

**Presentation for Dóchas Safeguarding Working Group**  
**20 October 2020**  
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# THE TRANSLATABILITY OF SAFEGUARDING TERMINOLOGY:

linguistic and cultural challenges for  
non-governmental organisations



# AGENDA

- Research questions
- Methodology
- Questionnaire findings
- Interviews
- Key findings
- Recommendations



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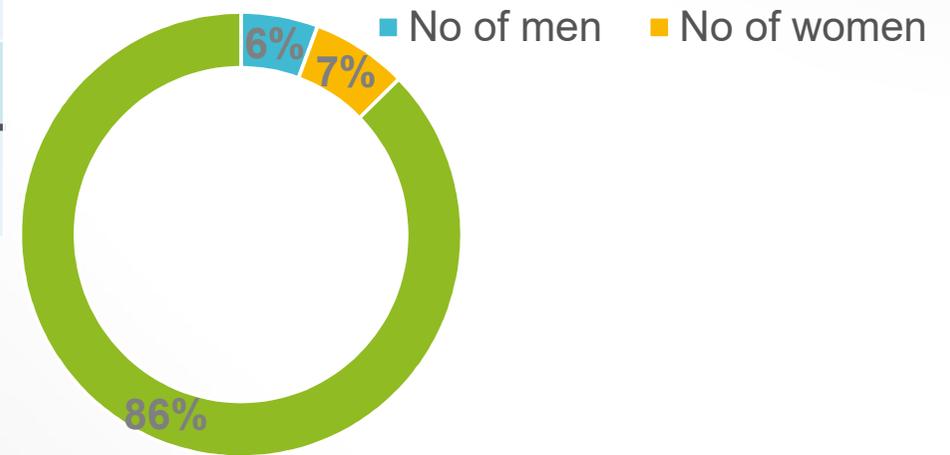
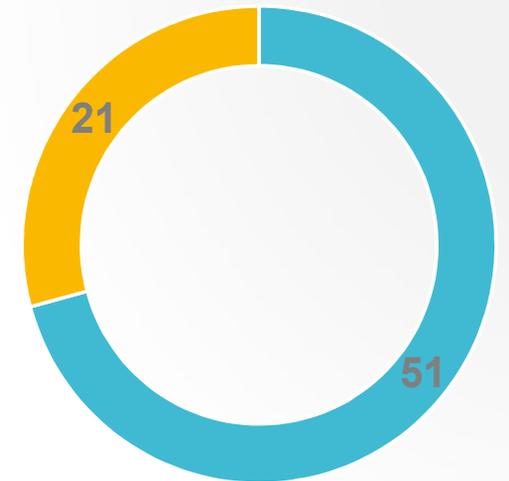


# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent can safeguarding terminology which is commonly used in the anglophone humanitarian sector be translated into other languages and cultures?
2. What are the linguistic and cultural challenges that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) may be facing during the implementation and monitoring of their internal safeguarding measures in their countries of operation?

# QUESTIONNAIRES & INTERVIEWS

Country of Origin	No of participants
DRC	34
Niger	23
Sierra Leone	15
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>72</b>



■ Primary School ■ Secondary School ■ Higher Education

10 interviews



## QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS – DRC: 34 PARTICIPANTS

- 10 different mother tongues among participants
- 72% of participants had to relocate for their work with Concern
- 47% confirmed that they have a different mother tongue to that of the communities they work with
- 47% either strongly agree or agree that language is a barrier between Concern staff and the local communities with whom they work

## QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS – NIGER: 23 PARTICIPANTS

- 6 different mother tongues among participants
- 57% of participants had to relocate for their work with Concern
- 30% confirmed that they have a different mother tongue to that of the communities they work with
- 52% either strongly agree or agree that language is a barrier between Concern staff and the local communities with whom they work

## QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS – SIERRA LEONE: 15 PARTICIPANTS

- 5 different mother tongues among participants
- 87% of participants had to relocate for their work with Concern
- 60% confirmed that they have a different mother tongue to that of the communities they work with
- 60% either strongly agree or agree that language is a barrier between Concern staff and the local communities with whom they work

## QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS – COMPREHENSION TEST

49 of the 72 respondents (68%) rated their level of their written working language as 'fluent'.

18 respondents (25%) said 'good', and

5 respondents (7%) didn't reply.

