

Framing the Debate: Language, inclusion and the Sustainable Development Goals

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Introduction

Inclusive language policy and practice play a critical role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and, in particular, SDG 4 Quality education, SDG 5 Gender equality, SDG 10 Reducing socio-economic inequality, and SDG 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions. Writing as a practitioner rather than an academic, I focus on how two very different language programmes contribute to achieving the 2030 Agenda. Ceibal en Inglés is a primary English programme, which raises the quality of education (SDG 4) and reduces socio-economic disparity (SDG 10) in Uruguay. Reducing Language Barriers is a civil service Tamil for Social Cohesion programme, which promotes gender equality (SDG 5) and post-war reconciliation (SDG16) in Sri Lanka. Together they illustrate the level of detail needed to develop successful language for inclusion programmes if governments, donors, education institutions and change managers are to move beyond advocacy and bring language inclusion from the policy to the public. I then look at some of the main challenges to achieving language inclusion through the SDGs: language blindness, the lack of financial flows to local level, and unrealistic time and budget constraints for effective reform. In the last section,

I explore three strategies for addressing these challenges at scale: holding governments accountable to their 2030 Agenda commitments; developing multilingual teacher training institutions; and strengthening social cohesion through the delivery as well as the design of inclusive language programmes.



SDG 4: Education quality, language and inclusion

SDG4 promotes equitable, quality education and lifelong learning. If the language of instruction in primary education is not the learners' home language their literacy and numeracy suffers. If the transition to another language in upper primary, secondary or tertiary is poorly managed,

dropout rates increase dramatically. Language barriers prevent students from developing their personal aspirations, creative and critical thinking. Their voices are silenced and they are prevented from participating in decisions that affect their wellbeing.

SDG 10: Employment opportunities, language and inclusion

Closely related to SDG4, SDG 10 promotes social, economic and political equality with an emphasis on income and economic parity at sub-national level. The lack of quality mother tongue-based early education, and poorly managed transitions to national or international languages beyond Grade 4 also reduce the possibility of formal employment. Income disparities are compounded in a downward

spiral by pre-service teacher education and vocational training institutions, which overwhelmingly depend on curricula, instruction and on-the-job practice in national languages. Graduates flock to employment hubs where the language of their vocational training is the norm, further depleting opportunities in the local language areas they have come from.



Working on SDGs 4 and 10: an example from Uruguay

Mother tongue-based multilingual approaches to education have been the focus of the language and inclusion debate in the Language and Development Conference Series and the Asia-Pacific Multilingual Education Working Group for several years and are the subject of several of the papers in this collection. However, in the remaining 40% of the world that is monolingual, language education can also play a vital role in enhancing inclusive, quality education. Ceibal en Inglés, a blended English language programme for more than 80,000 Spanish-speaking primary school children in Uruguay is one such example. Ceibal en Inglés is a component of Plan CEIBAL (Educational Connectivity in Basic Computing for Online Learning), which has made Uruguay one of the very few countries in the world to sustain the One Laptop per Child global initiative and use digital learning in primary and secondary schools to promote educational, technological and social equality (UNESCO, 2011). Indeed, in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, Uruguay has shown extraordinary foresight in doing so.

The National Education Plan 2010–30 (UNESCO, 2014) commits Uruguay to SDG 4 – accessible, inclusive, quality education for all – by providing universal early education, expanding school hours to a full-day timetable, improving transitions from primary to secondary and reducing dropout and repetition. It also commits Uruguay to SDG 10 by ensuring socio-economic parity across the country (with national assessments to identify and plan for regional and socio-economic disparities), equal opportunities for children with special needs through inclusive pedagogy and adequately resourced learning environments, and relevant and measurable knowledge and skills for digital literacy, digital learning, life skills and employability.

As part of this approach to achieve SDGs 4 and 10, a presidential decree gives every 4th to 6th grader in Uruguay the right to learn English. Unfortunately, only 28 per cent of Uruguayan state primary schools have a qualified teacher who can teach the children English face to face. Supported by the British Council in its design, implementation, quality assurance and scaling up, the Ceibal en Inglés programme provides English classes to the other 72 per cent of schools, with additional support for schools in deprived urban and remote rural areas. Qualified teachers from other parts of Uruguay, Argentina and even as far afield as the Philippines deliver the English classes online through the government's digital learning platform. They also mentor the children's home teacher to deliver follow-up lessons (Stanley, 2019).

