Community Preparedness and Linguistic Equality in Sierra Leone

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Pilot Project Report

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Crisis and emergency communication in multilingual settings can be inefficient if residents cannot rely on information in a language and format they can access and understand. The population in Sierra Leone witnessed the devastating effects of linguistically and culturally inappropriate risk communication during the 2014 Ebola epidemic in the Western African region, and YMCA Sierra Leone was actively involved in calling for a reform to risk communication\(^1\). The complexity of multilingual, cultural, and region-specific interferences in establishing equal access to crucial information was observed in relation to ordinary and emergency contexts by local stakeholders and personnel of the international humanitarian sector in Sierra Leone.

Personnel in local institutions, national and international organizations, NGOs, and partners working in sustainable development consider enhanced communication a purposeful activity to pursue a better understanding of risk and to enable behaviour change. Access to risk reduction concepts is fundamental. Understanding these concepts means being able to apply them, criticize them, and engage in debates about their relevance to individual communities. Discussing them facilitates people to achieve locally appropriate risk reduction goals, to contribute to reducing the impact of climate change on local areas, and to become participants in equal terms with all of those who value and can critically engage with these principles. In other words, gaining access to the terminology can achieve so much more as it enables multilingual communities to relate with national and international entities, to engage in community-driven initiatives, and to deal with relevant local risks in the country’s multilingual and geographically spread-out population.

The project emerged as a way of supporting the development of a better, language-specific, region-appropriate way of accessing information for residents speaking Kono, Krio, Limba, Mende, and Themne. For YMCA, Sierra Leone Crisis Translation training represented an opportunity of building translation capacity and awareness among crisis managers. It was an opportunity to expand collaboration and build on existing pools of translators. In other words, it was an

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opportunity to develop translation capacity to support dissemination and access to information in multilingual formats for public health and risk reduction campaigns. Project plans were completed in November 2020. The project was endorsed by the Office for National Security (ONS), the newly formed National Disaster Management Agency of Sierra Leone (NDMA) and supported by University College London (UCL) Grand Challenge initiative. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Brot für die Welt, YMCA, and UCL funded these activities.

This report summarizes objectives, activities, and costs of the project, providing an overview of the milestones reached and those forthcoming. The descriptions of the activities will hopefully encourage others to carry out similar projects so that international agendas can be considered by multilingual communities directly without intermediaries and principles of disaster risk reduction become part of local priorities and agendas rather than risking being felt as impositions from elsewhere.

Objectives

YMCA Sierra Leone partnered with the Centre for Translation Studies at UCL to work on building translation capacity through the project described here. The project has 4 core aims:

1. To translate the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) Terminology into Kono, Krio, Limba, Mende, Themne.
2. To create multilingual resources usable by disaster managers operating among communities that speak these languages.
3. To enable speakers of Kono, Krio, Limba, Mende, and Themne to engage with risk reduction principles without the need for intermediaries.
4. To support equitable communication in current and future activities that focus on sustainable development and risk management by reducing the impact of a monolingual mindset and increasing linguistic equality.

The translations of the UNDRR Terminology were collected in bilingual files (comma separated, .csv, spreadsheets). The format was chosen as it is easily accessible and allows conversion of textual data into proprietary and open-access translation tools. Five bilingual glossaries from English into Kono, Krio, Limba, Mende, and Themne can be imported and used as translation memories.

Translation memories are databases that archive sentences, clauses, or entire paragraphs of texts (called segments) translated by humans to be re-used in the future translations. Translation memories increase consistency and speed of translation; they retain quality as they must be revised by a human translator. They are flexible as they can be used in online server-based free translation memory tools, or imported in open-access, as well as commercial, computer-aided translation software. The project comprised training and development activities that supported and prepared language experts and crisis managers for the translation of the UNDRR Terminology and also for future translations. The project relied on multiple initiatives and collaborative efforts to pursue the four
aims above so to deliver the multilingual terminology tools, as well as the five-language translation of the UNDRR Terminology in PDF and in print.

Activities

As collaboration was key to its success, participatory initiatives drove the project forward. These activities involved members of the project network creating new partnerships and consolidating ongoing ones. Partners included Universities (Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, UCL), NGOs (YMCA SL), and Sierra Leonean language experts. Volunteers, trainee translators, and disaster and crisis managers among the civil servant community of Sierra Leone participated in and YMCA SL led the activities.

