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Local capacity building after crisis: the role of languages and translation in the work of development NGOs in Kyrgyzstan

Wine Tesseur, School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies (SALIS), Dublin City University¹

Abstract

Purpose: This article aims to discuss the role of languages and translation in the context of capacity building in NGOs in Kyrgyzstan. It argues that language barriers can impede local capacity building, while translation can help overcome some of the issues encountered.

Design/methodology/approach: The article reports on what NGO workers have said on the role of languages and translation in their work in 34 semi-structured interviews conducted in Kyrgyzstan in January 2018. The discussion is structured around a theoretical understanding of capacity building at three levels: the organisational level, the individual level, and a broader enabling environment.

Findings: Firstly, the article demonstrates that knowledge of English plays a key role in accessing international funding and information. Secondly, it describes the challenges that NGO workers encounter when translating information related to development into Russian and Kyrgyz. Thirdly, it argues that donors do not overtly consider the important role of languages. Together, the findings suggest that ignoring the role of languages and translation can have a negative effect on project outcomes and power relationships.

Practical implications: Policy recommendations for international NGOs and donors drawn from this case study and from comparative case studies on Peru and Malawi were published in Crack *et al.* (2018).

Originality/value: The paper argues that taking the role of languages and translation into account can result in a more in-depth understanding of aspects that may contribute to better local capacity building.

Paper type: research paper

Keywords: languages, translation, Western knowledge, local capacity building, Central Asia, development NGOs

1. Introduction

In recent years, networks of humanitarian organisations, language professionals and academics have started to address the challenges of working in multilingual crisis contexts through action and research. Examples include the work of the CDAC network (Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities), non-profit organisations such as Translators without Borders and Red T, and research

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clusters that conduct research and training on interpreting in humanitarian settings (Moser-Mercer *et al.*, 2013, 2014) and on crisis translation (Federici *et al.*, 2019; O'Brien *et al.*, 2018). Whilst the increase in initiatives and operations on the role of languages in humanitarian crisis indicates a growing awareness among main actors of the importance of effective communication, language issues in the context of long-term international development collaboration have been surrounded by relative silence. Illustrative of this language silence are for example the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which argue to 'leave no one behind', but which do not mention the role of languages in achieving these goals. Various scholars have drawn attention to this blind spot in the SDGs, particularly to the absence of language planning in education, health and legal settings (Bangbose, 2014; Marinotti, 2017; Taylor-Leech and Benson, 2017). In relation to the work of international NGOs (INGOs), who are key actors in delivering the SDGs, the low profile of languages has also been noted. For example, Crack (2018) has shown that donors such as DFID generally do not ask questions to NGOs about translation and interpreting, but assume that NGOs have the appropriate linguistic capacity to deal with the multilingual needs of development work. Contrary to donors' assumptions, research by Footitt (2017) and Delgado Luchner (2018) has indicated that international NGOs' capacity in local languages is often problematic, and that translation and interpreting costs do not tend to be taken into account in the planning stage of development projects. Although the rhetoric of international development is geared towards equitable relationships and genuine democratic dialogue, this growing body of research provides evidence that in practice the hegemonic role of English often excludes those from non-privileged backgrounds (Crack, 2018; Roth, 2018).

This article aims to add an additional perspective to these discussions, which are relevant to both disaster prevention and development studies. The article focuses on the role of languages and translation in local capacity building in and through Southern NGOs (SNGOs) in Kyrgyzstan, which are here understood as encompassing both national and local NGOs. It considers the language barriers that these organisations are confronted with in their work, and how translation may enhance access to funding, information and international networks, and may in this way contribute to local capacity building. Theoretically, the article takes a long-term view of disaster and looks at Kyrgyzstan as an example of a society in which 'the boundary between development strategies that aim to reduce poverty, powerlessness and underdevelopment and those of action focused on crisis prevention' have 'become blurred' (Gibson *et al.*, 2018: 127). Whilst Kyrgyzstan was led into acute poverty just after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Giffen *et al.*, 2005), one can challenge the view that the disaster of acute poverty concerned issues that would be solved in the short-term, since the entire political, societal and economic systems were going through major processes of transformation,

