



# Kuûmã\*

Guide to linguistic inclusion and justice

*Intended for organizations, institutions, groups or other entities interested in practices around linguistic justice and inclusion*

April 2022

ISDAO



Under the coordination of **Stéphane Simporé**, Director of Communications and Knowledge Management at ISDAO, this guide was written by **Alizée Aubertin** with the participation of the ISDAO team.

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**Kuûmã\*** means to speak, the word in Dioula and Bambara, languages spoken in several West African countries.

# Foreword

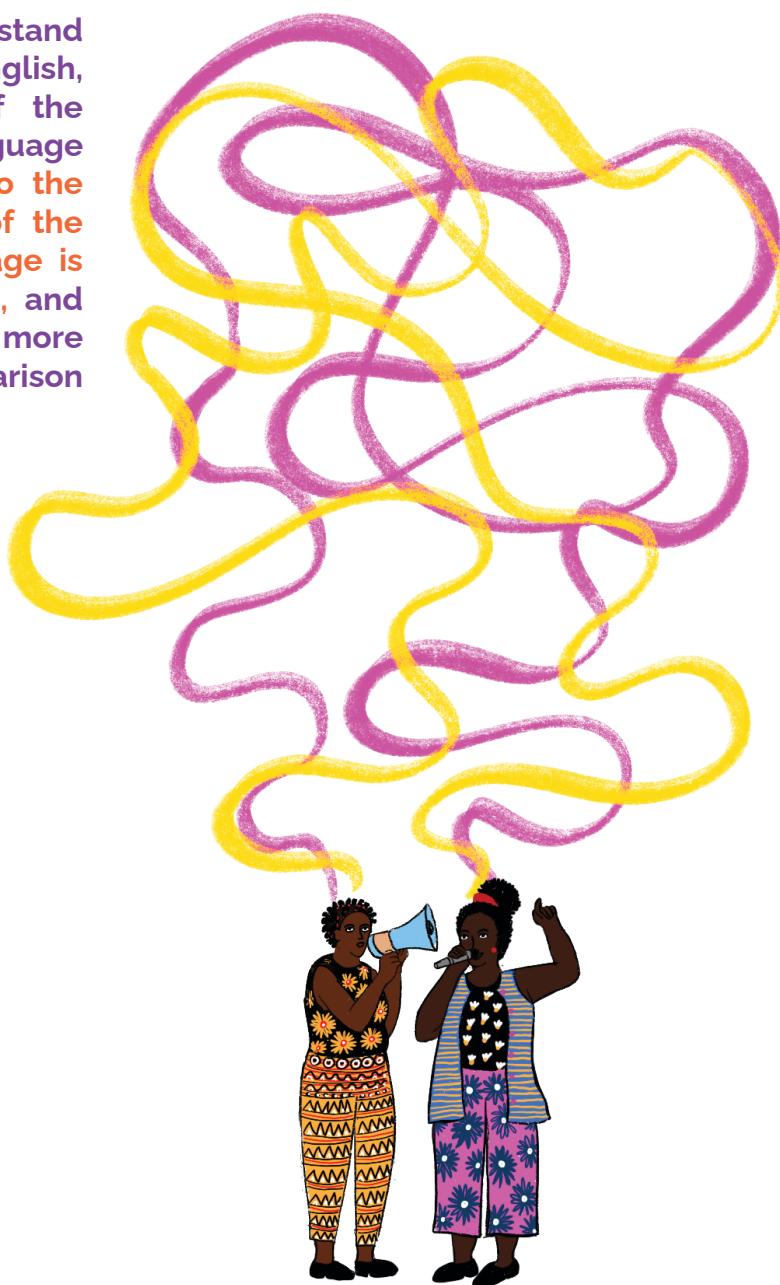
This guide was designed drawing from ISDAO's experiences in implementing practices to **promote linguistic justice and inclusion**.

This guide is not intended to be an exhaustive compendium of good practices in linguistic inclusion and justice. Moreover, this document is not a static document: **it remains a living document** - open for continued reflection and we look forward to updating it as we continue to learn from our practices around linguistic inclusion and justice.

