

## AUSTRALASIAN AID CONFERENCE

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### Panel session:

### Language matters in aid effectiveness

#### Convenor: Dr Hilary Smith

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#### Overview

The importance of language is so fundamental that it is often unproblematised and overlooked in the design of aid projects. Without consideration of the multifaceted ways in which language and literacy function in different communities, especially those with high levels of autochthonous multilingualism, the effectiveness of project outcomes may be affected.

The use of language is particularly complex in locations with high ethnolinguistic diversity, since this tends to occur in certain geographical regions with topographic heterogeneity, and in countries with rapidly growing populations and low economic growth (Casey & Owen, 2014). Although the causal relationships among these social and physical geographical variables are disputed, their patterns of co-occurrence highlight the challenges resulting from language issues in development endeavours (Smith & Haslett, 2016). The Australasian region includes some of the most linguistically diverse areas of the world, e.g. the Pacific Islands region has 0.1% of the global population but one third of the world's languages (Haberkorn, 2008, 98). These high levels of multilingualism, formalised in the relationships between official, national, and vernacular languages, frequently cause vigorously contested language policies and practices.

In this panel we show that while language per se may not have been identified as a focus of project design, addressing language issues was critical for the successful outcome of programmes in the diverse fields of poverty analysis and food security, women's farming, women's leadership, and quality education. We argue that the importance of language issues means that they should be explicitly considered in the design of all development aid projects. This reflects the conclusions from the Study Group on Language and the United Nations' consideration of language and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which stressed "the urgent need to include language at the planning, implementation, and assessment stages of each of the SDGs" (Language and the UN, 2016).

Casey, G. P., and A. L. Owen. 2014. 'Inequality and fractionalisation.' *World Development* 56: 32-50.

Haberkorn, G. 2008. 'Pacific Islands' population and development: Facts, fictions, and follies'. *New Zealand Population Review* 33/34: 95-127.

Smith, H. A., & Haslett, S. J. 2016. 'Design and implementation issues in surveying the views of young children in ethnolinguistically diverse developing country contexts.' *International Journal of Research and Method in Education* 39(1), 131-150.

Language and the UN. 2016. 'Conclusions'. *Symposium on Language and the Sustainable Development Goals*, 21-22 April 2016. [www.languageandtheun.org](http://www.languageandtheun.org)

## **Abstracts**

### **Prof Stephen Haslett**

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### ***Language matters in accurate measurement of the Sustainable Development Goals***

Monitoring and evaluation, progress reports, assessment of benchmarks and milestones, and official statistics underlie and are integral to the SDGs. They provide required measures of progress, often represented through numerical summaries. The substantive aspects of such measurements may seem purely quantitative, but the qualitative/quantitative divide can be an artificial one.

Rather than considering the underlying statistical modelling, this paper will explore the crucial role of language in even highly technical statistical research such as fine-level food security and child undernutrition assessments and poverty mapping in aid projects undertaken for the UN World Food Programme in Cambodia, Nepal and Bangladesh. The focus will be on equivalence of meaning, a core issue which goes beyond choice of language (Khmer, Nepali, Bangla, etc.) and translation of terms from or into English in the various survey and census instruments. Equivalence of meaning extends further to the way local knowledge, encapsulated in local languages, is captured and represented in the various survey instruments and field manuals used for data gathering in multilingual communities. The human and financial resources needed for language-related tasks must be taken into account in the planning, implementation and analysis of such development aid projects, if maximum accuracy is to be achieved in collecting the measurements necessary to support effective interventions.

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### ***Building gender equity through linguistically and culturally relevant capacity building programmes***

Utilising culturally, linguistically relevant and place-based materials and knowledge in capacity development projects significantly contributes to women's empowerment and gender equity. It improves livelihoods for women, their families and community. "Capacity development starts from the principle that people are best empowered to realize their full potential when the means of development are sustainable" (United Nations Development Programme, 2009); "simply transferring knowledge and instrumentation is not enough to help developing countries build" (Harris, 2004) capacity but doing so in a linguistically and culturally relevant manner significantly contributes to such empowerment.