bound to take decades (Buxton, 2014: 12). Indeed, INGOs and donors from the very beginning not only provided humanitarian assistance, but also focused their efforts on the development of a civil society sector in Kyrgyzstan, which previously did not exist, and which they considered as critical in tackling political, social and economic problems (Adams and Garbutt, 2008; Aksartova, 2005; Jailobaeva, 2011). The case of Kyrgyzstan is thus a prime example of one in which the lines between disaster and development were blurred from the very beginning. Furthermore, one could consider the withdrawal of international funding and donor programmes from Kyrgyzstan from the mid-2000s as a second 'disaster', as this led to less funding for SNGOs and communities to continue to develop their local capacity, which is considered as a critical aspect of development and disaster risk reduction (Bayalieva-Jailobaeva, 2018; Casazza *et al.*, 2009). The 1990s had seen a steep growth in the number of new national and local NGOs in response to huge investment from international donors, but it became much more difficult for these organisations to survive once donor funding became heavily reduced because of changes in priorities (Bayalieva-Jailobaeva, 2018).

Central to this article's analysis is the idea that overlooking the role of languages and the importance of translation may lead to reduced opportunities for Southern NGOs to develop their local capacity, to gain ownership of development projects, and to engage in equitable relationships with international development partners and donors. By placing language at its centre, the article makes an original contribution to the scholarly literature on civil society in Kyrgyzstan, which has briefly touched on the role of languages, but has not reflected on this as central to issues of capacity building and development (Aksartova, 2005; Féaux De La Croix, 2013; Howell, 2000; Jailobaeva, 2011; Simpson, 2010). The discussion in this article also contributes to a growing body of research in translation and interpreting studies on the relationship between development and translation (Marais, 2014; Delgado Luchner, 2015; Delgado Luchner, 2018), which can be considered as complementing research that has been conducted on translation and interpreting in humanitarian settings (Federici, 2016; Moser-Mercer *et al.*, 2013, 2014). Finally, the article is also a deliberate attempt to provide some insight into the linguistic and translational realities in a non-Western context (Marais, 2014; Tymoczko, 2006).

2. Conceptual framework and data

Capacity building or capacity development is considered in Western approaches to development as playing a key role in societal and state capabilities to minimise the impact of economic, climate and food crisis as well as in achieving the UN's development goals (Casazza *et al.*, 2009: 5). Approaches to capacity building have gone through a major paradigm shift in the mid-1990s. In earlier approaches, Western donors and INGOs considered building capacity as assisting local organisations

through funding, equipment and technical guidance. Nowadays, however, it is considered as a more complex process that aims to change people's behaviour and create sustainable societies. In current approaches, more emphasis is placed on local ownership of development programmes and genuine partnerships between international and local actors (Milèn, 2001: 1). UNDP identifies 'three points where capacity is grown and nurtured: in an enabling environment, in organizations and within individuals' (Casazza *et al.*, 2009: 11). This article considers aspects of language and translation that may hinder or enable capacity building in Kyrgyzstan on these three levels. It specifically focuses on (1) SNGOs' organisational capacity; (2) SNGOs' donor environment; (3) the skills, experience and knowledge of SNGO workers and community members on an individual level. It should be noted that these levels depend on and influence each other (Casazza *et al.*, 2009). The discussion of language and translation issues on these three levels therefore naturally overlaps in some places.

The discussion presents findings from thirty-four semi-structured interviews with international and Southern NGO staff conducted in January 2018, of which twenty were with SNGOs. Interviews were held in two locations: in Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek, and in Osh, the country's second largest city. The restriction to urban NGOs was mostly due to the time of year that fieldwork took place, as rural areas are often difficult to reach in winter because of heavy snow, and NGO projects tend not to run because of harsh weather conditions.

