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Cultures in translation, complexity and development inequalities: cultivating spaces for shared understanding

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Abstract

This article will argue that complex and multi-perspective approaches to translation and intercultural studies not only reflect the realities of life, they are indeed necessary in order to address the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, UN 2015), whose overall aim is 'leave no-one behind'. Taking examples from international development project experiences, we consider the role of 'translating cultures' in these fluid exchange spaces of multilingual and intercultural encounters, particularly at project beneficiary level where there is significant inequality and power difference between different actors. Development projects often focus on efficiency at the expense of inclusion; we emphasise the need to open up linguistic and cultural spaces which allow for values and processes to be interrogated.

Kifungu hiki kitaeleza kwamba njia ngumu na zenye mitazamo tofauti ya kutafsiri na tamaduni za kitaalam sio tu zinaonyesha hali halisi ya maisha,ni muhimu sana ili kushughulikia malengo ya maendeleo endelevu (SDGs,UN 2015),ambayo kwa jumla lengo lake ni 'kutomwacha yeyote nyuma'.Kwa kuangalia mifano kutokana na uzoefu wa mradi wa maendeleo ya kimataifa tunazingatia jukumu la 'kutafsiri tamaduni' katika hizi nafasi za kubadilishana kwa kukutana kwa lugha nyingi na za kitamaduni hasa katika kiwango cha wanufaika wa mradi ambapo kwa uwazi

hakuna usawa na tofauti ya uwezo katika watendaji tofauti. Miradi ya maendeleo mara nyingi inazingatia ufanisi kwa gharama ya kuhusishwa na tunasisitiza huitaji wa kufungua nafasi za lugha na kitamaduni ambazo huruhusu maadili na michakato ya kuhojiwa.

Keywords: community development, complexity, intercultural communication, international development, translation, shared understanding

Introduction

The 2019 IALIC conference, focusing on 'Cultures in translation and translating cultures' notes in the conference description:

Cultures are therefore not static, but are always on the move…rather they are diverse and multifaceted. In other words, cultures are always 'in translation' or moving from one location to another; similarly, cultural frameworks are always permeable and subject to change under the mutual contact that takes place between individuals.

(http://ialic.international/conference-2019-valencia/)

In a previous article, (Hamaidia et al., 2018), we have discussed parallel shifts in translation and intercultural communication studies, noting that both fields of study have moved towards more complex understandings of their disciplines. We noted that the fluid exchange spaces of multilingual and intercultural encounters characterised international development contexts, particularly at beneficiary level. We showed - through the analysis of examples from in-the-field international

development work - how the less essentialist, more complex understandings of these areas of study reflected better the lived realities of the activities involved in international development. We raised three important issues (ibid., p.119): (a) that studies in intercultural communication and translation can learn from each other; (b) that translation training should account for the messy intercultural spaces of contact zones; and (c) that guidance on intercultural practice be further developed to benefit those working in the field of international development.

This article will emphasise the importance of taking complex approaches to translation and intercultural studies, and will argue that not only do such approaches reflect the realities of translating and communicating interculturally in international development, they are indeed ***necessary*** in order to address the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, UN, 2015), with the overall aim of 'leaving no-one behind'. The recognition of the fluidity of 'cultures', of 'meanings' and of 'texts' as they are understood in their broadest sense is of central importance here.

As a professional field, International Development has peculiarities which make it particularly important for study. As a massive professional sector, with strong values of sustainability, equality and inclusivity with aims for empowering the world's poorest and most vulnerable, the work of development agencies in a time of climate and migration emergencies is clearly of paramount relevance. To cite one example, the Oxfam website states:

> We have a vision of a just world, a world where people are valued and treated equally, a world without poverty. We want a more equal world where a life of dignity and opportunity is not a privilege for some, but a right for everyone. To

> beat poverty, we must all have the power to influence decisions affecting our lives. (Oxfam, 2020).

