanently Settled Migrant Language Communities

The global tide of migrants and refugees has highlighted the role of language in policies related to education and integration. The linguistic integration of adult migrants was the central concern of many presenters. According to a Council of Europe survey, in 2013, 26 countries required a certain level of language proficiency, ascertained through official examination, for citizenship, 23 for residency, and 8 for initial entry into the country [18]. Although the appropriate use of testing need not be problematic, examinations may serve as a de facto barrier for vulnerable, low-literate or illiterate adult migrants or refugees. In 2015, the Council of Europe asserted that language tests must not "infringe the human rights of migrants, and [must] fully respect the principles of transparency and equity according to internationally accepted codes of practice" [18].

Unfortunately, the educational systems of the countries or regions where migrants or refugees are currently living are unprepared for the influx of this extremely heterogeneous population. Teachers are often under-prepared or have no experience with low-literate or illiterate students [26]. Curricula are often generic and ineffective, making little use of learners' eagerness for employment-oriented education [19]. In spite of these issues, if research on the education of refugees is to yield positive results, it must focus on concrete needs, best practices, and professional development programs which can be implemented within existing national frameworks [25].

The jobs available to incoming migrants vary in their required linguistic competencies. Profession-specific jargon, for example, is often essential for those ready to enter the workforce, yet standard educational programs fail to provide these crucial skills, inhibiting migrant integration. Since jobs themselves are powerful vehicles for language development in targeted and pragmatic ways, job-specific language training creates an environment where students, having a common professional background, cooperate with their shared desire to learn the language for a specific purpose [19]. Additionally, educational programs that emphasize whole family learning, with respect for multilingualism and its sustainability, may be more effective in engaging individuals through their past and future experiences [26].

7. Transient Migrant Language Communities

For migrants and refugees not permanently settled, linguistic and educational integration must be carefully planned so that it is not detrimental to future migration or repatriation. This is often difficult to achieve; but a lack of foresight in this regard may result in inefficient use of educational resources. Should the educational system of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, for example, attempt to integrate children into French- and English-speaking Lebanese schools if the resulting deficit in

Syrian and Modern Standard Arabic may hinder possible future repatriation? Or should the educational system for these refugees attempt to preserve Syrian and Modern Standard Arabic, and at whose cost [27]?

Without a specific goal, working toward language resilience becomes much more difficult. By emphasizing autonomous education, creating teacher development programs that celebrate diversity, and promoting family learning, educational systems may address the specific needs of transient populations. In such cases, home language and literacy become part of a resilient identity. These vulnerable populations may then gain access to education and employment, attain an increased sense of social cohesion and self-sufficiency, and effectively address the effects of trauma on life and learning [24].

8. Conclusion

For whom are what languages a resource [15]? This question served as the starting point for much of the discussion surrounding the interactions between language, the SDGs, and vulnerable populations. The answer, in each of the presentations, was tailored to the specific case study or issue involved. In essence, vulnerability is not a homogeneous state and should not be treated as such. Sustainable development efforts must be designed to understand and dismantle the specific geo-political, educational, and linguistic barriers that disempower individual communities [31].

The inextricable interconnection between identity, language, and resilience requires understanding that language is not only a vital instrument of communication but also carries a dignity and intrinsic value central to increasing the resilience of vulnerable communities [28]. Thus, linguistically-aware efforts at multilateral communication and information dissemination are crucial to the implementation and success of the Sustainable Development Goals. It is only by engaging in a collective multilingual discourse, by listening to the primary stakeholders of the SDGs (those whose lives would be most improved by their achievement), that development blueprints, action plans and development agendas become inclusive, equitable, and sustainable [12].

Citations & Programme

Thursday, May 11

Opening Panel Discussion: Defining the Issues
[1] Cristina Diez (UN Representative, ADT Fourth World Movement)
[2] Carole Maisonneuve (Public Information and Multilingualism Coordination Officer, DGACM, United Nations)
[3] H.E. Amb. Michael Ten Pow (Permanent Representative of Guyana to the United Nations)
[4] Humphrey Tonkin (President Emeritus, University of Hartford; former editor-in-chief, *Language Problems and Language Planning*)

Keynote Address:
[6] Christine Hélot (University of Strasbourg, France) *Analysing the Sustainability of Linguistic Diversity across the Home and School Contexts: Four case studies from Europe.*