Capacity development programmes that utilise the participants' mother tongue are more likely to be effective than those utilising a world language (e.g. English) or the relevant country's dominant language. This is particularly important for empowering women in rural and regional

areas of developing countries, as they are more likely to speak a local language as a mother tongue rather than a world or the country's dominant language. Women learn best in a language that they can fully understand and engage in. Using culturally and linguistically appropriate capacity building strategies allow women to fully engage in their learning, and such strategies have been shown to enhance the leadership capacity of women. Yet capacity development programmes are generally designed by and conducted in a world language or a dominant language. Whilst outlining "the urgent need to include [local] language at the planning, implementation, and assessment stages of each of the SDGs" (Language and the UN, 2016) this presentation will explore the pros and cons of using culturally and linguistically relevant materials and knowledge in gender capacity building projects conducted in rural and remote communities across three countries, Australia, Papua New Guinea and Timor Leste.

Harris, E. (2004). *Building scientific capacity in developing countries*. EMBO Reports, 5(1), 7-11.  
<http://doi.org/10.1038/sj.embor.7400058>

United Nations Development Programme. (2009). *Capacity Development: A UNDP Primer*. New York, USA.

Language and the UN. 2016. 'Conclusions'. *Symposium on Language and the Sustainable Development Goals*, 21-22 April 2016. [www.languageandtheun.org](http://www.languageandtheun.org)

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### ***Bilingual language resources to increase agricultural learning in Papua New Guinea***

Culturally relevant materials validate the users' identities, cultures, and languages. Materials that are both culturally and personally relevant are even more powerful.

As part of our Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research funded project to improve women smallholders livelihoods in Papua New Guinea we developed a series of culturally relevant, dual language resources to disseminate agricultural and livelihood practices to women farmers with low literacy and primary school teachers. We produced three place-based, bilingual language picture books on going to market, saving and budgeting income and raising chickens, as well as three bilingual language videos on how make soap, sweet potato bread and peanut butter. The books and videos were developed in collaboration with women. Both the books and the videos show life in subsistence farming villages in Papua New Guinea. The two languages used were Tok Pisin and English. Bilingual materials help the users develop literacy skills in both languages and value both the home and official language. The books have been used in six communities across three provinces. They were given to village community educators, families and schools. The books have been overwhelming successful with all audiences who appreciate seeing themselves and their lives in print. The two languages help them code-switch between Tok Pisin and English and increases their vocabulary in both languages. To date the videos have only been used with 160 primary school teachers to assist them in teaching agricultural and livelihood practices in school. Early evaluations show that teachers are using the learning from the videos both in their classrooms and their own home villages. Given the successful uptake of the materials we recommend that future aid projects

include resources that are culturally and linguistically relevant validate, engage and enhance audience learnings.

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***Language as a children's right in quality education: Evidence from Vanuatu, Kiribati and Solomon Islands***

Decisions about language-in-education policy tend to be highly controversial. The debates are often not well informed by the strong international research evidence which shows that high quality mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) results in improvements in all subject areas, including in an 'international' language such as English or French. A MTB-MLE approach also results in social and cultural strength, and allows the inclusion of marginalized children. For this reason, Pacific countries are developing MTB-MLE policies. However, tensions remain in communities who recall the colonial educational system which focused on developing an elite who spoke the colonial language, political and educational leaders who were successful in that system, and international donors influenced by monolingual approaches to literacy. This can hamper the effectiveness of aid projects to support quality education (SDG 4).

In this paper I outline some of the issues occurring in Pacific countries, informed by data from a UNCEF Pacific research project which investigated quality education for Years 1-6 in Vanuatu, Kiribati and Solomon Islands. I suggest that a children's rights approach, based on the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), provides a new lens with which to view MTB-MLE as a central issue for quality education. The CRC came into effect in 1990 and has been ratified by all independent Pacific states, and is increasingly well-known in Pacific communities. While itself controversial in its challenges to traditional notions of children's roles, the CRC provides a context for engaging with community members so that MTB-MLE becomes integral to the equitable quality education underpinning the SDGs.