The classes are participatory, task based and learner centred in a way that many COVID-affected school Zoom classes can learn from. Remote teachers are trained to use the camera to monitor pair work and group work by panning around the group and zooming in on learners. Class material and homework is uploaded on the digital platform, enabling a range of individual and shared screen possibilities for written work and differentiated learning.

The technology is utilised in a similar way for quality assurance. A third video conferencing location can be added, enabling a remote quality manager or peer observation group to monitor both the remote teacher in Argentina, for example, and the class being taught in Uruguay. This has helped establish continuing professional development, a community of practice among teachers, coordinators and school managers, and a culture of transparency and accountability.

Children with special needs are supported by the adaptive digital learning environment. For children with dyslexia, the online materials are enhanced with the Dyslexie font, dyslexia supportive background colours, reduced amounts of clearly segmented text, and more visuals. For children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or behavioural problems, the remote teacher works with the classroom teacher to introduce a buddy system, 'badges' for good behaviour, and icons to replace written instructions to visually trigger 'known routines'. For children with different types of sensory impairment, special laptops are issued, and, through the digital platform, fine details in visuals are reduced, visuals are given oral descriptions, and audio inputs are given supplementary text (Rovegno, 2019).

Classroom teachers, students and communities refer to the Ceibal en Inglés as opening a 'window on the world'. Classroom teachers connect to other teachers in different parts of Uruguay and in different countries. Parents learn along with their children when they connect to the school server from home: together they may take a virtual stroll through the Smithsonian Museum while learning prepositions of place, for example.

As well as a sense of the wider world, students are exposed to different approaches to teaching and learning. They see their classroom teachers as participants and facilitators when the remote teacher teaches. Their classroom teacher is not centre stage, but a helper and a co-learner, taking notes and asking questions alongside them in class. This new role is empowering in many ways. It showcases models of learner-centred classes, the teacher as friend and helper, and the importance of lifelong learning. This more inclusive, less authoritarian approach has empowered a whole generation of teachers and learners. Ceibal en Inglés has had horizontal spread, changing the way other aspects of the national curriculum are taught, including

mother-tongue literacy (in Spanish), Geography and Maths, with more songs, games, visuals and using other aspects of technology, as well as more lesson planning, scaffolding and recycling (Stanley, 2019).

Results from an adaptive English test developed by the British Council and validated by the University of Bedfordshire's Centre for Research in English Language Learning (CRELLA) showed there was no real difference in achievement between students who had studied face to face and those who had done the Ceibal en Inglés blended course. In fact, with one year less input, the Ceibal en Inglés children did marginally better (Marconi and Brovotto, 2019). The gap between results for socially advantaged children in the top quintile and socially disadvantaged children in the bottom quintile was not significant. This meant that Ceibal en Inglés had created equal access to English for two-thirds of primary students in Uruguay and equity for those who came from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. The results not only record social inclusion through student achievement; they enable planners to manage English language learning at primary and its transition into secondary, while contributing reliable data for ongoing inclusive language policy and quality assurance.

SDG 5: Gender equality, language and inclusion

SDG 5 promotes gender equality and empowering women and girls. Gender discrimination in the home and community includes boy-preference for education, period poverty, early marriage and teenage pregnancy. These factors often intersect with school-related, gender-based violence and the lack of role models for girls in leadership positions and

in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects. Speaking a different language from the medium of instruction in school can add to this cumulative burden of gender discrimination and gender-based violence, making many geographically displaced girl learners doubly vulnerable to exclusion and dropout.

SDG 16: Good governance, language and inclusion

Closely related to SDG 5, SDG 16 promotes just and peaceful societies where good governance ensures institutions do not discriminate against age, gender, race, religion, disability, and economic or social status. In language inclusions terms, this means government services must be offered in the language of the citizen's choice. In many countries, majority-language hegemony creates barriers in accessing public services.

Citizens who speak local languages are excluded from equal documentation, land rights, state school enrolment, medical advice and treatment, police statements, court proceedings, social service benefits, safeguarding and child protection. When language becomes a large-scale barrier to civil liberties and human rights, conflict often follows.



