Symposium on

**Language and the Sustainable Development Goals**

New York, 21-22 April 2016

**CONCLUSIONS**

The Study Group on Language and the United Nations, an independent group of scholars and practitioners on matters related to language, convened a symposium on Language and the Sustainable Development Goals at the Church Center for the United Nations, 777 United Nations Plaza, New York, on 21 and 22 April 2016. Its goal was to examine the importance of issues of language in the formulation, implementation, and successful completion of the Goals. The following document reflects some general conclusions of the symposium.

**Overview**

On 25 September 2015, world leaders adopted a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to address the root causes of poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation. Growing interest in the SDGs has bolstered their global visibility, but the targets and implementation strategies of many Goals remain unclear. Without greater clarity the global partnerships envisioned in Goal 17 and fundamental to the achievement of the SDGs cannot succeed. These partnerships require fair and multidirectional communication, which must inherently involve language. In fact, all of the SDGs interface with language, either as a substantive element of the goal itself (language as a goal) or as a means of communication, dialogue, response, and implementation (language as a tool).

The dominance of certain languages, particularly English, in international development discourse creates the illusion of a unified global effort. In fact, this dominance has widened the gulf between the Anglophone elites who research, discuss, and write policies, and the billions called on to implement these policies at the individual level. Dialogue tends to go in one direction: from the planners to the planned. Often, language prevents dialogue in a spirit of reciprocity and equality between planners and people. This Symposium on Language and the SDGs sought to draw attention to this gap.

The following conclusions, representing a broad consensus of the over 100 attendees – diplomats, United Nations staff, academics and practitioners – stress *the urgent need to include language at the planning, implementation, and assessment stages of each of the SDGs.*

**A. Language as a goal**

***1. Language rights - Rights to education***

The centrality of education to the successful implementation of all SDGs is emphasized in Goal 4 (Ensure inclusive and quality education for all), yet neither the Goal nor its targets may be said to address the role of language in providing inclusive education. Specifically, if the languages pupils speak and understand well are not used as languages of instruction, they are not being given access to the curriculum, nor to quality teaching and learning opportunities. *Linguistically-aware educational policies*, for example high-quality mother-tongue-based, multilingual education, must be adopted if Goal 4 is to be successfully implemented and assessed. Only then can equitable education form the foundation for the implementation of all the other SDGs.

***2. Language issues in displaced populations***

The migration of minors with interrupted formal education has reached crisis proportions in many areas of the world. This increase must be a central concern for any global sustainable development strategy since it lies at the intersection of migration, education, language policy, youth development, and inequality. Yet many policy makers continue their work under the assumption that disruptions to formal education, be they temporal, locational, or linguistic, are mere exceptions to the norm. Given the global flow of migrants and refugees, only a systematic and overarching re-analysis of educational policies, *including language policies*, will allow education systems to serve displaced students appropriately and facilitate their eventual productive reintegration into society.

***3. Language issues and ideologies - A social problem***

Languages are bound up with issues of ideology and identity: they are not neutral. Incorporating language into the planning, implementation, and assessment stages of the SDGs requires acknowledging that language issues are inseparable from social ideologies and power. *Top-down language policies frequently fail to engage individual members of society*, whose grass-roots motivations and thought-processes will ultimately determine the outcome of policy implementation. Even well-researched and well-intentioned policies, such as mother-tongue-based, multilingual education, can suffer from social prejudice and misperception, for example if communities, rightly or wrongly, equate particular mother-tongue education policies with the provision of sub-standard or marginalizing education. A social change, not only a policy change, may be required before policymakers and individuals become allies in achieving the SDGs.

**B. Language as a tool**

***4. Language at the institutional level - At the UN and beyond***

Taking advantage of lingua francas and selective multilingual policies, institutions have achieved global levels of cooperation in research and policy making. However, this is often at the cost of marginalizing key stakeholders. Any gains also obscure the reality of global multilingualism - the day-to-day experience of those at the grassroots level. *Engagement and authentic dialogue require acknowledgment of language diversity.* Language cannot be a policy addendum addressed only during implementation stages: it must be an integral part of initial research and policy planning. The UN’s institutional policies and rules regarding multilingualism demonstrate an explicit commitment to multilingual practice, recognizing language as a core value and as fundamental to its work. Yet these policies have been difficult to operationalize or enforce. The UN must reflect further on how best to convey the SDGs in languages and via media that can reach a global population and elicit a constructive response.

***5. Language rights: The legal system***

Legal systems which oblige individuals to interact with police, courts, and prison systems through a majority or government language infringe on the very rights the SDGs aim to enforce. Goal 16 (Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies) implies that sustainable development must incorporate the protection and enforcement of individuals’ fundamental rights – rights guaranteed to individuals under Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights *regardless of what languages they speak*. Therefore, language services, such as accredited translators and interpreters, must be offered so that the burden of accurate, unbiased, and contextually appropriate communication is not placed on already disenfranchised speakers of minority and foreign languages.