AUTHOR:
Carmen Delgado Luchner[1,2]

AFFILIATION:
[1]University of Geneva
[2]University of the Free State

EMAIL:
carmen.delgado@unige.ch

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'THEY ARE NOT EMPOWERED ENOUGH TO SPEAK ENGLISH': MULTILINGUAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN KENYAN NGOS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

ABSTRACT

Contemporary development NGOs aim to promote community participation and ownership rather than impose solutions that lack local relevance and support. Participatory development approaches consequently attribute high value to the direct interaction between NGOs and beneficiaries, and to an NGO's ability to hear and understand the concerns of local communities. However, given the diversity of actors involved, these interactions are far from straightforward, and many, in particular in Sub-Saharan Africa, involve one or multiple language barriers. Surprisingly, the multilingual nature of the contact zone between NGOs and their beneficiaries is rarely acknowledged explicitly in the discourse on participatory development emanating from NGOs and other institutions in the aid chain. Furthermore, NGOs seem to lack a systematic approach to multilingual communication in these encounters. This lack of engagement with multilingualism in development discourse, however, is not matched by a commensurate gap in development practice. Indeed, both translation and interpreting are common in development encounters, and aid workers in the Global South are highly resourceful in overcoming language barriers. The findings presented in this paper provide an overview of the multilingual practices deployed by Kenyan development NGOs to communicate with beneficiaries and deepen our understanding of how language constrains and shapes participation in development. In shedding light on these practices, the author hopes to contribute to enhancing the visibility of languages in development discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

Most Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) involved in development work currently rely on participatory approaches and methodologies that aim to promote the involvement of local communities in the Global South in all stages of a development project. Breaking with earlier top-down models of aid, these participatory development approaches evolved around the idea that the relationship between aid worker and aid recipient could (and should) be reciprocal and bidirectional (Chambers 1997; Mansuri &

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Rao 2013; Willis 2011). This meant that aid workers had to “give up one of their fundamental self-established rights —the right to define what the problem is, whose problem it is, how to solve it, and why” (Mikkelsen 2005, p. 31) and instead strive to listen to the needs and concerns expressed by beneficiaries.

The trope of participation entered mainstream development discourse from the 1980s onwards (Chambers 1997, p. 113), bringing with it a set of methodological concerns revolving around inclusion and an understanding of local cultural specificities (Mikkelsen 2005). Methods such as the “participatory rural appraisal” (see for instance Willis 2011, p. 114), initially developed in the 1970s, were rapidly exported to a variety of settings (including community development, work with the urban poor, empowerment of women) with the aim of enabling development professionals to “access” the views of local populations. In order to adequately reflect the new role of aid recipients, NGOs and international organisations often no longer referred to them as (passive and disempowered) beneficiaries but as “partners” or “project owners” in an attempt to make their language more inclusive (Alber 2002; Cornwall & Eade 2010).

To implement this participatory turn in development discourse, organisations promptly developed tools for “dialogic practices” (Owen & Westoby 2012), frameworks designed to help them “listen” to the individuals receiving aid (Anderson, Brown & Jean 2012) and methodologies intended to allow communities to exercise their “voice and choice” in development projects (Mansuri & Rao 2013). The aim of these new instruments was to enhance the ability of local communities to understand and ideally to (co-)define the stakes of a development project. In addition, it enables them to be consulted about decisions that affect them and to freely express their opinion in interactions with aid workers and representatives of donor organisations.

However, while the discourse surrounding participatory development approaches (as reflected in the documents produced by NGOs, international organisations and development agencies) relies on terms such as “voice”, “listening” and “dialogue”, it is also characterised by a lack of references to language and multilingualism as relevant variables in the participation equation, and as potential barriers to mutual understanding.[1] This lack of engagement with multilingualism is striking since development interactions involving aid workers and aid recipients are encounters between actors of an “international civil society” (Todorova 2018) that are always intercultural and very often also multilingual.

The absence of explicit discursive engagement with multilingualism on the part of development NGOs therefore stands in potential contradiction with the aims they intend to achieve through participatory practices. Development scholars have widely problematized the fact that development discourse and practice often co-exist in a state of “disjuncture” (Lewis and Mosse 2006), that discourse can be instrumentalised and/or diverted in practice (Olivier de Sardan 1995) and that different discourses can be mobilised to legitimise identical practices (Olivier de Sardan 2011). As such, the absence of explicit engagement with multilingualism in development *discourse* should not lead us to assume a commensurate absence of engagement in development *practice*. Indeed, since the language of the local community is not always the language of the aid organisation or its individual staff, we must

1 For a quantitative analysis of the (lack of) presence of multilingualism in discourse surrounding strategic planning for HIV/Aids-related communication in four developing countries in West Africa, see Batchelor et al. (2019).