The focus in this article is on examples where people are living in contexts where they have some degree of control over their lives and are in need of support to grow their resilience, rather than those living in emergencies such as war, conflict, confinement or natural disasters - such contexts we might describe as 'in crisis'. Our contexts involve situations where lives are precarious, insecure, and subject to disruption and/or shifting into disaster through perhaps an out of control event such as war or earthquake, or drought. While recognising that systemic change is all-important in relation to re-balancing power and enacting change (see Hamaidia et al., 2018), we wish here to emphasise the opportunities for 'making a difference' and enacting change at ***all levels*** of the international development 'aid chain'. This can be individually or collectively, whether in the headquarters of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), most commonly based in G7 countries, in regional or local offices within destination countries (such as Malawi, or the Dominican Republic), or in the communities who are destined to benefit directly from a development project (such as the villagers in a fruit-growing cooperative initiative in Central America). We take up the challenge from Phipps (2014) who argues for a necessary re-politicisation of the notion of *intercultural dialogue* - understood as open, equal and respectful exchange (CoE, 2008) - in contexts of extreme injustice and power imbalance where precariousness and insecurity are people's lived realities, to use Phipps' terms.

Translating cultures necessarily requires a consideration of the concepts of translation and intercultural communication, together with opportunities for

individuals to take action to open up spaces where shared understanding has perhaps either been imposed (through monolingual - usually English language - practices), or assumed to be shared (through competing agendas of efficiency and clarity over the time-consuming focus on complexities and multiple meanings, for example). Through discussion of individual – or collective- agency (by which we mean individuals or groups' power to influence and/or change[1]), social action and the opening up of spaces within encounters, we position *translating cultures* and *cultures in translation* as offering a focus for promoting the goals of sustainable development, equality and social justice.

We argue that the precarious and insecure context of international development demands not only the recognition of the complexities of translation and intercultural communication, but that these complexities need to be used as ***fundamental guides*** in building shared understanding and working within the international development field.

Translation and intercultural communication: Product to process orientation

There have been parallel shifts in recent years in theoretical approaches to translation studies and intercultural communication (Hamaidia et al., 2018). In translation studies this has been reflected in a progression from a focus on texts and cultures to a new emphasis on the role of the translator and a reconfiguration of translation as a form of social practice, whilst intercultural communication studies have shifted from essentialist views which assign cultures to rigid categories to a more critical and flexible notion of culture as a process of meaning-making. Marais' (2014) application of complexity theory to translation studies illustrates this

[1] see Block, 2013.

shift from product to process and is of particular interest in that he integrates insights from the fields of both translation and intercultural communication into an interdisciplinary approach to the role of translation in the context of development with a specific focus on South Africa, redefining translation as a form of social practice. He seeks to understand 'how translation plays a role in developing a society and how the values of a society are negotiated by translation' (p.8). Marais' work moves away from the paradigm of simplification associated with Western science, which he suggests informs some theoretical approaches in translation studies. He asserts that this paradigm implies a philosophy of determinism and simplifies translation challenges into clear-cut and opposing categories as reflected for example in binary linguistic approaches to translation (e.g. source text/culture orientation versus target text/culture orientation; domestication versus foreignisation). Marais argues that 'the paradigm of simplicity is the cause of the binary thinking that dominates the reductionist paradigm' (2014, p.20) and advocates a philosophy of complexity which can accommodate 'disorder, complexity and paradox' (2014, p.21). This is relevant to the way in which globalisation and technological advances have led to the development of a more fluid notion of *text*. To cite one example, journalists involved in news translation need to constantly edit, revise, rephrase, rearrange, adapt and modify information for different audiences. It is also reflected in Marais' proposal that attention should be given to ***the way in which people communicate*** in development projects across cultures and to the use of oral translation in the development context which similarly broadens out the concept of texts and the scope of translation studies (2014, p.145).

Marais' interest in nurturing an interdisciplinary relationship between translation

studies and development studies adds a further dimension to translating cultures in that it detracts from the focus on 'high culture' in the form of for example literary translation, scientific and conference interpreting and encourages a more holistic view of culture which includes different types of translation in both developed and undeveloped countries (2014, p.145).

Holliday (2015) acknowledges that the concept of culture eludes definition since 'culture itself is such an open and interpretable concept that can mean different things to different people at different times' (p. 25). This suggests that attempts to talk of culture will need to take into account the complexity of the notion of culture and move away from the rigid definitions of differences between 'cultures' characteristic of an essentialist approach.

Holliday (2015) examines four categories which he identifies as 'different and interconnected forces that act on culture and intercultural communication' (p. 23) in what he describes as a 'social action grammar of culture' namely: particular social and political structures, personal trajectories, underlying universal cultural processes and particular cultural products.

