Language barriers to e-discussions – what are the options?

Resource type: provisional guidance
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We have developed the following options or scenarios, each involving a different type of e-discussion with different aspects around language. It is hard to cost the options exactly, as not knowing how many participants will be non-English speakers in each case (it's difficult to estimate, for example, the number of translators needed and the amount of work they would be doing). We have also tried to indicate the pros and cons of each option, and say whether the cost would be low, medium or high. Each option is based on one e-discussion, lasting 3 days.

Option 1: English language discussion

This is the standard option – an e-discussion in English only without the use of translation technology or project team multilingual support.

Strengths and opportunities
This is the lowest cost option and should be, relatively speaking, straightforward to organise and run. Our previous experience indicates that many participants, who do not have English as a first language but do read and write English, are able to contribute.

Weaknesses and risks
This option is Anglo-centric in principle, and offers no opportunities for non-English speakers to contribute in their first language.

Roles / responsibilities / allocation
This option would require:
- Lead Convenor: this person is the discussion 'host'. They have a strong understanding of the thematic area and the key actors. They can quickly digest and synthesise posts, introducing their own commentary, considering the implications of posts for the wider discussion, and carefully picking moments to contribute themselves. They can reach out to participants and make them feel comfortable and welcome.
- Supporting Convenor / facilitator: This person supports the convenor and takes on a facilitation role; helping to create invitation lists, inviting participants to the discussion, sending communications and generating a pre-discussion 'buzz', addressing logistical issues, and reaching out to participants to help create an enabling environment for contribution.

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- Tech support: This person is the point of referral for complex tech issues, platform uptime and overall operation, out of hours participant support.
- Project co-ordinator / moderator: This person coordinates the project team and project timeline, advises on strategy and tactics, sets up the platform, brings participants into the space, provides tech support and produces participation reports.
- Summary writer: This person writes a daily summary of the key points made in the e-discussion.

Role	Before	During	After
Lead Convenor	3	0.5 days per day of discussion	0.5
Supporting Convenor / Facilitator	10	1 day per day of discussion	3
Technical support	0.25	0.5	0.25
Project co-ordinator / moderator	4	1 day per day of discussion	1
Summary writer	0.5	0.5 day per day of discussion	1

Project team time: 35 days
Direct costs: none
(This is the lowest cost option)

Option 2: Multilingual discussion using translation technology

This option would use a platform such as UN Teamworks[1], which has an automated translation function for many languages. 'Stand by' multilingual project team support would also be needed to check the translation is working ok and to provide any behind the scenes support for non-English speaking participants.

Strengths and opportunities
The automated translation would mean there would be no disruption to the discussion time flow and a free flow of ideas would be possible, regardless of language used. Depending on the platform used, email notifications could also be in several languages.

Weaknesses and risks
Automated translation is not always 100% accurate. While UN Teamworks say that they have recently held discussions with automated translation into Arabic which had no problems, it would still be wise to have multilingual project team support to spot and resolve any misunderstandings due to translation. Multilingual support would also be needed for offline activities (invitations, communication materials, tech support etc).

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[1] https://www.unteamworks.org/

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Roles / responsibilities / allocation (additional to Option 1)
- Stand-by multilingual project team support: responding to individuals with support issues, translating communication materials, monitoring threads to check issues, proof-reading summaries etc.

Role	Before	During	After
Multilingual project team support (per 'official' event language	1	0.25 days per day of the event	0 (for translation of post-event outputs see Option 3)

Project team time: Option 1 plus 1.75 days per language supported. If we assume 5 languages = 8.75
Direct costs: see UNDP packages of support services
(This is a medium cost option)

Option 3: English language discussion with translation of daily summaries and post-event outputs

This option incorporates all the features set out above in option 1, but in addition would need at least one person per 'participation language' in the project team who could be available at the end of each day to translate the daily summary.

Strengths and opportunities
No need to factor in real-time translation services, and support for non-English speaking participants would not been needed.