Also, while we recognize that the West African region is incredibly diverse in terms of languages, we have made a point of limiting ourselves to the use of our two operating languages, which for the time being are French and English.

Finally, the reader will understand that this guide, although in English, communicates on many of the variations of gendered language in French. In general, **due to the rules that govern the use of the French language, the language is considerably more gendered**, and the use of gender is much more pronounced in French in comparison to English.

*by Stéphane Simporé*





# Introduction

The language we speak in, listen to, and read influences how we think. As a bilingual feminist activist organization dedicated to advancing human rights and social justice, Initiative Sankofa d'Afrique de l'Ouest (ISDAO) has adopted practices to ensure inclusiveness in its publications. After years of practice and drawing from our journey of growth, ISDAO wants to disseminate its practices of linguistic inclusion and justice so that these may be useful and serve as a spark for other organizations, institutions, groups and entities wishing to deepen their commitment to this process.

As a reminder, according to the conventional rules of French grammar, the masculine takes precedence over the feminine and there are no other genders. In addition, English is often adopted as the working language in organizing spaces, to the detriment of French speakers and speakers of indigenous languages. These principles are not consistent with the social justice aims of ISDAO, and it is thus necessary to apply certain recommendations, which will be outlined below. The following guidelines are intended to define rules for more inclusive communications in French and English in order to promote greater equality, to reaffirm the sense of belonging of all community members, and to ensure consistency with the organization's goals of inclusion.

These guidelines were developed in the absence of a clear consensus on a universal form of inclusive writing in French and with the aim of reflecting the usage that best fits the needs of ISDAO. This guide is in no way intended to be an imposition on other people or organizations, but is open to any organization that wishes to invest

in practices of linguistic justice and inclusion. It can be used by anyone who wishes to do so as long as they give credit to ISDAO. These guidelines are not exhaustive and are intended to provide general rules that will allow anyone involved in communication processes to make informed decisions when necessary. They are not set in stone: language and practices are constantly and rapidly changing, and this document may be revised and expanded as often as necessary.

This document is organized in two parts: the first part proposes concrete solutions to ensure gender inclusiveness in texts, especially in French, and the second part outlines good practices for balancing the use of English and French. This document provides principles and best practices that are to be adopted by anyone working for ISDAO or representing the organization, including staff, consultants, members of the governance body.

If you have any questions about the content of this guide, the ISDAO Communications and Knowledge Management Department is happy to provide any clarification needed.







# I. Gender Inclusiveness

## General rules for French

### Application

The following rules apply only to terms referring to people, not to inanimate objects or concepts. Conventional writing and pronunciation will be used for terms that do not refer to individuals, such as « les groupes et organisations impliqués » (in English, “the groups and organizations involved”) or « les moyens et solutions mis en œuvre » (in English: “the means and solutions implemented”) which will remain unchanged.

These rules apply to written and oral documents, excluding any documents with legal value. In terms of implementing the suggested rules to oral speech, we recommend the use of neutral formulations to the greatest extent possible, to ensure simplicity and to facilitate clear communication and comprehension (see below).

For references to a particular person whose identity is known, it is best to ascertain that person's preferences either by asking them directly or by asking someone who may be more knowledgeable. It is important, for example, to ask people what pronouns to use to address them, as well as their preferences, including language preferences. In general, it is not advisable to make assumptions: it is better to consult the people involved.

### The use of the hyphen in French

For terms referring to people whose gender is not known or is not binary, an inclusive form must be created by adding the feminine form introduced by a hyphen, and possibly followed by a second hyphen.

#### French

#### English translation

les militantes et militants engagés	The committed activists
un-e participant-e	A participant

If a word has a different masculine and feminine root, the alternative feminine marker should be added to the unchanged masculine root.

#### Example:

#### French

#### English translation

cher-es (pas « chères »)	Dear (plural)
Infirmier-es (pas « infirmières »)	Nurses (plural)

This includes creating compound words in some cases.