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assume that participatory development encounters include more or less formalised language mediation practices that have remained at the margins of development discourse.

However, since language mediation can determine who is able to participate in the discussion and on what terms, these practices cannot remain invisible and undocumented if one is to assess their importance for participation. This paper sheds light on the multilingual practices deployed by Kenyan development NGOs in encounters with their beneficiaries and makes the case for a wider acknowledgement of these practices in development discourse and participatory methodology.

2. AID CHAIN OF KENYAN NGOS

This study focuses on NGOs[2] in Kenya who implement their own development projects or act as local implementing partners for NGOs or donors located abroad, generally in the Global North. These Kenyan NGOs work within an "aid chain" (Bebbington 2005) that encompasses several links, from donors to local populations (see Figure 1, adapted from Delgado Luchner, 2018). Each actor in the chain communicates with actors pertaining to other links in the chain. The aid chain can therefore be understood not only as a financial chain but also a communication chain with different "contact zones" (Footitt 2016; Pratt 1991) that are characterised by different multilingual communication practices.

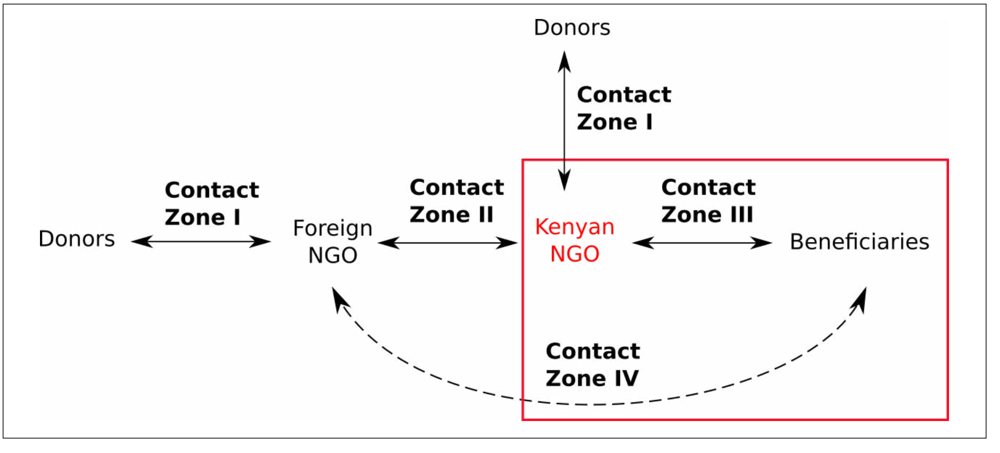

Figure 1: The main contact zones of the aid chain of Kenyan NGOs

The Kenyan NGOs in the focus of this study work with partners in the Global North but also engage in direct fundraising within Kenya and abroad. As such, their aid chain encompasses two potential contact zones with donors (Contact Zone I). However, the focus of this paper is on interactions between NGOs in Kenya and "their" project beneficiaries (Contact Zone III), some of which also involve showing a project to representatives of the partner NGO based in the Global North and facilitating interactions between them and the project beneficiaries (Contact Zone IV).[3]

2 For a definition of NGOs, see Lewis (2010).

3 Many actors in the aid chain refer to other actors as their "partners": NGOs in the Global North work with "implementing partners" in the Global South. NGOs in developing countries rely on "partners" in local government or implement jointly with other local NGOs while participatory approaches often require them to

 https://doi.org/10.38140/jtsa.1.4334

Kenya was chosen for this study because it has a particularly vibrant international and national NGO sector, although the country is less dependent on foreign aid than neighbouring Uganda and Tanzania (Fengler 2011). Kenya has been a recipient of foreign development assistance from the West since the early 1960s (Stein 2009), and like many other African countries, it underwent a series of structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a shift from development to humanitarian aid since Kenya began to host large numbers of refugees from other countries in the region, in particular Somalia, the DRC and South Sudan. Both development and humanitarian aid remain widespread in Kenya, and in recent years, the distinction between the two has increasingly become blurred in individual projects, in particular when organisations work within a human rights framework (Slim 2000).

3. LANGUAGE SITUATION IN KENYA

Kenya's constitution recognises both Swahili and English as "official languages". In addition, the more than 40 indigenous languages of Kenya, as well as Kenyan Sign Language and Braille are to be "promoted and protected" under the constitution. In practice, however, English remains dominant in public institutions, politics and the education system, although Swahili is used very widely as a *lingua franca* (Nabea 2009).

