

# Technical Documentation with and for Mesoamerican Indigenous Language Speakers

(Re)Designing Technical Documentation About COVID-19 with and for Indigenous Communities in Florida, Mexico, and Guatemala

## Community-Based Promising Practice

During public health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that all communities have access to timely information and public health guidelines. However, there was and is a lack of language-accessible and culturally appropriate resources for Mesoamerican Indigenous communities. The Rural Women's Health Project collaborated with partners and Indigenous language speakers to design, translate, and disseminate technical documentation and informational resources in Mesoamerican Indigenous languages during the COVID-19 pandemic. These collaborative strategies go beyond translation and provide more localized resources to better reach and serve a diverse community.

## Organization

- Rural Women's Health Project, Gainesville, Florida
  - Rural Women's Health Project (RWHP) is the only health justice organization in North Florida. Founded in 1991, RWHP uses a health justice approach to collaborate in the implementation of health projects, create innovative educational tools, train communities and organizations, and advocate for and provide lay health worker programs in rural communities.
- Project collaborators:
  - Laura Gonzales, University of Florida. Laura is a technical communication and translation researcher and professor. She also directs Language Access Florida, a translation, interpretation, and consulting business focused on language accessibility for and with Indigenous communities.
  - Erika Cuevas, Red de Interpretes y Promotores Interculturales de Mexico. Erika is a translator and interpreter of Chinameco.
  - Vianna Luciana, Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta, San Francisco La Union, Guatemala, Guatemala. Vianna is a teacher, translator, and interpreter of Maya K'iche.
  - Indigenous community members in Florida, Mexico and Guatemala.

## Unmet Need Addressed

Critical information, especially during public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, is often not communicated in Indigenous languages or with Indigenous people's cultures in mind. Indigenous communities are left more vulnerable due to the lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach and information. There is a need for more language-accessible digital and print resources and more representation of Indigenous peoples' values, traditions, and cultures to ensure adequate access to information.

## Description of the Practice:

The RWHP team and their collaborators tested participatory strategies to create multilingual resources alongside Indigenous communities. Materials included information about the COVID-19 pandemic through mediums such as fotonovelas, audionovelas, and flyers translated into Indigenous languages and representing Indigenous peoples. Through an iterative process of evaluating and designing materials with feedback from Indigenous partners, RWHP focused on “localizing” resources to resonate better and ultimately better serve Indigenous communities. Partners used WhatsApp chat conversations to solicit feedback from Indigenous promotoras. Several critical themes emerged from reviewing materials with Indigenous community members, which are described below.



## Key Messaging Themes



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Asesoría, Defensa, y Traducción

### 1. Appealing to the community over individual values”

Often health messages focus on individual benefits. However, Indigenous communities will respond better to messaging that addresses benefits for their communities. Additionally, imagery in resources should reflect community care, such as intergenerational care, aligning with Indigenous communities’ values and therefore resonate more deeply.

*“Indigenous communities care more about our community than we do about ourselves, so if we want people to stay home, if we want them to skip going to work, we can’t tell them to do it just for themselves; we have to tell them to do it for their communities”*

*— Estefania, visual designer and an Indigenous language translator*

### 2. "Acknowledging the importance of language preservation, education, and revitalization”

Messaging should include written and audio translations in Indigenous languages. While not everyone may read or write in their Indigenous languages, having a written record of their language is important in valuing and preserving the language.

*“I know that when people get information in their languages, they feel included and they pay more attention. When people get a message in their Indigenous language, they also become curious and want to know more.”*

*- Health promotor, Gainesville, FL*

### 3. Leveraging the power of communal storytelling and testimonial media



Incorporating stories into health education resources can help people more easily relate to characters and behaviors, and ultimately the message itself. Additionally, storytelling is valued in the Indigenous language-speaking community. RWHP and its partners took informational flyers and transformed them into a story with multiple characters conversing to communicate the health message. Successful health education story mediums include fotonovelas as well as radionovelas, audio recordings of stories with multiple characters and voices, to convey a health message.



## Challenges and How to Address Them:

Indigenous communities are diverse across and within communities. There is not one way to reach “Indigenous communities.” For example, the authors mention the multitude of variants of different Indigenous languages. Two communities may speak the same language, but different variants, and therefore different translations and localization must be used for each community. Researchers addressed this challenge by working directly with community partners, eliciting many different perspectives, and instituting an iterative design process.

## Resources Needed and Expenses:

1. Indigenous language translators and community partners
2. Clear understanding of the variants spoken within the population you intend to serve
3. Funding
  - This work was supported in part by Rural Women’s Health Project, in part by Fondation Chanel, in part by the Center for the Humanities and the Public Sphere with support from the Humanities Fund at the University of Florida.
  - The work was also funded by the Somos Salud Project in collaboration with Alianza Americas with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Health Resources and Services Administration.

## Evaluation: Data Collected and Results

Rather than a traditional evaluation, researchers created an iterative process of reviewing and revising with partners to ensure that materials were effective in reaching the intended population. Researchers conducted interviews with Indigenous language translators before the project to understand how materials needed to be adapted and designed to resonate with Indigenous communities. Additionally, RHWP collected feedback via WhatsApp from Indigenous health outreach workers throughout the design process to inform resource creation.

Be intentional in engaging with Indigenous peoples in your community and collaborating with organizations that are already serving Indigenous peoples. Act and speak with humility and respect for Indigenous collaborators. Show that you value their time by offering compensation for their cultural and linguistic expertise, follow through on your commitment to incorporate their feedback into messaging and materials, and provide them with the final product once its complete. Make sure that you pitch the value of expending funds to meet the needs of a smaller population of Indigenous speakers, with the same value as Spanish speakers, to partners and stakeholders. When federal funds are involved, remember to cite Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act requiring the provision of information in the languages of the communities served.

### Lessons learned

- Move beyond translation and consider how to localize a message, including language, visual representation, values alignment, and cultural practices.
- Gear messaging toward Indigenous language speakers. Messaging should leverage the power of storytelling in visual and digital contexts.
- Collaboration between translators, designers, and health communicators throughout the design process is critical to ensure cultural values and elements are centered.
- Collaborate with members of Indigenous communities on materials, including setting up feedback loops for multiple iterations of input and feedback.
- Create multiple ways to communicate information including visual, audio, and written materials.
- Visuals should accurately represent the Indigenous community, including using the specific community's traditional clothing, textile patterns, etc. Details are important.
- There is a lot of diversity within Indigenous communities – languages have many variants and communities hold different cultural practices and values. To respect this diversity, it is important to get many perspectives in the design process.



## Tools and Resources:

- Visit [Rural Women's Health Project](#) to browse their available resources such as:
  - [Fotonovelas addressing COVID-19 vaccines](#)
  - [Radionovelas addressing COVID-19](#) in six different languages (Spanish, and variants of K'iche, Mam, Mixteco, Q'anjobal, Zapoteco)
  - [COVID-19 Tips](#) – audio, video, and print materials available in 6 languages (English, Spanish, and variants of K'iche, Mam, Mixteco, Q'anjobal)
  - Read more about the challenges and value of multilingual health messaging [on our website](#).

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