### Example:

#### French

#### English translation

tou-ttes les acteur-ices locaux-ales  
concerné-es sont respectueux-ses

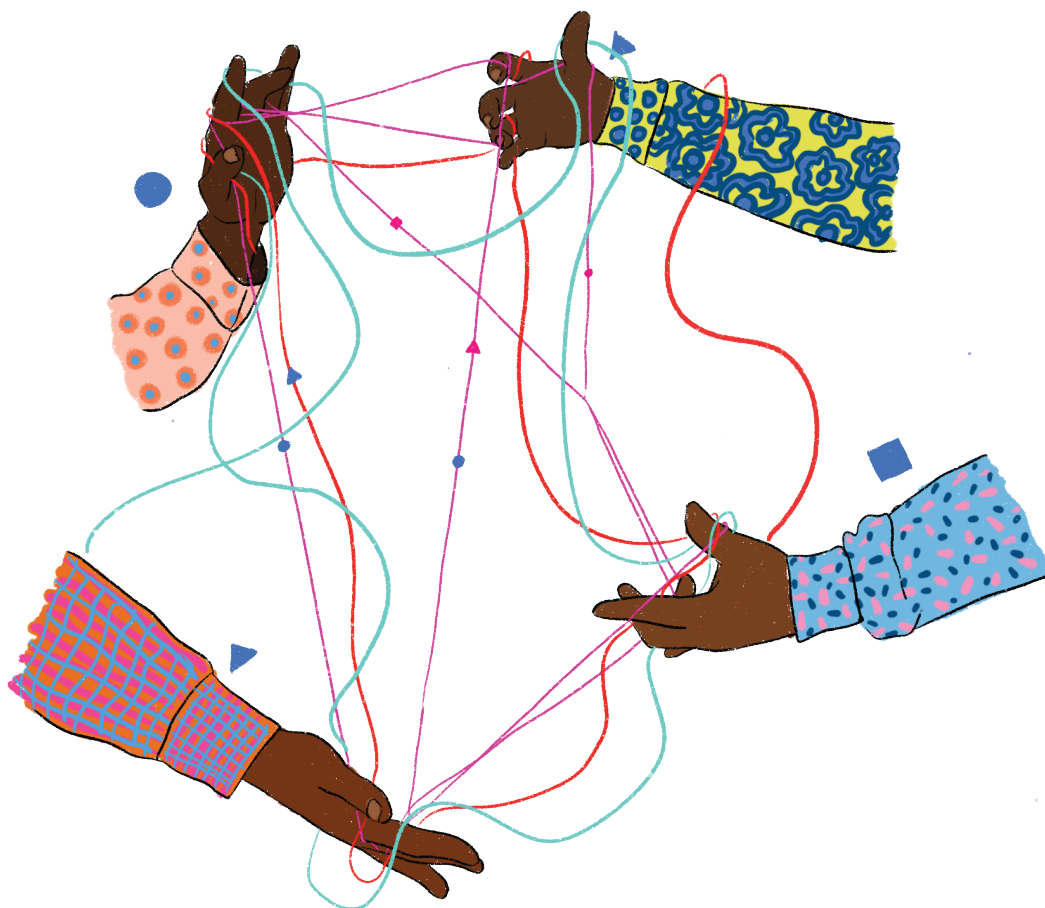
all of the local stakeholders are  
respectful

This rule should take precedence over other forms of inclusive writing, including midpoints, capital E's, parentheses, slashes, periods, etc. ISDAO has determined that this form of writing is the most appropriate for its own use. **We recognize that other forms adopted by other organizations are also valid and legitimate, but for the sake of clarity and consistency, these other forms will not be used by ISDAO.** The use of masculine and feminine forms as doublets and spelled according to conventional rules, such as “les militantes et les militants” (in English: “*activists*”) or “ils et elles” (in English: the plural “*they*”) is not an appropriate solution in writing because it is binary.