The language use and language skills of individuals —including those likely to be development workers and development beneficiaries —depend on several variables, in particular age, location and level of education (see for example Mbithi 2014; Michieka 2012). Older people with a low level of education living in ethnically homogeneous rural areas tend to rely mainly on their mother tongue, and have limited mastery of Swahili and very limited command of English. Younger people, people living in urban areas and people with a high level of education tend to have a high command of English and Swahili, as well as limited mastery of their mother tongue. Code mixing and code-switching are common, in particular in urban settings where individuals rely on a combination of English and Swahili, sometimes including elements of a third language (Ogechi 2002). Ethnic tensions, or what Kenyans unapologetically refer to as 'tribalism', remains an issue in the country[4], rendering the question of 'mother tongue' highly sensitive. Kenyan NGOs and their staff are deeply embedded in the sociolinguistic reality of their country, and their work is therefore likely to be influenced and constrained by the larger power asymmetries between language communities in Kenya.

4. LANGUAGE BROKERS IN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Available research indicates that NGOs do not rely on trained language professionals to broker interactions with beneficiaries (Delgado Luchner 2018; Tesseur & Crack, in this issue). It is therefore unlikely that the language intermediaries used have acquired an understanding of the professional norms or ethics of interpreting applied in other settings and inculcated through training (Baker and Maier, 2011). This means that a wider conceptual framing is necessary in order to understand language mediation in interactions between NGOs and

refer to the local communities they work with as "partners". Throughout this paper, I therefore rely on the term "local communities" or "beneficiaries" to refer to the intended target group of a development project.

4 There have been several instances of ethnic tensions and/or violence in recent years, including most notably a two-month episode of post-election violence in late 2007 and early 2008, as well as minor skirmishes around the 2013 and 2017 elections.

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their beneficiaries. Consequently, I view these practices as situated at the intersection of development brokerage (Bierschenk, Chauveau & Olivier de Sardan 2000; Blundo 1995; Droz, Steiner & Weyer 2010; Lewis & Mosse 2006; Neubert 2000) and dialogue interpreting (Angelelli 2004; Hale 2015; Wadensjö 1998). Development brokerage provides the macro-level framing for mediated development encounters between NGOs and beneficiaries while dialogue interpreting is a relevant lens through which to understand the dynamic and stakes of an individual multilingual encounter at the micro-level.

Development work, at its most basic level, is always an encounter between a variety of actors from very different backgrounds and with diverging interests (Olivier de Sardan 1995). Given the geographical and social distance between these actors, their encounter is often mediated by brokers. The term "development broker" (*courtier en développement*) generally refers specifically to the individuals that operate at the interface between development workers (NGOs) and local communities, although brokerage can occur at any point of the aid chain, where two "worlds" enter into contact (Blundo 1995).

Because of their network among and knowledge of local power structures (Blundo 2000), brokers are often the ones "matching" villages and NGOs in the first place (Neubert 2000) or helping local communities to formulate their needs in terms of topical development issues (Neubert 1996) and development jargon (Blundo 1995). To fulfil this role, brokers require a specific repertoire of skills that includes several levels of linguistic competence: mastery of the language of beneficiaries, mastery of the official language or local lingua franca used by the NGO and mastery of development jargon, including an understanding of the buzzwords likely to yield success at a given time (Bierschenk et al. 2000).

As intermediaries between development workers and the local population, brokers often assume the role of spokesperson for a group of beneficiaries. They are described as active stakeholders in the development process, as gatekeepers, mediators or manipulators (Bierschenk et al. 2000). Dialogue interpreters, in contrast, are often viewed as largely disinterested intermediaries who aim to remain impartial. Their failure to do so in practice is generally explained by a desire to conform to the expectations of their employer or the party in power (e.g. Baker 2010; Blommaert 2009; Inghilleri 2008; Maryns 2013; Tipton 2008) or an urge to engage in advocacy on behalf of the party perceived as weaker (Barsky 2005; Inghilleri 2007). However, although interpreting scholars have largely abandoned the model of the interpreter as 'neutral conduit' (Angelelli 2008; Inghilleri 2005; Wadensjö 1998), the field is yet to embrace the possibility that interpreters might also use their position to pursue their self-interest. The literature on development brokerage emphasises precisely this aspect, viewing brokers as endowed with a specific personal and professional interest (Bierschenk et al. 2000; Bako-Arifari 2000; Blundo 2000; Coll 2000; Edja 2000) that they pursue through their activity at the interface between local and global. Nevertheless, studies on development brokerage have paid limited attention to the micro-level of the individual encounter where the development broker might take on the role of dialogue interpreter. A juxtaposition of the two strands of research, which acknowledges that the same individuals might shift back and forth between a development broker and a dialogue interpreter role, therefore has the potential to enrich both fields.

