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# The International Humanitarian Sector and Language Translation in Crisis Situations

Assessment of Current Practices and Future Needs

## Research Brief

During major social disruptions, such as civil conflicts, natural disasters, or other crises, access to information is of fundamental importance to response and recovery operations. Ability to understand the language in which information is disseminated is a key marker of social vulnerability to disasters or crises. It is important to assess the degree to which the service efforts of intergovernmental agencies, international non-governmental organizations, and other organizations in the humanitarian sector are informed by commitment to multilingual communication and language translation. Such assessment is important to understanding how humanitarian organizations contribute to risk reduction and improved community resilience. This research brief provides an assessment of the current state of practice and key language access issues in operational humanitarian organizations.

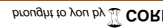
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*The International Humanitarian Sector and Language Translation in Crisis Situations: Assessment of Current Practices and Future Needs*  
Report

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London; Phoenix, AZ; Dublin.

Note: the identity of the representatives of the organizations has been protected. When organizations have been mentioned explicitly, the researchers received consent in accordance to the legal requirements of the General Data Protection Regulations 2018.

We use 'humanitarian organizations' as a shorthand to refer to the various entities whose personnel participated in the interviews on which this report draws. Personnel working within the humanitarian sector were interviewed. The sample here discussed cuts across the sector, as interviewees are affiliated to intergovernmental organizations (e.g. WHO), non-governmental organizations (e.g. Harvard Humanitarian Initiative), international non-governmental organizations (e.g. Oxfam Global Humanitarian Team), global networks (e.g. CDAC Network), and the International Red Cross Red Crescent movement. For ease of discussion, the report refers to them collectively as humanitarian organizations, unless examples of practice come from one specific organization.

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# Research Brief

## The International Humanitarian Sector and Language Translation in Crisis Situations:

### Assessment of Current Practices and Future Needs

Federico M. Federici, Brian J. Gerber, Sharon O'Brien & Patrick Cadwell

#### Executive Summary

##### Assessment Focus

During major social disruptions, such as civil conflicts, natural disasters, or other crises, access to information is of fundamental importance to response and recovery operations. Ability to understand the language in which information is disseminated is a key marker of social vulnerability to disasters or crises. Assessing the degree to which the service efforts of organizations involved in the humanitarian sector are informed by commitment to multilingual communication and language translation is important to understanding how these organizations contribute to risk reduction and improved community resilience. This short report provides an assessment of the current state of practice and key language access issues in the humanitarian sector.

##### Guiding Questions

Assessment of the efforts in the humanitarian sector in crisis relief and recovery work can be understood in the context of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit's Grand Bargain commitments to reform aspects of humanitarian organizations' relief work. Among those goals are key pronouncements on accountability, localization, and participation; language is integral to each. Because of the importance of language access to risk reduction and resilience in crisis situations, the assessment here attempts to address three questions: (1) what is the significance of language access to international humanitarian assistance efforts?; (2) what constitutes effective practices or key challenges at present?; and (3) what is the prospect for humanitarian organizations' managing language access needs in the future?

##### Key Findings

- Study subjects voiced near unanimity that providing language access is fundamentally important to humanitarian operations, but, at present, the capacity to formalize or routinize such efforts is limited;
- There was wide-spread consensus that accommodating language needs is necessary for achieving the Grand Bargain's aim of two-way communication for greater accountability of operational humanitarian organizations towards affected communities;
- Accommodating language needs is consistently seen as a complex task; currently, even when there is capacity to address the issue, there is no agreement on how language needs should be accommodated;
- Language access capabilities may go beyond budget or staff resources and include issues of modality, culture, politics, ownership within the organizations, etc.;
- Key gaps in practice render service delivery less effective.

##### Implications & Recommendations

- Findings suggest defined "ownership" of language translation within an organization is key to effective practice;
- Incorporating more systematic efforts on language translation in humanitarian operations is directly relevant to the Grand Bargain goals of accountability, localization, and participation in serving affected communities;
- Establishing systematic provision for communication in local languages in humanitarian response plans is crucial as the world is facing increasing hazard vulnerability;
- Improving humanitarian assistance requires management solutions such as better integration of language access provision with the cluster system.

##### Purpose & Context

This assessment is one part of a larger study on crisis translation being undertaken by the International Network on Crisis Translation (INTERACT). This report is a part of the project aimed at understanding policy and practice on crisis translation issues across organizations and sectors.

