

Anti-racism & Localisation Community of Practice

Theme 1: Linguistic Inequality in Nutrition in Emergencies

November 2024

In the research article [Linguistic Capital and Inequality in Aid Relations](#), 57 qualitative interviews shed light on how language affects power relations and inequality within aid organisations, in particular between national and international staff. This is also expressed by monolingual English speakers relying on bi- or multi-lingual colleagues while, the language skills of national staff are "essentialised, taken for granted, and made invisible." These power structures further enable English-only speakers to pursue careers in multilingual spaces that demand bi- or multilinguistic skills from national staff of international aid organisations.

The brief online article [Lost in translation? The role of local language in anti-racist practice](#) encourages us to think deeply about language inequality by confronting the racist and colonial attitudes deeply embedded in development, where "Western perspectives are considered superior, and where Anglophone countries have exerted a disproportionate amount of power in shaping the discourse". Remedying these issues requires structural change and restorative justice. INGOs and donors should prioritise translation as an anti-racist practice. Failing to tackle language hierarchies will replicate historic power structures.

The report [Co-investigators but with different power": Local voices on the localization of humanitarian research](#) challenges linguistic inequality in humanitarian research. Global North "establishes and maintains its control and power in the humanitarian sector through language. For example, most calls for proposals are published online and in the donor's language—usually a former colonial language." Meanwhile, humanitarian researchers in the Global South are very valuable because they are "much more likely to speak the language of the study participants, allowing them to catch nuances and facilitating trust and the rapport needed to get good, credible information from informants." Language is an important barrier, with English dominating humanitarian research and locally-generated resea-

*We can think of
linguistic inequality
as a consequence of
the unequal social
value attached to
different languages.*

-rch having low visibility. More work should be carried out in the Global South researcher's language, with the donor bearing the responsibility of translation to English. (See particularly The section on language, pages 19-21)

In [Navigating global guidance: The accessibility and use of global guidance research brief](#), staff and volunteers working in emergency settings faced significant challenges in accessing materials in Mozambique, DRC, and Bangladesh. An identified barrier was the lack of guidance in the languages used by practitioners and the use of unfamiliar sector terms and acronyms. One key recommendation is to communicate in the languages of your audience, translate key content into local languages, and seek input from local sector practitioners to ensure translations are accurate, clear, and appropriate to the context.

Key Takeaways

These are a collection of key takeaways generated among CoP members while discussing the practical ways in which we can combat linguistic inequality in the NiE sector. They do not necessarily represent the views of any specific organization or the Global Nutrition Cluster. Further, we acknowledge that the resources shared and CoP discussions were exclusively in English, which we consider a limitation, especially for this topic.

- 1 Language is power; shifting power requires the use of local and national languages
- 2 The use of local languages shows respect for the communities we serve
- 3 We need to value local languages, not just western/colonial languages, at all levels. This includes encouraging the use of local languages by nutrition cluster coordinators and in-country partners.
- 4 We need to have a better sense of our audience and their working languages to guide what materials are translated into and what interpretation is available at meetings (Although spoken language estimates are largely unavailable, Clear Global has mapped the [primary languages spoken in 26 countries](#))
- 5 Many terms, acronyms, jargon, and idioms come from English, making translation into other languages from English challenging. Overall, we need to use plain, simple, and clear language that is easily translated (see the Translators Without Borders [Guide to Writing in Plain Language](#))
- 6 Websites should be available in multiple languages (example: <https://alnap.org/>)
- 7 Where nutrition guidance and materials are translated, we should ensure that titles are also in that languages (example: not just the title in English with "FR" at the end for French)

- 8 Key global nutrition guidance and materials should be available in numerous languages. When translated, there should be both an initial translation and a back translation to ensure the intended meaning carries over and the complexity of the local language isn't "dumbed down" to accommodate English
- 9 Wherever possible, encourage NiE trainings to be led by trainers or local partners who speak the working language of participants, to optimize learning and reduce the pressure to have trainings held in more dominant languages. Trainers facilitating in a language that is less preferred by participants or relying on interpretation creates barriers to learning and adds additional time and cost to trainings
- 10 Where appropriate, encourage practitioners to embrace learning in multiple languages
- 11 Before conducting a training or event in multiple languages, develop a list of key NiE terms that are translated and back translated to ensure the intended meaning carries over
- 12 Consider developing common humanitarian terms and definitions banks in the working languages of humanitarian practitioners
- 13 Where support is provided and there is a language gap, the burden should not be on local or national practitioners to bridge the language gap but on international actors to find innovative ways of supporting them in their working language
- 14 Promote opportunities for knowledge transfer/capacity exchange between practitioners who speak the same language in-country. This helps foster the in-country nutrition community and facilitates uptake of learning
- 15 Advocate for in-country practitioners to be able to write proposals and reports in their working language, and for the burden of translation for review purposes to be taken up by donors

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The A&L Community of Practice is hosted by the GNC Anti-racism and Localisation Working Group, which aims to create and build anti-racism and localisation principles and practices into the Global Nutrition Cluster, and share experiences and lessons learnt with the wider nutrition sector.