A non-essentialist and process-orientation to intercultural communication is evident in previous work by Scollon and Scollon (2001) who consider action in interaction. Scollon and Scollon (p. 545) advocate a shift away from conceptualising cultures as distinct groups which will influence interaction *per se* to a focus on understanding the concept of culture in relation to the way in which it emerges from social actions. They question the fundamental meaning and purpose of culture as a category and propose a theory of mediated discourse analysis which they describe as 'reconstituting the research agenda around social action not categorial memberships or cultural genres' (2001, p.545). This approach signals a departure from earlier

approaches in the field of intercultural communication in that it 'dissolves the foundational questions' and sets out a radical new direction for research in this area. In principle this means that the notion of 'cultures' as groups should be replaced by the recognition that groups such as 'cultures' are taken to be the outcomes of social actions and of histories but to have no direct causal status in themselves.

The movement away from fixed and static binary and essentialist approaches in the translation of cultures to a broader theoretical perspective which combines insights from translation, intercultural communication studies and other disciplines, forms what could be described as a more comprehensive philosophical approach in that it functions 'as a means of explicating and interpreting the world'(http://ialic.international/conference-2019-valencia/). This can be seen for example in Marais' (2014) reference to the fact that the fundamental aim of complexity studies which informs his approach to translation theory and development studies, is to understand the complex nature of reality:

> Complexity studies is…a transdisciplinary field that brings together insights from philosophy, maths, physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, linguistics, sociology, economics and other fields in an effort to understand reality as a complex phenomenon' (p.19).

Shifts in the development sector: downward accountability and listening

International Development agencies typically function as a chain of communication and activity which has been critiqued in the past for an emphasis on upward accountability, where the focus is more on the needs and interests of the funders than the communities where projects are being implemented. Projects are typically

managed by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), both international and national[2].

NGOs are in a constant state of change and adaptation. As ideas for change are mainly initiated from the top of organisations, delivering the change through different levels of operation takes time; concepts, ideas and plans are likely to be interpreted and re-interpreted in multiple contact zones.

In recent years there has been increasing recognition that downward accountability (to those the organisations aim to serve), has been overshadowed by funder demands. To address this, a 3-year pilot (INTRAC 2016) using beneficiary feedback mechanisms in a large international non-governmental organisation (INGO) was funded by the Department for International Development (DfID). A consequence of the study is that projects in receipt of DfID funding, in particular those funded by UK Aid Direct[3] fund, must include such mechanisms in project monitoring[4].

A small study (Methven, 2019) of ten UK Aid Direct grant holders revealed that beneficiary and community feedback were mainly used to adapt aspects of project implementation, such as timing or places of meetings etc. It was less common for such feedback to influence headquarters (HQ) staff or organisational strategies and approaches. This welcome shift to listening and responding to the community has yet to address how voices from below are communicated through the different

[2] For a longer explanation, see Hamaidia et al. (2018).
[3] https://www.ukaiddirect.org/
[4] While the inclusion of beneficiary feedback mechanisms can be seen as a positive step, it could be argued that the fundamental power of knowledge-holding still lies with the NGOs; attempts to bring in beneficiary perspectives do not necessarily challenge the imbalance of power.

layers and spaces in the NGOs. An approach[5] called 'most significant change' initiated in the 1990s sought to encourage a flow of feedback from the community to the HQ. People from the community would be asked what was the most significant change for them. These 'stories' would be shared up through the NGO hierarchy, with the view that people in HQ would hear community views on the value of change in any project.

Both approaches recognise that listening and adaptive management is important; in beneficiary feedback mechanisms, however, the information shared appears less likely to reach or challenge the project hierarchy. As feedback travels across different parts of the organisation, there will no doubt be translation, communication and (re-)interpretation issues. In theory the most significant change approach requires feedback to be communicated back to the source (beneficiary) community, closing the feedback loop. We would argue that such processes create a space for intercultural communication which could benefit from greater scrutiny.

This new focus on downward accountability is a welcome shift in project relationships and dynamics. The need for internal change as well as change in relation to project participants emerged from inadequate responses to complaints of exploitative and abusive behaviour by senior staff in early 2019, which created scandals in the aid sector. Unequal power relations within organisations and weak accountability systems meant that complainants were not listened to by the senior

[5] https://www.theoryofchange.org/wp-content/uploads/toco_library/pdf/2001_-_Davies_-_Most_Significant_Change_guide.pdf

management and trustees undermined the reputations of several large UK INGOs[6] (for example, Oxfam and Save the Children).