The data in Kyrgyzstan was collected as part of a larger UK AHRC-funded research project, titled 'The Listening Zones of NGOs' (2015-2018), which investigated the role of languages and cultural knowledge in the relationships between NGOs and local communities.² The project team conducted exploratory case studies in Kyrgyzstan, Malawi and Peru. This selection was determined by the status of English and the unique multilingual setting in each of these countries, which offered critical variation and allowed for significant insight into the differences and similarities in how languages and culture may affect development relationships. Because the case studies aimed to explore the role of languages in these relationships at large, the sample of interviewees included INGOs and SNGOs that worked on a wide variety of thematic areas. For Kyrgyzstan, these included ten organisations working on human rights and women's and girls' rights; five on health-related issues; two on peacebuilding and community relations; and four with a broad range of activities. The remaining interviews were conducted with national networks and organisations that supported SNGOs through organising training and other events; and with Kyrgyz academics and language professionals.

² <http://www.reading.ac.uk/listening-zones-ngos>

Because the researcher working on the Kyrgyz case study did not speak Russian or Kyrgyz, the role of the interpreter working with them, Cholpon Akmatova, was key in developing the case study and selecting interview participants.³ Selection methods can roughly be split in two: interviews in English were arranged through the researcher's network of contacts through the British non-profit organisation INTRAC, which was a partner in the research project and had an office in Bishkek. The initial list of contacts was further extended through the snowball method. For interviews in Russian and Kyrgyz, a selection of organisations was made in preparatory discussions with Cholpon Akmatova, who had over ten years' experience in the NGO sector as a professional interpreter. Consent forms and information sheets were translated into Russian and Kyrgyz in advance of fieldwork through a translation agency, and elaborate discussions on the translation of the interview questions were held with the interpreter in advance and throughout the interview period as a process of constant critical reflection. Eighteen interviews were conducted in English, mostly with staff from international NGOs, thirteen were in Russian, and three in Kyrgyz. Twenty-four interviewees were female, and ten respondents were male. The higher number of female interviewees can be explained by the fact that urban-based SNGOs in Kyrgyzstan tend to be female-led (Féaux De La Croix, 2013; Jailobaeva, 2011).

3. Linguistic context: Russian, Kyrgyz and English in Kyrgyzstan

According to official statistics, 71.4% of the population have Kyrgyz as their first language, 14.4% speak Uzbek, and 9% Russian (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017). What makes Kyrgyzstan a compelling case is that the civil society sector is marked by an urban-rural divide that largely concurs with a Russian-speaking elite based in Bishkek, and to a lesser extent in Osh, versus a Kyrgyz-speaking rural population (Orusbaev *et al.*, 2008; Simpson, 2010). After years of Russification during the USSR, Kyrgyz received official status next to Russian around the time of Kyrgyzstan's independence. Recent years have seen a push for Kyrgyz in official settings linked to a discourse of nationality, ethnicity and identity, and rural populations now increasingly speak Kyrgyz (Orusbaev *et al.*, 2008). However, Russian continues to be widely spoken in urban areas and is still the dominant language in professional and higher education contexts (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017). Its status as a language of socio-economic advantage that can offer employment opportunities abroad or in international organisations is further reflected in its high percentage of second language speakers, which stands at 34.5%. In comparison, statistics for speakers of English as a foreign language are as low as 0.5% (Aminov *et al.*, 2010).

³ Akmatova has given explicit and enthusiastic consent for her name to be mentioned in this research article.

4. Study findings: Languages, translation and capacity building in Kyrgyz SNGOs

4.1 Organisational capacity

Southern NGOs (SNGOs) in Kyrgyzstan generally work together with citizens to collectively solve problems they are facing, either through advocacy on political and civil rights, or by complementing the state through service delivery (Garbutt and Heap, 2002). Key actors that they work with in international development projects are international donors, international NGOs (INGOs) and local communities. As these actors speak different languages, the linguistic capacity of the SNGOs interviewed often characterised the type of relationship they maintained with other actors. The languages that were typically used between SNGOs and other actors are presented in Figure 1, in which dotted lines represent communication through language mediation. The SNGOs interviewed in Bishkek, and to a lesser extent in Osh, were typically monolingual in Russian, with little to no working capacity in English and Kyrgyz, or in other local languages such as Uzbek or Tajik.