##### Data & Methods

A purposive sample of just over two dozen humanitarian organizations was taken to investigate practices and issues of language access in crisis settings. The sample was designed to capture a range of organizations with different types of primary services, different areas of the globe for current operations, and different national headquarter locations. An organizational representative served as a subject matter expert; interviews were conducted using a structured questionnaire to allow for consistency in coding of responses.

##### For More Information:

INTERACT is an academic, industry and NGO consortium aimed at research and development of solutions regarding translation in crisis situations; for details, see:

<https://sites.google.com/view/crisistranslation/home>

## Background: Language Access & Crises

In situations of significant social disruption, such as civil conflicts, natural disasters, or other crises, access to information is of fundamental importance to risk reduction and general resilience (Altay & Labonte 2014; O'Brien et al. 2018). Both the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-30 (see Aitsi-Selmi et al. 2016) and the European Union's General Guidelines for Operational Priorities on Humanitarian Aid (see European Commission 2014) recognize this. Addressing language access needs in a crisis situation can also be viewed as a basic human right that informs more effective crisis or disaster management practices (O'Brien et al. 2018).

In this report, intergovernmental organizations (e.g. WHO), non-governmental organizations (e.g. Harvard Humanitarian Initiative), international non-governmental organizations (e.g. Oxfam Global Humanitarian Team), global networks (e.g. CDAC Network), and societies of the International Red Cross Red Crescent movement whose personnel was interviewed are loosely referred to as humanitarian organizations for ease of discussion. In addition, language translation refers to all forms of written translation and oral interpreting across two languages.

Assessing the efforts of humanitarian organizations in multilingual communication and language translation is important to understanding how the sector helps reduce risk and improve resilience. Investigations into this topic are limited to date. Some research on how humanitarian organizations deal with language access has started to emerge and considers the use of a lingua franca as an additional burden on representatives of local NGOs as well as national staff of humanitarian organizations, and a serious obstacle to establishing relationships of trust with the affected populations. For example, the Listening Zones Project<sup>1</sup> (University of Reading, UK) addressed the role that languages and cultural knowledge play in the policies and practices of development international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). The Listening Zones report recommends the integration of language access at the stage of project planning, for instance by including translations of project objectives in languages accessible to the local communities working with INGOs in developmental projects. To build a two-way route of communication for increased community engagement, this report also recommends translation of documents and reports based on local practices into English to establish more collaborative practices in keeping with the cultural values of the local populations.

In a special volume of the journal *Translation Spaces*

(Tesseur 2018), the topics of language access, policies, training, and INGO practitioners' viewpoints on translation and accessibility were addressed, including considerations on development and resilience, humanitarian response, and recovery practices. The common denominator in all contributions is a concern with the distance between extensively multicultural and multilingual situations in which humanitarian responses occurred and the scarcity of options available to them to manage demand and needs for language translation.

*Translators without Borders* is a non-profit organization that has highlighted the significant global issues in relation to language access for humanitarian and disaster response. To highlight just one of their contributions, a position paper sets out that information is a human right—a position that is also espoused by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (Greenwood et al. 2017)—and that “information and dialogue were also part of the ‘participation revolution’ promised to people affected by humanitarian emergencies as part of the Grand Bargain in May 2016” (Translators without Borders, no date<sup>2</sup>).

The academic literature around long-term issues such as access to social services, rights, and responsibilities for crisis-affected populations is one area that documents needs for interpreting (oral translation) in institutional and NGO settings at national level (for expectations on risk communication see Lundgren & McMakin 2018; for health communication to gather information about and spread correct measures for anti-contagion see Bisen & Raghuvanshi 2013: p. 54, 143, 214; for an overview of language access in marginalized communities or ethnic minorities, see Taibi and Ozolins 2016). However, the focus on accommodating language needs by increasing resilience and preparedness for crisis situations of linguistically and culturally diverse communities has seen a growth of interest only recently.

## Problem Statement

Being able to understand information in an accessible language and format is critical to effective crisis communication, effective response operations, and overall risk reduction. Further, as noted, limited or no proficiency in the predominant language of a given community, or an official national language, is an important dimension of greater social vulnerability to disasters and related crises. For these reasons, improving language access is an important tool in risk reduction and enhancement of community resilience capacity.

