



# Field Guide to Humanitarian Interpreting & Cultural Mediation



**TRANSLATORS**  
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**Save the Children**



European Union  
Civil Protection and  
Humanitarian Aid

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide has been developed by Translators without Borders (TWB) to support humanitarian field managers, interpreters and cultural mediators in their daily interactions and responsibilities.

Translators without Borders is a unique non-profit organization specializing in language. We support NGOs and aid organizations in their core work by providing them with our core work: language, content, and translation. We are governed by our objective to increase access to critical information in local languages. In 2013, TWB created the first-ever crisis relief translation service, Words of Relief, which has responded to crises every year since.

The need for this document first arose in Greece, in the context of the European refugee crisis response. It builds on an initiative taken by the Communicating with Communities Sub-Working Group to provide interpreters, cultural mediators, and humanitarian actors, with elements of a code of conduct.

Interpreters and cultural mediators are key allies for humanitarian actors sensitive to the needs of those affected by disaster to receive and share information in their own language. Communication is aid and words build trust. Recognizing these essential principles of a people-centered humanitarian intervention, it is essential to build effective language bridges between people in need and those providing aid and services. Whenever humanitarian responders do not speak or understand the mother tongue of the person they serve, the risk of miscommunication, loss of critical information or misinformation is high, potentially leading to unnecessary suffering or loss of life.

Working with interpreters and cultural mediators helps to bridge that gap. We hope this guide will be of use to both the linguists themselves and their humanitarian managers. It covers the following topics:

- Interpreters and cultural mediators; key responsibilities, differences and similarities
- Humanitarian interpreting and cultural mediation do's and don'ts
- Working with interpreters and cultural mediators - best practice
- Humanitarian principles in practice
- Resources

# INTERPRETERS AND CULTURAL MEDIATORS: KEY RESPONSIBILITIES, DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

Interpreter and cultural mediator are different jobs with different skill sets. Not all interpreters will be able to provide cultural mediation, and not all cultural mediators will have professional interpreting skills. When planning to call on one or the other, the humanitarian professional should be clear about what support s/he needs.

## Interpreter

An **interpreter** verbally translates spoken material from one language (source language) to another language (target language). S/he is present physically or interprets remotely, on the phone for example. This can take three main forms: simultaneous interpreting, performed generally from an interpreting booth in a conference environment; consecutive interpreting, where the speaker leaves pauses for the interpreter to relay the speech one section at a time; and bilateral interpreting, the most common in humanitarian field operations, where the interpreter relays both (or all) sides of a conversation between speakers of different languages, working both into and out of their main language.

## Cultural Mediator

A **cultural mediator** is a person who facilitates mutual understanding between a person or a group of people, the migrant/refugee population for example, and a caregiver, a doctor for example, by interpreting, taking into account cultural elements. S/he can give advice to both parties regarding appropriate cultural behaviors.

# INTERPRETERS AND CULTURAL MEDIATORS: DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

	I	CM
Bidirectional between source and target language	✓	✓ Can be a bit less fluent
Convey information as accurately as possible, while being faithful to the source	✓	✓
Convey only the main message	✗	✓
Acting as a bridge between cultures	✓	✓
Provide cultural advice and context if and when asked	✗ Unless absolutely necessary for comprehension	✓
Liaise with communities, collect information and feed it back to relevant parties	✗	Depends on job description
Use of glossaries and other resources	✓	✓

# INTERPRETERS AND CULTURAL MEDIATORS: DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES - CONTINUED

	I	CM
Verbally translate written information	✗	✗
Verbally translate spoken information	✓	✓
Facilitate communication between two parties	✓	✓
Cultural competence in source and target culture	✓	✓
Provide additional support besides conveying information	✗	✓
Remain impartial and neutral in any situation	✓	✓
Adapt language to target audience	✓	✓
Be sensitive & aware of the target group's situation	✓	✓

# HUMANITARIAN INTERPRETING

## DO'S AND DON'TS

An interpreter translates verbal communication between two languages. An interpreter may provide an oral translation of a written document, i.e. sight interpretation, under exceptional circumstance, but does not provide written translations (this is the work of a translator).



