Language, Digital Resources and the Sustainable Development Goals

Lisa J. McEntee-Atalianis

Abstract In September 2015 the United Nations (UN) adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offering an internationally agreed blueprint for economic, environmental and social development. However, those people most in need and specifically targeted by the SDGs face significant barriers in accessing information and knowledge about the goals and about sustainability in a language or medium that they can understand. Drawing on previous research on the UN's language policy and practice in general, and on analyses of UN reports and resolutions on multilingualism, information policy and practice in relation to the SDGs, this chapter examines the current status of multilingualism and information transfer within and outside the Organisation. It identifies significant linguistic and digital/media barriers, arguing that the UN and its member states must plan in linguistically more plural and inclusive ways by developing a *tri-sectoral communication network strategy*. This strategy should involve civil society and the public and private sectors to facilitate knowledge transfer and increase participation, thereby ensuring that "no one is left behind".

Keywords Information technology · Language policy · Multilingualism · Sustainable development goals · United Nations

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The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[1] agreed by an intergovernmental Open Working Group in 2014 and adopted by 193 Member States in September 2015 at the UN General Assembly (United Nations, 2015e) build on and extend the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set out in the Millennium Declaration in 2000. They serve as an internationally agreed blueprint for development actors pressing for a global agenda, with targets for the assessment of their implementation over a period of 15 years "to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all" (http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/). The SDGs seek to rectify the weaknesses of the MDGs, in particular their marginal focus on developing countries and difficult-to-reach groups, and their preference for a universal, "one-size-fits-all" approach to sustainability. The new agenda is ambitious in its scope, more than doubling the number of previous goals and incorporating 169 targets. It promotes a rights-based approach to sustainability, emphasising the importance of participation by all in policy making and in the development of democratic societies. Thus, while Goal 9 calls for building a resilient infrastructure, Goal 16 stresses that institutions should be accountable and inclusive (including, presumably, the UN itself), and Goal 17 calls for knowledge sharing "on mutually agreed terms", as documented in Table 1.

Table 1 Sustainable development goals 9, 16 and 17

Goal 9 **Build a resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation**
9.c Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020
Goal 16 **Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels**
Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels
Broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance
Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements
Goal 17 **Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development**
Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing on mutually agreed terms, including through improved coordination among existing mechanisms, in particular at the United Nations level, and through a global technology facilitation mechanism
Fully operationalize the technology bank and science, technology and innovation capacity-building mechanism for least developed countries by 2017 and enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology

[1] See https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300 for a list of all goals and targets.

In setting out his stall for the new objectives at the 69th Session of the General Assembly in December 2014, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon asserted that "[a]ll voices demanded that *we leave no one behind*, ensuring equality, non-discrimination, equity and inclusion at all levels" and that in achieving dignity and justice "we must pay special attention to the people, groups and countries most in need: women, youth, minorities, indigenous peoples…[and] persons with disabilities" (United Nations, 2014c, paras. 51 and 68). Further, in order to ensure "effective governance of the SDGs" (para. 77), long-term investment in information and communication technology within and between countries should be achieved, especially for the poor and developing countries, via multi-party partnerships involving a variety of actors. He claimed (para. 123), ambitiously (and sadly prematurely), that the development of "concrete initiatives, including leveraging technology" should be ready at the outset of the SDGs and that he and the UN would facilitate cooperation, record technological initiatives, target "fragmentation" within and outside the Organisation and encourage networks, the sharing of information, technical expertise and knowledge transfer.

Some headway has been made, nationally and within the UN; but in recent decades, numerous committee deliberations, reports and studies (see McEntee-Atalianis, 2006, 2015; Tonkin, 1996a, b, 2011) have shown that such initiatives are either not in place in the UN, or only partially so, noting particularly that delegates and stakeholders experience difficulties in gaining access to information about sustainability in a linguistic form or medium that is timely and easily understood. Indeed, the issue of "language" in the goals themselves is conspicuous by its absence (Fettes, 2015 and see Fettes, Chapter "Language and the Sustainable Development Goals: Challenges to Language Policy and Planning", this volume). This chapter argues that success in achieving the SDGs is contingent on developing global and multi-sectoral partnerships to engender an internationally enabling environment placing language and media of communication at its centre.

1 Aims

In a 2013 article, Suzanne Romaine points to the centrality of language in achieving the MDGs. Language, she suggests, is "at the very heart … of the development process" and present at its "major fault-lines" (Romaine, 2013, p. 2).[2] In many nations, she notes, ethnic and language minority groups constitute a significant proportion of the bottom fifth of the population who fail to profit from poverty reduction efforts. Pressing particularly for changes to language policy and planning in education, and the engagement of applied linguists in development work (p. 3), she argues that addressing linguistic and socio-cultural obstacles is essential for poverty

[2] See also Phillipson's (1996) earlier account of the role of language in the UN's development agenda.

reduction and sustainable development. “Because there can be no true development without linguistic development … keeping the promise of the MDGs requires reconciling development with linguistic diversity.”

Taking Romaine’s comments as a starting point, in the present chapter, drawing on data garnered from prior desk research, ethnographic investigation, interviews and discussions with the Secretariat and membership of the UN (McEntee-Atalianis 2006, 2016; McEntee-Atalianis & Hult, 2020), in addition to virtual and interpretive policy analysis of UN documents, and current statistics of digital access/divides, I will focus on linguistic and communication barriers within the Organisation itself and among the groups the SDGs specifically target. I will discuss the operational and participatory constraints on understanding and transferring information on sustainability to diverse multilingual/multicultural and technologically disparate environments, both internationally and within regional, national and local contexts. I will argue that the language and medium of information transfer are inextricably linked, acting as inter-related enablers and/or barriers in the dissemination and implementation of the SDGs and the subsequent creation of strong participatory societies and communities.