These examples illustrate that although organisations aim to address inequality and power issues in the external or community contexts, less attention was paid to the internal workings of an organisation. This reflects a need for more explicit processes for listening. Internally, this means paying more attention to whistle-blowers and their protection. Externally, it means listening to communities through the use of beneficiary feedback mechanisms or feedback loops. Processes also need to be addressed in a system-wide or holistic way to be useful and reflect the values of the organisations. The focus on inclusion of perspectives and feedback as a way to address inequalities at community level is valuable but there is still limited attention to the power imbalance between local project staff and the HQ staff (see below).

Translating cultures, cultures of translation in international development

The International Year of Indigenous Languages (UN, 2019) is a United Nations observance in 2019[7]. The focus on indigenous language aimed to raise awareness of the consequences of the endangerment of indigenous languages across the world, and establish a link between language, development, peace, and reconciliation. This

[6] See for example https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/save-the-children-response-to-charity-commission-report

[7] (UN Observances aim to stimulate interest in **United Nations** activities and programmes in specific areas, and promote international awareness and action).

UN interest in indigenous languages and culture provides an opportunity to look at how people communicate.

The output from 2019 is an action plan for a decade of indigenous languages 2022 to 2032. At this stage, it is not possible to say how this will happen; however, at the end of 2019 the hope has been that ten years of action will reveal the potential for indigenous languages to provide original solutions to contemporary issues.

In the meantime, the SDGs are in a process of 'domestication' into national policies. Generally, this means that national governments align their long-term plans with the goals. At a prize-giving event organised by the UN, a project in Western Uganda was recognised for their translation of SDGs into local languages as a means by which communities and lower tiers of government could communicate in their own languages on priorities in the local area. There may be more of these examples; however, given that this initiative was recognised with a prestigious award it suggests that there may not be many such initiatives across the world; this is indicative of how far we have to go in terms of integrating language/s and culture/s into international development work.

We recognise that this is not an easy task. In International Development contexts across the world, it is highly likely that a range of languages will be spoken by communities who can be considered as the recipients or beneficiaries of 'aid' or 'development'. With over a thousand languages spoken across the continent of Africa, for example (Harvard, n.d), and with multilingualism being the norm in a vast range of countries (e.g. Huguet, 2007; Trivedi, 2007), English is often the dominant language where there is no shared language between the different actors

and agencies in the organisation and project contexts[8]. In the latter this can contribute to the distancing of local communities, as can be seen in this article. Languages of the world do not have equal status. In the context of NGOs, the old colonial languages (English, French, Spanish, Portuguese) dominate in the majority of donor agency headquarters, and they are also languages into which policy documents may be translated for use in regional offices. It is hard to know what to do for the best when considering translation and what to translate. The decisions of policy document translations are often made in relation to financial and legal/policy requirements, such as the need to explain legal requirements of a development project, or contractual obligations; often the decisions about what to translate and when to translate it are made at the periphery of a project rather than as a central concern (Sanz Martins 2018).

As noted in Hamaidia et al. (2018), the implications for translation of 'buzzwords' such as *advocacy* through offices in the development chain with differing linguistic and cultural contexts, means that such a 'key' concept is not going to carry the same meaning as it did when it was 'conceived' in the headquarters or within academic circles. But should it carry the same meaning we ask? Why should the concept of advocacy be 'translated' and imposed in the local community context? We could argue that such clarification of linguistic terminology is essential for successful and smooth running of projects; here however we propose that it is not only the meaning of the word which is important to ensure transparency of goals of any development project, ***but the processes through which meaning is established***. There is a

[8] We recognise the role of dominant languages is closely tied up with colonialism (Kachru, 1992) and often referred to as *lingua francas*. There are also many *lingua francas* across the African continent (for example Kiswahili, Hausa, Fulani, Manding among others) - deeper discussion of these is beyond the scope of this article; we are grateful to one of our reviewers for highlighting this.

pressing need for opening up spaces for discussion about how we arrive at concepts and how we build projects. In a context of enormous global social and economic inequalities, to reduce language diversity to the need for translation is failing the SDG's agenda of leaving no-one behind (UN, 2015).