Weaknesses and risks
Summary translators would need to be available after the summary writer has finished (often late in the day). This option offers only limited help for non-English speakers, and it assumes that all participants can read and write English at some level. The translation work may delay the circulation of the daily summary by 2 – 3 hours.

Roles / responsibilities / allocation (additional to Option 1)
- Translator: translate end of day summaries and post-event outputs

Role	Before	During	After
Translator (per official event language)	.25	.33 days per day of discussion	1

Project team time: As option 1 plus 2.25 days per translator. If we assume 5 languages = 11.25
Direct costs: none

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(This is a low – medium cost option)

Option 4: Discussion with translation of posts for specific participants

This option incorporates all the features set out in option 1, but also involves the provision of translation services to translate the posts of non-English speakers. One person per 'participation language' in the project team would need to be available at short notice to translate posts into English. Participants would be identified in advance and matched/connected with a translator. Some multilingual project team support might also be considered for discussion preparation and explanation.

Strengths and opportunities
This option would help the natural expression of ideas from non-English speakers, and there would be a limited impact on the flow of discussion.

Weaknesses and risks
The translation would lead to some delay in the flow of discussion. Timing issues would need to be organised; the translator needs to be available when the participant needs them. You would need to decide whether the participant should go ahead and post in their first language, or wait until the English translation is done. It would difficult to anticipate the level of challenges until you knew how many of the participants would need this service.

Roles / responsibilities / allocation (additional to Option 1)
- Translator: translate posts contributed by named individuals on demand
- Multilingual project team support: communicating the process with non-English speaking participants.

Role	Before	During	After
Translator (per official event language)	0.5	Up to 1 day per day of the discussion	0
Multilingual project team support (per official event language)	0.5	0	0

Project team time: As option 1 plus up to 3.5 days per translator and 0.5 days per multilingual support person. If we assume 5 languages = 20 days
Direct costs: none
(This is a medium cost option)

Option 5: Discussion with every post translated into several languages

This option incorporates all the features set out in options 1 and 3, but also requires project team capacity to translate all posts at short notice and provide multilingual support behind

the scenes. The translation could be done before posting (causing delays) or afterwards, with a delay of 1-2 hours.

Strengths and opportunities
This option enables free sharing of ideas in participants' first languages and doesn't exclude non-English speakers.

Weaknesses and risks
There will be a significant delay in posting translations, and problems could arise in quality of translation. Email notifications of new posts would still be in English. Translators would need to be available/in the same time zone as participants, so several may be needed for each language. Discussion facilitators would also need support in understanding the posts (or they could use an automated translation service like Google translate[2]). The scale and timing pressures are unpredictable, and the complexity adds risks of expectations not being met.

Roles / responsibilities / allocation (additional to Option 1)
- Multilingual project-team support: responding to individuals with support issues.
- Translator: translate all posts into all languages on-demand, as well as communication materials (for translation of summaries see option 3).

Role	Before	During	After
Multilingual project-team support (per 'official' event language	2	At least 1 day per day of discussion	.25
Translator (per official event language)	.5	Up to 1 day per day of discussion	0

Project team time: As option 1 plus at least 5.25 days per language for multilingual support. If we assume 5 languages = 26.25 days. Also add 3.5 days per translator. Total: 43.75 days
Direct costs: none
(This is a very high cost option)

Option 6: peer translation

This option incorporates all the features set out in option 1, but we would also identify friendly individuals who can be trusted and resourced to translate all or part of posts in non-English languages.

Strengths and opportunities
A spirit of non-exclusion is carried by the group.

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[2] https://translate.google.co.uk/

Weaknesses and risks
The translation may not be as accurate, timely or reliable as professional translation. There may be political issues about how posts are translated. The peer translators would need to be available when needed and across time zones.

Roles / responsibilities / allocation (additional to Option 1)
- Language helpers: provide ad-hoc support to translate key statements / posts to help non-English speakers get their message across

Role	Before	During	After
Language helpers (one per event language)	.25	At least .25 per day	0

Project team time: As Option 1 plus 1 day per official event language. If we assume 5 languages = 5 days
Direct costs: none
(This is a low – medium option)