Working on the Fundamentals of Translation

Following extensive planning, Jonas Knauerhase and Pious Mannah (YMCA SL) brought four groups of participants together to attend the training sessions. The training introduced participants to essential principles of translation. The introductory training had a dual purpose. On the one hand, it was used to discourage bilinguals without sufficient skills from undertaking translation projects. On the other hand, the training also had to encourage bilinguals with advanced language skills. If they had attitude, motivation, and determination to understand translation principles, they were better suited to participate in more intensive training and workshops to complete the collaborative translation of the UNDRR Terminology. The course intended to increase awareness of the difficulties encountered when attempting to translate without training, practice, and experience. For crisis and disaster managers involved, the training also served the immediate purpose of raising awareness of the complexity of completing translations. The expectation was that the training sessions would identify a pool of bilingual individuals able to translate the risk reduction terms collected in the UNDRR Terminology. The translation had to aid the participants to translate the text collaboratively and accurately, with the support of Kono, Krio, Limba, Mende, and Themne language experts and experienced professionals.

The terms collected in the UNDRR Terminology are regularly used in disaster risk reduction activities connected with sustainable development and community-driven projects. They are part of debates around risk, development, sustainability and many related domains; the English terms are widespread and mastering them is key to interact with international stakeholders. They are widely used in many activities engaging young people and communities with the purpose of raising preparedness levels in multilingual rural and urban regions of Sierra Leone. The translation of the UNDRR Terminology made sense to increase local participation.
Training sessions

The introduction to fundamental principles of translation consisted of training sessions, collaborative work, and hands-on workshops to complete the translations. The first six sessions of 2-hour training were delivered between 9 and 18 March 2021. Each group attended two of these sessions. The sessions drew from the INTERACT Crisis Translation Training as the blueprint for fundamental translation training offered to multilingual groups. The Crisis Translation Training was designed by identifying fundamental principles of translating for situations where, or at times when, local translation capacity does not meet language needs in relation to disaster and crisis communication. The INTERACT training is intended as a solution when no other options are available. As this project had the dual purpose of enabling collaboration between disaster managers and developing further translation capacity the sessions were revised and expanded. Chloe Franklin, a free-lance translator with expertise in crisis translation, redesigned the training with the purpose of discussing translation concepts pertinent to the UNDRR Terminology and the language resources available to speakers of Kono, Krio, Limba, Mende, and Themne.

Collaborative translations

The project participants started translating the 5,100 words of the UNDRR terminology (the source text) on 1 April 2021. The English source text was divided into segments rather than sentences to make the rendering available for use with translation technologies, such as translation memories and to train machine

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translation engines. The segmentation creates a multilingual resource that can find later uses and applications to support other translation projects and develop further translation capacity. WhatsApp was used to share translated segments and to provide recording of spoken translations of the terminology. WhatsApp proved to be an important risk reduction and communication tool in Sierra Leone. It was therefore chosen as the shared resource to access fragments of the source text and share their translations, as well as discuss doubts, issues, or leave oral versions in the target languages for these to be transcribed later. The WhatsApp language groups had weekly tasks assigned that were collected by Pious Mannah and Jonas Knauerhase into a spreadsheet. Completing the weekly tasks, participants began drafting the terminology in Kono, Krio, Limba, Mende, and Themne. The drafted translations were to then be consolidated, revised, and reviewed during the workshops.

**Workshops**

The workshops were planned as intensive hands-on events, grouping participants by language. They last over 2 and half working days. Participants joined their language group at a specific venue, as summarized in Table 1. It is worth offering some additional detail about the workshops, as future initiatives willing to replicate this project ought to include workshops.

In this project, the workshops took place in regions where the local languages were most used. The workshop created an immediate focus on language specific problems of translation for the participants. They reinforced the sense of participation, collaboration, and purpose, among the participants. Their intensive, interactive, and hands-on setup helped to cement partnerships among the novice translators and the experienced language experts. The training during the workshops followed a hybrid form of learning and teaching. The segment translations by were facilitated locally; discussions among bilinguals who were drafting the translations were interspersed at set intervals with interactions with the trainer who would connect via a video conference link. The fixed interactions created micro-deadlines and set times to complete tasks. They monitored progress without evaluating or increasing the time pressure on the translators. At local level, the discussions were also supported with interactions with experienced translators and language experts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Starting on</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freetown</td>
<td>Krio</td>
<td>21 June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makeni</td>
<td>Themne</td>
<td>24 June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabala</td>
<td>Limba</td>
<td>28 June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kono</td>
<td>Kono</td>
<td>01 July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenema</td>
<td>Mende</td>
<td>05 July</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Workshop Delivery Plans*
The workshops looked at practical matters: assessing the quality of the translations, readability, comprehension, and standardizing the lexical choices. During the workshops, the participants completed the translations.

