



Partnering for Change: Link Research to Societal Challenges

Video Transcript

Mobile pastoralists and communication challenges

[Prof. Dr. Jakob Zinsstag] Mobile pastoralists face many challenges when it comes to find basic healthcare. There are, for instance, numerous environmental and societal hazards. In addition, these groups are often culturally very diverse and move in a multilingual context. How do we best think about communication in such a setting?

After all, it is key if you want to create basic healthcare. To answer the relevant questions, I am happy to introduce you to Kristina Pelikan. She is a linguist who participates in our projects. She is our guide when it comes to issues of multilingualism and communication.

[Dr. Kristina Pelikan] Thank you, Jacob. Indeed, I'm very much interested in questions that concern communication and multicultural and multilingual projects. After all, if you want to collaborate productively, we need to communicate efficiently. And this with all parties that are involved.

The first question we need to ask is how to best discern the different parts of communication at work in a project. In fact, you might distinguish between two parts of communication. On the one hand, there's the internal communication, that is the communication among project partners.

On the other hand, there's external communication. This is the communication that, for instance, disseminates findings or conclusions like the results published about a research. External communication is a highly discussed and well-elaborated topic. Internal communication, on the other hand, is often neglected.

The same is true for multilingualism of research projects that are transdisciplinary. As a result, the essential backbone of efficient collaboration is often not considered soundly enough. This neglect concerns also the project's language. In research projects, multiple languages are often used. They include the languages that are spoken by a majority of the project partners and the local languages used doing field work or local workshops.

[Prof. Dr. Jakob Zinsstag] Indeed, in our projects we are exposed to many different cultures and languages. For example, in Chad, on the shore of Lake Chad, there are Gorane, Fulani, and Arabic communities all living closely together and having their own specific animal husbandry system. They speak Fulani, Gorane or Arabic languages.



If we want to communicate with them, we need translation to French or English. This was the case, for instance, with this Fulani chief in Chad. Similarly, in Mali, we engage with Tuareg pastoralists who speak Kel Tamachek. There are also Fulani, or people speaking Bambara or French.

However, most often, a direct communication is not possible unless scientists like Anna Münch, become fluent in Kel Tamachek and Arabic. Then they can talk directly to the people.

[Dr. Kristina Pelikan] In transdisciplinary research, it is very important to differentiate between two forms of multilingualism: interlingual multilingualism on the one hand and intralingual multilingualism on the other hand. Please keep in mind that all members of a project should develop awareness for both types.

Jakob has just described the number of languages encountered in Chad and Mali. We describe this as interlingual multilingualism: the use of different languages spoken by different communities in an area. If in such an environment, a language exists that all participants understand, this would be a shared language, a Lingua Franca.

However, which Lingua Franca should be used, needs careful reflection. Using, for instance, English as shared language for all projects causes difficulties. It intensifies issues concerning power that already exist due to a number of dimensions.

These issues concern hierarchy, physical location, and the fact that both native and non-native English speakers are involved in research collaboration. Therefore, we recommend to decide which language to use for every phase of the project separately.

If research is done in a foreign language, less knowledge is acquired than while doing this in the mother tongue. This has an important influence on the outcome of a transdisciplinary research project that should not be underestimated.

[Prof. Dr. Jakob Zinsstag] Let me illustrate what Kristina explained. In Chad, we speak mostly French between scientists. If non-French speakers join in, we switch to English. However, many Chadian partners do not understand English well and therefore cannot contribute to the discussion.

In the field, on the other hand, most people do not speak French. We need translators in order to translate from Chadian Arabic or Fulani to French. The work thus requires a lot of time and becomes cumbersome. Especially in a transdisciplinary project it is important to be sensitive to culture and languages. We need to decide conscientiously in every phase of a project which language we use for what reason and which consequences our decision might have.



[Dr. Kristina Pelikan] Let us now investigate intralingual multilingualism. This is the term for the multilingualism in a given language, for instance, English. Every academic discipline uses terminologies that are specific to it and so does every local group. These specific terminologies form the intralingual multilingualism: different concepts in the same language we need to consider.

A project team needs to discuss how to transmit specific terms, for instance, belonging to medical terminology. How should these terms be explained, paraphrased, or replaced by images? It also helps to implement a terminology that is specific for the project.

Consider that every term denotes not only a single word, but refers to a concept. These specific concepts need to be known and transferred if you translate, be it between individual languages or an intralingual translation.

In a multilingual research context, decision making and communication share an objective. They have to shape processes in which multilingual stakeholders are involved. They should ensure that this happens in an equitable way.

In order to achieve this, a project needs to consider all language groups that are represented. In such a project, it is mandatory to develop a multilingual project management, as well as clear concepts for communication.

[Prof. Dr. Jakob Zinsstag] Intralingual multilingualism brings us back to the health issues pastoralists are facing and how they relate to the health system. In our projects, we cannot use medical terminology when we talk with pastoralists. They often have no formal education.

However, they are excellent observers. And would also know, for instance, the genealogy of their animals to the sixth generation. So what do we do? A good approach is to ask them about signs and symptoms of illnesses. The quality of their observation and how well they describe these signs and symptoms then often helps us to identify the medical terms.

Mobile pastoralists like those in Chad are almost completely without any health service. If we want to address the most urgent needs, we need to prioritise. The priorities include preventive childhood vaccinations, mother and child health, control of the rampant malnutrition, and control of infectious diseases, like malaria and tuberculosis.

Thank you, Kristina. From this very brief and incomplete description, it becomes evident that developing better healthcare involves several requirements. The communities need to engage with the authorities and technical experts. All participating groups need to be willing to listen to each other and to learn to understand across multiple languages and cultures.