The central challenge in this area is that producing effective language access or multilingual communication



on a large scale, in a crisis or disaster setting, is resource intensive. Language access provision is rarely included explicitly in plans, thus making language provision a challenge at the outset of humanitarian operations. Governmental agencies and non-profit or for-profit organizations (referred to loosely as non-governmental organizations) seeking to provide response, recovery or mass care relief services to those affected by a disaster or other type of crisis may face capacity constraints. Capacity or resource constraints are also applicable to the humanitarian sector. The most recent *World Disasters Report 2018: Leaving No One Behind* (IFRCRCs: 2018 p. 103) identifies the challenge for humanitarian organizations in terms of continued reliance on lingua francas:

*“However linguistically diverse the affected population, **humanitarian responses are usually coordinated in international lingua francas and delivered in a narrow range of national languages.** Basic data on the languages and literacy levels of the affected population is not systematically collected and shared in the way that other fundamental characteristics such as gender and age might be. As a result, evidence-based multilingual communication strategies are rarely developed. The small pool of trained translators and interpreters in many underserved languages is also a limiting factor. Without data, humanitarians tend to assume a lingua franca will be universally understood. Without resources, they call on untrained members of the affected population who speak the language used by responders to plug the gap, frequently unresourced and unsupported.”*

*(World Disasters Report 2018: p. 103)*

Coupled with this characterization is a recent accountability assessment report titled *How Change Happens in the Humanitarian Sector* (CHS Alliance 2018). In evaluating a set of commitments on Core Humanitarian Standards, the aggregate rating for performance on the commitment that “humanitarian response is based on communication, participation and feedback” is second lowest of nine. This is at least suggestive of the importance of considering how well the humanitarian sector is addressing language access issues, considering its relevance to broader efforts aimed at participation, localization, and accountability. These concerns warrant further scrutiny.

## Analysis

The characterizations referenced in the preceding

section suggest key challenges that the humanitarian sector faces in meeting Grand Bargain goals related to participation and accountability. Furthermore, the sector’s ability and capacity to enhance support in the area of local language needs requires further attention. In using the term, “language access” we are referring to effective multilingual communication that ensures information is accessible through translation in multiple modalities, while being sensitive to context and cultural settings. Language access is a critical aspect of crisis or disaster management and is relevant to risk reduction and resilience building.

To better understand how this critical issue is currently being tackled, we posed three broad assessment questions:

- (1) What is the significance of language access to international humanitarian assistance efforts?
- (2) What constitutes effective practices or key challenges at present? And
- (3) What is the prospect for humanitarian organizations managing language access needs in the future?

A purposive sample of just over two dozen humanitarian organizations was taken. The sample was designed to capture a range of organizations with different types of primary services, in different areas of the globe for current operations, and with different national headquarter locations. To be more specific, organizations were selected for inclusion in the sample based on variation across organizational size (large global agencies, international NGOs and smaller, local NGOs were included), across type of services provided (organizations providing primarily crisis or disaster response and relief services, organizations providing health-care or public health services, and organizations providing educational or advocacy-related services were included), and across locations of organizations’ headquarter operations and locations of primary or predominant service locations.

An organizational representative served as a subject matter expert who shared their perspectives on both internal organizational practices and on the broader humanitarian sector. The interviews were carried out by individual members of the INTERACT team—the authors of this research brief. A structured questionnaire was used to allow for consistency in questioning and coding of responses. The interviews were carried out online between August 2018 and December 2018.

The interview questionnaire was structured around several key themes. The first of these pertained to the basic importance of multilingual communication in providing services to target populations in crisis settings.

Questions in this thematic area related to the degree to which processes of multilingual communication (translation and/or interpreting) are formalized in the organizations in the sample, the ways in which language access barriers are addressed by them, and the importance of language access to their humanitarian operations and related services.

A second thematic area pertained to what constitutes effective practices or key challenges at present for local or global humanitarian organizations. Questions in this area included identifying how such organizations attempt to address the underlying need of multilingual communication, how challenges in meeting such needs are addressed given the types or services provided by the organization and existing resources available to do such work, and finally, identification of key gaps in the area of multilingual communication during humanitarian assistance services—and the implications of such gaps.

The third thematic area of this assessment concerned the matter of future direction of the humanitarian sector on language access issues. Questions under this theme related to the appropriate positioning of the issue of multilingual communication within existing humanitarian sector structures and on moving from awareness to action on the issue.