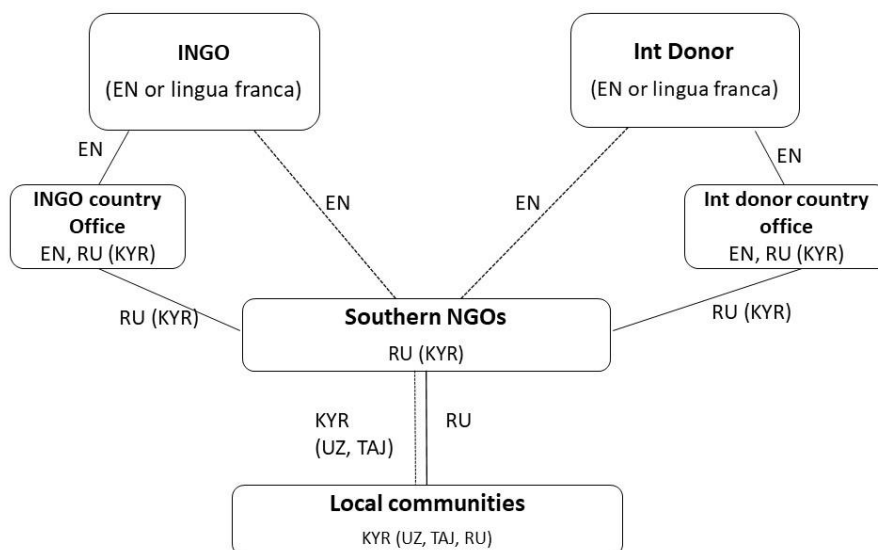


Figure 1. Languages in international development projects in Kyrgyzstan

Challenges with English: communicating with donors

Only four of the twenty SNGOs interviewed had some English language capacity. English was considered by interviewees as dominating the NGO sector, with Russian providing fewer opportunities for collaboration and learning on a global level, despite its status as an official UN language. In one case, an SNGOs' beneficiaries were excluded from participating in international

events because of insistence on English: 'Recently we received an invitation [for a conference]. And they ask please (...) nominate your candidates from the youth who are infected by HIV, but they should know English. [We have] no one!' (KYR 4, Director of SNGO, Bishkek). Another SNGO was part of an international network that fostered South-South development collaboration. However, because the SNGO's representative did not speak English, these collaborative opportunities were much more difficult to benefit from. Even if an interpreter was available to participants, this still often resulted in reduced agency to contribute:

'When we have group discussions, by the time the interpreter translates, by the time I think about it, and for example I want to react and express my opinion, but by the time I am ready to speak, someone else, who speaks English, is already speaking the same thing that I wanted to say' (KYR 26, Director of SNGO, Osh).

A representative of a national NGO network described the insistence on English as 'limiting capacity of civil society activists, to be fruitfully engaged, [this is point] A. [Point] B, it's also disempowering the relations, because you can have no voice if you don't understand all the details' (KYR 9, Director of national network, Bishkek).

SNGOs' lack of English language skills reportedly also led to some organisations being excluded from participating in shaping development programmes: 'Mainly [international organisations] consult with the government agencies at the central level. They consult with ministries (...) They don't consult with local self-governments at the district level or the rural, village municipalities' (KYR 8, Director of national network, Bishkek). Because communication took place at these higher levels, there would be no need for INGOs or donors to engage in conversations in local languages with local organisations and institutions. Thus, according to this interviewee, SNGOs often became involved in programmes when they had already been designed; when INGOs would go 'with this programme to rural municipalities, [but] it was clear that rural communities and the local administration that they don't need this programme, it doesn't really meet their needs and requirements. And, yes, the programme will be implemented in the end, but it will be done just to kind of, to tick off, to say that it is done' (KYR 8). It is important to note here that the issue of programming in itself is beyond the scope of this article, and the data analysed here draws on what people have said rather than on what may happen in practice in specific development programmes.