Working on SDGs 5 and 16: an example from Sri Lanka

Reducing Language Barriers is a component of Supporting Reconciliation Processes in Sri Lanka implemented by the British Council on behalf of the European Union and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) for the Ministry of Public Service and Local Government. In the aftermath of Sri Lanka's civil war, social inclusion and justice are yet to be realised for the losing side. Language discrimination, one of the root causes of the conflict, remains prevalent. In public consultations in bilingual areas, affected Tamil citizens reported inequalities that pre-dated the war and were exacerbated by it. They confirmed that many services were still not offered to them in Tamil even though it was their constitutional right: accessing health, education, social services and agricultural subsidies; getting family background checks for foreign employment and personal documents reissued that were lost or destroyed during the war; reporting cases to the police and pursuing justice through the court system. More than two-thirds of citizens interviewed said they had to pay for translations of public forms, struggled with wrong information on birth registration documents originally filled in Sinhala, and were not able to resolve issues with government staff because there was no common language (Croos and Kennett, 2019).

In a separate set of women-only consultations, it became evident that gender-and-language intersectional discrimination in bilingual areas added another layer of exclusion. This was especially true for older women in the Estate Sector and the war-affected Northern and Eastern Provinces. Inadequate healthcare for the elderly and the lack of government pensions for those working in informal employment, two-thirds of whom are women, help account for the fact that the highest mortality rates in these areas are for women (Department of Census and Statistics, 2019).

Poverty contributes to high levels of household debt, spouse substance abuse, dowry pressures and domestic violence. These 'push' factors mean many women from deprived areas apply for foreign employment. But this necessitates a family background check from their village head, of whom less than ten per cent are women. The same village heads wield further power over women because most applications for government services and allowances require their signature. Thirty-seven per cent of remitters are women and the migratory work they usually do is as housemaids in the Middle East (ADB, 2015). Foreign employment for mothers can create child protection issues for the young children they leave behind, whose welfare then becomes the responsibility of the child protection services (Croos and Kennett, 2019).

In theory, the more women work in formal employment, the more gender equality will permeate into the traditional societies they come from. But Tamil respondents reported that women's business development and access to loans is 80 per cent transacted in Sinhala. This problem is compounded by the use of Sinhala in state and private banks. In an analysis of the intersectionality between gender and language needs, several women commented that: "If we fill the withdrawal slip in Tamil at the bank, they return it and ask us to fill it in again in Sinhala. If we can't fill it in there is a person who will help us but then we need to pay" (Croos and Kennett, 2019).

Patriarchal culture and tradition in Tamil and Muslim communities, particularly in rural and remote areas, favour boy children for education, employment, marriage and inheritance. Although equal under state law, the unrepealed 1935 Land Development Ordinance offers women differing levels of protection for inheritance because traditional land laws can still be applied (ADB, 2015). This leads women to

seek assistance from local government or the police but women 'on their own' reported facing the greatest amount of gender- and language-related discrimination. They were often ignored by public servants, especially the police, because they had neither 'the support of male relatives' nor the Sinhala language (Croos and Kennett, 2019).

Based on these findings, Reducing Language Barriers aims to build social cohesion and reconciliation through equitable delivery of government services in Tamil. Content and language integrated learning is used to promote equality, inclusion and social justice through Tamil language classes for Sinhala-speaking government servants. The programme targets frontline officers working directly with the public in Sri Lanka's bilingual areas whose Tamil is not adequate for the job: nurses, midwives, school principals, child protection and social service officers, and staff from the Divisional Secretariats, local government and the police. Through the teaching and learning of core Tamil language systems and skills at elementary to pre-intermediate level, a new textbook, Practical Tamil for Public Servants, focuses on the language functions of responsive governance. Participants learn Tamil for equitable government service delivery regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, disability, social, geographic or economic status. Lessons cover public documentation and information dissemination for safeguarding children, special needs, social service allowances and environmental protection. Other lessons cover the role of the police and citizens' language rights (Knight and Priangani, 2021).

Like the Uruguay Ceibal en Inglés programme, Reducing Language Barriers promotes inclusion with loop input: classroom processes and methodology mirror social inclusion messages in the materials. Government servants are selected through placement testing in a transparent way and are grouped according to ability not staff grade or status. This is a first for Tamil language teaching and learning in Sri Lanka. In this fresh setting, removed from the bias and hierarchy of institutional culture, participants learn to cooperate in groups on an equal, inclusive basis with new colleagues from different departments and organisations. During the course they create

informal networks that begin to break down long-established work silos. These networks help them to link up service delivery across departments within a bilingual division in order to better serve the Tamil-speaking public.

