

Language: A Critical Issue in Humanitarian Response

Words of Relief

Translators Without Borders

“In the foothills of Kathmandu and in the surrounding villages, there are many people who do not speak English and it’s these people that have been badly affected by the earthquake. Translation really matters.”

Andrew Bredenkamp, Translators without Borders

Following a crisis, one of the most immediate priorities for both relief workers and victims is disseminating and receiving information. But often language barriers on the ground complicate response and recovery efforts. This gap became particularly apparent after the Haiti earthquake in 2010 and the Japanese earthquake and tsunami in 2011, when NGOs and frontline aid workers realised they were unprepared and unable to communicate in the primary languages of the affected populations.



Translators without Borders provides people with access to vital knowledge in their own language, connecting non-profit organisations with a professional community of volunteer translators. This in turn builds local language translation capacity and raises awareness of language barriers.

Translators without Borders translates more than eight million words per year. In 2012, the organisation established a healthcare Translators Training Centre in Nairobi, Kenya.

“Communicating with communities in their own language is vital to the effectiveness and adequacy of relief efforts. It is essential if we are committed to reach people with life-saving information, practical advice and very importantly if we want to listen to what they have to say.”

Jacobo Quintanilla, ICRC

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Programme Name:

Words of Relief

Key Information:

Grant awarded: 2013 – Large Grant (Development of Systems Software and Platforms), 2014 – Extension to Large Grant (Focusing on Ebola Translations)

Lead organisation:

Translators without Borders

Partners:

Acrolinx; CDAC Network, Content Rules, Digital Humanitarian Network (DHN), Microsoft MT Local Language Team

Location: Kenya, West Africa

Summary:

Translators Without Borders 'Words of Relief Crisis Response Network' is a global translation and localisation initiative. Leveraging both human and technological resources, the project builds capacity to facilitate and improve communication among victims, field workers, and relief agencies during and after crises.

What humanitarian need is being addressed?

Following a crisis, one of the most immediate priorities for both relief workers and victims is disseminating and receiving information. However, language barriers on the ground frequently complicate response and recovery efforts.

What is the innovative solution?

Social media, mobile communications and digital technologies now enable real-time communication between victims, relief workers and remote volunteers, dramatically increasing the flow of vital information in the wake of a crisis. Words of Relief is working towards eliminating linguistic barriers that impede vital response and relief efforts during and after a crisis by:

- 1) building a pool of translators and interpreters, as well as machine translation capacity in under-resourced world languages
- 2) preparing a digital *inventory* of essential crisis response information in multiple local languages that can be accessed on demand by aid organisations, frontline relief workers and affected communities
- 3) maintaining a network of human and technological linguistic resources that can mobilise immediately in response to a crisis

Innovation Phases Description:

Words of Relief offers a cost-effective solution for aid organisations and other humanitarian NGOs as it creates a free corpus of open, localised, disaster-response content in under-resourced languages as well as a volunteer-driven, standing network of professional translators and interpreters that can be deployed immediately in a crisis. These resources currently do not exist. The project builds on TWB's existing infrastructure in East Africa, which includes a translation training centre in Nairobi that will be used to identify and train the regional Words of Relief *Captain*.

Key Deliverables:

Words of Relief is developing and testing model approaches designed to

- 1) increase the availability of and access to vital crisis response information in Swahili
- 2) build technological and human capacity to provide improved real-time translation support in Swahili and additional regional languages to NGOs, other humanitarian actors, and crisis-affected populations (facilitating two-way communication)
- 3) develop a standing network of translators in multiple East African languages that can be rapidly deployed in a crisis
- 4) establish a formal code of ethics to ensure compliance with humanitarian principles

www.translatorswithoutborders.org

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