A solution that was often referred to in interviews to overcome these language barriers was a system of subgranting, in which international donors such as the EU would give a grant to INGOs, who would be allowed to 'use 25% of the money you receive to regrant to smaller NGOs' (KYR 7, INGO worker, Bishkek). In this collaborative structure, INGOs would then often take charge of the burden involved in reporting to donors in English. Whilst interviewees described this practice as a

positive feature of this working model (e.g. KYR 29, Director of SNGO, Osh), a negative implication that SNGO staff associated with it was that INGOs were particularly keen on recruiting staff with English language skills. Many INGO staff were said to be English language graduates: 'English language was the first requirement, for the job (...) So many of us, myself for example, I learned a lot about community mobilisation, project management, when I was employed by the organisation, but my initial skill was English language' (KYR 16, INGO worker, Bishkek). INGOs' appetite for English skills led to frustration among SNGOs, who felt this caused a brain drain in the SNGO sector.

'We build their capacity, and then they go off to work for the donors. And in reality, I don't understand the donor policy. Like why they do this kind of thing, like why they lure away our staff members? In reality, it's the civil society organisations who prepare staff for international donor organisations' (KYR 30, Director of SNGO, Osh).

Furthermore, it meant that local staff with in-depth knowledge of the local context did not have access to jobs in international organisations and could not influence development policy and practice on a structurally higher level (KYR 17, SNGO staff member, Bishkek).

Challenges with Kyrgyz: communicating with communities

A lack of English language capacity was not the only challenge that SNGOs encountered. Many SNGO interviewees, particularly those from Bishkek, were monolingual Russian speakers, and organisational capacity in Kyrgyz in their SNGOs was limited. As many as thirteen SNGO workers described their Kyrgyz language skills as limited. These skills would not be sufficient to deliver workshops or trainings to local communities, so SNGOs would hire others to do this. A typical set-up was to have two trainers, one Russian-speaking and one who spoke the local language, yet it was not always possible to find local professionals who mastered the appropriate terminology: 'Sometimes there are some topics where we don't have trainers in Kyrgyz (...) we try to translate some hand-outs into Kyrgyz, but the training is in Russian, and we ask like in Osh to invite people who have a knowledge in Russian language' (KYR 5). Information and training was thus often not easily accessible to the very communities SNGOs set out to work with because of the Russian/urban-Kyrgyz/rural societal divide.

SNGOs also related that it was difficult to produce written material in Kyrgyz. Next to SNGOs' limited Kyrgyz language capacity, the reasons for this indicated in interviews were that (1) Kyrgyz is considered to be composed of several different dialects, making it difficult to produce materials that are widely accessible to communities throughout the country (KYR 4, 13, 24); (2) the fact that the Kyrgyz language is not well developed in areas such as business, technology and development (KYR 1, 10, 12, 13); and (3) a reported lack of competent interpreters and translators into Kyrgyz, especially when translating from English into Kyrgyz (KYR 5, 8, 11) (cf. Korth, 2005: 125).

The disconnect between Bishkek-based SNGOs, and by extension of international organisations, and Kyrgyz-speaking communities was a cause for concern for many interviewees. Whilst some Bishkek SNGO workers made efforts to learn Kyrgyz (KYR 21, Director of SNGO, Bishkek), others noted international organisations often did not insist on Kyrgyz language skills, which 'shows the arrogance of the elite of Bishkek... and it's just not right, you know, not to have that capacity' (KYR 14, international donor, Bishkek). Some interviewees thus identified a responsibility on the part of the donor to reflect more carefully on the role of languages and language skills in the context of development.