One example of practical implications of multilingualism in international development is offered in our previous work from Sarah, who described the local linguistic situation of one project she worked on in northern Mozambique thus (summarised):

- Mixed Mozambican and international staff in project teams
- Mozambican staff came from different parts of the country, with some from Nampula.
- The national staff all spoke Portuguese. International staff had varying degrees of competence in Portuguese. The community where the project existed mainly spoke a local dialect of Makhua, little fluency in Portuguese and was not used in community conversations
- Basic education had been delivered in Portuguese during colonial times. Following independence, the Government had started to promote some primary education in the local language.
- The disruption caused by 16 years of civil war meant that many people had not attended school. Apart from older males, who had attended colonial primary school, few people spoke Portuguese.
- Women had often not been to school or had left early and had not had significant exposure to Portuguese.
- No project staff were fluent in the Makhua dialect of the interior.

(adapted from Hamaidia et al., 2018 p.132-3)

Questions of which language to translate into, and/or which language to train interpreters or translators in, become almost irrelevant in this scenario, which requires a very much in-situ response, solution and negotiation of understanding in order to make any kind of meaningful contribution. What remains important in this scenario, however, is the need to raise awareness of the role of language and culture in shaping, hiding, and contributing to understanding.

The power of the translator (in the broad sense of the word) cannot be underestimated in these situations where power imbalances already exist at all levels, from the funders to NGOs to communities (see Hamaidia et al, 2018). How meanings are passed from one office to another, how key terms are understood in local communities, all position the translator/interpreter as gatekeeper of information, and, if information is what allows for finances to be unleashed (Crack, 2019) then the translator's role cannot be underestimated (see also Valdeon, 2019). This is particularly relevant as translating information always involves interpretation of that information (Buhler, 2002).

Translators, interpreters and intercultural communication professionals, therefore, need to focus on far more than the language code alone; they need awareness not only of the linguistic and/or cultural context, the purpose of the communication, but also an awareness of the possibilities for misunderstandings regardless of one's ability in the language. Local meanings, multiplicities of language and language usage, all play their part in developing shared understandings.

Dealing with messy multilingual spaces is not something with which translators- at least in English-speaking academic circles- have been traditionally associated. A quick survey of translation Masters' programmes across the world will reveal that translation studies still have their core and key focus on source and target text expertise; that is, in translating/interpreting between two (or more) languages. There is little emphasis on training to deal with the messiness of everyday multilingual encounters. Work on translator training (e.g. Kelly, 2005) does recognise, however, the need for a range of competences over and beyond linguistic expertise, and include what Kelly describes as cultural and intercultural competence, 'attitudinal and interpersonal competence' (2005: 32).

The implications for translator training when working with minority languages are noted by Cronin:

> Much more needs to be done to encourage translation exchanges between lesser-used languages on the planet and translator-training institutions need to explore ways in which this can be done. These exchanges have training implications. …[T]ranslator-training institutions have to argue beyond the rationale of the accountant for more inclusive training programmes that have minor-minor language combinations.
>
> (Cronin, 1998:158)

We have much sympathy with Cronin's perspective, however, in the contexts which we are discussing here, these questions of meaning, power, language and culture cannot be solved by the translator, regardless of how many languages they speak. Translator/interpreter training needs to include an awareness of the role of power, politics and how to work within complexity, which we argue is intrinsically

necessary and therefore good. Recognising complexity is good because it requires us to make explicit the often hidden multiple perspectives which are necessary for solving urgent world problems. For example, we can ask ourselves: *Is it possible to represent others through translation?* following Spivak's (2007) comment: 'Translation is... not only necessary but unavoidable. And yet, as the text guards its secret, it is impossible. The ethical task is never quite performed' (p.274).

In order to even try to represent others, one needs first to learn to adopt perspectives of others- this is one of the central abilities necessary for the development of intercultural competence (e.g. Byram, 1997, Deardorff, 2006, Fantini, 2013). Adoption of others' perspectives cannot take place without listening. Notwithstanding the current issue of internal accountability in INGOs at the moment, the recognition that listening and adoption of perspectives of others through the development feedback loops described earlier is at least a beginning. (see also the Listening Zones Project, n.d, and Deardorff, 2020).

Ethnographic work, a central feature of intercultural communication studies, can contribute to the development of translators with the skills to adopt perspectives of others while at the same time live in the messiness of everyday lives. The role of the translators themselves becomes visible as we cannot write ourselves out of ethnographic perspectives (Spradley, 1980, 2016; Roberts et al., 2001). Sturge (1997) for example, reminds us that nothing can be directly translated, that we as the 'translators/interpreters' (in the broadest sense of the words) need also to be evident in the process. The broadened role of the translator (see earlier) requires this openness to clarification of position. As Holliday (2009) states:

> The solution seems not to lie within the sensitising and liberalising of Centre thinking, but with a cessation of the zealous defining and fixing of others in order to allow spaces for the margins to become visible (p. 153).

