



A STUDY OF COST AND USE OF FUNDS IN **BIBLE TRANSLATION**

Bible translation ministry flows from the Great Commission. It is also complex, involving hundreds of cross-cultural contributors working in a highly technical field to steward the precious Word of God. As a result, translation costs vary greatly and can be easily misunderstood. The challenge of measuring Bible translation's cost multiplies when the focus is not a single organization but rather numerous translation partners working interdependently, as with illumiNations, an alliance of Bible translation partners. Understanding cost and use of funds in Bible translation is an essential act of stewardship precisely because this work is so missionally aligned with God's heart.

God, Your Word is more precious than all I possess **Psalm 19:10**

Your Scripture gives light to my path and directs my steps **Psalm 119:105**

Through Your will alone, lives are transformed and minds made new **Romans 12:2**

So I now pray for all people that do not yet know You **1 Timothy 2:1-6**

For You've promised that Your voice by every tribe and nation will be heard **Revelation 7:9**

So, equip us by Your breath to provide every heart language with Your Word **2 Timothy 3:15-17**

SAGAMORE INSTITUTE

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METHODOLOGY

Sagamore Institute, an applied research and consulting organization, was engaged by Maclellan Foundation to study cost and use of funds in Bible translation. From January to March 2022, Sagamore conducted a series of documentation requests, expert interviews, and a quantitative cost survey with members of illumiNations, an alliance of Bible translation partners.

The figures contained herein are based on Sagamore's analysis of costs incurred by translation partners over their most recently available and respective 12-month reporting periods.

This study seeks neither to judge nor rigorously audit spending. Rather, this analysis provides a high-level view of cost and use of funds in Bible translation that can be useful for education, reflection, and innovation.





HOW MUCH DOES BIBLE TRANSLATION COST?

\$59,302

TEXT TRANSLATION
AVERAGE ANNUAL PROJECT COST

\$937,446

COMPLETE WRITTEN BIBLE
AVERAGE TOTAL PROJECT COST

\$105M

ANNUAL EXPENDITURE
AGGREGATE PROJECT COST

This analysis defines Bible translation as the project costs (A) and support costs (B) required for translation to occur. Among surveyed partners, annual expenditure across both categories (A+B) totaled \$202 million. Support costs (B) are typically underwritten so individual donors can give directly to project costs (A). Therefore, the above figures and some sections of this report focus on category (A) costs only. See page 5 for discussion of the factors affecting cost.

Translation partners also incur costs for activities that precede and follow Bible translation (C) and activities unrelated to Bible ministry (D). While category (C) expenditure may enhance the impact or efficacy of (A) and (B) costs, it is not part of Bible translation spending directly.

RECENT ANNUAL AGGREGATE COST SNAPSHOT

BIBLE TRANSLATION = A + B
((\$202M over 12-month period))

(A) TRANSLATION PROJECT COSTS:

Project development, accountability, training, tools, and translators.

(B) TRANSLATION SUPPORT COSTS:

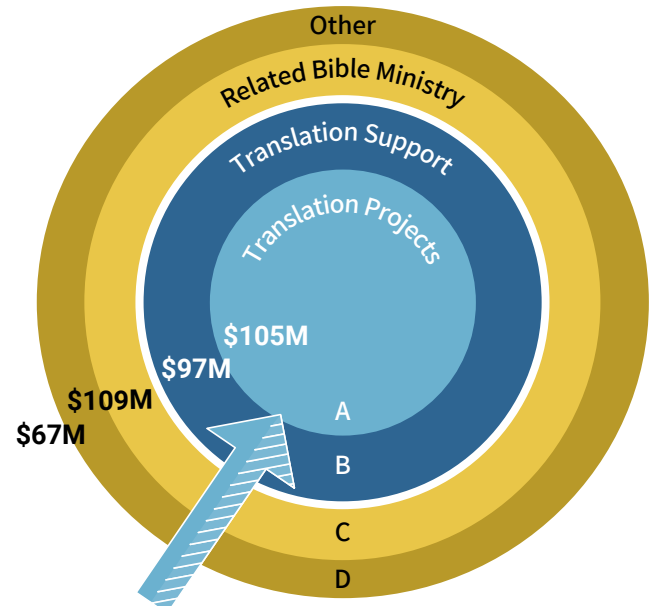
Local capacity development, maintenance of translation tools, research and development, and alliance infrastructure.

(C) RELATED BIBLE MINISTRY COSTS:

Activities that precede translation (language study, etc.) and follow translation (publication, distribution, engagement).

(D) OTHER:

Activities conducted by translation partners that are unrelated to Bible translation or ministry.



Typically, individual donor contributions go only to translation project costs (A)

Expenditure across all categories is \$378M and represents total cost incurred by illumiNations translation partners in a 12-month period, excluding: SIL costs outside of those in partnership with Wycliffe USA; grants unrelated to American Bible Society in the United Bible Societies' International Support Programme; and differences in the treatment of GAAP reconciliation items.

HOW ARE CONTRIBUTIONS SPENT?