Session 1: Language and Development
[7] Carol Benson & Kelsey Woodrick (Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, USA) *Roles played by UNESCO and UNICEF in supporting multilingual education for vulnerable populations*
[8] Julia Szelivanov (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary) *UNESCO and its efforts to preserve multilingualism in the light of contemporary theories of language policy*
[9] Wine Tesseur (University of Reading, UK) *Listening in what language? The role of languages in international NGOs' development programmes*
[10] Ana Lado (Marymount University, USA) & Fakhira Najib (Islamabad, Pakistan) *Sustainable success in Pakistan: Broad Class Interactive Radio Instruction*

Session 2: Non-State Languages
[11] Kurt E. Müller (National Defense University, Washington DC, USA) *Access to non-state languages for interacting with vulnerable populations*
[12] Sozinho Francisco Matsinhe (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa) *Language and the quest for sustainable development in Africa: Old challenges and new approaches*
[13] Jean-Paul Dailly (JPD Systems) *Participation and governance in French-speaking Africa: Is the role of language in fostering knowledge sharing underestimated by international development actors?*
[14] Cornelius Wambi Gulere (teacher and development worker) *Cultures that use indirect language today face the challenge of being misunderstood*

Session 3: Perspectives on Literacy

[15] Francis M. Hult (Lund University, Sweden) *Linguistic landscapes and sustainable cities for vulnerable populations*

[16] Corrie Blankenbeckler (Creative Associates International) *Reading from the heart: Expanding the bilingual education experiment in Mozambique*

[17] Ari Sherris (Texas A&M University-Kingsville, USA) & Paul Schaefer (SIL) *Lessons learned from Ghanaian Safaliba literacy activists: Theorizing expanded literacy opportunities in unrecognized mother-tongues*

[18] Fernanda Minuz (SAIS Europe, Bologna, Italy), Lorenzo Rocca (Università per Stranieri, Perugia, Italy) & Alessandro Borri (CPIA Montagna, Italy) *Teaching L2 to non-literate and low-literate adult migrants in Europe*

[19] Alexander Braddell & Matilde Grünhage-Monetti (Language for Work Network, European Center for Modern Languages, Graz, Austria) *New initiatives in Europe to support work-related language learning by low-skilled migrants: lessons for policy and practice*

Friday, May 12

Keynote Address:

[20] François Grin (University of Geneva, Switzerland) *Sociolinguistics and economics: Reassessing an ongoing dialogue*

Session 4: Language and Social Justice

[21] Shereen Bhalla & Terrence Wiley (Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, USA) *Reducing inequality and discitizenship within the multilingual United States*

[22] William Savage (organizational and community development facilitator) *Facilitated Advocacy: Connecting people through dialogue and action*

[23] Minati Panda (Jawaharlal Nehru University, India) *Critical Multilingual Education (CME) for social justice and citizenry*

[24] Anne Wiseman (British Council, UK) *Language for Resilience: A framework for language and sustainability for vulnerable populations*

Session 5: Refugee and Immigrant Education

[25] Jan Stewart (University of Winnipeg, Canada) & Thomas Ricento (University of Calgary, Canada) *Refugee student integration in Canada: Building welcoming communities and schools for a stable future*

[26] Belma Hazndar (Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, Turkey), Joy Kreeft Peyton (Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, DC, USA) & Martha Young-Scholten (Newcastle University, UK) *Teaching refugee and immigrant adults: A focus on their languages*

[27] May Akl (Notre Dame University, Lebanon) *A reality check on language and education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon: Issues and challenges*

[28] Eunice Kua (SIL International) & Mubarak Baraka Ismail *Mother language as a powerful motivator for refugee education*

Session 6: Educational Access

[29] Rosemary Salomone (St. John's University, New York, USA) *Global English, vulnerable populations, and educational access: Lessons from the courts in three countries*

[30] John Knagg (British Council, UK) *Respecting linguistic diversity and promoting English. Is it possible to do both ?*

[31] Michel DeGraff (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA) *Language, education, human rights, equal opportunity & sustainable development: Haiti as a case study.*

THANKS

In addition to all those who presented papers, chaired sessions, or otherwise contributed to the symposium discussions, the organizing committee wishes to thank:

Sonya Soskina, Allison Thorsen, Raul García, and **Miko Brandini** for their assistance with registration and other on-site arrangements

Ulrich Becker for his help in preparing and disseminating print and on-line materials

João Pedro Marinotti for serving as rapporteur and editing the final report

The staff of 777 United Nations Plaza for handling the arrangements for the meeting space

The organizations sponsoring the symposium, particularly the **Center for Applied Linguistics,** which provided both expertise and financial support

The **Esperantic Studies Foundation** whose financial support made the symposium possible.