**None of the respondents rated their understanding of spoken or written English/French as limited or non-existent.**

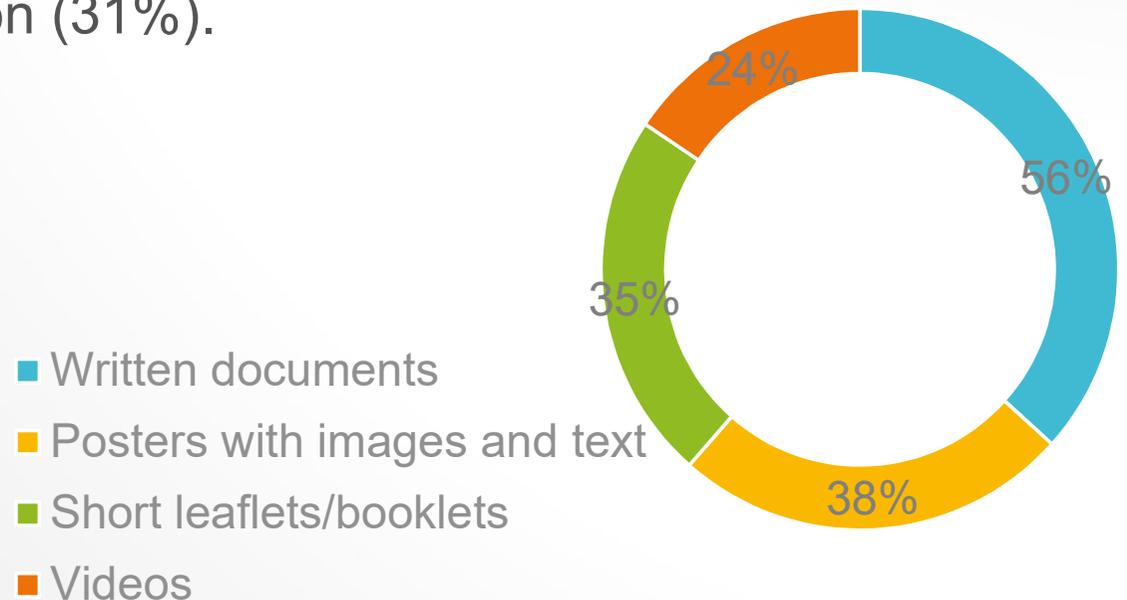


# QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS – PREFERENCES

The most popular language for safeguarding training and making a safeguarding complaint is the Concern working language (94%).

Participants in all three countries prefer to make a safeguarding complaint by email (60%), followed by in person (31%).

*Preferred format for receiving information on safeguarding in Concern DRC, Niger and Sierra Leone*



# INTERVIEWS

“In Bangladesh, we accept that everybody speaks English, but that’s not true. [...] I did the rollout in Bangladesh and [...] luckily, I speak Bangla, so I could do the training in Bangla. But when you ask questions, whether it was in Syria, Iraq or Bangladesh or Sudan, and ask them **‘have you signed the documents?’**. **‘Yes, we did, because you asked me to sign them’**. **‘Have you understood it, have you read it?’** **‘No, I can’t understand what you’ve given’**. It’s a massive problem.”

# INTERVIEWS

“I also think that **whenever we engage with partner organisations or someone in the fields**, whenever we recruit someone, even if it’s just temporary, **we do require them to read and sign the Concern Code of Conduct and P4**. The problem is that even if you make them read it, **it’s not sure that they actually understand what it says in there**. Especially because it is in French and when you’re in the field, the level of understanding French is very low. What I do with my staff is to explain to them what it says and means. Sometimes it works very well, but sometimes especially **when you’re in the field and it’s quite rushed and everything is happening very quickly, it can be overlooked sometimes**. It can be like ‘this is allowed’ and ‘this is not allowed’. I think we need to make sure that everyone understands what it says and what they are signing.”

# INTERVIEWS

**“People don’t understand the concepts. They feel you just want to abuse them. If you translate it into local language, it feels very harsh. Sometimes they misunderstand. You have to explain to them those words so that they can understand. It’s challenging. I tell them that there are words that I have to translate to the local language and that we may see an immoral translation according to their conception. This is not for you to feel bad, it’s just to translate the exact words from English. [..]. In some of the meetings with staff, they would shout or laugh. For them, it’s funny.”**

# INTERVIEWS

“The word prostitute for example, we don’t use the word prostitute, or we shouldn’t be in English. We usually use commercial sex worker. **When I use the word sex worker translated into French ‘travailleuse du sexe’, people think it’s the funniest thing I’ve ever said in my life.** And so basically, I had to say prostitutes in French because for them that didn’t translate to what they thought it meant.”

## KEY FINDINGS

- The majority of participants in this research feel that languages present a barrier between staff and the local communities they work with.
- Despite training, comprehension levels of policy terms and definitions remain low among local staff.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Languages and translation requirements are not considered a priority when planning and implementing safeguarding policies and procedures. This starts already at donor level.
- Attempts to overcome linguistic and cultural challenges are mainly driven by HQ and are focused on *linguae francae* which results in safeguarding policies and procedures being considered as tick-box exercises.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Humanitarian jargon and lack of planning at both HQ and country-level leads to language and cultural barriers affecting communication and participation with local staff, partners and communities.
- By relying on bi- or multilingual staff to deliver training or translate training content in an area which may not be their expertise and in which they may not be fully trained in, the risks for mistranslations are high. Their translations might be influenced by several factors, such as non-fluency in the target language, misunderstanding of terminology or concepts in the source language and/or bias towards the INGO's safeguarding concepts due to their cultural and social norms and realities.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Engage with local staff, partners and communities** and draw on their linguistic and cultural knowledge to translate humanitarian concepts and terms into the local languages.
- Use this dialogue with staff, partners and communities to develop **multilingual glossaries** in the languages of the organisation and the local languages.
- Develop **language maps** for the programme areas to support the implementation of safeguarding measures and inform staff about the language requirements in the different areas.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- At the design phase of a project, carry out **language needs assessments** and include language and translation requirements in the project cycle.
- Include a **budget line for translation and interpreting** as part of your programme budget.
- Draw on internal linguistic and cultural knowledge by engaging with local staff and looking at **lessons learned from existing programmes**, such as gender equality programmes.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- Use **plain language texts for policies and procedures** and draw on existing resources within the sector, such as Translators without Borders, to develop and translate these plain language texts into your organisation languages as well as the local languages of your programmes areas.
- Carry out **comprehension testing with staff, partners and communities** to ensure safeguarding policies, procedures and reporting mechanisms are fully understood.
- Be creative and innovative when disseminating your safeguarding message by using a variety of formats. This approach should be informed through dialogue with staff, partners and communities. **Remember a one-size-fits-all approach is rarely effective.**

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide **translation and interpreting training for your bilingual/multilingual staff** which focuses on safeguarding messages, humanitarian concepts, translation ethics and cultural challenges during the translation and interpreting process.
- Include language and translation requirements as part of your programme discussions when **networking with other humanitarian actors or working in consortiums**.
- Look at and learn from **existing research and innovative solutions within the sector** when addressing linguistic and cultural challenges.