Once completed, the translations were saved in a spreadsheet that can be reused as a resource to support consistency of translation and computer-aided translations in the future. The aligned spreadsheets are available online.

Quality was assessed by surveying the experienced linguists the complete tasks. A bespoke survey was developed to assess error systematically. Adopting recent on evaluation and quality assessment of translation, based on EU-funded research project qt21, the survey adopted accepted criteria of assessment based on the harmonised metric of the Multidimensional Quality Metrics (MQM). The MQM is an error typology metric, developed by the Deutsches Forschungszentrum für Künstliche Intelligenz (DFKI, German Research Center for Artificial Intelligence) as part of the QTLaunchPad, and funded by the European Union.

Participants

The training involved 32 City Council Representatives (2 per district) assigned by the Office for National Security (ONS) and 18 volunteer trainees.

Networking

Since the end of April 2021, we have worked to increase participation and support. A collaboration with Dr Abdulai Jalloh of the Department of Linguistics at Fourah Bay College enabled us to involve undergraduate students who can speak Kono, Krio, Limba, Mende, and Themne. With their specialization in linguistics and knowledge of the languages, they brought to the network further opportunities to work on language equity and decolonizing the language of disaster risk reduction in Sierra Leone. The Department of Linguistics of Fourah Bay College assisted in recruiting expert language users, and specialist linguists. They all actively contributed to

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3 They can be downloaded from [https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5772299](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5772299).
assisting participants who took the Crisis Translation training to revise their translations. The revisions focused on suitability and appropriateness of the target language rendering for speakers Kono, Krio, Limba, Mende, or Themne. The translations were so revised to match the linguistic and cultural expectations of the speakers of the target languages. Furthermore, the project secured the expertise of professional translators within the Institute for Sierra Leonean Languages to complete the quality assurance process. The MQM error diagnostic tool was useful for the 10 language experts with professional experience of translation into the five languages as it offered the opportunity of comparing their own quality assurance practices with an alternative model that they may have not previously considered.

The project ultimately intended to stimulate growth in terms of local translation capacity and to encourage increased awareness among crisis and disaster managers. Its tangible output, a reliable, trustworthy multilingual resource for wider usage, was only one part of the story. The network developed over the course of this pilot project allows us to envisage a continued collaboration with Forah Bay College and the expert linguists. The collaboration should lead to the foundation of a Sierra Leonean association for linguists, translators, and interpreters recognizing existing professional skills and fostering translation training to increase translation capacity over the coming years.

**Timeline**

Figure 1 summarizes the milestones reached in the first phase of project.

![Figure 1. Project Milestones](image)

In addition to the dates already in the timeline, the following were important dates in the project:
27 January 2021  We put forward Expression of Interest to apply to a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Global Challenges Research Fund. This project was selected for submission as a full application. However, the UK government cut funding to the scheme on 15 March 2021 and no full applications were accepted.

5 May 2021  Jeanne Elsworth of UNDRR granted permission for the translated terminology to be published as “Not an official UN Translation”. The UNDRR guaranteed support for dissemination of information about the 5 translations through its social media and website.

22 May 2021  Pious Mannah and Federico M. Federici attended the FIT African Forum ‘How to establish a TTI association?’.

7 July 2021  The translations into Kono, Krio, Limba, Mende, and Themne were completed.

17 August 2021  The translations and the additional materials were revised and the volume went to typesetting.

19 September 2021  AmberPress designed the volume and its bespoke font type; the project’s team revised and checked all texts and went to press.

29 October 2021  The translations were officially made available to download: http://doi.org/10.53241/CenTraS/001.

Successful completion of the project and dissemination of the printed resources laid the foundation for stakeholders to build on the pilot project. The next aim is to establishing translation training pathways initially focusing on language combinations from and into Kono, Krio, Limba, Mende, and Themne.