A key distinction between a development broker and a dialogue interpreter lies in their "positionality". In line with earlier work on humanitarian organisations (Delgado Luchner & Kherbiche 2018), I use the term positionality to refer to the interpreter's attitudes towards and relationships with the different parties to the mediated encounter. An intermediary's positionality generally results from a complex combination of factors, namely their own and the other parties' personal backgrounds (including gender, level of education, linguistic biography, occupational status), the assigned roles of the different individuals involved in the encounter, and in particular in the case of the study at hand, the prestige associated with the different languages involved.

5. METHODS

The findings presented below are the result of a qualitative interview study carried out among the local staff of several Kenyan development NGOs. This interview study was part of a larger research project that aimed to explore language brokerage along the aid chain. The first part of the project, a study carried out among development NGOs based in Switzerland (Delgado Luchner 2018), focused primarily on communication between NGOs based in the Global North and their "local partners" in the Global South. One of the key findings of this study was that communication between the "local partner" and project beneficiaries was left largely in the hands of NGOs in the Global South. Swiss NGOs were often unaware of the language situation on the ground and generally assumed that their local partner's staff had full mastery of the languages of the local communities where projects were being implemented. However, participants did not know how communication between their local partner and the community played out in detail, in particular in the highly multilingual countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. I therefore decided to implement a second case study, this time in Kenya, in order better to understand communication a the interface between local partner and community.

Nairobi was chosen as the main location for the second part of the study, for several reasons. Kenya has a particularly vibrant NGO and INGO scene. One of the Swiss NGOs participating in the first part of the research project, Caritas Switzerland, had a local office in Nairobi, which allowed me to follow the whole aid chain of this particular NGO. I was furthermore familiar with Kenya as a research context through prior work (Delgado Luchner 2019; Marais & Delgado Luchner 2019) and therefore closely acquainted with the sociolinguistic reality on the ground.

The focus of interview questions was on whether and how language barriers or multilingualism have influenced the implementation of participatory approaches. Additional questions focused on the use of translation and interpreting, internal and external communication practices and the importance of cultural knowledge for development work. These interviews aimed to shed light on the perspectives of Kenyan development workers and the strategies they deploy in order to communicate with beneficiaries who do not speak English. Including the perspectives of beneficiaries was not the aim of the research project these interviews were part of[5] since doing so would have required extensive travel throughout the country, the involvement of several interpreters to cover different local languages and a lengthier stay in the research field. However, the results of interviews conducted with Kenyan aid workers indicate that interviews with beneficiaries, supplemented by ethnographic observation of development encounters, would constitute a promising avenue of research that I hope to pursue in the future.

5 A summary of the overall research project can be found here: http://p3.snf.ch/project-171914

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Interviewees in Kenya were selected through three main avenues:

- snowball sampling, starting from Caritas Switzerland in Kenya, whose staff put me in contact with other members of the Caritas network;
- "cold calls" (or rather "cold e-mails") to NGOs based in Nairobi, using the contact information found in the 2017 Directory of the Kenyan NGOs Co-Ordination Board;
- contacts with personal acquaintances and friends who knew people working in the NGO sector.

During the four weeks available on site, I was able to carry out 19 in-depth interviews, ranging between 45 minutes and two hours in length. The 19 respondents (nine female/ten male) had all worked on development projects in Kenya. Three of them were expatriates (one German and two Swiss), and 16 were Kenyan nationals. The interviews took place in German (3) and Kenyan English (16). This nuance is important, given that my prior exposure to the Kenyan context and my mastery of the local variety of English, including the ability to understand and practice the kind of English/Swahili code-mixing that is characteristic of Kenyan English, allowed me to build rapport with my interview participants and to gain access to information about communication difficulties with other interlocutors from the Global North that they might otherwise not have been willing to share openly.

Given that I contacted over 100 NGOs, the number of respondents might seem small. However, it is important to note that interviewees contacted through the snowball method or personal networks were much more likely to participate than those contacted through the "cold call" method, which yielded very limited results. I could no doubt have obtained additional interviews if I had been able to spend more time on site. However, the existing interviews provide a broad overview of language brokerage practices in Kenyan development NGOs since they include data on urban and rural settings, projects involving monolingual and multilingual communities, members of pastoralist and sedentary groups, and NGO staff based in Nairobi and in different rural areas. Interview data were analysed using a combination of conceptually and empirically grounded categories (Dey 1993; Paillé & Mucchielli 2012).