In addition, the task-based nature of the Practical Tamil for Public Servants materials helps participants apply critical thinking and creative problem solving to issues they confront on a daily basis. The multilingual classroom approach encourages them to use Tamil when they can, and Sinhala when the discussion becomes more linguistically challenging, to analyse root causes and brainstorm solutions for key inequalities: supporting women head of households dealing with land rights or police statements in a monolingual judiciary, collaborating across several government services to stop early marriage and child labour, safeguarding women in foreign employment, and so on.

Dropout rates on the programme are low and participants remain motivated in a way that goes beyond the government's incentive payment if they pass their language exam at the end of the programme. Their enthusiasm to learn Tamil contradicts commonly held wisdom that Tamil is difficult for Sinhalese speakers to learn, or that longstanding language prejudice against Tamil holds them back. No longer bored or discouraged by the traditional way Tamil was taught before, participants report in end-of-course evaluations that it is the content relevant course material and the learner-centred methodology that engages them and builds their confidence.

From the policy to the public

Reducing Language Barriers and Ceibal en Inglés illustrate the role language and inclusion play in achieving the SDGs. The two programmes are written up in detail because only when the language and inclusion debate moves from the general to the specific can it move to action. They illustrate two ends of the spectrum in second language teaching and learning: primary Grade 4 to 6 English and professional Tamil for special purposes. They also illustrate two ends of the resource spectrum. Primary English is a worldwide business, honed by high demand, international standards and a wealth of resources and expertise in international publishing houses, exam boards and institutions such as the British Council. Tamil for inclusive governance, gender equality and social cohesion has never been attempted before in a language programme.

Sri Lankan Tamil grammars are outdated, textbooks are behaviourist, random-context, gender-discriminating, grammar-translation anachronisms. No digital corpus, functional grammars, high-frequency word lists or sociolinguistic approaches to curriculum development exist. No comparable textbooks in Tamil, or indeed in other languages, were available to draw on, even though equitable access to government services in the language of the citizens' choice is a global issue (de Varennes, 2015). This made it very hard to compile a Tamil language scope and sequence to match the good governance content of this content-and-language-integrated course. The lack of linguistic fundamentals went hand in hand with a dearth of communicative, task-based, learner-centred methodology. It is hard to develop a competent materials development team if they have no real experience of communicative methodology for language

teaching. At the same time, it is very difficult to provide methodology training to such a team if there is no communicative, learner-centred textbook for them to practise with. This vicious cycle can push local language textbook writers to fall back on translating national or international language textbooks, with all the problems inherent in that approach.

The list of obstacles Reducing Language Barriers faced when developing Practical Tamil for Public Servants is the list of obstacles any education programme will face when the language of instruction has not been formally documented, developed or updated for language teaching and learning. Overcoming such obstacles is at the heart of moving the language inclusion agenda in the mother tongue-based multilingual education debate from the policy to the public.



Challenges to achieving inclusive language approaches through the SDGs

Looking at the bigger picture, policymakers and programme implementers face several development challenges when they engage in the issues Ceibal en Inglés and Reducing Language Barriers are working to address.

Language blindness has hampered comprehensive data collection, root cause analysis, and 'intersectionality' where language combines with disability, displacement, gender, and/or economic status to increase vulnerability and exclusion. The United Nations-mandated approach to international agreements, negotiating with the central governments of member states to set international targets and national indicators for the SDGs, is nonetheless partly to blame for the marked lack of local language inclusion in the 2030 Agenda.

The neglect of local languages goes hand in hand with the problems sub-national governments face in localising the SDGs. Bilateral financial flows by their very nature move from central government to central government. International and bilateral memoranda of understanding leave it to the discretion of central ministries of finance to send money down the line for local initiatives. Yet decentralisation and localising the SDGs is crucial to the inclusion of local languages in the development agenda. Without a proper understanding of how financial flows for language and development work, language inclusion advocates are not doing their job.

