Mexico: training interpreters in Indigenous languages

The civil association Diálogo y Movimiento (DIMO) created the Diploma for the Training of Interpreters in Indigenous Languages to improve the tools of the profession and the quality of access to justice. The training and professionalization of translators is essential to avoid the daily problems that Indigenous people face, especially concerning conflicts with criminal law: from not understanding the charges and accusations held against them and not being able to communicate correctly before judges, to not obtaining a proper defense.

By Elisa Cruz Rueda and Artemia Fabre Zarandona - August 1st 2022

The absence of a public policy aimed at training teachers to train interpreters in Indigenous languages has led the civil association Diálogo y Movimiento (DIMO) and the National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI) to create the Diploma for the Training of Interpreters in Indigenous Languages for the penal system in the state of Campeche. The results of the initiative are now visible: 22 interpreters were accredited in six Indigenous languages: Peninsular Maya, Maya Chol, Maya Tosotsil, Mam, Ixil and Ke'kchi – all languages spoken in the state of Campeche.

With the arrival of Andrés Manuel López Obrador to the government, INALI changed its perspective and started considering that the institution was not the appropriate one to train interpreters or trainers, since it didn’t have the necessary resources. Instead, the institution states that these are competencies that belong to associations and academic institutions. In response, Diálogo y Movimiento promoted collaboration with other institutions to influence public policies that would transform the work of universities and social organizations. The objective is to promote training spaces for Indigenous people, especially those who carry out the extremely important work of intercultural interpretation in official spaces and in the Mexican justice system, guaranteeing the right to due process.
Training of instructors in Indigenous languages

In this context, this Diploma aims to promote true interculturality and multiply professionalization and training through the formation of trainers of interpreters in Indigenous languages. This challenge implies generating alternative forms, mechanisms and professionalization, and improving the quality of interpretation in Indigenous languages. The objective is to support the presence of this important sector in Mexico, since it is one of the guarantees of access to jurisdictional justice and a step towards social justice.

This diploma course, sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation and with the academic recognition of the Centro Universitario Comunal de Valles Centrales of the Universidad Autónoma Comunal de Oaxaca (UACO), was held from March 17 to June 18, 2022. Together with DIMO, they built a synergy to reflect on new alternatives for teaching and on how to overcome inequality and the exclusion of cultural diversity. The guiding principle of the cooperation is the search for equity, quality and professionalism among interpreters.

The course included the permanent participation of four teachers trained in Indigenous languages: two teachers of Tzeltal, one of Peninsular Maya and one of Chol. These teachers are linguists from the Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas (UNACH), the Centro de Investigaciones Multidisciplinarias sobre Chiapas y la Frontera Sur (CIMSUR), the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and the Centro Estatal de Capacitación, Investigación y Difusión Humanística de Yucatán (CEDECHY). There were also guest professors from the Centro Profesional Indígena de Asesoría, Defensa y Traducción (CEPIADET) and the Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca (UABJO).

Through this collaboration of institutions, competencies and skills were developed with the aim of revising and adapting study plans and programs to take into account cultural differences, culturally relevant content and the highest quality in teaching. The pedagogical work was developed under the academic coordination of Dr. Elisa Cruz Rueda, professor at the Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas and consultant for the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs and Dr. Artemia Fabre Zarandona, President of DIMO. At the opening of
the Legal Pluralism Module, retired magistrate Pablo Monroy Gómez gave a keynote lecture.

**Diploma participants**

The people who took the diploma course are speakers of Indigenous languages of the Mayan family: Chol, Tseltal and Peninsular Maya. Most of them already have a track record as interpreters in the justice system (especially in criminal matters), health and education. In the process of selecting the graduates, it was taken into account that they had a commitment to their peoples and communities, and that they had dedicated themselves to teaching, interpreting and translating their languages.

The intention of the Diploma is to provide more tools and knowledge with official validity that will allow interpreters to access better employment conditions in the Judiciary and the Executive Branch. This is relevant since many agencies do not have a permanent staff of interpreters (as stipulated by international human rights standards) and prefer to "hire" the services of language speakers who are not trained in technical legal language. In some cases, they even pay them less than the base salary stipulated by the State itself.

These circumstances violate the due process to which Indigenous persons must be subjected: they cannot communicate in their own languages, they do not understand the accusations against them, they do not make themselves understood correctly before the judges and, consequently, they are unable to obtain a proper defense. All these difficulties jeopardize the right to due access to justice and call into question the due diligence in the investigation of crimes. Similarly, this course was implemented so that participants are properly prepared to provide a dignified service as interpreters for Indigenous people and, above all, before judges.

Under a virtual modality and with a duration of 224 hours, the Diploma has the following curriculum: interculturality and professional identity; racism and Indigenous peoples in Mexico; interpreters and translators of Indigenous languages facing institutional racism;
gender perspective; translation practices; legal pluralism; justice systems in Mexico; interpreting as a profession and mechanism for the exercise of rights; and teaching professionalization. The Universidad Autónoma Comunal de Oaxaca provided connectivity and technical assistance for the virtual course.

**Final thoughts**

At the end of the course, the participants agreed that it is necessary to promote a Peninsular Network of Interpreters to position themselves before the institutions of the Judiciary and the Executive in the states of Campeche, Yucatan and Quintana Roo. Unity is essential to make themselves heard and be taken into account in the design of public policies, and to dignify their work in public administration, both municipal and state. In turn, the Peninsular Network would be a tool to make cultural diversity visible, to fight for the rights of Indigenous people and, above all, to defend their linguistic rights.

The challenge of training interpreters is not a minor one, as the Mexican State outsources its obligations regarding social justice to Civil Society Organizations. Given the lack of resources, the government no longer promotes competitions for projects, while at the same time increasingly questioning the organizations that work with this issue.

At times, the Mexican government has promoted policies of direct support to Indigenous organizations and individuals. However, Indigenous peoples often do not have access to the calls for proposals or are not sufficiently organized to demand these resources. This is the case of interpreters. Thus, in Mexico there is a sad paradox: in the face of more recognition of rights, there is an increase in violence and in the violation of rights.

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