6. RESULTS

The results fall into two macro categories: instances where the local NGO workers master the language of the community (as is generally assumed by their partner NGOs in the Global North), and instances where this is not the case. While translation and interpreting practices are more common in the absence of a shared language, they nevertheless also exist in the first case, in particular when the encounter involves a foreign visitor (e.g. a representative of a partner NGO in the Global North) or aims to produce materials intended for a national or international audience.

A key finding of this study is that translation[6] co-exists with other multilingual coping strategies in the contact zones of these NGOs and that this panoply of strategies cannot be understood in isolation from one another. In particular, interlinguistic translation competes with the use of English, or rather "Englishes", in the Kenyan aid chain. However, English is not the mother tongue or first language of the overwhelming majority of the speakers involved in Kenyan development encounters. Both local aid workers and aid beneficiaries use it as a

6 Throughout this paper and unless otherwise specified, the term "translation" is used in a broad sense to refer indiscriminately to written, oral and hybrid practices, i.e. it includes interpreting.

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vehicular language, often to include foreign visitors or staff who are unfamiliar with Swahili, Kenya's uncontested *lingua franca*. Among expatriate aid workers, only a minority are native speakers of English. As such, the English used is always influenced by and often mixed with other languages, which makes the use of English in the Kenyan aid chain a multilingual practice in its own right.

6.1 The role of English for participation

English, the main language of international aid, unsurprisingly plays a key role in development projects in Kenya. The language is particularly prominent as a *lingua franca* in brokered encounters between Kenyan beneficiaries and representatives of international NGOs (Contact Zone IV), but it is also sometimes leveraged strategically in encounters between Kenyan NGOs and beneficiaries (Contact Zone III).

Given that English is the language of education, political power and urban elites in Kenya, its use along the aid chain is never neutral. Instead, differences in social status and power often crystallise around actors' ability to communicate in English. The interviews show that Kenyan NGO workers relate to English differently, depending on whether they are communicating "upwards" or "downwards" along the aid chain, i.e. with partners in the Global North or with beneficiaries.[7]

All NGO staff interviewed used English to interact with their partners from the Global North, and it was assumed that visitors from abroad would be able to communicate in this language. This assumption stands in contrast to how NGOs working within wider pan-African networks manage communication with partners from other African countries. Indeed, when asked about multilingualism and the potential for translation within their organisation, several interviewees (Int4, Int12, Int14, Int15) started to describe difficulties in communicating with their network members from francophone and lusophone Africa and the need for systematic translation and even professional simultaneous interpretation in these encounters. However, with interlocutors from the Global North, including those from France, the status of English as a *lingua franca* remained uncontested and was presented as unproblematic.

Instead, several interviewees emphasised difficulties in communicating with "native" speakers of English, i.e. partners from the US or the UK. When these native speakers were present, Kenyan NGO workers generally felt the need to "broker" interactions with beneficiaries who could speak English but would not understand these foreign native speakers. Non-native speakers were perceived by NGO workers as both easier to understand and more approachable for beneficiaries:

> "The Germans, it's harder even the Dutch. But they are better in terms, they are [*more*] slow than others than the British or the Americans. And then it gives other people confidence that: 'Oh you're an English or white and you can't speak in English ...' ... I have gone out to the communities with a Dutch and he was very clear according to them, I've gone with, where was this person from, Denmark! So that was okay." (Int15)

7 The terms „upwards" and „downwards" are used in this paper to describe the direction of communication along the aid chain, in analogy with the terminology used to describe a supply chain. While „upstream" indicates communication in the direction from beneficiaries to donors and „downstream" from donors to beneficiaries, these terms are not intended to convey a hierarchy between actors.

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Attempts by native speakers to “simplify” their English were dismissed by Kenyan NGO staff as condescending (Int14, Int15), in particular when these foreigners also used simplified English to address the NGO workers themselves.

When beneficiaries use English, this is often intended to break with habitual patterns of language use in order to reach a specific audience, namely foreign or Kenyan donors. For instance, beneficiaries are often asked by an NGO to record a short message in English about the impact a development project has had on their lives. These messages are then generally used by the NGO to advertise their work and appeal to donors on their website or on social media. Interviewees assured me that, in these cases, the beneficiaries were selected first and foremost based on the relevance of their story, rather than their ability to tell it in English (Int15, Int9), and that subtitles could be used if necessary if the original recording was in Swahili or a local language (Int9, Int11). However, the additional workload involved in translating these messages and the systematic absence of a budget for this language work constitutes a strong incentive for Kenyan NGOs to select beneficiaries who can tell their story in English, which might limit the participation of other beneficiaries in this kind of exercise.

