

The Sustainable Development Goals: The Art of Translating Words into Change

A Position Paper of the Universal Esperanto Association

Leave no-one behind: Guaranteeing attention to vulnerable groups in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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The SDGs must embrace civil society as well as governments.

The seventeen Sustainable Development Goals recently adopted by the United Nations build on, and go beyond, the Millennium Development Goals, the focus of the UN’s development efforts in the period 2000-2015. At the time of the launch of the MDGs the representatives of the Member-States made it clear that their successful completion would depend not only on the efforts of governments but also on the efforts of those whom the governments serve – the ordinary citizens who must hold their governments accountable, and the various organizations of civil society which can both provide help in ways that governments cannot and also put pressure on governments to fulfil their commitments.

The SDGs are for everyone everywhere.

This outreach to civil society that proved increasingly necessary as the fifteen years of the MDGs proceeded was given particular emphasis in the planning and formulation of the recently announced SDGs for the period 2015-2030. Civil society, especially in the form of nongovernmental organisations, was involved from the beginning. “This 2030 agenda is for everyone everywhere,” remarked Helen Clark, Administrator of the UN Development Program and former Prime Minister of New Zealand, in a recent meeting on the SDGs. The SDGs, added Erna Solberg, Prime Minister of Norway, constitute “the largest development dialogue the world has ever seen.” “It is important to listen to the voices of the people,” remarked Phan Binh Minh, the Deputy Prime Minister of Viet-Nam, in that same meeting.

The SDGs must involve dialogue as well as monologue, listening as well as talking.

In short, as these political leaders suggest, we are looking at an effort that involves everyone – in a dialogue, a two-way conversation, on development – and a dialogue in which it is important to *listen to the voices of the people* rather than dictate solutions to them in the one-sided, top-down development process that in the past was all too common in international development circles and also at the national level.

The dimension of language is largely missing from the SDGs.

Yet, while the talk is of dialogue, and of listening as well as talking, somehow this does not translate into an awareness of language itself. It is striking that the dimension of language is barely mentioned in most discussions of the SDGs, and not at all in the seventeen goals themselves. The “dialogue” to which Prime Minister Solberg refers is conducted overwhelmingly in English, and to a lesser degree in other major languages. Yet the people at whom so many of the goals are directed – particularly those dealing with such fields as poverty, education, and literacy – often do not speak the language or languages of the policymakers. Often they belong to language minorities with little voice in their own countries, and certainly not in the wider world. As Suzanne Romaine, of Oxford University, puts it, citing Clinton Robinson, “Use of local languages is inseparable from participatory development. Local people will not own development until they can discuss it among themselves and with outsiders without the barrier of someone else’s language.”

Are we listening?

Yet are we listening to these voices? Are their governments listening? Are the NGOs listening? As the editors of the journal *Reconsidering Development* recently stated, “International development exists inside language; we do not have international development without language” – but is the dialogue truly a two-way dialogue?

Language lies at the very core of human communication.

When, a couple of years ago, the Canadian scholar Mark Fettes examined the eighteen “think pieces” put out by the United Nations System Task Team in the early stages of formulating the SDGs, he was startled to find that this “group of senior experts from over 50 UN entities and international organizations appointed by the Secretary-General” mentioned language only a total of four times in the entire length of all eighteen documents, and then only in connection with other “indicators of diversity, inequality or discrimination,” never as a factor in its own right. Yet language choice and language use have a direct effect on the efficacy of political engagement, on the effectiveness of education, on legal processes, on human rights. Language is a major factor in the inclusion or exclusion of particular populations, and sadly is often used as an instrument of discrimination and disempowerment. It seems odd that people of goodwill (and we have no doubt about the goodwill of our UN colleagues in the field of development) should accord so little attention to the linguistic processes that lie at the very core of human communication.

The United Nations must pay greater attention to language in development.

The Universal Esperanto Association, an NGO associated with both the Economic and Social Council and the Department of Public Information at the United Nations, is interested not only in the promotion of the International Language Esperanto but also in the elimination of all forms of discrimination, including linguistic discrimination, and in the advancement of all basic human rights, including linguistic rights. It is one of only a very few NGOs concerned with issues of language. It is pursuing a two-part strategy in connection with the Sustainable Development Goals. First, it is using its worldwide network of Esperanto speakers to advance the SDGs and urging the members of this network to intervene with their governments in support of the SDGs. Second, it is urging the United Nations in the strongest possible terms to pay greater attention to language issues and to recognize that effective communication and inclusive language

policies go hand in hand.

Translating words into action involves attention to language.

In a recent article, Kathy Calvin, president and CEO of the United Nations Foundation, and R. Venkataramanan of the Tata Trusts, pointed out that “We are in a new era of development that recognizes the need for fresh approaches and engagement from all sectors. These lessons can help the international community move beyond traditional models and strengthen public-private partnerships so we can translate our next set of global goals from words to lasting change.” The authors’ choice of metaphors merits a second look: they talk of translating global goals from words to lasting change. Such translation will not be realised if we do not listen to the languages of those we wish to include, nor will words produce lasting change unless the words are their words as well as ours, and the lasting change a result of change on the part of all.

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