Conventional gender-invariant terms should remain unchanged, e.g. “les activistes féministes” (in English: “feminist activists”).

However, when naturally neutral terms cannot be used, it is recommended that only one form be used when the sound is unchanged and that both forms be repeated when the sound changes, starting with the feminine form. For example: “les militant-es engagé-es” (in English: “committed activists”) reads as “les militantes et militants engages” (in English, “committed activists”).

For further explanation for non-French speakers, in French, “les militantes” (“activists”, feminine form) and “les militants” (“activists”, masculine form), are pronounced differently, but “engagé-es” (in English, “committed”) is pronounced the same whether in feminine or masculine form, so it is necessary to use this more comprehensive statement when speaking.





# Readability

It is important to balance the need to be inclusive in one's written and oral expression and to ensure that it is accessible. Texts must remain easy to comprehend. Thus, when there are two options that are equivalent in terms of meaning and inclusiveness, the option that is relatively more readable and understandable is the one to adopted.

This can be done by using terms in French that are neutral by nature for plural objects, and by using terms that are neutral by nature for singular objects.



## Example:

### French

### English translation

les personnes concernées (au lieu de « les concerné-es »)	the concerned persons
Les migrant-es	the migrant population
la personne	the person
l'individu	the individual
quiconque	Whoever

It is advisable to reduce the number of past participles by using the active rather than the passive voice. These options make it possible to compose sentences in French that have several markers of inclusion more readable, without making them less inclusive. For example, the sentence “les acteur-ices locaux-ales concerné-es seront contacté-es” (in English “the local actors concerned will be contacted”) can be reworded as follows: “nous contacterons les personnes concernées qui agissent au niveau local”. (In English: “we will contact the concerned persons who are operating at the local level”).

## Special cases

### Nouns

#### Names, titles, functions

The default masculine form of names, titles and functions should not be used. Where a feminine form exists, it should be used where appropriate, even if standard usage protocol advises the use of the masculine form.

#### Example:

##### French

##### English translation / explanation

Professeure	Professor
Autrice	Author
Présidente	President

### Collectives

Terms characterized by a universal masculine form should be avoided. For example, the expression “human rights” should be translated as “les droits humains” and not as “les droits de l’Homme”

See the section above on inclusive terms that are neutral. Other examples:

##### French

##### English translation / explanation

Les membres	The members
Les activistes	The activists
Le personnel	The staff
Le groupe	The group

## Pronouns

Where appropriate, the inclusive pronouns « iel », « iels », « celui » and « ceux » should be used, e.g., « si un-e militant-e souhaite participer, iel pourra le faire de la façon suivante » (in English: “if an activist wishes to participate, he/she may do so in the following manner”) or « nous contacterons ceux qui souhaitent participer » (in English, “we will contact those who wish to participate”).

### French

### English translation / explanation

iel (remplace “il/elle”)	“iel” is gender inclusive and replaces “he/she” or “he or she”
iels (remplace “ils/ells”)	“iels” is gender inclusive and replaces “ils/elles” which is “they” (plural)
Cellui (remplace “celle/celui”)_	“cellui” is gender inclusive and replaces “celle/celui”. In French, the word “celle” is the feminine singular demonstrative pronoun and “celui” is the masculine singular demonstrative pronoun.
Celleux (remplace “celles/ceux”)	“Celleux” is gender inclusive and replaces “celles/ceux ». In French, the word « celles » is the feminine plural demonstrative pronoun and “ceux” is the masculine singular demonstrative pronoun.

The pronouns “nous” (in English: “we”) and “vous” (in English: “you” (plural form)) are inclusive and should remain unchanged.





## Articles

Possessive definite articles should be formed as follows:

### French

### English translation / explanation

le-la militant-e  
du-de la militant-e  
ce-tte

This is a more gender inclusive form of writing:

the activist  
of the activist  
that

The articles « ces », « les », « des » (in English, “these”, “the”, “of”) etc. are inclusive and should remain unchanged.

Possessive determiners should be formed in the following way that is inclusive:

### French

### English translation / explanation

mon-ma  
son-sa, etc.