A perhaps kinder way to consider our roles in the 'defining and fixing' of others, is recognising that 'human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings things have for them' (Blumer, 1969, cited in Spradley, 1980, p. 6). Increasing awareness of our own role in the process of building shared understandings requires us to interrogate our motives and actions as social actors involved in work to empower others. This process opens us up to scrutiny and exposes us and our ethical position; we are open to judgement by others.

On a daily basis, we are faced with professional and personal ethics, and ethics of others which may not coincide. These may not be - at the community level of international development - the same as the ethics and values of an INGO headquarters, and may for example involve local solutions to inclusivity, or to gender issues (Abu-Lughood, 2002, see also example below). Ting-Toomey's (1999) derived ethical position offers opportunities which interrogate the power relationships and require us as individuals to adopt an explicit (political) position considering questions such as:

1. Who or which group perpetuates this practice in this culture?
2. Who or which group resists this practice and with what reasons?
3. Who is benefiting? Who is suffering (voluntarily or involuntarily)?
4. Should I condemn, go along with it, reject the practice, withdraw from the cultural scene, or act as a change agent?

(adapted from Ting-Toomey 1999, 274).

We have not found that codes of practice in relation to translation and interpreting go as far as positioning the translator/interpreter as social action-taker, given that faithfulness to text (written or spoken) is a strong part of the translator's role. For example, one of the ethical values stated in article 4.1 of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting, (2016, p. 4) states: 'Members are required to convey the meaning between people and cultures faithfully, accurately, and impartially.'

Given our commitment to the complexity of translation studies as discussed above, it is clear we need more than this.

Dreaming of being an agent of change while matching and marrying needs in a community development project – example from Sarah

In early 1993 I was a project manager of a rural development project, in a remote part of Nampula province (Mozambique) that had been isolated during the civil war. The community were mainly Makhua speaking with a local dialect. Male leaders often had some Portuguese, as prior to the war they had either attended Portuguese schools or worked in Portuguese businesses.

As a project manager of a 'participatory' community development project, managing and adhering to the value of being community-led is challenging within the NGO hierarchy, if not impossible when seeking external funds from donors. An initial period of 2 months was dedicated to participatory community consultation, involving creating space for dialogue to explore needs and solutions as expressed by the community. The wide range of needs expressed by the community included health, water and education services, livelihood and economic development to reduce hunger and vulnerability. Following the consultation, a

detailed project plan and funding proposal were developed with an underlying emphasis on a community development methodology that aimed to meet the community's needs as well as increasing organisational skills, social capital, empowerment and ownership.

Initially project work was funded directly by the INGO, as the scope and method of the project was considered ‘hard to fund’ by donors. The approach of being led by community ideas was not, at this time, a cultural fit with bilateral funders. In an effort to be sincere in the project’s offer of being responsive to the community it became necessary to match (and to some extent narrow) community priorities with the types of action that the INGO was familiar and what might be fundable by donors. One area of overlapping interest was support to educational infrastructures to replace classrooms made of local materials that didn’t provide sufficient shelter for the pupils. In the spirit of community participation, building organisational skills and ownership during several project /community meetings it was established that the community would contribute their labour, while the project would provide materials and food. This ‘agreement’ was in line with the project methodology and may not have been fully understood by the community members. Over time the burden of work became a point of contention between the project and the community. In this context, time was spent reminding people about the values and intentions underpinning community contributions as a basis for ownership and participation as defined by the project. What was seemingly part of the project /community deal at the outset, became unacceptable several months into the build. It can be argued that the concepts and values underpinning the ideas of community ownership and contribution had not been effectively translated or discussed with the community. The agreement between the project and community was written in

Portuguese. The project's offer that we would listen to community needs and respond appropriately meant that a solution had to be found if our reputation as honest brokers and facilitators was not to be undermined.

As the first community build initiative, no one fully knew the demands that such a build would place on the community. In a similar project in the urban areas the community had gone on strike 6 months after the building work began. The rural project team was aware of this risk and didn't want the same to happen. There was a sense of urgency and several meetings were held between community representatives and project staff in Portuguese. Eventually it was agreed the project would pay 'masons' providing semi-skilled and skilled labour, In the meantime women who mainly collected water for mixing cement would not be paid as it was 'unskilled'. This was a divisive process. Although a space was created for dialogue, as the project manager and budget holder was not fluent in the local language and needed to be involved in the discussion because of budget implications, Portuguese was used in what became an "exclusive" process. From a gender perspective the outcome was very unsatisfactory - but not one the male community leaders were conscious of.