God's work through the Scripture translation process starts at the beginning — working in and through the translation team and community, and continues as Scripture portions, New Testaments and full Bibles are translated and communities are transformed by God's Word. Given the Bible translation landscape's complexity, it's helpful to isolate where costs are incurred. Figures 1 and 2 show how funds are spent in the Bible translation economy.

FIGURE 1. JOURNEY OF THE DOLLAR: TRANSLATION PROJECT COSTS (A)

When a donor gives to the Bible translation cause, they can generally expect their gift to support four aspects of project translation costs. The majority (62.2%) goes towards tools, training, and translators "in the field." This work would not be possible without a well-designed project plan and monitoring structure (17.9%), which is commonly a combination of local and cross-cultural capacity. Similarly, for translation work to occur effectively at scale, administration (10.4%) and advancement (9.5%) structures must exist to resource and serve projects in contexts all over the world. Administration and advancement expenses also represent a combination of local and cross-cultural capacities.

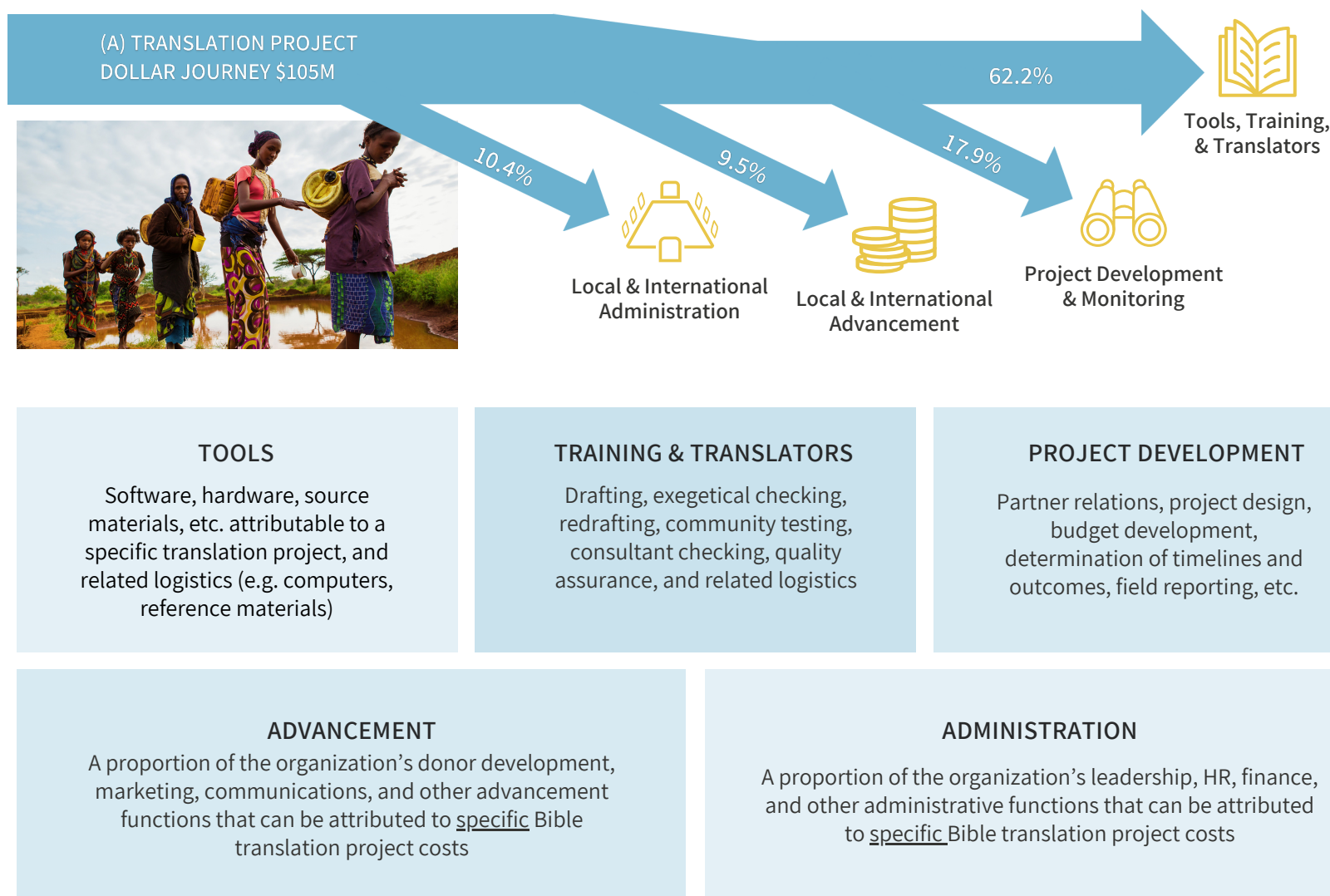


FIGURE 2. STRATEGIC INVESTMENTS: TRANSLATION SUPPORT COSTS (B)

While all the above translation project costs (A) are important, they are only half of what it takes to make translation happen today. **Another category of essential spending exists - translation support costs (B) - which generally enable or accelerate translation projects.** These investments are typically made by specific funding partners and include recurring expenses like translator capacity building, maintenance of existing translation tools, and research into promising new translation innovations (e.g. artificial intelligence).