## Key Findings

- *With respect to the first thematic area of assessment, there was, perhaps unsurprisingly, virtual unanimity that the issue of multilingual communication in humanitarian service provision in a crisis or disaster setting is of high importance.*

While that might seem intuitive, it is important to note this reported consensus because it indicates a clear value and commitment statement in light of Grand Bargain goals and areas of potential improvement for crisis or disaster service provision.

What does that consensus translate to in terms of practical operations? In general, the interviews revealed a high degree of variance in terms of individual organizations turning a commitment in principle to effective

language access into formal organizational policy, or at least routine operational guidance. Some organizations are concerned with providing access to information on their institutional websites and for their donors. A limited number of organizations stated that they had a formal guidance to accommodate language access in crisis situations. However, ***in the majority of organizations in the purposive sample, there appeared to be no formal guidance on providing translated information to beneficiaries.*** Most of the participants indicated that they address these needs on an ad-hoc basis. In spite of a lack of formalization, there was wide recognition for the need to create processes to support language translation.

It is also worth noting that part of the challenge of a more systematic language access commitment by the humanitarian sector on health information, instructions on safety, etc. concerns the appropriate use of funds; donors provide resources, but translation might not fall within the scope of the delegated funds. Furthermore, where resources for language translation are made available, several participants reported that it can be undertaken more as a box-ticking exercise to satisfy donors (e.g. ensuring official reporting in a donor's language) than as a tool to ensure appropriate multilingual communication with affected populations.

- *In general, the interviews with the organizational representatives indicated significant complexity in tackling the challenge of language access.*

This complexity involves dimensions related to literacy levels of the service population, cultural sensitivity (e.g. choice of language(s) or dialect in which to translate can alienate or even lower levels of solidarity, or cause friction in communications), concepts and terminology



“to communicate is also to listen to people’s concerns, to address their concerns, to know what they’re thinking about. It is important for us to speak the same language, so it is a critical part of any humanitarian response.”

*Interview with WHO Communication Officer September 2018*

(with interview participants citing disease or gender-based violence as particularly complex domains for translation), trust (both of the information provided and of the information provider), modality—which refers to communication in written, spoken, or sign—as well as through multiple channels, including several forms of oral communications (e.g. face to face, community meetings, radio), and finally, the dimension of training approaches for an organization: expecting ‘local staff’ with language skills, full workload and no training to ‘provide’ translation.

With respect to the second theme of identification of effective practices and key challenges in language access provision,

- *participants felt that the sector has not fully realized the Grand Bargain goals of accountability, localization, and participation as they relate to language access issues in humanitarian assistance.*

First, it is generally true that virtually no individual organization is capable of servicing all the languages that are required in a given humanitarian assistance setting; the basic scale of translation or interpreting needs is simply too great.

Second, there is, in general, a lack of systematic approaches to accommodating language access service needs. While all the representatives interviewed indicated some type of either informal or formal organizational process for addressing language access needs among the communities they serve,

- *there was a near uniform acknowledgement that systematic identification of community language access needs and corresponding targeting of organizational resources to meet those needs is deficient at present.*

And third, interview participants noted that more effective two-way communication is required for effective language access practices. In general, participants observed that **if there is no translation, or translation is in one direction only (from responder to the community), then creating accountability or giving a “voice” to the affected community in response or recovery operations is not truly possible.**

Another key area of current practices, including challenges, is the matter of how the basic type of crisis or disaster affects language access needs during humanitarian assistance operations. Interview participants were asked about this and offered a perspective that protracted crises or disaster incidents can and do create a different set of challenges for humanitarian organizations providing aid than those

created by acute or sudden-onset crises or disasters. Further, the type of hazard or crisis—a civil conflict, a disaster such as flooding, or a public health crisis or emergency—each presents a unique set of challenges for assistance operations. For instance, interpreting services for displaced people as a result of conflict and civil unrest can be planned and organized after the movement of people begins. Planning of suitable language resources is either logistically extremely difficult, or potentially not possible, in a sudden large-scale outbreak of cholera or Ebola in a region which was not previously at risk.

The third theme addressed during the interviews was future directions. Most of our interview participants agreed that working towards the Grand Bargain goals serves the aim of meeting the underlying needs of engagement and participation with the affected communities, which are both underpinned by efficient two-way communication. They also agreed that it is important to elevate the issue of language access in order to create ownership within institutions, thereby making it more prominent among the conflicting priorities of their organizations’ agendas. There was less clarity among participants about how, or where, language access could best be embedded in the cluster system, with some observing that language access is in fact relevant to almost all parts of the cluster system.