In the following, it will become apparent that an ideology of efficiency at low or neutral cost has prevailed at the UN for many years, leading to restrictions in multilingual provision that undermine the achievement of the Goals by favouring monolingualism/restricted language regimes and the use of digital (rather than traditional) media. I argue that if the goals and the work of the Organisation in general are to achieve impact, the UN must actively involve delegates and stakeholders in the languages they speak and via media they can access. Failure to involve them will almost certainly lead to policy failure. There are signs that the UN is moving in the right direction, especially under the current Secretary-General António Guterres[3] and successive Co-ordinators of Multilingualism, who have championed multilingualism as a “core value” (United Nations, 2019, 2021). Yet there is still much work to be done to mainstream multilingualism by ensuring parity among languages and by expanding linguistic provision on- and off-line for communication within the Organisation and outwards to its various stakeholders.

Delegates, particularly (although not exclusively) from developing nations, have called for attention not just to ensuring parity in the Organisation’s multilingual provision but to the growing digital divide – the unequal access to digital information and services – between developed and developing nations[4] and the

[3] See, as an example, the “cross-cutting measures” documented in the SG’s Report on Multilingualism (United Nations, 2019, p. 18ff) in which he documents his personal multilingual endeavours, e.g. delivering speeches and messages in multiple languages and engaging bilaterally in the language of his interlocutor. He details his plans and support for a multilingual Secretariat, e.g. mainstreaming multilingualism in senior leader’s compacts and appointment notices; encouraging language learning, etc.

[4] It must be noted that the “digital divide” does not correlate neatly with the division between the local v. global, or developed v. developing countries nor a North/South divide. Reinicke et al. (2000, p. 88) assert that many living in industrialized nations still have limited if any access to the internet, whilst Governments and NGOs in developing nations do. On balance, the global South is

need for maintenance of traditional media in the dissemination and implementation of its work. It is clear that those most in need and specifically targeted by the SDGs still face significant barriers in accessing information, knowledge and support for sustainability. The consequences of not prioritising language and communication are serious and cannot be divorced from socioeconomic or sociopolitical development.

Therefore, in the following I argue that linguistic and media support for the dissemination, implementation and monitoring of the SDGs at national and local levels must involve the contributions and expertise of multiple actors within three sectors – public, private and civil society. Required is a robust coordinated strategy, as previously developed in other successful UN endeavours[5] – a *tri-sectoral communication network strategy* – in order to initiate and nurture collaborative linguistic and media ventures that facilitate participation by stakeholder communities and societies internationally – especially those acknowledged to have been "left behind" at the end of the MDGs. First, however, some background.

2 The Global Public Sphere, Civil Society and the Private Sector

Political and social theory asserts that there is an ever-increasing divide between the spaces and places where world issues are raised (e.g. international organisations) and where they are managed (at the level of the nation state and at regional or local levels) (Castells, 2008). The present capitalist global system depends on a network of unequal interstate relationships (Blommaert, 2009, 2010), which has led, some argue, to "political crises" of "efficiency", "equity", "identity" and "legitimacy" (Castells, 2008, p. 82), also inequity in matters of digital and multilingual provision (Gazarian, 1992).

While the political elite, among them intergovernmental organisations (e.g. the International Monetary Fund), influence national policy directly through their policies and conditions and indirectly via information spread, networked societies and global governance have become a matter not just for this elite but also for non-state actors: civil society (NGOs and pressure groups) and the for-profit private sector (international businesses and corporations). These non-state actors are positioned to bring about change in state[6] functions and conditions through direct and indirect

less able to access information technology, however. Also see Zaugg et al. (2022, p.3). They note that while many endangered, Indigenous, oral, minority and signed languages are 'digitally disadvantaged', so too are widely spoken and thriving national languages.

[5] E.g. The "Roll Back Malaria" campaign (see Reinicke et al., 2000).

[6] Blommaert (2009, p. 240) suggests that the term "state" now extends to sub-state actors/institutions (e.g. unions, civil society groups, regional/local governments); the nation-state and super-state institutions (e.g. the EU or UN).

contact with local communities and ordinary people (see, for example, Ibeh, 2020). Their work is facilitated by global and local traditional and digital (media) outlets. The UN and other intergovernmental institutions have long recognized that they must engage with the general public (see, for example, United Nations, 2020) not just through national representations and the mechanisms and instruments they create, but also through such channels as the media and local organisations and businesses.

However, research on language policy and the digital divide has revealed a diverse and multifarious picture across and within sub-state, state and super-state ecologies (Blommaert, 2009). The global public sphere is acknowledged to favour and extend to some more than others, with advances in technology widening the knowledge gap between the haves and have-nots: rich and poor; private and public sectors; developed, developing and undeveloped states (Graham, 2011; Ibeh, 2020; Zaugg, 2020; Zaugg et al., 2022).[7]

As former Secretary-General Kofi Annan acknowledged in his address to the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum in 1999, "The United Nations once dealt only with governments. By now we know that peace and prosperity cannot be achieved without partnerships involving governments, international organisations, the business community, and civil society." Such partners have "successfully politicized many global issues and have accumulated significant financial, ideological and bargaining resources" (Reinicke et al., 2000, p. 3) over recent decades. Yet changes in global governance and an exponential growth in information technology have proven challenging for the UN, which finds itself excluding, either intentionally or unintentionally, key stakeholders from its debate and operations, while recognising that they are fundamental to long-term sustainability. In short, as noted some 20 years ago, the UN's "formal institutional structures lack the scope, speed, [finances], and informational capacity to keep up with the global agenda and [communication/linguistic demands]" (Reinicke et al., 2000, p. 91).

Efforts have since been made to nurture partnerships, and some recent examples illustrate their success (see ESCAP, 2020b).[8] Likewise, attempts to draw up guidelines for inclusive technology and innovation policies for sustainable development (ESCAP, 2020a) have been largely successful. But, all things considered, it is clear that there is still much work to be done.