Next Milestones

10 December 2021: bilingual files on Zenodo.


7 January 2021: Design of mobile app to begin.

15 January 2021: Project activities to be disseminated through a website and all resources made available through the website.
Dissemination

16 July 2021: An invited lecture was delivered online at the British School at Rome (BSR) detailing the project and its development. The recording is available on the BSR’s YouTube channel.

Launch

On 29 October 2021, the Kono, Krio, Limba, Mende, and Themne translations of the UNDRR terminology were launched at an official event in Freetown. Translators were awarded certificates for the training they had received, and the language experts’ contributions were recognized and certified. Their work was justly celebrated as there were no guarantees that the project would be such a success.

Representatives of many institutions and organizations attended the meeting. These included the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Youth, the National Disaster Management Agency, Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, and a representative of the Freetown City Council. National and international organizations like Caritas, European Union, the German Embassy, World Food Programme, and United Nations Development Programme were present.

Funds

The project has been funded via a range of schemes and sponsorships from several sources, as summarized in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sponsor</th>
<th>Amount (EUR)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brot für die Welt (Bread for the World)</td>
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<td>UNDP</td>
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<td>YMCA/CPS</td>
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<td>UCL - Global Engagement Fund</td>
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<td>UCL - Grand Challenges (Crisis Translation training)</td>
<td>4,207</td>
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<td>UCL - Africa and Middle East Teaching Initiative</td>
<td>3,894</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Sponsors and Funders

A full breakdown of expenses is provided in Table 3 (p. 16).
Policy Innovation: Sierra Leone leading the way

Crisis and emergency risk communication (CERC)\(^6\) relies on establishing effective, timely, and efficient strategies to send out messages when it matters. The project team and members of the Advisory Board emphasize how NDMA and ONS in Sierra Leone have set an important precedent as CERC principles can be enhanced in multilingual crisis settings by embedding translation, interpreting, and accessibility services in preparedness and planning. This type of multi-agency approach from the outset is part of the core recommendations emerging from the INTERACT project (2017-2020). This cross-sector collaboration put forward a number of recommendations to enhance crisis communication practices in multilingual setting. The recommendations shown in Figure 2 were published in 2019 and awarded the EU Radar award as a society-ready research output. By linking up crisis and disaster managers with linguists and by increasing awareness of what linguistic diversity entails, NDMA personnel, ONS, and UNDP in Sierra Leone have shown that this integration is possible. The project indicates that it is possible to create multi-agency collaboration at the outset of new emergency management initiatives - but it can easily be replicated in existing and long-established emergency management traditions.

1. Emergency management communication policies should include provision for translation and interpreting and should be regularly reviewed and revised.
2. A specific owner of the policy on translation and interpreting should be identified and assigned within organizations responsible for emergency communication policy and implementation.
3. Emergency management communication policies should be developed in consultation with relevant multilingual and multicultural communities.
4. Emergency management communication policies should cover all phases of crisis and disaster management (mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery).
5. Emergency management communication policies should consider languages spoken by affected communities (including sign language), levels of literacy, and cultural appropriateness.
6. Alternative formats and channels for dissemination of translated information should be considered – not just traditional written or spoken formats.
7. Emergency management communication policies should allow for two-way communication between responders and affected communities.
8. Ensure training is provided for professional and volunteer translators and interpreters so that they can effectively operate in crisis and disaster settings. Also ensure training for users and managers of translation and interpreting services.
9. Establish direct lines of communication between emergency responders and professional associations of translators and interpreters for the purposes of collaboration.
10. Recruit into multilingual organizations who are responsible for aid or emergency response in such a way as to avoid reliance on international lingua franca and ad hoc or convenience translation and interpreting.


Next steps

Terminology App

The next phase of the project starts with the design of a bespoke UNDRR Mobile App in Kono, Krio, Limba, Mende, and Themne. The app features will be designed in public consultations with speakers of the 5 languages, including participation of disaster managers affiliated to National Disaster Management Agency and Office for National Security. Personnel from local authorities, emergency services, local and international NGO personnel. The app template will be free to use in other languages, making it a point of reference for future tools that create the basis for understanding, discussing, and criticizing the terminology with the bigger purpose of increasing awareness of the urgency of disaster risk reduction activities among multilingual communities. The design is expected to be a collaborative project between UCL’s BSc Computer Science students, YMCA IT Hub, and students of the Department of Physics & Computer Science at Njala University in Sierra Leone.