### Illustrations of Effective Practice

A variety of practices on accommodating language needs emerged from the interviews. Three illustrations have been chosen; they consider practices relating to different phases of crises: a local response example (diphtheria in Bangladesh), a cross-boundaries response (Ebola in Eastern Africa), and an example of promoting resilience through translation, based on lessons learned during the recovery phase (in New Zealand).

The 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa showed up the limitations in disseminating information in languages and in ways that would let populations at risk of contagion understand and trust the measures suggested to avoid it. Several interviewees from different global organizations recognized that the 2017 information campaign in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, although patchy, had taken onboard the lessons learned regarding language access from the 2014 outbreak—probably resulting in a quickly contained containment and a virtually unknown outbreak. This is an example of the use of language translation in a response phase that benefited from materials developed in preparation for future outbreaks. Thanks to the learning, translators were identified very quickly in

2017; translations were completed rapidly and, most importantly, they were made accessible in multiple modalities—oral and written—and through different media including radio broadcasts. This successful approach focused on communities first by considering how information is accessed in the local context.

The second illustration of an effective approach concerned a diphtheria outbreak in Bangladesh in 2017. With support from Translators without Borders, information in Bangla and Rohingya targeting different groups from health professionals, to community health workers, to local communities was tailored to those audiences. It was known that the practice of isolating people infected with diphtheria from their families and close groups was new to many in the local communities and was as upsetting as the risk of contagion. However, the information was communicated through different modes (not only through written leaflets but also orally) and the people informing the affected communities were trusted members of the family or of the community. Both means and modes to communicate these needs appropriately to each group played a positive role in containing the outbreak. This success was possible as a result of a crucial understanding of the language needs of the community. The illustration shows that community engagement implies enabling communication in ways that facilitate the affected communities rather than the humanitarian responders.

The third illustration emerged from experience by responders, the public health sector, institutions, and interpreters in New Zealand, when the 2010/2011 Canterbury Earthquakes revealed difficulties in crisis communication in a region experiencing a protracted recovery phase. Lessons learnt from the sudden increase in language needs in the response phase and in the years of (ongoing) recovery of the earthquake-affected areas stimulated a change of approach at institutional level. Culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD) continued to need language support for a long time, stretching language provision in social services, public health, and other council bodies for years after the event. Regional offices of the Department of Civil Defence and Emergency Management decided to increase awareness of hazards in New Zealand among all CALD communities by involving members from these communities in the translation of a household earthquake planning guide. The pilot project entailed multilingual translation coordinated by New Zealand Red Cross officers with no previous experience in translation management, who approached INTERACT members for assistance. The INTERACT team designed a fast-track, 90-minute introductory citizen translation course focused on fundamentals that need to be considered when translating texts. This course was delivered to 45 citizen translators working with a total of

15 languages in frequent use in the Wellington Region. The project included professional translators in those language combinations where there is a role, need, and demand for professionals. The regional emergency management officers aimed to include CALD communities in the hazard-awareness campaign by giving them their own voices. INTERACT provided translation training materials to be used to onboard members of communities whose language combinations are not served by professionals to create a minimum understanding of translation processes. The increased awareness on the role of communicating in languages a community can understand has been embedded in the programming of the national Red Cross society. Furthermore, this focus on increased resilience has been maintained (2017-2019); a- project proposal is looking at establishing a collaboration with an industry partner to automate translation of warning messages through the support of the newly established groups of citizen translators. After the initial project, the guides are available in print and online; audio and videos recordings are part of ongoing work to be used in crises or beforehand, creating a set of resources and building an engagement with communities.

## Implications and Recommendations

Language access in humanitarian assistance operations is of significance for several reasons: access to information serves as a basic human right, it enhances communications in crisis or disaster settings, which improves management of such incidents, and it contributes to community resilience capacity (O'Brien et al. 2018). The view that communication with affected communities in a language they understand deserves to be systematically embedded in the agenda of the humanitarian sector is not controversial—all interview participants shared this perspective. Several participants chose to underline the role that organizations such as Translators without Borders have played in raising awareness of the issue. At the same time, most interview participants emphasized that achieving the inclusion of effective multilingual communication is a complex goal. Many departments/units within the different humanitarian organizations have duties and responsibilities connected with language access policies. These duties and responsibilities cut across all operations.