CAPACITY BUILDING

9.8%

Long-term local capacity development efforts for translation to build sustainability among national, local, and indigenous partners



MAINTENANCE OF TOOLS

31.7%

Upkeep and iteration of established translation infrastructure (tools, methods, technologies)



RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

9.2%

Exploration, development, and testing of newly emerging or unproven translation infrastructure (tools, methods, technologies)



ADMINISTRATION

28.4%

A proportion of the organization's leadership, HR, finance, and other administrative functions that can be attributed to Bible translation support costs



ADVANCEMENT

10.5%

A proportion of the organization's donor development, stewardship, and communication functions that can be attributed to Bible translation support costs



ALLIANCE INFRASTRUCTURE

10.4%

Advocacy, marketing, innovation, and coordination costs supporting illumiNations; these costs are fully underwritten by a few core investors



FACTORS INFLUENCING COST

Given the multifaceted nature of Bible translation, many factors can affect translation cost and use of funds. In this study, three translation cost drivers were examined—context, medium, and roles. These drivers also appear to influence time, another critical variable to consider when studying Bible translation's cost. For example, survey data suggest that a sign language translation will require more cost and time to complete than a written translation.

CONTEXT

The context of translation refers to the social, cultural, and economic conditions characterizing the translation environment. Economic conditions, such as cost of living and wage expectations, have obvious impact on cost, yet there are other factors to consider. A location characterized by hostility towards Christians, for instance, will likely require greater investment in physical and digital security. Likewise, a community with limited access to education, internet, and related resources may need more training and support. Depending on the context (cultural, social, economic, religious) remuneration for services is appropriate and required; in others, volunteerism and bi-vocational service is more common and appropriate. All these factors result in tremendous cost variability.

MEDIUM

The medium of translation refers to the communication method, whether a written (text) translation, oral translation, or sign language translation. Oral translations typically cost the least, sign language translations the most, and written translations somewhere between the two. Cost variability is due in part to the technologies required, but population context also matters.

ROLES

Roles in a translation project refer to the division of responsibility among contributors. While there are many roles in the translation process, our discussion focuses on two groups: local actors and cross-cultural (non-local) actors. Depending on the translation project, local and cross-cultural actors may have varying degrees of leadership and/or responsibility. In general, Bible translation is trending towards greater local ownership due to missiological shifts in the Church. This can result in better ROI for external funders because sustainability is established locally. The data collected in this study revealed a shift in external investment from translation project costs (A) to support costs (B) when comparing co-led projects to locally led projects.





TRANSLATION LANDSCAPE

The Bible translation landscape is unique; its distinct features affect cost. For example, translation ministries are adapting to changing economic models, unprecedented technological developments, and a rapidly expanded global church. Interviewees emphasized two particularly significant issues that inform Bible translation cost today—missiological shifts and philanthropic realities.

MISSIOLOGICAL SHIFTS

For decades there has been a gradual shift in the Western church to equip and empower local believers to serve and reach their neighbors, rather than importing Western leadership and influence. More recently, there has been widespread awareness and acceptance in the Body of Christ that this approach aligns missiologically, with ripple effects on translation, evangelism, discipleship, and many other aspects of the Church.

Relative to the cost of translation, expansion of the global Church and the missiological shift to support local believers (which itself may be the result of proper missiology) has expanded the pool of translation workers, who are also more culturally and linguistically competent in their own language. The increase in talent and resources coming from local contexts can result in lower overall cost to Western funders.

This missiological shift is also impacting where the Western dollar is spent in the Bible translation process. Whereas Western funders have traditionally supported the work of translation in a local context, funds are increasingly being used for capacity development and technological advances.

PHILANTHROPIC REALITIES

A second reality in Christian ministry is the practical nature of philanthropy, particularly the professional nature of the field and Western donors' expectation of personalization and accountability from ministries. Whereas missiological shifts generally reduce the cost of translation to Western funders, philanthropic realities often increase indirect costs because more money is invested in administration and advancement budgets, as well as marketing, evaluation, and reporting systems.

Overall, philanthropic realities have had a positive impact on Bible translation, resulting in more money available for translation projects and exceeding any additional cost. This reality means, however, that each translation project is more expensive overall. The desire to customize offerings to donor interests has also made the translation ecosystem more complex. Translation organizations partner with one another to make more projects available to their donor pool, which can make it more difficult to track where and how funds are spent. Finally, being too reactive to donor interests can risk duplication of programs and allocation of funds to less strategic aims.



Understanding cost and use of funds in Bible translation is an essential act of stewardship precisely because this work is so missionally aligned with God's heart. We intend this high-level study of cost and use to be useful for education, reflection, and innovation to advance illumiNations' precious mission. We join in prayer that one day soon every tribe and nation will have access to God's Word in their heart language.

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