Par exemple, « chacun-e prendra contact avec son-sa chargé-e de programme ».

This is a more inclusive form of using possessive determiners, including for:

My  
His / hers / theirs

The pronouns « notre », « votre », « leur », « nos », « vos », « leurs », « ses » (in English, “our”, “your” (singular), “their” (singular), “our”, “your” (plural), “their” (plural), etc. are inclusive and should remain unchanged.



## Terms to avoid (in French)

For the sake of inclusiveness, terms with potentially problematic connotations, such as “liste blanche/ noire” (in English: “white/black list”) should not be used.

## For the English language

Overall, the English language lends itself more easily to inclusiveness in that adjectives are invariable, which is different from the French language. However, the need to ask each person which pronoun to use to refer to them remains unchanged – and is necessary regardless of the language. In addition, in English, the pronoun “they” and its derivative “their” is sometimes used by, or can be used to refer to people whose gender is unknown or non-binary.

## Terms to avoid (in English)

Similar to the list for French terms, terms such as “blacklist/whitelist”... should be avoided. Other terms to avoid include nouns formed on the basis of “man”: for example, the use of “spokesman” is to be avoided and “spokesperson” is preferred, etc.



## II. Inclusiveness and bilingualism: good practices

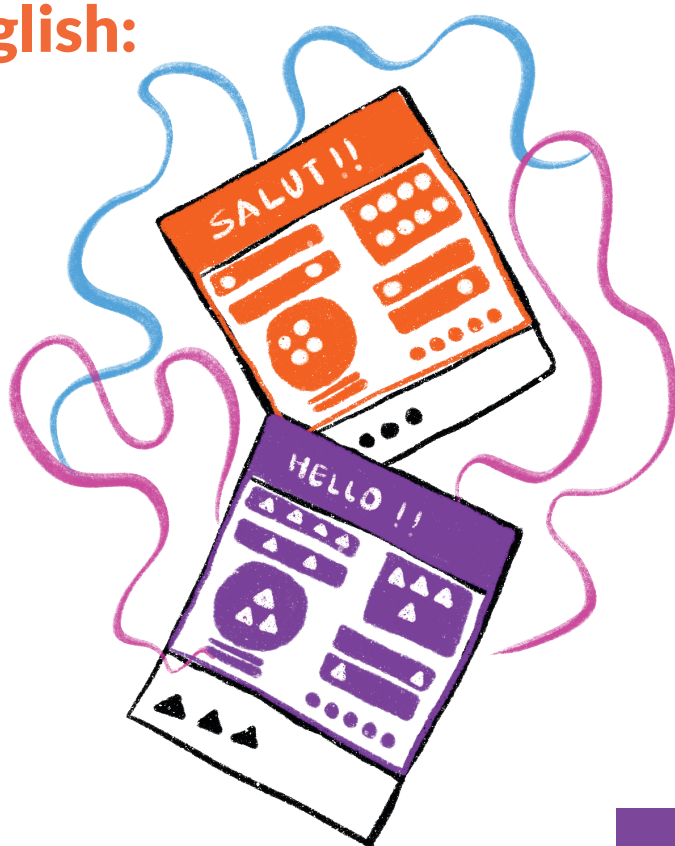
ISDAO is aware of the prominence of French and English as a colonial legacy in West Africa. However, for practical reasons, local languages cannot be used on a daily basis in the organization's activities, so it produces texts for both French and English-speaking audiences. While English is increasingly becoming the lingua franca, it does not reflect a universal preference, and ISDAO produces all of its key documents in bilingual versions for reasons of equity and accessibility. This principle applies to both written and oral productions.

With a few exceptions, ISDAO does not expect or require that individuals engaging with ISDAO be bilingual (staff, volunteers, activists, grantee partners, governance, etc.). Therefore, several procedures have been put in place to ensure that the organization is bilingual, regardless of an individual's preferred language. This section suggests some good practices that should be followed to ensure that the organization functions in a bilingual manner and in a way that is as linguistically equitable as much as possible.