[7] Zaugg (2020) and Zaugg et al. (2022) assert that disparities of access are only one element of the digital divide. Zaugg et al. (2022, p. 2) claim that digitally disadvantaged language communities confront three obstacles: lack of 'equitable access'; inadequate digital tools for the 'integrity of their languages, scripts and writing systems, and knowledge systems'; and, 'vulnerability to harm through digital surveillance and under-moderation of language content'.

[8] For example, in 2020, the UN secretariat supported Myanmar in the development of a national science, technology and innovation policy and strategy. Also, the secretariat, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Science and Technology of China jointly developed a capacity-building workshop on science, technology and innovation for sustainable development (ESCAP, 2020b).

3 Linguistic and Digital Challenges Facing the United Nations in its Public Information and Outreach Work

The UN has experienced an increasing work load and decreasing budgets for decades now, which have, along with a tolerance for lingua franca usage within its Organisation over many years, led to a marked quantifiable reduction in multilingual provision and use, both internally within the functioning of the Organisation and externally in its public information and outreach work (McEntee-Atalianis, 2015, forthcoming; Pearl, 1996; Wyzner, 1992). The effects of the economic crisis in recent years, coupled with increases in departments' mandates, have led to decreases in resources and a euphemistic push within the Organisation for "cost-neutrality" and the need to devise "creative solutions" (United Nations, 2015a, 2019) to the problem of supporting multilingualism for political and public diplomacy and for operations. Stagnant and reduced budgets have led to a culture of parsimony in which English has become dominant over all other official and working languages[9] and digital dissemination of information is seen as cost-effective and efficient (see discussion below where this is contested). Member states and observers have raised concerns (e.g. United Nations, 2014a, 2020) about the lack of, or reductions in, multilingual provision, particularly in the UN's outreach work and its global communications.[10] Recently, delegates in the Committee on Information urged the Department of Global Communications "to produce content in the six languages … rather than simply translating from one language to another" (United Nations, 2020, p. 8, para. 14) and requested the Department to continue to invest resources in traditional as well as social media, given the digital divide. Indeed, the committee ambitiously urged the Department "to take steps within its means to secure Internet connectivity for all, so that developing countries would be in a position to use it for their social and economic development" (p. 9, para. 16), noting that the digital divide has only widened during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In recent years the DPI/DGC has prioritized the development of multilingual websites and social media in order to reduce the disparity between material in English and the other official languages of the Organisation. In February–March 2015 it launched a sustainable development website in all official languages (United Nations, 2015b, p. 16). Unlike other departments in the Organisation, the DGC

[9] The UN supports six official languages – Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish – and a varied number of (working) languages across its Headquarters and agencies. See McEntee-Atalianis (2015, forthcoming) for details.

[10] Formerly, the Department of Public Information (DPI), now known as the "Department of Global Communications" (DGC) (since 2019) is the conduit for the dissemination of information about the UN to global audiences. It consists of three main divisions: Strategic Communications (key responsibilities include the development and implementation of strategies for communicating UN information and managing Information Centres); News and Media (news services – print, radio, television and internet) and Outreach Division (conveys information and encourages exchange of ideas and knowledge in support of the UN agenda).

webpages are in strict compliance with the UN's multilingual policy[11] and live multilingual coverage of the General Assembly is available online. The most recently available statistics on website traffic revealed an increase in the number of new sessions developed across all languages; however, a preference for English was evident, with over half (53%) of users downloading English text, in comparison to Spanish (23%), French (8%), Chinese (6%), Russian (6%) and Arabic (3%). The number of pages viewed reveal an even stronger preference for English – 60% (United Nations, 2014a, p.16).

The Secretary-General's 2019 report on multilingualism (United Nations, 2019, para. 75ff) documents continued variability in the status of multilingualism on UN websites. It notes that whilst the Department of Global Communications hosts 94% of websites (a total of 213) in all official languages, other Secretariat entities have continued to find it challenging to do so. Some 48 entities contributing to the SG's report declared that they made all content available in English whereas other language content was significantly limited. Figures documented and illustrated in Table 2 and Fig. 1 show the continued prevalence of English.

Substantial resources have been devoted to developing social media platforms in all official languages and "several [unspecified] other languages". UN messages were reported to be viewed in 2014 regularly by nine million people across different platforms (Facebook; Twitter; Vkontakte and the UN Weibo site) with a steady increase registered across all official languages. The DPI also rolled out new audio channels in the six official languages and Kiswahili and Portuguese for Android and iOS, in addition to two other mobile applications – UN news reader and Calendar of Observances; the latter also available in Bahasa Indonesia and Kazakh (United Nations, 2015a, p. 15, para. 65). Contact with NGOs by the DPI's Non-Governmental Organisation Resource Centre increased its linguistic capacity to respond to queries – extending its capability in 2014 to German, Italian, Portuguese and Ukrainian. The DPI also reported in 2019 (United Nations, 2019, p. 20, para. 76) that it had continued to pursue partnerships with universities to provide translations of "some public information materials on a pro bono basis". During the previous 2 years, four such agreements had been signed to increase capacity in Arabic, Kiswahili, French and Russian.

Table 2 Estimated percentage (by Secretariat entities) of external website content available by language (as of 30 September 2018, United Nations, 2019, p. 20)

Arabic	36%
Chinese	30%
English	99%
French	44%
Russian	30%
Spanish	32%

[11] See United Nations, 2015d.