The power of delivering a message in English is a secret known not only to NGOs but also to beneficiaries themselves, as illustrated by a Mama Mboga[8] from Nairobi’s slums. In a meeting with a government minister that had been brokered by the NGO worker I interviewed, Mama Mboga had been designated by her community publicly to read a petition to the minister, i.e. to act as a spokesperson for her whole community. To rise to the occasion, Mama Mboga chose to read the petition in English. Reflecting on this experience, the NGO worker admitted that her image of Mama Mboga was irrevocably changed by this event:

> “I knew she could speak English but I didn’t know she could read that way and she said, “Yes I can read, *thanks to you people*, now I am reading a lot, I am writing a lot.” And I said, “Wow!” ... I’ll start looking at her differently. I’d never thought she could read like that, I was really impressed. And I think even everybody else got wowed by that.” (Int15, emphasis added)

As the example above illustrates, mastery of English, especially in writing, is seen as a sign of empowerment, i.e. development, in Kenya, and providing access to English enhancement opportunities is part of the development activities of some Kenyan NGOs. The opposite is also true, as illustrated by the following description of beneficiaries from the remote Turkana region:

> “Most of the communities in Turkana ... you need a translator because they’re not so empowered in terms of picking up, you know, understand the English.” (Int7)

Mastery of English correlates with many indicators of “development” in Kenya, for instance access to secondary and tertiary education, level of income and urbanisation. As such, it is not surprising that many interviewees viewed beneficiaries’ inability to speak English as a temporary phenomenon, one of the features that characterises precisely those who are in need of development interventions. This understanding of the linguistic situation as something that development itself would be able to “fix” in the medium term might explain why language mediation, while widely used, seemed to be provided on a mainly *ad hoc* and generally unplanned basis.

8 Name used to designate a woman selling vegetables on the market or by the road side.

6.2 Language mediation in participatory development work

Multilingual communication and language mediation in encounters between NGOs and beneficiaries were described as generally quite informal, added almost as an afterthought. Beneficiaries were sometimes expected to sort out the language issue for and by themselves, which resulted in arrangements of varying formality:

> "Usually, we tell them, 'If you can't [*understand*], ask your neighbour ... to assist you.'" (Int15)
>
> "[*We ask beneficiaries*:] 'Do you have people you trust, who speak English?' Sometimes people will say: '... my daughter speaks English. And when you come, my daughter will translate.'" (Int14)
>
> "... the beneficiaries ... had appointed someone who could talk in English ... and [*who*] answered our questions. ... but then also the other members of the community who had questions to ask would ask their questions in the local language, I guess then we'd have it translated." (Int1)

In these arrangements, the power asymmetries between language communities alluded to above play an important role. The NGO workers I interviewed came from a different socio-economic background than the beneficiaries of their organisation's projects[9] and belonged to the Nairobi-based (upper) middle class. In Kenya, this means that they mainly belonged to ethnic groups that are a majority in the region (i.e. Kikuyu) or groups whose members are at least well represented in the centres of socio-economic power in Kenya (e.g. Luo, Luhya, Kamba). Consequently, the languages spoken by minority groups or more marginalised groups in Kenya, i.e. specifically those groups to which many development-aid beneficiaries belong, are not covered by these NGO workers. Members of the community are therefore tasked with ensuring language mediation into Swahili or English. This is for instance the case for pastoralist communities (Samburu, Turkana, Maasai and Karamojong), which several interviewees mentioned in this context (Int4, Int6, Int7 and Int17), or small indigenous communities, such as the Sengwer (Int14).

However, formally designating an interpreter for an encounter (whether an aid worker or a beneficiary) seemed to be an exception rather than a rule. When an interpreter was present, this person was always an insider, for example, a member of the community:

> "[*The translator*] is one of the community members, in fact we have always preferred it that way. Yeah the message is much more at home when you have a translator who is a local." (Int17)
>
> "There has always been somebody who is part of the [*linguistic*] community, and is either [*an NGO*] staff or one of the [*beneficiaries*], yes probably from the local organisations that we work with." (Int1)
>
> "Yes it has to be a member of same community, trusted, known, and accepted by the respondent ..." (Int5)

Interviewees overwhelmingly saw this insider positionality as an advantage and as the only viable option, breaking with professional understandings of the interpreter as an impartial intermediary.