4.2 Donor environment

Awareness among donors of the necessity of translation activities, the time and cost involved, and the fact that SNGOs' multilingual capacities were often limited, were reported to be low. A major challenge for SNGOs was obtaining international funding, as most international donors would only accept funding applications in English and would not be open to funding the translation costs of project applications. For SNGOs without English language skills, three coping strategies were described: not apply for international funding at all; use Google Translate to produce an application in the required language; or hire a translator to do the work, which involved considerable financial investment without any guarantee that the application would be successful and would result in any income. Six SNGOs reported relying on Google Translate quite heavily in their work, although they recognised that it was not an ideal solution, because 'the reader will not get the idea, the way that I want to express it', but 'we have no choice' (KYR 25, SNGO worker, Osh).

As it was difficult for SNGOs to obtain their own funding, they would often participate in INGOs' projects instead. SNGO interviewees related they were faced with multiple language barriers during such collaborations. Firstly, INGOs rarely translated successful funding proposals into local languages, which made it difficult for SNGOs to fully understand project aims. Secondly, international donors would generally not ask NGOs how they would deal with language needs at any point in the development cycle. Thirdly, there was no requirement to translate reports into local languages. This meant that often: 'Not all final monitoring reports are translated [into Russian or Kyrgyz]. The wider public does not have access to them. We have very little understanding of what's going on there' (KYR 2, Director of national SNGO network, Bishkek). In other words, final reports would often not contribute to local learning and capacity building because local organisations could not gain access to them.

A question that received mixed responses was whether donors would be open to funding translation costs that were part of development projects. Sometimes this was not the case, as these costs were seen as administrative:

‘They [donors] told that “we are not supporting any administrative expenses”. So how they want us to work? (...) They only want us to provide some work (...) but we need an office, we need, I don’t know, stationary, and electricity (...) and of course the translation, payment for translation is the same’ (KYR 19, SNGO worker, Bishkek).

On the other hand, others reported that particularly those international organisations that had an office within the country would sometimes expect to see translation costs budgeted for, and would want to see proof that SNGOs produced material easily accessible to local communities: ‘it was one of the requirements that we would produce simple concise text and content in any publication we published here’ (KYR 18, INGO worker, Bishkek). One SNGO director explained that developing Kyrgyz language material was considered by their in-country based donor as part of the SNGOs’ work, and so they would not pay for it, yet the task was ‘very time consuming. We have to spend a long time to make sure that we are expressing things accurately and clearly in Kyrgyz’ (KYR 29, director of SNGO, Osh).

While some donors would be open to funding costs, SNGOs would not always think in advance of the translation needs of specific projects. One SNGO related that they had developed a booklet that their international funder liked very much, but ‘our communities, parents of children with disabilities, they are Kyrgyz-speaking people, but we didn't think about budgeting the translation costs. So we cannot publish it in Kyrgyz’ (KYR 26, Director of SNGO, Osh). Despite SNGOs being well aware of the local context and the need for Kyrgyz, these findings indicate that language and the need for translation often come as an afterthought.

4.3 Individual skills: understanding and explaining buzzwords

The work of many SNGOs revolves around closing gaps in people’s knowledge in order to fight justice and poverty. A key challenge in transferring information on development to local communities was translating the many Anglophone buzzwords. Such terminology was often translated literally into Russian and then into Kyrgyz, without terms having real meaning. A freelance translator related that:

‘First when I was translating the project proposals of NGOs into English, it was funny that in Russian already they were writing these words, like ‘actor’ for example, and I was like, well, there IS no such word in Russian. It’s only someone who knows this word in English would understand what it means’ (KYR 11, freelance translator).

Russian and Kyrgyz SNGO workers gradually learn to use these buzzwords: ‘They don't speak English, but they know these words: actors, stakeholders, and then they would say 'SWOT analysis' in

Russian: “analys SWOT” (KYR 11). While using such terminology was acceptable with peers, problems would arise when speaking to local communities. Unpacking and applying terms to the local context was a widely employed solution:

‘If you want to have a specific dialogue, specific interaction in a specific community, then you have to simplify the same sexual rights, for example. So you cannot just say sexual rights. You have to explain it in very simple terms, just to explain say that what sexual rights mean in a family for example, what sexual rights mean for a wife. So you have to oversimplify the concepts’ (KYR 10, Director of SNGO, Bishkek).