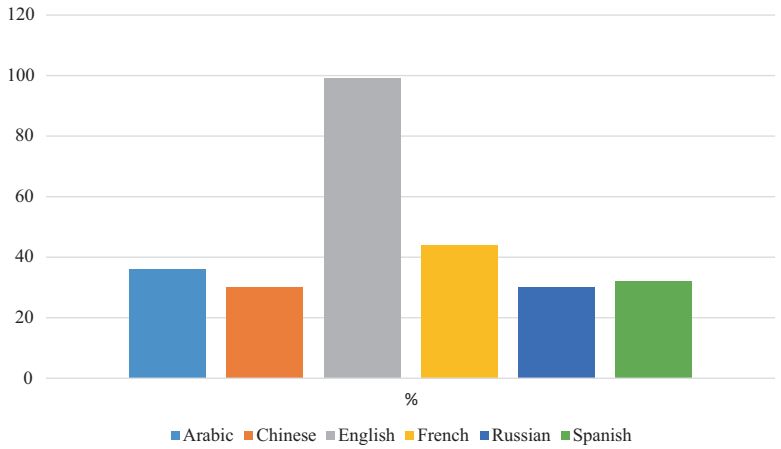

Fig. 1 Estimated percentage of external website content, by language by Secretariat entities (United Nations, 2019, p. 20)

Departments and offices with a field presence (e.g. the Department of Peacekeeping Operations) reported expansion of multilingual provision online via websites and social media, with some using the official languages of their host countries (United Nations, 2019, p. 20).

In contrast to concerted efforts to support online resources, traditional media outlets are given comparatively scant reference in recent SG reports on Multilingualism to the General Assembly, reflecting the Organisation's focus on new media (United Nations, 2014a, paras 77, 80, 2019).[12] It should be noted nonetheless that 100 programmes were available in 2014 in all of the Organisation's official languages and brief (2-min) "UN stories" were developed in recent years. The news magazine programme *21st Century* also extended its coverage to French and Chinese, the latter enabled by a partnership with the Chinese Business Network in Shanghai. UN radio and News Centre cover "breaking news, reports and feature stories" (United Nations, 2015a, p. 15) in all six official languages with some additional programmes produced in Bangla, Hindi, Kiswahili, Portuguese, Urdu. In 2018, the DPI also introduced a multilingual website entitled "UN News", noted to be "the most frequently downloaded United Nations application" (United Nations, 2019, p. 21, para 78), available in the six official languages of the Organisation, in addition to Hindi, Kiswahili and Portuguese.

The 63 Information Centres (ICs) operating in the regions of Africa, the Arab States, the Americas, Asia and Pacific, and Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States work (in total) in five out of the six official languages (with the exception of Chinese), and an additional 97 local languages, as needed. Statistics from 2013 revealed promotional (print and multi-media) material was produced in

[12] Also see calls by member states in 2020 to allocate resources to new media (United Nations, 2020).

40 languages and websites were maintained in 30 local languages.[13] In 2019 this number had not increased significantly, however – social media channels and websites operated in 34 languages (United Nations, 2019, p. 24).

The latter account appears promising; however, an analysis of websites[14] revealed an uneven picture of local language provision which somewhat masks a marked disparity in languages available on the internet across the centres. For example, UNRIC Brussels (Belgium) supported 13 languages, in contrast to UNIC Accra (Ghana), which supported only English. A significant difference is apparent in local language provision in the region of Europe and the Commonwealth, in contrast to all other regions. Only two Centres (out of 16) in Africa – a continent with the most diverse linguistic ecology – supported a local language – Kiswahili (UNIC Dar es Salaam and UNIC Nairobi); only one additional local language (other than English), i.e. Portuguese, was maintained in the Americas by UNIC Rio de Janeiro; six local languages (Bahasa Indonesia, Bengali/Bangla; Hindi; Japanese; Persian and Urdu) were maintained on a few websites in Asia and Pacific (across 11 ICs); whilst 24 languages appeared on websites in Europe and the Commonwealth (14 ICs), where the greatest number of websites and languages were supported by UNRIC Brussels (Belgium) and UNIS Vienna (Austria).

Alongside the use of traditional media (television and radio programmes), concerted efforts have been made within ICs to enhance digital tools, including websites, social media platforms and mobile telephones "to reach a wider and younger audience in a timely and effective manner" (United Nations, 2015a, p. 11, para 48).[15] As reported in 2015, 76% (48/63) of ICs had Facebook accounts and 63% (40/63) hosted Twitter accounts. Less than half of these (a total of 17) were in languages other than English, however – and 29 (46%) were reputed to have YouTube accounts in 12 languages (including English).

Information Centres, as other arms of the UN, face resource constraints and have been forced to explore ad hoc "cost-neutral" alternatives to providing multilingual information. These have included: the IC in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil working in collaboration with the UN headquarters to support the provision of Facebook and Twitter pages in Portuguese; the IC in Islamabad in 2014 signing a memorandum of understanding with a Pakistani[16] network (PTV World) in order to translate news and campaigns into Urdu and 23 regional languages (United Nations, 2015a, pp.11,

[13] These included: Armenian, Bahasa Indonesia, Bangla, Belarusian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, Georgian, German, Greek, Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Italian, Japanese, Kazakh, Kiswahili, Malagasy, Norwegian, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Slovak, Slovene, Swedish, Turkish, Ukrainian, Urdu and Uzbek. Materials ranged from brochures to video and audio press kits.

[14] Undertaken by the author in 2017, see http://unic.un.org/aroundworld/unics/en/whoWeAre/index.asp for raw data.

[15] Examples of ad hoc campaigns are listed; however, an exhaustive listing is not provided.

[16] A research study undertaken by the UN Pakistan "Communication Group" determined that 61% of Pakistanis had no opinion about the UN. This prompted the development of the "One UN Programme" to engage multiple sectors and agents, e.g. media, government institutions (federal and provincial), civil society, the general public and donors.

12 para. 49, 52); and ad hoc partnerships with educational institutions and local UN teams or the UN Communications Group. For example, UNRIC in Brussels partnered with universities to provide "virtual interns" (United Nations, 2015c, p. 19, para. 95) for the translation of UN documents.

A total of 41 ICs produced their own newsletters either in print or electronic form informing interested parties about conferences, special and current events. These were produced in 16 local languages. They also "prepare[d], reissue[d] and often translate[d]" fact sheets, press releases and other information into 43 local languages (United Nations, 2015a, p. 12 para 51).