Despite the significance of language access, it is also true that operational capability demands are so high in a crisis or disaster situation that it is difficult for organizations to meet the potential demand for internal resource capacity, whether through staffing or well-established contracts or partnerships. While many interview participants reported that the demand for translation is growing in their organizations, they also



emphasized budgetary and/or staff constraints making the logistics of language access difficult in practice. This implies a basic need for making language access a priority in line with Grand Bargain efforts so that it is not perceived as an addition to the many pledged goals, but rather as being integrated in all of the goals that focus on accountability to, and engagement with, affected communities.

Overall, the results of the interviews suggest a recognition that multilingual communication warrants greater attention on the humanitarian sector's agenda. However, there are so many competing factors that a strong argument needs to be made to decision-makers based on systematic data on need and on effectiveness of service provision. In other words, there is a broader need to collect evidence as to whether or not a lack of translation is linked causally to increased morbidity and mortality. Future data collection has to be collaborative across sectors, including local and international emergency responders, humanitarian organizations, researchers and, not least, affected communities.

Some interview participants noted that humanitarian organizations also need to seek out technological resources to support operations. As noted above, the expansive demands of language access are likely to outstrip the internal resources of most organizations in the humanitarian sector, and only those with the greatest budgetary resources will be able to contract translation services, or materially support key volunteers in the translation domain. As a result, more efficient use of translation technology represents clear potential for augmenting or improving capacity on language access service provision for the humanitarian sector.

Finally, **the overall results of the interviews indicate that commitment to language access services in the operational processes of humanitarian organizations is seen as critical to future success.** In short, greater internal organizational "ownership" of language access among staff is a fairly basic requirement for improving the effort to address language access needs among the communities served. Taking responsibility for language access in this way would clearly be in line with existing humanitarian standards, such as Commitment 6 of the 4th edition of the Humanitarian Charter and minimum standards disaster response (*The Sphere Project* 2018: 71) advocating to

- "Respect the use of local language(s) in meetings and other communications. [...]"
- Communicate clearly and avoid jargon and colloquialisms, especially when other participants do not speak the same language.
- Provide interpreters and translators if needed."

## Notes

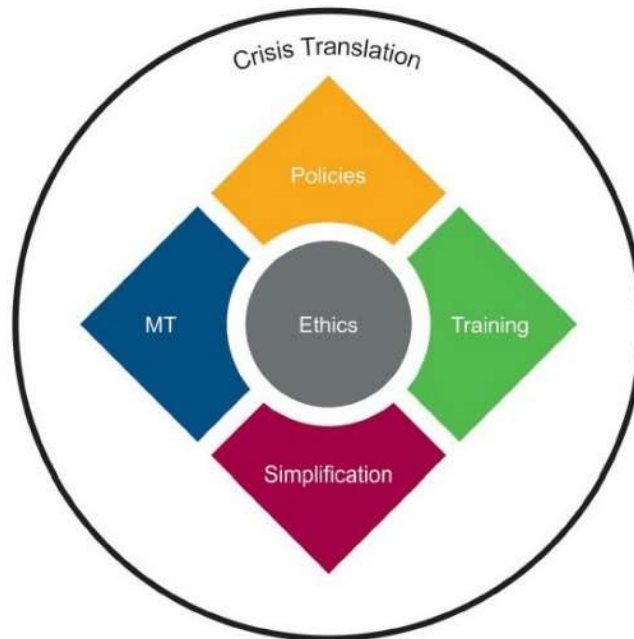
- 1 The project ran between 2015 and 2018, see <https://www.reading.ac.uk/modern-languages-and-european-studies/Research/mles-listening-zones-of-ngos.aspx>. (Accessed 10 December 2018).
- 2 The report on the project is available here <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/04/English-Information-without-understanding-rights-without-meaning-TWB-paper-for-the-Global-Compacts.pdf>. (Accessed 10 December 2018).

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## INTERACT

INTERACT is an H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research and Innovation Staff Exchange Network aimed at researching translation in crisis situations. It brings together a unique combination of actors from social science, humanities, technology developers and humanitarian responders to collaborate and to educate each other. The network is led by Dr Sharon O'Brien of Dublin City University and brings together four academic partners (Dublin City University, University College London, Arizona State University, The University of Auckland), two NGO partners (Translators without Borders, Cochrane), and two technology industry partners (Microsoft Research, Unbabel) in a consortium. The consortium shares knowledge and conducts research on policy, training, technology, and ethics in relation to the translation and communication that takes place in crisis settings.

<https://sites.google.com/view/crisistranslation/home>