9 The exception was two interviewees who came from slum communities in and around Nairobi and had initially been beneficiaries of the NGO they now worked for.

 https://doi.org/10.38140/jtsa.1.4334

In addition to community members, NGO staff based in regional or local offices (i.e. outside the capital) were also described as "bridges" between beneficiaries and national or international staff who do not speak their language (Int1, Int18), and all of my Kenyan interviewees, without exception, had themselves taken on the role of translator for their colleagues on an *ad hoc* basis at least once in encounters with beneficiaries from their own community.

In some cases, interpreters were also brokers in a more general sense, i.e. members of a community who regularly act as mediators between the community and outsiders. Their brokerage tasks encompassed the macro-level (i.e. providing information, granting and negotiating access, as is generally associated with development brokerage) and the micro-level (i.e. interlinguistic translation during meetings or interviews):

> "So you'll find in most of the rural places in Kenya, so most of the teachers will come from that community. So it's easier if you go then talk through the teacher ..., he or she will translate."(Int8)
>
> "[*Every*] community or every language usually has interpreters, identified interpreters, even if they have other jobs." (Int5)

The identity of these brokers varied, depending on the kind of organisation. Religious NGOs relied heavily on local clergy while secular organisations involved teachers or health care workers. The use of individuals who are used to speaking *on behalf of* a community to translate the words of a community member is potentially problematic as it remains doubtful whether these brokers are able clearly to distinguish between the role of spokesperson and the role of dialogue interpreter. However, this arrangement also reflects the tendency of NGOs to work "with" rather than "against" local power dynamics in order successfully to implement their projects. Furthermore, none of my interviewees was concerned with the lack of independence of language brokers. Rather, the NGOs wanted them to view their role as contributing to the success of a project and to leverage beneficiary participation as a means to this end.

Individuals with more power also had the ability to exert greater control over the way in which their message was translated, sometimes even full control. Indeed, in multilingual communities or in meetings involving visitors from outside who did not speak the local language, community elders would sometimes engage in "self-translation":

> "I've had someone, an elderly man, he speaks his own language, then he also speaks [*the other language*] and I find it so interesting if someone can speak more than two languages, especially in those two communities."
>
> Interviewer: "So he will say the same thing two times?"
>
> "Yes. Exactly. In different languages." (Int7)

With regards to the accuracy expected from their interpreters, interviewees' opinions diverged. One respondent explained that modifying the message to ensure a successful negotiation was not only acceptable but also desirable, in particular in sensitive encounters involving several communities (Int7). However, other interviewees emphasised the importance of ensuring accurate renditions. Two respondents complained about situations where their interpreter would answer a question on behalf of beneficiaries (Int2, Int14), and one respondent argued that something was always lost in translation (Int6). In addition, a Kenyan Somali speaker remembered repeatedly correcting the local Somali-English translator when travelling to the field with colleagues in his capacity as project coordinator (Int19). These

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examples point to the fact that, when it is provided, interpretation in participatory development encounters is often neither accurate nor faithful or complete.

This, however, does not mean that quality is not a concern for development NGOs. Indeed, many organisations try to monitor the quality of the interpretation provided through different means. For instance, one NGO who had employed the local jobless youth as security in order to be able to work in a community then used this arrangement in order to check on the accuracy of translations:

> "... we have them as security and enough of them will be educated, they can read and write English. If the translator tries to change something, they'd be like, 'Why don't you just translate it as you were told?' So then again, these are check mechanisms." (Int14)

In other instances, NGOs would rely on their habitual brokers to monitor the quality of translations, in this example the translations into vernacular languages produced by local radio stations tasked with disseminating the NGOs message:

> "[*We give the radio stations the fact sheets about our projects in*] English and then we coordinate with the different dioceses to ensure that the translation is done correctly, the radios have their translators." (Int6)

Other interviewees similarly confirmed that translators knew they were being 'monitored' by other members of the community who spoke at least basic English.

7. DISCUSSION

The findings presented above illustrate that the requirement for beneficiary participation that has become a key component of mainstream development discourse has given rise to a large array of formal and informal intra- and interlinguistic language mediation strategies in development practice. These strategies continue to remain hidden, including from the Western partners of NGOs working in the Global South. Indeed, contrary to the view expressed by NGOs based in Switzerland (Delgado Luchner 2018), Kenyan NGOs were not always able to draw on their own staff to communicate with beneficiaries in their language, thereby creating a communication gap that was readily filled by community members, local leaders and development brokers.

All respondents indicated that they had used interpretation to communicate with their beneficiaries at one point or another, but none of them was able to recall an example of drawing on an external or professional interpreter in these encounters. However, many respondents had relied on professional translators or interpreters in coordination meetings with NGOs from other African countries during training for development professionals or in written communication targeted at donors. Therefore, while formalised language mediation arrangements exist in other parts of the Kenyan NGOs' aid chains (namely in Contact Zones I and II), translation in interactions with beneficiaries was usually largely informal or even *ad hoc*, reflecting the dynamic and transient nature of the practice. This characteristic is further reinforced by the invisibility of multilingualism in development-funding schemes or project-planning documents.