**Two-way proficiency:** Do ensure you are proficient in the languages you translate from and into.



Do not seek to take advantage of information acquired during or as a result of your work.



**Cultural competence:** Do develop your knowledge of the cultures you are interpreting between. This is essential to relay information accurately.



Do not accept assignments that require knowledge or language or other skills beyond your competence.



**Accuracy:** Do convey information as accurately as possible. Relay messages between the parties without omission or distortion.



Do not interject personal opinions or counsel.



**Neutrality:** Do remain neutral with regard to gender, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc. If at any point you feel you cannot do so, you should withdraw from the assignment.



Do not attempt to exercise power or influence over your listeners.



**Confidentiality:** Do respect the confidentiality of the parties and their discussion at all times.



Do not disclose information gathered during the course of your assignments.



**Use of resources:** Do use the resources provided to you, including glossaries and reference material.



Do not use your position to gain favors from clients.



Do not accept an assignment when family or close personal relationships affect impartiality.



Do not interfere with the flow of communication between the parties.

# HUMANITARIAN CULTURAL MEDIATION

## DO'S AND DON'TS

A **cultural mediator facilitates mutual understanding** between a person or a group of people (e.g. the migrant/refugee population) and a caregiver (e.g. a doctor) by providing two-way verbal translation (interpreting) and helping them overcome cultural barriers.



Do interpret all that is said accurately and in full. "I'm telling you this but please don't translate" is not acceptable.



Do interpret words, and attitudes, in each language, and explain cultural differences or practices as needed.



Do give additional support aside from conveying information if requested. For example, you can help filling out forms.



Do correct yourself if you make a mistake and ask for clarification if there is something you don't understand.



Do respond to racist or abusive language by highlighting its offensiveness with the speaker and checking that is what they want to say before interpreting it. Report this behavior to their supervisor afterwards.



Do use all resources available, like glossaries or reference material, to improve your understanding and knowledge.



Do ensure that your appearance is appropriate and adapted to the context (decent and neutral).



Do not accept assignments for which you know you are unqualified or not prepared.



Do not take assignments if you risk being biased or in case of conflict of interest (e.g. a family member or a close friend is involved).



Do not repeat what you have heard to friends, relatives, or anyone else.



Do not use your position to exercise power or pressure over any speaker or listener.



Do not use your position to gain favors, including financial, from any speaker or listener.



Do not comment on what you interpret or answer a question on behalf of one of the speakers.



Do not show your feelings or express your opinion. It is important to remain neutral.



Do not hold a separate conversation with one speaker without interpreting for the others.



# WORKING WITH INTERPRETERS & CULTURAL MEDIATORS IN A HUMANITARIAN SETTING - BEST PRACTICE -

**Interpreter and cultural mediator are different jobs with different skill sets.**  
Not all interpreters (I) will be able to provide cultural mediation, and not all cultural mediators (CM) will have professional interpreting skills.

## Duty of care and adequate preparation: key issues to address before starting work with an I/CM

I/CMs may be putting themselves at risk working for you. Whether or not you are contractually responsible, protect them.

Be aware that if you find something psychologically difficult to handle, your I/CM probably does too. Ask if (s)he wants support, and provide it if so.

Be aware that interpreting requires concentration, which is difficult to maintain in unfamiliar or dangerous environments. I/CMs will need regular breaks to ensure that they can remain focused.

Ensure that the I/CM understands and abides by your organization's code of conduct and the humanitarian principles.

Provide your I/CMs with appropriate comfort and facilities. Be aware of their needs and concerns.

Ensure that the I/CM has a clear job description and brief him/her as precisely as possible on the session ahead.