In disseminating information about sustainable development in particular, some increase in multilingual provision is evident. The combined translations of some ICs of the Secretary-General's document, "A global movement for change", peaked at 22 languages, reportedly reaching "64 outlets in 42 countries" (United Nations, 2015a, p. 19 para 94). The strategic communications service of the DPI developed a magazine: *Africa Renewal-Afrique Renouveau* in order to report on its 'New Partnership for Africa's Development' and an accompanying online website in English and French. The syndicated feature service of the magazine meant that articles were republished in Africa and elsewhere, in English and French (632 times in 164 media outlets). And in 2019 it was reported that translations of the SDGs were available in 66 local languages (United Nations, 2019, p. 24).

Despite these efforts, as is clear, many initiatives have been piecemeal and ad hoc, and many stakeholders still cannot access vital information on sustainability (beyond the SDGs themselves) in a language or via a media that is easily accessible. An independent report commissioned by UN DESA (2013, p. 1) discussed the means of "strengthening public participation … for sustainable development" noting with respect to public engagement "a lack of local language use" (p. 15) and the need to reach people in their local languages. This report highlighted the patchy nature of multilingual provision and stressed the dominance of English within the work of the UN calling for greater language diversity, and noting that many UN documents relating to sustainability remain untranslated into the UN's official languages, "let alone unofficial languages" (p. 20) hampering the participation of many. The report called for funding to be allocated to increase "multilingual capacity" (p. 20). Some 7 years later (at the time of writing) whilst there have been some developments, there is still significant room for improvement.

4 Critical Review

A shift to digital media has been a policy and strategic focus and practical endeavour at the UN, seen as a cost-effective and an efficient means of information transfer. However, the figures and analysis above, along with reports from UN personnel (United Nations, 2014a, 2015a, 2020), demonstrate that this is not a panacea. Many representatives attending the Committee on Information (United Nations, 2015a, 2020) have recently expressed deep concern with the widening gap between

developed and developing nations and emphasized that priority must be given to ensuring that information on the post-2015 SD agenda is disseminated in the first instance in all of the UN's six official languages (as stated in United Nations, 2015d, Resolution 69/324) to ensure "accountability, transparency, ownership and sustainability" and that daily press releases are made in all of the UN's languages and in a traditional format[17] enabling public and private sectors, as well as individuals, who do not have access to the internet or cannot read (but have access to radio), to engage with the work of the Organisation and express their views and values through "endogenous cultural" (p. 13) products. The report "notes with concern" (para 88) that many services provided for outreach and knowledge transfer are not available in all six official languages, with English dominating over all others.[18]

A minority of nations – the United States of America, Japan and South Africa – while agreeing with the sentiment of multilingualism, have pushed for "cost neutrality", noting that an unexpected request by the Organisation for an additional $13.8 million to expand multilingual provision at the 69th Session of the General Assembly (2014) must not be replicated. Delegates unanimously praised the work of the UN Information Centres, recognising their function and potential as important sites of information transfer in local languages. Calls were made for capacity building within these sites and for allocating financial resources to support their work.[19] Moreover, special attention to the development of communication capabilities and infrastructure in developing nations to eliminate current disparities in information flows was mapped as a priority, with co-operation encouraged within and across nations and regions. Overall, the need to engage with "a new world information and communication order, seen as an evolving and continuous process" (p. 13), was recognized as fundamental to the successful dissemination and implementation of UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The reality is, however, that in responding to an ever-increasing workload and reduced budgets the actions proposed in recent Resolutions on Multilingualism entertain the continuation of linguistic parsimony and the mainstreaming of digital media – a continuation of what some may see as a "digital apartheid" (Graham, 2011). Networked communication technology is inaccessible to many, and/or material posted on sites is in a language or in cyberspaces that are not accessible to all[20] – especially those nations, vulnerable communities and individuals specifically targeted by the SDGs. Where measures have been taken to increase translation into

[17] In contrast to the limited availability of e-resources, 75% of households are reported to have radios (UNESCO, 2014). Arguably the use of traditional media should be prioritized in the Department's planning.

[18] As documented by Zaugg et al. (2022), UNESCO – following the UN's declaration of 'The International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032) – has asserted that they will attempt to focus efforts on expanding digital support for Indigenous languages.

[19] Some report a decline in materials available in the official (let alone local) languages, e.g. Belarus reports a decline in Russian material, only receiving information in English which they claim to be "of no use". Moreover, the budget has remained at the same level since 1995.

[20] See Graham's (2011) discussion of physical and "existential" divides.

official and local languages using cost-effective and cost-neutral means, problems persist. For example, whilst the use of voluntary services such as partnerships with universities is beneficial, it is neither free nor efficient. Interns' work is comparatively slower than that of professional translators and has to be supervised and checked to ensure it meets the editorial consistency and standards of quality expected by the UN. Moreover, many of these agreements have been forged in developed nations. Information and news material in the source language (most notably English) frequently precede those in other languages and not all languages are translated. Russian and Chinese representatives in particular lodged objections to the unfair representation of the official languages on the UN sites.[21] Further, while a move towards recycling texts previously translated for other purposes has meant a reduction in translation costs, arguably their reproduction does not fully service the needs of their new context of use, nor carry the same pragmatic force.

The DGC's dissemination of the SDGs and information related to sustainability is constrained by, and rooted in, the Organisation's policy and practice. The reality for the Department (as for other departments of the UN) is that mandates have expanded; expectations by delegates and stakeholders have grown, yet resources have shrunk. This situation has led to operational and participatory gaps. Staff and member states at the UN find themselves working within an increasingly technologically-oriented organisational culture which favours a minority of the Organisation's languages and imposes developed-country norms of communication. Some delegates report feeling excluded or disadvantaged, receiving information at a slower rate or not in the officially recognized organisational language that they would prefer to work in. Transference of information to the outside world is also limited by these operational constraints and the work of individual Information Centres is forced to rely on ad hoc partnerships with external agencies.