On reflection the project should have involved a broader group from the community build team and organised the space for dialogue with separate groups with different languages to allow greater inclusion of non-Portuguese speakers. This would have allowed a wider conversation about the need to adapt the project approach as well as building confidence that the project was willing to listen to the whole community more than being led by the leaders, even if the 'solution' may have been the same. A solution was found locally, albeit one that played into the

hands of the more powerful community members. Language and translation were not the only factors influencing the process; existing inequalities played a part, however the chance to include more people through dialogue in the local language was missed.

I was never sure of the extent to which the community understood our intentions and approach. I would further argue that even when listening happens and ideas are shared, a commitment to ethical practice of participation is too easily derailed by the need to get things done as well as respond to those higher up the NGO hierarchy. The communication of ideas from below sometimes met deaf ears.

If projects are to be driven by local priorities and needs, funding criteria need to be more open and flexible. Otherwise as illustrated in this examples there is no space for individual agency of the project manager and budget holder to adopt community perspectives and thus work towards a downward accountability.

This 1990's experience of the role of project managers as cultural mediators, of needs expressed by communities, with the parameters set by donors is not outdated. A study by Crack (2019) found that NGOs' careful curation of proposals to meet funding criteria can negatively affect their ability to listen to the needs of the communities in which they work. Tesseur's (2019) study of capacity building projects in Kyrgyzstan argues that translation is a blind spot in project planning, and as a consequence, southern NGOs (SNGOs) do not feel they can include the costs of translation in their proposals. Donors tend to assume that NGOs address translation costs without explicitly providing a budget line. Tesseur argues that when language and translation is overlooked, this reduces the ownership of projects by SNGOs and

undermines local capacity development and the ideas of equitable relationships with international development partners and donors.

Overlooking the role of languages and the importance of translation may also lead to reduced opportunities for SNGOs to develop. Crack (ibid.) recommends making space for translation in project budgets, working with local interpreters to share information, and translating successful projects into local languages.

Becoming an agent of change

Three years into the rural project, it was clear that through certain livelihood activities, different self-managing groups had accrued some savings. The project did not have the resources and capacity to manage a savings and loans scheme nor was it a strength in the INGO. In this context, some community leaders began to lobby for a distribution of funds. As project manager I agreed to negotiate with a national, Makhua-speaking, savings and loan organisation to work directly with the community. This is an example of how a project manager can use their agency and influence to 'live' the values of listening to a community and seek alternatives to ensure there is sincerity in the offer of community driven development.

We have suggested above that there is a need for greater intercultural awareness amongst translators and an understanding of process-orientations which could require a change in the way subjects are taught. It may also be relevant to argue for a systematic change in the way INGOs and donors work. In my experience in programme advisory roles in different INGOs, changes agreed at the centre or head office demanded significant 'translation' in language and culture. An example is the drive for gender mainstreaming, as a means to address gender inequality. Wallace

(2007) notes that in the process of translating ideas from the centre to the project frontline there is a strong tendency to count what can be counted (such as workshop attendance numbers) using prescribed management tools, rather than explore changing power relationships.

For staff at country and project level it felt like being on a treadmill of explanatory workshops, some of whom would be tasked with explaining to communities in a third language to the community. One example is the development of in –country workshops which were run by NGOs on rights-based approaches; these involved trying to empower communities to use the approach of – in this case- educational rights to hold local governments to account and provide school books. What happened in this instance was that after undergoing the training, the community participants used the rights-based approach to demand school books from the NGO project manager- seeing this as a less risky course of action than actually taking the challenge to the local authority. This course of action did not change power relationships in the short-term, but it is hard to know the possible longer term influence of the workshops. As Wallace (2007, p 128) says:

> A different way of potentially opening up new spaces and ways of working even within the narrow confines of existing procedures, is to work with a clear recognition of where power lies and actively address power imbalances.

