

USING LOCAL FIELD STAFF AS INTERPRETERS

1. BUILD IN PREPARATION TIME

- Preparation is crucial, so make contact with your interpreter as early as you can – before you leave base, if you can do it.
- Ask if your interpreter is happy to interpret for you and clarify if interpreting could pose any risks to them or their family.
- When you arrive, hold a meeting with your interpreter in private to discuss the assignment. You should leave about an hour for this. Ideally, a day or more should be left between this meeting and starting work, to give you both a chance to digest what has been said.

1.1 BRIEF YOUR INTERPRETER TO HELP THEM PREPARE EFFECTIVELY

- Reassure them that you appreciate their help and understand that what you are asking them to do would be challenging for any interpreter.
- Say who you want to talk with, about what, and in which places/contexts.
- Ask them to do what they can to find out about the subject matter to be discussed, as well as the accents and local customs of the area you will be visiting. Clarify any jargon or acronyms which may be used (e.g. IDPs)
- Give them a chance to prepare emotionally for what they may see and hear.
- Explain that their role will be to say everything that you say to the people you are interviewing and vice versa, as far as they are able to. You don't want them adding anything in, leaving anything out, or having their own conversations with subjects.
- If you want quotes, give examples of what a 'quote' is and what it isn't (e.g. a paraphrase).

1.2 DISCUSSING INFORMED CONSENT DURING PREPARATION TIME

- Explain to your interpreter that you do *not* want them to place any pressure on local people to participate and that you will not be angry or think any less of them if they refuse.
- Ask interpreters if they know of any circumstances or contexts which might make local people feel coerced into participating. For example, if they are asked to participate whilst queuing up for aid or asked by someone upon whom they depend for aid.
- If circumstances may seem coercive to local people, how could you minimise this?
- Clarify what informed consent is, who needs to be approached for this and the kinds of information which should be explained to potential participants.
- It is important to make it clear to participants when material could be seen by anyone in the world, including those in participants' local areas. But ideally, you should also specify in which outlets the material will be published/broadcast. If you don't know whether material will be used internally or given to journalists, this needs to be made clear to participants when seeking

consent. Participants need to be asked if they are happy for their names and locations to be included.

- If you want to keep media on file for future uses, then permission needs to be sought for this, and participants asked if they want it deleted after a certain date.

1.3 QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING PREPARATION TIME

- Ask exactly which words the interpreter plans to use when approaching people to ask them to participate. Discuss how to rephrase this, if the words they plan to use could pressurise local people or narrow the range of what they feel able to say to you.
- Give your interpreter the opportunity to ask you questions without feeling rushed.
- Ask if your interpreter would like to take a pen and paper to take notes
- Ask your interpreter how s/he will flag up to you if people use colloquial phrases, or refer to ideas and values which don't 'translate' easily. Explain that it is particularly important for you to understand and that they should take their time to try and explain what speakers are saying as fully as possible, even if this slows down the conversation.
- Ask open questions to check they have understood what you want them to do using an open question e.g. 'So how would you explain to someone else what we are going to do?' rather than 'Have you understood?'

2 DURING THE TRIP

- Position the interpreter, your participant and yourself in a triangular position so you can all see and hear each other easily.
- Explain to the subject what the interpreter is doing and that both they and you will need to pause after speaking a sentence or two, to allow for accurate interpretation.
- Factor in breaks – interpreting is intense, exhausting work.
- Be patient and courteous at all times. Even if your interpreter is not great, you are only going to make things worse if you fluster them by getting frustrated and irritated.
- Make sure your interpreter is told about any changes, especially if new people join you or if media will be used for different purposes.
- Throughout the trip, keep asking your interpreter - in private if possible – how s/he is finding interpreting for you. Ask if s/he has any questions, or if anything is happening which is making interpretation more difficult than it would be otherwise.

3 AFTER THE TRIP

- Ensure your interpreter will be debriefed and given access to emotional support on their return.

WHY IS GOOD INTERPRETATION IMPORTANT?

NGO-workers tend to treat getting someone who speaks the language on board as a logistical issue: a bit like getting a travel permit or booking flights. If they brief the interpreter at all, it is usually a rushed five minute conversation just before starting work and in front of others. But your interpreter is the lynchpin in your editorial team – the strength of the case studies you get depends on them. It is a false economy to skimp on communicating with them when your organisation is spending thousands of pounds on a trip. Your beneficiaries won't be able to say what they want to say to you properly and you will be likely to return to base with a series of dull, bland and same-y case studies.

NGO-workers' communications with interpreters also tend to involve little dialogue: at most, they involve instructions about the need to translate 'word-for-word'. Although you don't want to end up with bland paraphrases, this kind of instruction shows that NGO-workers don't really understand what they are asking field workers to do - or how hard it is. That makes local staff feel stressed and unsupported, makes communication much more difficult, and makes it more likely that they will be emotionally exhausted long before the end of the trip.

So to spell it out: intercultural interpretation is not translation. It involves mediating in real-time between individuals who are may be in a very unequal position, one or more of whom may be very distressed. It may involve interpreting between two cultures of unequal status, which may have their own conversational traditions. Those cultures may also be linked by a violent or oppressive colonial history, which can make speakers resentful, fearful or hesitant to say things which are important to them. In addition, when people are trying to express something painful, they often use colloquial phrases, which may involve culturally-specific ideas or values. Finding ways of understanding those phrases can be the key to really powerful and unusual case studies - but they are especially difficult to interpret.

All of that would be extremely challenging even for a professionally-trained interpreter. But field staff are unlikely to be professionally trained and may be unsure about their linguistic fluency - no matter what you have been told about their abilities. Many are also junior, on short-term contracts and have family responsibilities. Even when interpreters have more senior, secure jobs, they can still feel under a lot of pressure to 'do well' in front of visiting press officers. If they have any previous experience of interpreting at all, it is often in the context of project reporting. So unless you tell them otherwise, they may approach beneficiaries in contexts where they are receiving aid, which can make them feel coerced.

They may even pressurise beneficiaries by saying that they have an obligation to prove to donors that their money has been well-spent. This is disempowering, limits what they can say to you and won't result in distinctive and colourful case studies. Finally, even when interpreters are briefed in advance, they tend to be forgotten when plans change. That makes it impossible for them to seek informed consent on your behalf – so keep talking!

FURTHER RESOURCES

ISO Guidelines for Community reporting <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/#iso:std:iso:13611:ed-1:v1:en>

Red-T Guidelines for interpreting in conflict zones: http://red-t.org/documents/T-I_Field_Guide_2012.pdf

The Dart Center for Trauma and Journalism booklet on self-care <http://dartcenter.org/content/trauma-journalism-handbook>

IF YOU USE THESE, PLEASE LET US ME KNOW!

AUTHOR CONTACT:

Dr Kate Wright, University of Edinburgh Kate.Wright@ed.ac.uk: 00 44 (0) 7980916975

Assisted by Dr Sabela Melchor-Couto, Senior Lecturer in Spanish and Dr Pablo Romero-Fresco, Reader in Audiovisual Translation and Film-making at the University of Roehampton