Nevertheless, issues were unavoidable. Even when working with ‘an official translator of the president team’ (KYR 4, Director of SNGO, Bishkek), one SNGO ran into problems with producing material that should be widely understood:

‘We produced special instruction for police officers for this project, and we started trainings in all regions of our country, and we translated our presentation into Kyrgyz language... our trainer, he was... from Bishkek... and when we go to the regions, people are listening and listening and they say: “who translated this?” They are very angry, because in our country, we have 7 regions, and we can say that we have 7 dialects of the language, and they said “we don’t understand!” ’ (KYR 4).

This implies that much of the training material and workshops that are delivered to increase knowledge and local capacity in local communities run the risk of being ineffective because of language barriers. One INGO worker reflected that:

‘Even you if you understand fully the language of the training, the probability that you will keep only 40% of the information you receive is high ... when in addition... you also have a language barrier, then probability will decrease down to 10% maximum, otherwise 5% so the impact of gathering all people with different backgrounds and spending a lot of money on simultaneous translation becomes very difficult to measure’ (KYR 16, INGO worker, Bishkek).

The difficulty of development terminology also played a role here, as it made training not easily accessible to participants, who would ‘be kind of nudging you, like “what is that?”, and then you have to explain, and then while you are explaining you already missed a lot of things’ (KYR 29, Director of SNGO, Osh).

Despite these challenges, interviewees also shared some success stories. For example, one Kyrgyz-speaking NGO had produced a methodology on one of the main topics it was working on:

‘[B]ased on our many years’ experience as an NGO in a rural area. It’s written in a very simple Kyrgyz language, and where we tell about the best practice including, like, what we learned from international best practice, and it’s all written in a very accessible Kyrgyz language, and that’s why it’s quite popular with rural NGOs’ (KYR 06. SNGO, Bishkek).

Another interviewee related that their NGO had produced guidelines for local carpenters in Kyrgyz (KYR 28, INGO worker, Osh). Their handbook on construction norms was the first of its kind to be available in the Kyrgyz language and was seen as a key publication that makes this kind of

information accessible to Kyrgyz people. An interesting development was that the international donor then asked to have the book translated into Russian, because it was difficult to find this kind of handbook in Russian. This project thus intentionally set out to produce information and knowledge in the local language, embedded in the local culture and context. It contributed to developing terminology of key development topics in the local language first, and in the regional lingua franca after.

5. Discussion

The findings presented in this article encourage more critical reflection on the role of languages in capacity building. A number of findings are of particular relevance in relation to previous research. Firstly, on the level of organisational capacity, the interview data indicated that limited English language skills led to SNGOs often being excluded from shaping development programmes. As indicated in the wider literature on development and risk reduction, SNGOs tend to be contracted as partner organisations to carry out a particular service, but are often not valued for their knowledge of the local context (Banks *et al.*, 2015; Gibson *et al.*, 2018; Mawdsley *et al.*, 2002; Wallace *et al.*, 2007). The present data adds to this that a lack of English language capacity in SNGOs hinders them from being involved in the early stages of project design. Furthermore, interviewees indicated that because project proposals and reports are usually not translated into local languages, local organisations and communities are not fully informed of project objectives, which makes it difficult for them to claim local ownership. The development literature has been critical of INGOs placing too much emphasis on accountability to donors, instead of to their beneficiaries, which has led to a culture in which quantitative data and reporting templates defined by donors have gained priority (Banks *et al.*, 2015; Eyben *et al.*, 2015). The current findings add to this that the focus on accountability to purse-string holders also means information is often reported in a linguistic format that is not accessible to local organisations or communities.