Bridging the digital divide is far from easy and still would not solve the myriad barriers to access to information about sustainable development for key stakeholders. Statistics garnered in recent years shows that the reality is that approximately half of the world's population still remains off-line. The top 20 countries (with the greatest number of users) constitute approximately 70% of total world usage. National penetration rates (i.e. percentage of the population with access to the internet) vary considerably. The difference between developed and developing nations and geographic regions is particularly marked, as shown in Table 3 and Fig. 2.

A continuing linguistic divide exists: English remains dominant as the content language on the internet,[22] far outstripping the presence of other languages internationally, as shown in Table 4 and Fig. 3.

[21] It is interesting to note that the Division of Sustainable Development (Department of Economic and Social Affairs) conducted on-line consultations in English, Spanish and Chinese (only) to support the preparation of the Global Sustainability Report.

[22] Zaugg et al. (2022) note that linguistic digital marginalisation reflects wider power dynamics, particularly due to digital technologies being developed in the (English-speaking countries of the) UK and USA. Although see Danet and Herring (2007) for examples of other languages (including code-switching) on the internet.

Table 3 Penetration rates per country with highest number of users with UN Economic Categorisation (June 2020) (https://www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm)

Number	Country or Region	Penetration (% population)	Economies
1	China	62.8%	Developing (E Asia)
2	India	40.6%	Developing (S Asia)
3	USA	89.8%	Major developed
4	Indonesia	64.1%	Developing (E Asia)
5	Brazil	70.8%	Developing (S America)
6	Nigeria	61.2%	Developing (W Africa)
7	Japan	93.5%	Major developed
8	Russia	79.7%	Economy in transition
9	Bangladesh	54.8%	Developing (S Asia)
10	Mexico	69.5%	Developing
11	Germany	96%	Major developed
12	Philippines	72.1%	Developing (E Asia)
13	Turkey	81.9%	Developing (W Asia)
14	Viet Nam	70.4%	Developing (E Asia)
15	United Kingdom	93.6%	Major developed
16	Iran	80.5%	Developing (S Asia)
17	France	92.3%	Major developed
18	Thailand	81.7%	Developing (E Asia)
19	Italy	92.5%	Developed (EU)
20	Egypt	48.1%	Developing (N Africa)

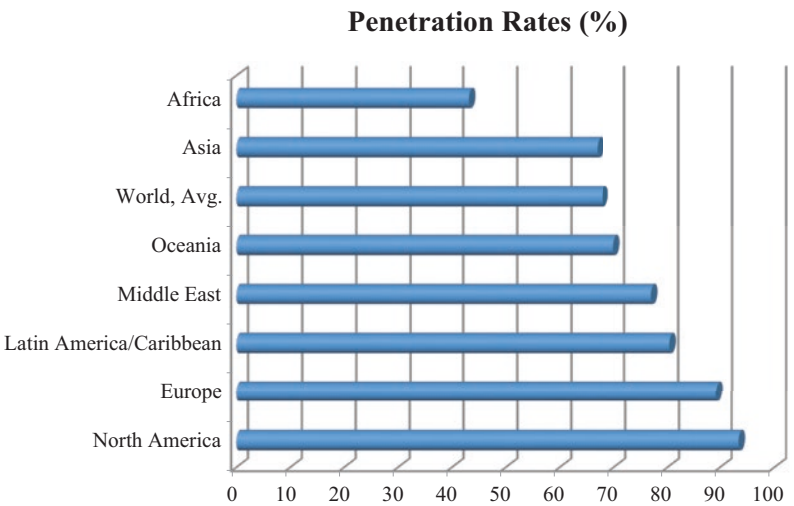

Fig. 2 Penetration rates (%) by geographic region (June 2022). (www.internetworldststs.com/stats.htm)

Table 4 Top 10 Languages on the internet (in millions of users). (www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm) March 31 2020

Country	Millions of users
English	1186
Chinese	888
Spanish	363
Arabic	237
Portuguese	171
Indonesian	198
French	151
Japanese	118
Russian	116
German	92
Other languages	1060

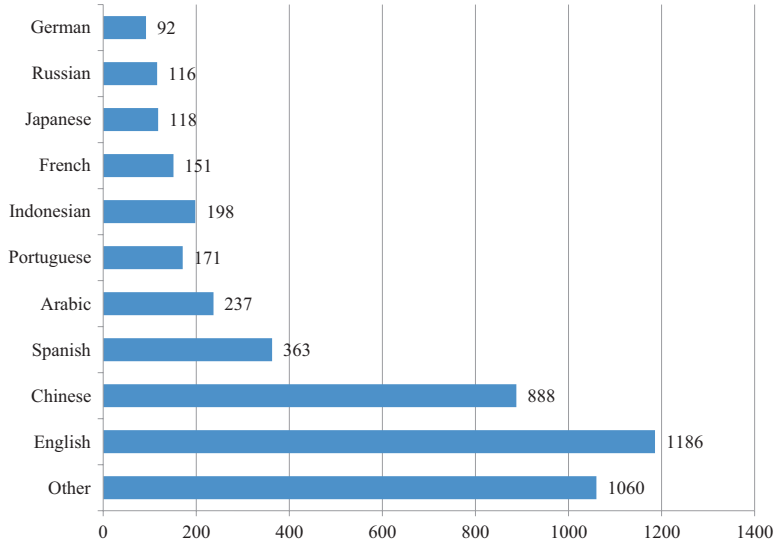

Fig. 3 Top 10 languages in the internet (in millions of users) March 31 2020. (https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm)

Many languages use a non-Latin script; many others use an elaborated version of the Latin alphabet which is not catered for in current technology. For the internet to function globally it must be able to accommodate multilingual scripts and alphabets.

