



## **Language for Work at the Symposium of the Study Group on Language and the United Nations, *Language, the Sustainable Development Goals, and Vulnerable Populations*, New York , May 11th and 12th, 2017**

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For its contributions on work-related language learning by low-skilled migrants, Language for Work was one of the two initiatives on adults' language development presented at the symposium on *Language, the Sustainable Development Goals, and Vulnerable Population* (<http://www.languageandtheun.org/>).

Organized by the Study Group on Language and the United Nations, the event took place in New York, on 11 and 12 May 2017. Its goal was to investigate issues of language and vulnerable populations and their centrality in the development, implementation, and successful completion of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>).

This event drew on the theme of the first symposium in 2016 on *Language and the Sustainable Development Goals*, which addressed the SDGs' lack of attention to language and to the consequences, both positive and negative, of linguistic diversity.

Yet language matters, as the diverse and excellent contributions of this year's symposium from all continents showed. Language barriers exacerbate vulnerability. Vulnerability is not an inherent characteristic of certain individuals or groups but a construct "built up" by specific geo-politics and "cemented" by education and language policies.

The symposium focused on three types of vulnerable populations:

- permanently settled refugees/migrants,
- temporarily settled refugees/migrants, and
- indigenous or heritage language minorities.

Within these three groups, adults and children face different language-related challenges, so that six groups could be finally identified, each requiring individualized sustainable development solutions informed by inclusive, multi-directional communication.

### **Permanently settled refugees/migrants and speakers of heritage migrant languages**

Growing populations of young people are marginalised by the socio-political subordination and enforced illegitimacy of migrant languages in educational systems. They are commonly forced into linguistic and cultural assimilation under the guise of successful integration, thus nullifying their social and cultural capital, and exacerbating existing inequalities.

For adults the linguistic challenge is different, as the LfW contribution showed. Limited skills (including literacy skills) in their mother tongue and in the host country's language contribute to marginalization and keep many

migrants trapped in low-paid employment. Support for these migrants to acquire the majority language is still a relatively low priority for policy-makers across Europe, despite the positive contribution they make through their work and taxes to the economic and social development of the host country. New approaches to literacy and work-related language development build on the understanding of linguistic integration as shared responsibility, with benefits for the whole society.

**Temporarily settled refugees/migrants** live in a tension between hope of repatriation and prospects of permanent displacement, which require different interventions. Repatriation demands support for the reintegration into the educational system and/or the labour market and civil society of the home country. Emigration requires support for integration into new systems, often through a new language.

The challenges refugees and supporting organizations face are overwhelming: there is no unequivocal solution. So far, the only constructive support for this group of migrants/refugees seems to consist in valuing their linguistic and cultural capital while providing language and vocational tools for an uncertain future showing great respect for them and their situation.

**For indigenous or heritage language minorities**, especially speakers of low prestige languages, inequality is reinforced through the institutionalized legal, economic, educational, and social discrimination in the form of inaccessible languages of education and government. For some, differences in cultural language use, such as a linguistic tradition of allusions, proverbs, and riddles, may also result in a preconception of untrustworthiness or lack of confidence, potentially further disenfranchising them.

#### **A final personal remark**

The symposium was a special experience: rewarding but also distressing. As a West-European living and working in a European context I am well acquainted with the issues concerning permanently settled refugees/migrants. In many contributions I recognized challenges, approaches and visions shared by the LfW. But I was also confronted with my ignorance as for the disenfranchising consequences for real people among the indigenous or heritage language minorities of what I had only considered as an “interesting” difference in cultural language use.

Finally the engaged presentations of colleagues working in the field made me feel the alienation of temporarily settled refugees /migrants may experience and the civil courage of those who work with them in spite of all disenchantment.