The App will be a significant addition to the usability of the UNDRR Terminology in translation, to stimulate activities that increase understanding of risks but also to enable communities that may have expertise and conceptualizations to share to participate in the efforts of understanding present and future risks. These risks go beyond linguistic differences, to raise awareness of the linkage between development, and they need to account for varying degrees of literacy and for the importance of oral languages. The inclusion of recordings with the definitions and pronunciation of the terms is fundamental in pursing the aim of increasing community preparedness through linguistic equality in Sierra Leone. After all, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (Sendai Framework) “was the first major agreement of the post-2015 development agenda and provides Member States with concrete actions to protect development gains from the risk of disaster.”

Association of Translators, Interpreters, and Linguists of Sierra Leone

The momentum created by this project among experienced linguists who have used professionally their natural skills as translators and interpreters will be put to good use by working towards the

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creation of a Council of Sierra Leonean linguists. The Council will work on organizing the statute and the legal entity of a professional association in 2022. The national association will enable Sierra Leonean’s speakers of multiple languages to share practices, concerns, and approaches to professional language service provision. They will seek ways of accessing and sharing training opportunities and of organizing mentoring schemes to support early career professionals and new linguists aspiring to work in the professional sector. The next phase will receive advice, feedback, and mentoring support from the International Federation of Translators (Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs) FIT/IFT, which is the international grouping of national associations of translators, interpreters, and terminologists. Experienced translators and willing trainee translators to establish a professional association of translators and interpreters.

Over time, the association will train and mentor future professional linguists and recognize the existing experience and expertise of the speakers of multiple Sierra Leonean languages who daily contribute to cross-language communication.

**Concluding remarks**

Translating the terminology in itself is not sufficient to embed crisis communication provision in multilingual crisis settings. However, the collaborative approach, the workshops, the partnerships behind the translation efforts of this project can be catalysts for change. Developing connected ways of thinking around disaster risk reduction messaging in turn works as an enabler. It allows Kono, Krio, Limba, Mende, and Themne speakers to appropriate the terminology and make disaster risk reduction practices relevant and accessible to their communities. These practices become more familiar and closer to meeting culture- and language-appropriate requirements of the communities that need to consider increasing their preparedness to risks. These communities may subsequently gain better access to resources and support so as to drive sustainable development practices and risks reduction initiatives that matter to them. The project in Sierra Leone indicates that with reasonable financial resources, there are societal benefits of developing translation capacity to achieve accurate, timely, and effective communication in languages and formats that people can access.

Some initial difficulties in establishing participation among volunteers and novice translators were resolved by involving experienced language experts with a professional background in translation as well university students training as linguists. A network begun to emerge, created around the notion of building a network of linguists to protect speakers of endangered languages from being left out of language- and culture-appropriate messaging. The project team liaised with linguists who may be willing to sustain translator training programmes in Sierra Leone in the coming years. This project has created the premises to establish an association of linguists who translate, interpret, and mediate into and out of Sierra Leonean languages.
The involvement of experienced language experts with a professional background in translation as well as trainee linguist from academic settings supported and guided the volunteer and novice translators, ensuring high quality outputs. A network of linguists formed around the three groups, the trainee translators, the professional translation experts, and the experts in linguistics. Their success as language groups and as a partnership (across Sierra Leonean languages) led to the emergence of a network of linguists who can support current training, awareness campaigns, funding activities, workshops, and political initiatives concerning disaster risk reduction in multilingual Sierra Leone.

This new partnership and the crisis communication system that they can support was called for by the country’s tremendous experience during the 2014 Ebola epidemic. The collaboration between the country’s organizations leading on the disaster risk reduction agenda together with those cooperating on sustainable development indicates that Sierran Leoneans’ multilingualism is acknowledged. The success of the translation project may give new impetus to initiatives that further support efficient communication and sustainable development of the richly multilingual communities of Sierra Leone. This small-scale project suggests that initiatives led by young multilingual Sierra Leoneans have a transformative potential; this potential deserves to be nurtured to support linguistic equality and to encourage culturally and linguistically appropriate conversations on disaster risk reduction.
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<td>Action: 3.2.2.3</td>
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<td>Persons</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action: 3.2.2.4</td>
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| Sub-total | 250,064,000.00 | 250,064,000.00 |  

(€19,611.90)