Nations most in need, particularly those recognized as most "vulnerable" in the "Report of the Open Working Group on the General Assembly on the SDGs Agenda" (United Nations, 2014b, Items 14, 19 (a) and 118): African states; least developed countries; small island states, and developing land-locked states, middle-income countries and countries in conflict often have the most diverse multilingual

populations to address and service. At national levels they experience problems of infrastructure, finance, technology and capacity-building, not to mention social and political barriers to information transfer, such as educational, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic disparities. Indigenous communities,[23] the poor, disabled, and women (to name but a few groups) remain excluded. Nations with the highest linguistic diversity are reported to have the highest percentage of children (over 70% of the world's population) not in education globally (Pinnock, 2009). Indeed, statistics on adult and youth literacy reveal that, among young illiterates, 59% are female (UNESCO, 2015; https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/literacy/ downloaded January 2020). Most of these girls are from sub-Saharan Africa, East and South Asia, and the Pacific – and from minority communities (ethnic, linguistic, religious) (Romaine, 2013, p. 7; UNESCO, 2010). And where internet facilities are available and accessible to literate girls in telecentres or internet cafes, these may be highly masculinized spaces closed to women.

The availability of Wi-Fi connection is limited to the rich. Internet access in many African states is below 5%, with electricity functioning intermittently and for a few hours each day. Fixed broadband is still not accessible for most Africans and adoption of digital skills is reported by the World Bank to be 50% of the global average (Ibeh, 2020; Madden & Kanos, 2020). In Ghana, for example, internet access can cost almost all of the average income (Schuppan, 2009). In rural Africa approximately 70% of the population speak a local language and English is mainly inaccessible. Zaugg (2020) notes that support for African languages and scripts online fall behind others and therefore those with digital access often use colonial languages or the Latin script, creating additional barriers for those who do not have command of these codes. Indeed, the majority of Africans find their official language difficult to understand (Mackey, 1989 in Romaine, 2013) and a minority of African languages are supported in higher education (Ouane & Glanz, 2010 in Romaine, 2013. p. 10). Romaine (2013, p. 7) notes that "a third (30.5%, N = 2,110) of the world's languages and a third of the world's poor" live in Africa, with greatest poverty and under-development existing in the linguistically diverse countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Africa continues to struggle with development, experiencing difficulties in accessing information and knowledge and, as a consequence, remains cut off from contributing to knowledge creation and development. Without the ability to engage in discussions about development in their local languages key stakeholders will remain isolated from the global development agenda. This situation applies as much to nations in Africa as minority communities in comparatively wealthy nations.

These linguistic and technological barriers hamper policy transfer[24] from all sources, beginning top-down from the UN itself, since national representatives and key stakeholders have insufficient information about the SDGs, and sustainability in general, to share and impart to their governments and people. Transfer of

[23] Indigenous populations constitute around 15% of the world's poorest peoples and speak 60% of the world's languages (Nettle and Romaine, 2000; United Nations, 2018).

[24] See Dolowitz and Marsh's (2000) discussion of factors leading to failure in policy transfer. Also see Flammia and Saunders' (2007) discussion of "language as power" on the internet.

information and knowledge is often incomplete, and, as a consequence, transfer of policy or programmes may be inappropriate. Information and the way in which it is communicated play a vital role in popularising the SDGs and in nurturing ownership among governments and stakeholders.

So how might the UN attempt to remedy the situation?

4.1 A Tri-Sectoral Communication Network Strategy *for Information Transfer*

Policies and practices must be directed to ensuring greater linguistic and media equity and inclusion, first at the organisational level (including key departments, agencies, programmes and funds – among them ICs) in order for member states to be able to debate and take action; and then at regional, national and local levels to facilitate universal access to information about sustainability.[25] Mainstreaming digital media is not a panacea. The realities of the "digital divide" must be one of the main policy issues addressed by the UN, with priority given to ensuring that the dissemination of information about the SDGs and sustainability is not only digitally transferred but also conveyed using traditional media (radio, television, newspapers, printed documents) in local languages. Given the UN's capacity constraints, this work will demand systematic and reliable network building and multisector collaboration between civil society (e.g. NGOs), the public sector (states and international/national organisations) and the "for-profit" private sector, to establish regulatory frameworks, infrastructure, funding, education and research. Such "trisectoral" networks (Reinicke et al., 2000, p. 28) will bring local partners and the general public, knowledgeable about social and cultural norms and restrictions, into the global debate and mission.

In networked collaboration there is always a danger that responsibility will become diffuse. However, it is the role of the UN to develop and support these networks by establishing guidance, frameworks, and indicators of success, thereby facilitating collaboration and providing advice on identifying key actors and organisations that can provide linguistic and technological support at global, regional and local levels. In short, the UN should support the development and maintenance of these networks, and contribute to and monitor their effective operation. As in any of the UN's projects, networks have been acknowledged as "not just a policy choice but an operational imperative if [the UN] is to meet its goals effectively and efficiently". Such networks, if properly established, will ensure the inclusion of "the

[25] UNESCO already recognizes that developments in information and communication technology are imperative for economic and social development. They are understood as fundamental to the eradication of poverty in developing countries. But UNESCO also recognizes major disparities between and within developed and developing countries. The first international forum focussing on 'Multilingualism in Cyberspace for Inclusive Sustainable Development' (co-hosted by UN IITE) took place in June 2017.

disempowered and marginalised constituencies" (Reinicke et al., 2000, p. 92) such as indigenous communities, women and the poor. Moreover, networks may be initiated and managed bottom-up (e.g. see Zaugg et al. (2022) on grassroots endeavours), facilitating the adaptation of global policies to local situations.

In conveying the goals for sustainable development and in ensuring their successful implementation, the UN needs therefore to develop an effective system-wide communication and information policy and *programme*[26] based on a network approach as proposed above. A typical network would include voluntary contributions from interest groups and civil society, including national and transnational NGOs[27]; financial and technical support from local and/or global businesses, banks and corporations in targeted settings; and co-ordination, legislation, advice, research and training from institutions and bodies within states and within the UN.