As with questions of gender inclusion and diversity, it is not appropriate to make assumptions about a person's experience and comfort level with a language. It is thus important to not assume that a person is comfortable speaking or engaging in either English or French, and people should always be asked about their language preferences. For ISDAO, it goes without saying that any discrimination or belittling of a person because of their language choice will not be tolerated.

### The place of French and English: communication strategies

ISDAO is a bilingual organization whose working languages are French and English. The organization's key documents (website, social networks and all other public communications) are in French and English. Internal written and verbal communications (regardless of the communication channel) must also be in both languages. To balance the predominance of English over French, all publications must be translated into both languages. For reasons of **linguistic justice**, **for publications, French must appear first.**



This will also be the case for oral presentations, during prepared and read speeches: **the French version must be spoken first**. In the case of materials such as videos, etc., French should be preferred and ideally both versions of the materials should be available.

In the case of conferences (physical or virtual), care must be taken to use professional interpreters to make communications available in both working languages of the association. It is very important to ensure that interpreters are familiar with inclusive language in French and English, and therefore respectful of gender diversity. Summaries or reports of the various interventions must be bilingual as well.

For written communications that are “for information purposes”, especially those that are not intended to be published (e.g. e-mails, internal memos, etc.) it is possible to use automatic translation tools, preferably neural, such as DeepL. ISDAO has a shared Pro account (up to 100 documents per month for the organization). Again, the French version must appear before the English version. It is strongly recommended that the accuracy of the AI-assisted translation be reviewed and edited, if necessary. Towards this aim, ISDAO has several focal persons among the organization's staff who are available to review and, if necessary, modify the translated texts.

**Important Note:** ISDAO recognizes that machine translation tools like DeepL cannot replace professional translators. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that external documents or “high priority” documents be translated by a professional to ensure that the content is accurate and adheres to the principles of inclusive language.

## Practical aspects: incorporating elements and standards of linguistic justice and inclusion in recruitment and staffing

Recruitment and hiring of staff in a way that ensures inclusion and linguistic justice requires adequate resources and planning on the organization's end to ensure that the process and information about the process are as accessible as possible, to ensure that candidates can fully engage in the recruitment process in the language that they feel most comfortable in. For ISDAO, this means ensuring the following:

- Position descriptions and announcements always published in both French and English, with positions available to both French and English speakers, unless due to the nature of the project or focus of the position, it is specific to country or context with specific language requirements
- Bilingual candidates or those who have some capacity in French and English, are encouraged to apply, but this is not a requirement or a criteria for selection. If not bilingual, open-ness/willingness to learn the other language is important.
- In alignment with this commitment, it is ISDAO's responsibility to arrange and provide interpretation and translation that enables candidates to be able to submit documents, interview and be fully considered for the position, in their predominant language (French or English).



- Candidate documents, interviews, etc. can be submitted in either French or English, unless in the rare circumstance where the position requires the candidate to be fully bilingual, in which case they are expected to be able to engage in the process in both languages.
- ISDAO budgets for language learning for every staff member who is not bilingual such that they can learn French or English. ISDAO supports staff, when hired, to identify the best option for language instruction and learning for their particular needs and context.



In some cases, staff members who are hired may not have the same dominant language as their supervisor. Written communication is a critical part of working across languages, as quick translation of written text helps to get across key ideas and information, in a way that would be more difficult orally without transcription. ISDAO plans and budgets for interpretation and translation to ensure that everyone is able to communicate and work with each other effectively and across the two languages for all organizational processes. ISDAO maintains a pool of professional interpreters with whom they have open contracts, and who can join virtual calls and in-person meetings, including at the individual, team or departmental level as well as at the staff-wide level. ISDAO prioritizes and resources in-person team meetings or retreats, which are key to creating moments of collaboration, and which are supported by interpreters who provide whisper or consecutive interpretation. In addition, ISDAO is exploring and experimenting with different technologies for more ad hoc interpersonal communication, including translator earbuds from Timekettle. As an organization, ISDAO varies the location for organizational meetings (including staff retreats, board meetings and activist grantmaking meetings), where possible alternating between Francophone and Anglophone countries, to provide greater exposure and engagement in the various contexts where they work.