Secondly, on the level of the donor, international donors were considered as not overtly recognising the burden of translation that NGOs were faced with. Donors were typically only open to receiving grant applications in English, which meant that the large majority of SNGOs interviewed were excluded from international funding mechanisms. Furthermore, donors tended not to ask NGOs any information on how they would deal with language challenges in their work. This evidence further corroborates the findings of Crack (2018), which found that DFID does not ask questions on NGOs' linguistic capacity.

Thirdly, on an individual skills level, translating development buzzwords was a key challenge for SNGOs. Whilst the issue of development terminology has been problematized in the development

sector (Cornwall and Eade, 2010; Green, 2018), these discussions have largely focused on the English language and have not yet fully engaged with the difficulties involved in translating this Anglophone terminology into vastly different languages and cultural contexts. Recent work in Translation Studies by Todorova (2019) has started to explore the difficulties involved in translating civil society concepts, and the current article adds to this limited body of evidence.

Overall, this article has provided new insights on the challenges involved in capacity building by taking language as the focus of analysis. In the development literature, establishing international partnerships and local ownership are considered as lying at the heart of local capacity building and sustainable development, but critics have contested the success with which these new theoretical understandings have materialised in practice (Groves and Hinton, 2004; Mawdsley *et al.*, 2002). The findings described in this article indicate that one key area that has been ignored within these development discussions is the role of language. The argument materialising from what interviewees said is that by ignoring the role of languages and by not allocating sufficient resources and time to producing communication that communities would be able to understand and act on, development programmes and attempts to build local capacity run the risk of being ineffective.

6. Concluding remarks and policy recommendations

In conducting this research, there were some inherent limitations. The exploratory nature of the case study and the short time available to conduct the interviews in Kyrgyzstan meant that little other data was collected. The findings presented here thus rely on what interviewees have *said*, rather than on what they may *do* in practice. Future research that could add data from observing meetings between SNGOs, INGOs and local communities, for example, can shed further light on the complexity of development relationships and issues of programming. Furthermore, future research would ideally draw on participatory research methods and engage with SNGOs and local communities to discuss their needs and challenges from the early stages of the research, thus allowing space for collaboration (LeCompte *et al.*, 1999; Stringer, 2007). An important observation is that researchers will face the same kind of linguistic issues as NGOs when aiming to engage with local communities. Just as in NGOs' work, careful preparation and appropriate budgeting for translation and interpreting is essential to bring such plans to a successful end (Tesseur, *in press*).

Many of the findings on Kyrgyzstan outlined in this article were similar to those of the two other Listening Zones research case studies on development relationships in Malawi and Peru. The joint research findings led to a number of practical policy recommendations for international donors and NGOs published in Crack *et al.* (2018), many of which focus on incorporating linguistic reflections

This is an Author Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Emerald in the journal Disaster Prevention and Management on 16 August 2019, available at <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/DPM-12-2018-0378> throughout the development project cycle. Some of the key recommendations in relation to translation and the data presented in this article include:

- For donors to consider applications in other languages than English, e.g. another lingua franca, or reimburse translation costs of (successful) applicants
- For INGOs to translate successful applications and reports into local languages, and feed back to partners in their first languages.
- For all actors to start recognising the 'burden of translation' carried by some staff in the sector, i.e. the informal work of language mediation undertaken by bilingual/multilingual personnel in addition to their normal work and outside agreed job descriptions.
- For donors to ensure that NGOs reflect on how language issues affect project outcomes; and to encourage them to include a budget line for translation and interpreting.

Overall, the findings confirm the silence that tends to surround language issues in long-term development work and demonstrate how this can negatively impact local capacity building. When comparing these findings to language practices in crisis situations, the research findings indicate that what is similar is the fact that language tends to be a blind spot in planning processes. Whilst the focus in this article has been on local capacity building, much remains to be said on the consequences of overlooking languages in efforts to build equal power relationships. To interviewees, making an effort to speak each other's language was considered as a cornerstone of building equitable relationships, in which trust and respect held a central place.

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