

Standard operation procedures (SOP) for working with professional and non-professional interpreters and translators in the refugee crisis in Greece

Prepared by UNHCR

Preamble

The large number of languages spoken and understood by refugees and migrants arriving in Greece poses a significant challenge for humanitarian personnel working in the country. Consequently, the need for translation and interpretation services within this context is enormous – yet, in reality, such services are not always easily (or quickly) accessible.

As a result, humanitarian actors often enlist the help of community members or volunteers to fulfill certain translation and/or interpretation needs. As such, these ‘community interpreters’ have become an integral part of the humanitarian response, and continue to play an invaluable role.

However, it is important for humanitarian actors to keep in mind the differences between professional interpreters and non-professional or ‘community interpreters’ – particularly when it comes to expected codes of conduct, and/or ethics. These standard operation procedures (SOP) aims to explain the role of professional interpreters and translators, as well as to outline some basic considerations for determining when it is (and when it is not) appropriate to enlist the aid of volunteer or non-professional community interpreters in the context of humanitarian activities. The purpose of these SOPs is to help support a successful co-operation between humanitarian actors and interpreters / translators.

Professional interpreters and translators

Professional interpreters (who convert spoken messages from one language to another) and translators (who convert written materials from one language to another) must act at all times in accordance with the standards of conduct and decorum appropriate to their profession. In other words:

- Professional interpreters and translators take responsibility for their work and conduct; they are committed to providing quality service in a respectful and culturally sensitive manner, dealing honestly and fairly with other parties and colleagues, and dealing honestly in all business practices.
- An interpreter is a facilitator and not an advocate. Their role is to be neutral, to remain unbiased, and to relay what is being said, exactly – not to give their opinion, or to influence a situation on either party’s behalf. Interpreters are not responsible

for what the parties communicate, only for the complete and accurate transfer of the message. They do not allow bias to influence their performance, nor do they soften, strengthen, or alter the messages being conveyed.

- They disclose any conflict of interest or any matter that may compromise their impartiality.
- Interpreters and translators use their best professional judgment in remaining faithful at all times to the meaning of texts and messages – to preserving the content and intent of the original text or message, and to transferring it without any omission or distortion.
- Interpreters do not misuse any information received in connection with the interpreting assignments. Interpreters do not seek to further their own interest in an interpreting situation in order to gain financial or other benefit. Nor will interpreters use the information received in an interpreting situation for the benefit of others or in order to harm others. Interpreters conform to contractual obligations towards their employers or commissioners.
- Professional interpreters and translators are bound by strict rules of confidentiality, similar to protection officers or social workers. Interpreters and translators must maintain confidentiality, and do not disclose information acquired in the course of their work. Confidentiality can only be broken in cases of imminent harm or danger to either party.

For humanitarian actors working with translators / interpreters

For humanitarian actors working with interpreters – whether that interpreter is a professional or volunteer / non-professional interpreter – it is important to maintain a clear understanding and respect for boundaries when it comes to the role that the interpreter should and should not be expected to play. For example:

- The focus of interpreters / translators is on message transfer. They should not, in the course of their interpreting or translation duties, be expected or asked to engage in other tasks such as advocacy, guidance or advice. Even where such other tasks are mandated by particular employment arrangements, a clear demarcation should be maintained between interpreting / translating and other tasks.
- An interpreter should not be asked for, nor offer their opinion about whether a speaker is telling the truth, or about *why* a statement is being made.
- Professional interpretation is done in first person singular. That is, using 'I'. There should be no 'he said', 'she said'. If the interpreter wants to ask a question of the

humanitarian actor for which they are interpreting (which is not a direct quote from the other person), they should make it clear that “This is a question from me, the interpreter”, so that there is no confusion over who is asking what.

- Keep in mind: the original statement in its source language should be about the same length as the statement the interpreter relays in its converted language. If you feel something has been left out, ask the interpreter to repeat back to you what was being said. Or, to avoid misunderstanding, speak in shorter sentences, and have the interpreter convey them one at a time.

Working with non-professional or community interpreters

In many cases, it is completely acceptable – or perhaps even preferable (for reasons of convenience, advanced contextual or cultural understanding, improving of community relations, etc) – to utilize volunteer or community interpreters in humanitarian settings. However, there are certain situations where this is not appropriate. These include:

- Any situation or discussion around which confidentiality is a clear concern, such as many discussions involving individual protection or health issues.
- Any situation that requires specialized interpretation skills, knowledge, and/or certification. For example: specialized medical or legal interpretation.
- Any situation in which there is or may be a conflict of interest for the interpreter. This might be something as simple as the interpreter being from a different ethnic or religious group than the individuals they are asked to interpret for, or it might be that the topic they are meant to be discussing is one about which the interpreter is personally biased. For example, when a camp resident is interpreting confrontational conversations between camp inhabitants and camp management. It is important that humanitarian staff are sensitive to these potential conflicts of interest, encourage interpreters to divulge them, and do not pressure interpreters to continue interpretation duties should any such conflict arise.
- Any situation in which the interpreter could be mistakenly seen as being part of authoritative structures. For example, if he/she is asked to interpret orders from the military or site management to a camp population he/she is part of.
- Any situation in which the interpreter may be offered information that could give him / her access to preferential treatment, or be used for inappropriate personal gain.