Few examples of direct funding to the local level exist. German development cooperation funding for the Performance Improvement Project (at that time, through Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit GmbH) was paid directly to the North East Provincial Council of Sri Lanka, a sub-national governance structure, from 2003 to 2006. The money was used to

strengthen decentralisation and good governance, mainly through a wide-reaching language for conflict resolution programme (Kennett, 2011). However, after the breakdown of the ceasefire agreement and the bifurcation of the two provincial councils, all subsequent funding agreements were clawed back by Sri Lanka's central government. In 2008, Dakar City in Senegal tried to circumvent central government and raise funds at the local level. With the support of the Gates Foundation, Dakar became the first municipality in West Africa to attempt to use a bond borrowing system to fund its own development projects. The process of securing the bond took four years. A day before the bond was launched, the central government stopped the whole process, claiming there was too much collateral risk. In fact, the bond was very secure with a reserve fund in Commercial Bank and a USAID guarantee. The real reason for the central government to halt the process was political (Khady Dia Sarr, 2019.)

In addition, donors and host governments show a fundamental lack of understanding of the scale of investment, for both time and money, required by language policy reform. To develop a textbook for one subject at one-year grade or level for approximately 120 hours of study takes approximately 18 months, if materials development training, piloting and revisions are taken seriously. Multiply that by six grades of primary for both literacy and numeracy, or six grades of secondary and, for example, for four key subjects, and you begin to see the scale of the reform and the time and resources required. International donors are either entirely cynical or entirely naïve when they design three-year projects for the same. It is worth noting that Ceibal en Inglés developed as a programme over the period of eight years. Its sustainability at

scale is due to the fact that it had international expertise from the British Council, strong financial commitment from the host government's side and, perhaps most importantly, time: time to work through

the design and the inevitable wrong turns, time to become fully inclusive. In 2020 it was awarded the British Expertise International Award for International Positive Social Impact.

Three more things for managing change

Governments cannot afford the financial burden of social, economic and political language exclusion, but combating language inertia and language discrimination requires convincing technical solutions that use equity strategies to attain language equality.

Firstly, Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) should be used to further language and inclusion policy dialogue. VNRs are the reports member states submit to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. They are the main accountability tool to measure government progress towards the SDGs. Each VNR is supposed to track progress in a transparent and inclusive way. Some member states take the process seriously, mainly when they have serious progress to report, and involve a range of stakeholder inputs in the review, including those from civil society organisations. This is a mechanism that language and inclusion advocates can use for holding governments accountable to their 2030 Agenda commitments. Civil society organisations can make direct contributions to the review, or, if they are purposefully excluded, can submit their own shadow report to the High-level Forum. Advice on how to do this can be accessed through the Transparency, Accountability and Participation (TAP) Network and their SDG Accountability Handbook (Cardinal, 2018).

Secondly, teacher training institutes should be included in the mix. Language policy advisers and implementers need to take a closer look at the institutional arrangements and language bias that underpin the status quo. Language exclusion is often embedded in the way public administration manages human resources, especially in the recruitment, deployment, transfer and promotion of teachers. Teacher training college curricula, classes and teaching practice are more often than not conducted in national rather than local languages. Graduate teachers with local languages are then not deployed, or do not want to return, to the place where their mother tongue is most needed. Often perceived as second-best universities, teacher training colleges can start behaving as such, operating a drop-in lecture culture which suits staff and timetabling at the expense of teaching and learning. Administrative convenience and compartmentalised lecturing supersede the integrated nature of pre-service language teacher education. Input-task-output connections between theory and teaching practice are neglected. The old 'do as I say, not as I do' comes easier to 'lecturers' than showcasing the sort of participatory methodology in their own delivery that trainees should be mirroring in schools. Given the negative impact of these practices, it is time SDG 4 reached the teacher training system. It is also time to address

language exclusion and lack of quality by strengthening locally based, methodologically sound, multilingual training institutions.

Thirdly, effective language teaching and learning needs to be strengthened for language as a subject in the curriculum and for language as the medium of instruction. This involves applying the highly evolved communicative, learner-centred methodology of English language teaching and content and language-integrated learning to other languages and other subjects in the curriculum. It involves harvesting the inheritance of Bloom's taxonomy of task types so that critical thinking and creative problem solving become intrinsic to language programme curriculum reform. It also involves loop input so that multilingual messages of diversity and inclusion within materials are reinforced by the participatory, inclusive way they are delivered in class.



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