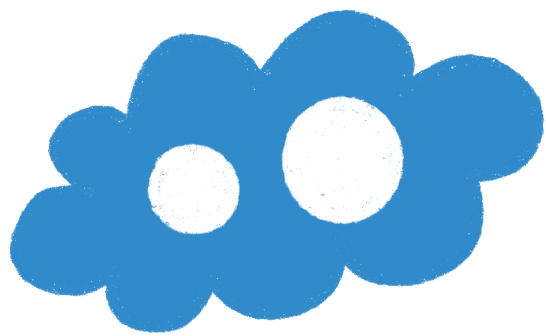


# Practical aspects: tools and principles for the practice of bilingualism in the professional context

Prior to each meeting or conference, organizers should ensure that both French and English speakers are selected to ensure fairness and representativeness. To guarantee greater diverse representation and inclusion, it is important to ensure that there is more than one French-speaker.

All participants must have the right conditions to express themselves in the language of their choice. For the same reasons, it is necessary to contact the participants beforehand, if they are known, in order to get an idea of the linguistic preferences of each participant. Practices that tend to propose to the whole assembly to speak English “for the sake of simplicity” should be avoided: under the guise of facilitating expression, these solutions are false “good ideas” that undermine

efforts at linguistic justice and discourage some people from expressing themselves if they consider their level of English to be insufficient. It is therefore crucial that event organizers remind speakers and participants of the language rules outlined here. Presenters are not required to make their presentations in both English and French, but presentation materials and other written materials should be available in both languages whenever possible. This also facilitates the work of interpreters supporting the meeting. When ISDAO organizes a meeting, where possible, they provide support to translate these presentations or documents for partners and will provide them to participants who wish to refer to them.



During virtual events, tools with instant captioning capabilities should be preferred for clarity. ISDAO has a Zoom Enterprise account, with individual licenses for each full-time staff member and an open license for their inbox, which is its administrative account. This tool includes simultaneous interpretation capability, so any staff member scheduling a meeting can integrate interpretation into the call.

Meetings, conferences and other in-person events must also respect the principle of bilingualism. This requires the use of professional interpreters and a systematic reminder at the beginning of the session that interventions are encouraged in both languages, and sharing of best practices for participants. A climate of trust must be created that is conducive to speaking in French; to this end, facilitators may speak in French first to encourage participants to do so.

ISDAO systematically provides activists with working resources (books, publications, etc.) in both languages, and organizes regular working meetings in accordance with the principle of systematic bilingualism.

The ISDAO team is available to provide other support around language or suggestions on appropriate resources to activists or other interested parties, in the language of their choice. For more details, including the organization of bilingual virtual meetings, ISDAO has developed an internal document entitled “ISDAO Guidelines for Scheduling and Coordinating Interpretation for Virtual Meetings”. This document, which also includes a list of professional interpreters and translators familiar with the vocabulary of ISDAO's work, can be shared upon request by the ISDAO team at [info@isdao.org](mailto:info@isdao.org)

## Working with professional translators and interpreters

For reasons of professionalism, quality of communication and ethics, it is essential to use professional translators and interpreters. The excellent level of English and French of a person who is not a professional linguist does not guarantee their ability to translate a text or to interpret an intervention. ISDAO works with a network of linguists who are already vetted and have an experience of work with the organization (list available upon request). The Communications and Knowledge Management Department at ISDAO is the point of contact for general relations with linguists.

ISDAO-contracted interpreters can work in both directions, but most interpreters have one main direction (e.g. French to English or English to French) that they work in. Interpreters are expected to interpret only into their native language, but exceptions exist. It is best to ascertain

the linguists' preferences before sending a request. Similarly, all ISDAO-contracted translators are able to translate in both directions.