English emerged as a key vector of participation for those beneficiaries who were able to leverage the language strategically. English is what enabled Mama Mboga, a slum dweller and a woman, to become a spokesperson and to challenge the perception local NGO workers

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had of her. It gave her power that she could not have wielded otherwise. However, other beneficiaries who already were in a position of relative power – for instance, community elders – did not have to master English in order to be heard in participatory encounters. Language mediation was deployed to ensure their ability to participate.

Beneficiaries who could not express themselves in English or Swahili were also not excluded from participating but depended on language mediators who would often provide only a partial rendition of their utterances (e.g. allowing them to ask “their” questions but not translating the questions asked by other individuals).

Full interpretation into and from a local language was a last-resort strategy, used only when communication in Swahili or English had reached its limits and when the situation did not warrant providing only a short summary of utterances, namely when individuals in a position of power (community elders) spoke in a local language.

However, viewing these interactions as instances of “non-professional interpreting and translation” (NPIT) (Antonini 2015) and therefore as something potentially to be “solved” through professionalization completely obscures the fact that these practices overwhelmingly seemed to reflect the expectations and needs of their users and were adapted to the very specific communication objectives of encounters between aid workers and beneficiaries. Indeed, participation was only an end in itself for one NGO whose focus lies on empowering beneficiaries to access their human rights (including a right to development) rather than on directly implementing development projects. For the remaining NGOs, participation is a means to an end, i.e. a method that serves the purpose of enabling the successful implementation of a project.

This reality shapes the positionality of language mediators in development projects. Indeed, according to the development professionals I interviewed, successful interpreters are not necessarily those who are the most accurate, and certainly not those who are the most able to remain impartial, but rather those who can obtain and preserve the trust of all parties involved and are seen as making a meaningful contribution to the success of a development project. These language intermediaries are “invisible” (Venuti 1995), not by virtue of being neutral but because they are indistinguishable from other stakeholders and fully embedded within the NGO, the local community or both. Their positionality evolves and shifts, and their role as dialogue interpreters is subordinate to their role as NGO worker, beneficiary and/or development broker.

Their dual role as aid worker/aid beneficiary and interpreter can present these brokers with dilemmas, forcing them to prioritise one role over another, similar to interpreters working for humanitarian organisations (Delgado Luchner & Kherbiche 2019). For interpreters in development projects, this might mean that ensuring the success of the project will in some cases take precedence over ensuring broad participation.

All NGOs whose staff I interviewed had deployed an impressive array of formal and informal multilingual communication practices to reach the largest possible number of beneficiaries. All interviewees were aware of language as a potential barrier to participation and the importance of including beneficiaries based on needs rather than language skills. However, all interviewees were also surprised by my questions about the linguistic dimension of their work and by the focus of my study. Many indicated that this was the first time anyone took an explicit interest in this matter.

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8. CONCLUSION

Development encounters in Kenya bring together a highly heterogeneous set of actors (expatriates, foreign visitors, highly educated urban professionals, local government officials and the rural or urban poor) that would only rarely interact with each other under different circumstances. The contact zones of the aid chain therefore present a particularly broad panoply of complex multilingual communication practices that are at odds with some of the key assumptions underlying existing theorisations of interlingual translation and interpreter positionality. Kenyan aid workers are thus atypical "Figures of interpretation" (Delgado Luchner 2020; Meier, Lorente, Muth & Duchêne 2020).

However, the findings presented in this paper also highlight that gaps in development discourse circulating at the level of international organisations and NGOs based in the Global North are not necessarily indicative of commensurate gaps in development practice as implemented locally in the Global South. Rather, the absence of a thorough engagement with multilingualism in participatory development discourse points to a disconnect between discourse and practice that development workers in the Global South are forced to bridge daily through *ad hoc* solutions, often without necessarily being aware of this part of their work.

However, as long as the language work these development workers and their beneficiaries engage in remains invisible in recruitment procedures, implicit in project planning and largely taken for granted during implementation, the languages an NGO is able to cover will be the result of chance, and the quality of participation available to members of some language communities will differ substantially from that of other communities. Furthermore, interpretation might be the first element to be compromised when NGOs are constrained by time and funding.

A broader acknowledgement of these practices within the institutions funding development projects or shaping international development goals would ensure that aid workers on the ground have the conceptual and material means to continue carrying out this crucial part of their work.

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