The examples above suggest that more listening and feedback loops from the local actors, community and frontline staff which penetrate the INGO hierarchies may be more effective at introducing change. Greater use of these could open a space for dialogue between frontline staff and project users to make adjustments along the

way. While this adaptive management is a first step, the space for dialogue between the frontline staff, HQ and rigidity of donor contracts means that these adaptations are likely to be small but not unimportant. By opening space, a new type of conversation can take place and this is not only relevant to the international development sector as illustrated in a recent example from a UK council worker. She explained how in the process of clearing space for an urban community garden, an elderly Chinese resident extended his own garden into the shared community space and began planting in his new patch. This annoyed the other (English) community gardeners. With no budget for translation services, the community worker contacted a Chinese speaker to assist. The crux of the matter was that the Chinese resident did not understand the concept of a UK community garden. Without this intervention, there would have been a risk of conflict and division along language/culture lines in the community. This example reminds us that it can be easy to 'exoticise' the issues discussed above as pertaining only to international development work; opportunities exist everywhere in our everyday lives; the levels of complexity, precariousness, power differentials, inequalities and the consequences of assuming shared understandings without opening up spaces for scrutiny or discussion may be more serious in the international development contexts.

Opening up spaces

The 2019 symposium of the UN and Language group concluded that the work of scholars and practitioners in relation to multilingualism in the development sector is not complete. The main themes of the symposium were listening, talking and taking

action in a multilingual world**.** Reaching the goals of equal participation and representation will not be achieved without the promotion of linguistic diversity. The meeting reiterated the need to be open to listening and action including all stakeholders in an atmosphere of equality. Increasing a sense of agency in development workers and listening to the views of communities and intermediaries requires a rebalancing of power dynamics within INGOs and donors and between staff and the communities.

The creation of joint - and shared- perspectives among project stakeholders, according to Lewis et al. (2003), contributes to successful international development projects. It is essential to build what we see as complex responses to complex contexts involving complex language and culture scenarios and find ways and time to consider multiple perspectives.[9] As Marais (2014) notes: 'The lack of translated development documentation creates the illusion that "his master" speaks with one voice" ' (p.167)

In the long chain of development from donors/INGOS to national regional/local offices, to project beneficiaries and vice-versa, it is inevitable that joint understandings will be multi-perspective and hard to achieve. Focusing on outcomes at the expense of the process of meaning-making and building shared understandings (which may well be shared understandings of different understandings) may well jeopardise opportunities for success, as Lewis et al. (2003) believe. Pressure from donors on NGOs has intensified in recent years.

[9] It is interesting to note, however, that Lewis et al. (2003) make no reference to multilingual perspectives when discussing shared perspectives, even when discussing the role of culture in building shared perspectives.

Rhetoric has traditionally referred to 'accountability to the poor' but in reality, the needs of *next level up* in accountability are prioritised over needs of other stakeholders. There is now some recognition, however, of the need to address this and the time is right to open up spaces both up and down the aid chain as well as across language speakers and diverse groups. These spaces remain under-interrogated, however. Spaces at the bottom end of the aid chain involve communication which is often multi-layered and multilingual, translation is often ad-hoc, unprepared, messy and informal. Power relationships, once made visible and put into the public space, can be more easily interrogated, resisted, or contested.

Openly making one's values known to others so that people can understand the contexts of your position is also an ethical position, and can contribute to the equalising of power relations, as can be seen from some of the examples offered here. Marais (2014) notes that in the development context of South Africa: 'locality or space has become one of the defining factors in conceptualising translation' (p.4).

We recognise that our perspective is constrained by the fact that we are authors writing from a privileged position within the parameters of white Western academic traditions; we are conscious of the fact that we too are interpreting others' perspectives in this article, others who do not currently have a voice for the readers of this article. This article does not so much offer solutions to the complexities we have identified; more, it is an attempt to address Wallace's (2006) challenge of addressing power imbalances and move towards spaces for shared understanding and interrogation.

We have examined how the varied and frequently informal situations and locations in which translation activity and communication between cultures take place have led to a new focus on different types of space in relation to the theme of cultures in translation. We have aimed to demonstrate the need to embrace complexity and to move away from binary and essentialist categories in both translation studies and intercultural communication. We have noted that this move is necessary to accommodate local people and NGO staff to the fluidity of the spaces for intercultural communication in what we have termed 'the messy intercultural spaces of contact zones' (Hamaidia et al., 2018 p.119). The need for systemic change has been recognised and there are signs of these changes taking place. As individuals taking social action, we can open possibilities for futures which can only be built collectively through shared understanding and meaning-making.

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