ISDAO-contracted linguists have various obligations and are most often freelancers. For this reason, it is essential not to assume that they are available by default. It is necessary to include them in the planning process as early as possible, including establishing a shared interpreter schedule and notifying them as early as possible of an upcoming event or publication that requires their involvement. This allows them to prepare in advance and confirm their availability. This way, if the linguist is not available or does not wish to participate in the project, it will be possible to identify another person early enough. If the linguist is not willing to participate in the project, it is

essential to respect his/her decision without trying to influence them: only they know the limits of their expertise and availability. It is advisable, however, to ask this person if they would be able to recommend someone else.

For the same reasons, it is essential to provide linguists with the documents they need to prepare their work: style guides (including this guide), previous publications, glossaries, etc. It is also necessary to be available to the linguists to answer their questions and to guide them in their work when they request it. For example, it is recommended that the organizers plan for a training session and practice inclusive writing in order to put into practice the guidelines outlined in the first part of this document. In ISDAO's experience, linguists who do not have experience of working in this field may be experts in the technical delivery, but may lack the correct vocabulary and nuance of the context of the movement and the work prior to their assignment, so the initial vetting and training is key. ISDAO also recommends testing linguists with shorter or smaller assignments, in order to assess their fit and to provide appropriate feedback prior to engaging in more substantial assignments. For example, for a translator, one might assign a text-heavy 5-page document first as an initial assignment. For interpretation, an initial assignment could be interpretation during a 1-hour internal team/staff meeting.

## Adapted and appropriate interpretation material

We recommend that appropriate interpretation equipment be used for effective linguistic inclusion and justice in the meeting or conference room. To illustrate: the configuration of some equipment forces speakers of the same language preference to sit together in the meeting room to share the microphone. This practice should be avoided by choosing equipment that allows for a mixed group and therefore promotes linguistic inclusion.





# Sample workflow for effective collaboration with linguists

We recommend the following general workflow for optimal collaboration with linguists on each assignment:

- Give as much advance notice as possible of any potential collaboration by providing as much detail as possible. Assign a focal person(s) within the organization for this engagement.
- Confirm the date (conference date, or date of sending and turning in the text to be translated) as soon as the organization has set it to ensure that the linguist is available and willing to participate in the project.
- For interpretation, build adequate breaks within the meeting agenda. This is both for meetings with one or more than one interpreter. If working with one interpreter, ideally incorporate a short break of 5-10 minutes for every 30-45 minutes of meeting time (where possible).
- For interpretation assignments, organize a briefing meeting prior to the event, if necessary. Provide information around the format, details around the participants, agenda and any key information during the briefing and/or via email. If working with more than one interpreter, ensure that the interpreters are in contact with each other and that there are shared agreements and understanding about responsibility, relaying and approach to interpretation for the event. The organization should organize a coordination meeting prior to the event.
- Send the final document to be translated in the case of a written translation, and send the resource documents needed to prepare the work (guides, glossaries, previous publications, user guides and instructions for the software used) as well as any new contextual elements that need to be brought to the linguist's attention in the case of a written translation or an interpreting assignment; remind him/her that he/she is available and can be contacted to answer any questions.
- Respond to questions quickly and accurately, as appropriate.
- For interpretation assignments, provide the meeting agenda and any presentation materials in as much advance as possible.
- On the day, receive the translated text or participate in the event requiring interpretation.
- A few days later, offer the linguist comments or suggestions for a future assignment and, similarly, provide any comments or suggestions.

Further details on the use of interpreters for virtual meetings and interviews are available in ISDAO's Guide to Scheduling Interpretation for Virtual Meetings (available upon request).



# Conclusion

These recommendations are intended to disseminate ISDAO's linguistic justice and inclusion practices necessary to create and maintain a fair and inclusive work environment. While it is not possible to list all the good practices that can be implemented, and ISDAO encourages all partners to reflect on what they can implement and suggest to the organization, it is our hope that this document will spark and nourish this discussion, while also providing some useful and practical tools and guidance.







# ISDAO

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