In developing a communication and information policy and programme, consideration needs to be given to a number of issues. These may include, e.g.:

(i) The reception of the *goals* of the programme – whether or not these will be voluntarily taken up or involve coercion in particular settings.
(ii) *Agents, institutions and organisations* necessary for knowledge, for information transfer and for training at global, regional and local levels (e.g. UN personnel, elected officials, civil servants, academics, NGOs, communication and technology businesses and transnational corporations, consultants, language specialists – including interpreters and translators).
(iii) *The management of the path* of transfer and consideration of the *sectors and communities* involved – from UN to State to local authorities, contexts and communities, including a consideration of the linguistic and technological and media needs at each level.
(iv) *Investments and resource requirements* in infrastructure and capacity building for information and communication transfer, including funding (public/private donors), staffing, training and equipment (financial and otherwise, e.g. material, personnel).
(v) The t*ype* of transfer and *sharing* of resources globally/regionally/nationally – linguistic and media (traditional/Internet). Whether innovating materials and media or using those produced elsewhere, in global, national or regional contexts.
(vi) *Barriers* which may impede multilingual transfer of information at national or local levels. These may be structural or arise from a host of other factors – political, institutional, socio-economic, socio-cultural, technological, linguistic, attitudinal, etc.

[26] A distinction is made between policy (meaning a statement of intent and broad plan of action) and programme (meaning the actions necessary in order to effectively implement policy).

[27] The civil society sector is now quite large and has direct access to sources of international funding. Donor organisations (particularly those supporting projects in developing nations) often prefer to provide funds through NGOs and other civil society groups rather than government organisations (Reinicke et al., 2000).

(vii) *Targets* – minimum and maximum targets, nuanced for different contexts. Common but differentiated responsibilities[28] should be determined including consideration of speed of progress and stages of delivery.

(viii) Planning for a r*eview* of progress at local/national, regional and global levels. At local level such a review should involve: Government representatives, officials, civil society, business, language specialists, etc. At regional level countries can share experiences and address common issues and problems. At global level political fora on SDGs and information will monitor progress, identify difficulties, recommend and support action.

Examples of successful ad hoc public–private collaborations are already available, particularly in the work carried out by some Information Centres (as discussed above) which have experienced decreasing or stable budgets and have drawn on the expertise and assistance of multiple agencies within and outside the UN to produce materials, traditional media products and internet resources. Some, as noted above, have formed partnerships with broadcasting stations. To date, however, there is insufficient information about such partnerships and the impact on their potential audiences.[29] Other successful partnerships in enacting sustainability have been reported in Reinicke et al. (2000) and by the UN itself.[30]

5 Conclusion

Access to knowledge is one of the UN's indices for human development, but to achieve development and to find long-term sustainable solutions to global challenges a collective effort must be made. These efforts must prioritize the development of networks of support involving multiple partners across various ecologies, prioritising the involvement of local stakeholder communities, in the languages of those communities, in order to ensure take-up and support of policy goals. Knowledge cannot be transferred without access to media and sources of information that can be easily accessed and understood. Inequity in information transfer

[28] The notion of "common but differentiated rights" was proposed by the Center for Economic and Social Rights (2015). They argue that some countries, particularly developed countries, bear greater responsibility for sustainable development given the impact they have had on the global environment and their command of superior resources (financial and technological): "These differentiated responsibilities should be reflected and concretely captured when States are crafting targets, commitments and indicators regarding the means of implementation for the post-2015 agendas" (p. 1). They assert that their contributions should not only focus on aid but also on co-operating in mobilising resources for universal cultural, economic and social rights.

[29] Information about those partnerships and their "multiplying impact" was requested at the 37th session of the Committee on Information (United Nations, 2015a, p. 26, paras 62, 63).

[30] For example, they report on training provided by Deloitte on the UN Compact on Global Management which was delivered in five local networks using local languages (see https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnership/?p=1035).

will only lead to persistent problems in tackling global issues of (for example) poverty, hunger, gender equality and literacy.

Whilst acknowledging some positive developments, we have to conclude that the current information and language policy and practice at the UN is too limited to support the effective transfer of the SDGs and information on sustainability to diverse multilingual and technologically supported settings. The problem is not simply economic but also social, cultural and political. There are many reasons for lack of access to information at the organisational level and even more complicated reasons within the field, as noted above (e.g. age, gender, social status differences within national and local settings, political barriers). The UN has for reasons of economics and efficiency prioritized digital work streams and the use of lingua franca and these factors have impacted negatively on information transfer. They have engendered practices which exclude and/or discriminate against those whose preference is for a language other than English and who do not have easy access to digital media. Under such circumstances national representatives and stakeholders find themselves without the information and knowledge to engage with and respond to issues initiated at the interstate level.

The Report of the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on the SDGs (United Nations, 2014b) called aspirationally for the Organisation to "strive to increase access to information and communication technology … to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020" so that by 2030 "people everywhere [should] have the information and awareness of sustainable development" ensuring "public access to information" (paras 12.8, 16.10). Attempting to bridge the "digital divide" within and outside the Organisation must not, as argued above, be seen as a panacea: information technology cannot combat structural and social pressures of discrimination and inequality. Attention to traditional modes of information transfer must also be considered in order to reach the widest possible audience. Nuanced plans and networks are needed to meet the needs of diverse contexts. It is incontestable that information societies can address global problems more easily; however, the efforts needed to reach "people everywhere" will demand more than the provisions and plans currently in place. Co-ordinated and strategic support from a multitude of agents, communities and organisations will be essential. Bringing these together in networks of super-state, state and sub-state partnerships to facilitate access to multilingual information and to enable engagement in debate and problem-solving for the successful transference and implementation of the SDGs should be prioritized as a goal in itself. Without it, sustainability cannot take root.

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