Provide the I/CM with the necessary background documentation (terminology, glossaries, etc.) ahead of time.

## Appropriate set-up, clear communication and control: best practices during and after a session with an I/CM

Pay attention to seating/ positioning so that everyone is clear that the conversation is with you, not with the I/CM.

Interpreting and cultural mediation take time. Schedule additional time for all meetings to allow for information to be repeated.

Speak directly to session participants (not the I/CM): maintain eye contact.

Allow the I/CM to finish interpreting before speaking.

Speak unhurriedly, clearly and with pauses. Speak only one or two sentences at a time.

Minimize your use of jargon, technical terms and abbreviations.

Explain words or concepts at the I/CM's request.

Be aware of cultural differences. Ask the CM for clarification on cultural differences if needed. Interpreters may not be able to provide such nuances.

You are responsible for ensuring understanding between all the parties. If you think there is misunderstanding, check with the I/CM.

Ask for full interpretation of side conversations.

Do not allow the I/CM to answer questions on behalf of participants.

Inquire if interpretation is longer or shorter than expected.

Debrief with the I/CM at the end to address issues or concerns and get suggestions on how you can work better with I/CMs.

# HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

The Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief was developed and agreed upon by eight of the world's largest disaster response agencies in 1994.

The Code of Conduct, like most professional codes, is a voluntary one. It lays down ten principles, which all humanitarian actors should adhere to in their disaster response work. The code is self-policing. TWB is a signatory and adheres to the Code of Conduct.

1

The humanitarian imperative comes first.

2

Aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone.

3

Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint.

4

We shall endeavor not to act as instruments of government foreign policy.

5

We shall respect culture and custom.

6

We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capacities.

7

Ways shall be found to involve program beneficiaries in the management of relief aid.

8

Relief aid must strive to reduce future vulnerabilities to disaster as well as meeting basic needs.

9

We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources.

10

In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognize disaster victims as dignified human beings, not hopeless objects.

For the full Code of Conduct see: <http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/idrl/I259EN.pdf>

# RESOURCES

## **AIIC, FIT and Red T Conflict Zone Field Guide for Civilian Translators/Interpreters (T/Is) and Users of Their Services - 2012**

A two-pager outlining rights and responsibilities of T/Is and also those of users of their services. Meant for all conflict contexts, including for T/Is employed by the military. Available in 17 languages.

[http://red-t.org/documents/T-I\\_Field\\_Guide\\_2012.pdf](http://red-t.org/documents/T-I_Field_Guide_2012.pdf)

## **Monash symposium on humanitarian interpreting – April 2016**

<https://vimeopro.com/monasharts/humanitarian-interpreting>

## **Working with interpreters video**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=1&v=pVm27HLLiiQ>

## **Basic interpreter training videos – by Clarity Interpreting**

Part 1 (body positioning; speaking in first person; never add, omit or substitute; handling side conversation)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wg-qZjMhU4>

Part 2 (clarifying, managing the session, tone, register, and style)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9e\\_nIDJV-Lk&feature=relmfu](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9e_nIDJV-Lk&feature=relmfu)

## **Ethical Principles for Translating and Interpreting - Highline Public Schools – 2008**

A 30 minutes self-learning course on the key principles of interpreting and translating. Not tailored to humanitarian contexts

<http://www.speakyourlanguages.com/courses/selfstudy3/index.htm>

## **Basic skills for interpreting - Highline Public Schools – 2008**

30 minute self-learning course for novice interpreters. Could be very helpful for cultural mediators or bilingual training. Not tailored to humanitarian contexts.

<http://www.speakyourlanguages.com/courses/selfstudy1/index.htm>

## **UNHCR interpreting in a refugee context – self-teaching module 3**

<http://www.unhcr.org/4d947e2c9.pdf>

## **Training opportunities**

InZone – CAS Humanitarian Interpreting – Application deadline Sept 2017

<http://www.unige.ch/formcont/cashumanitarianinterpreting/>