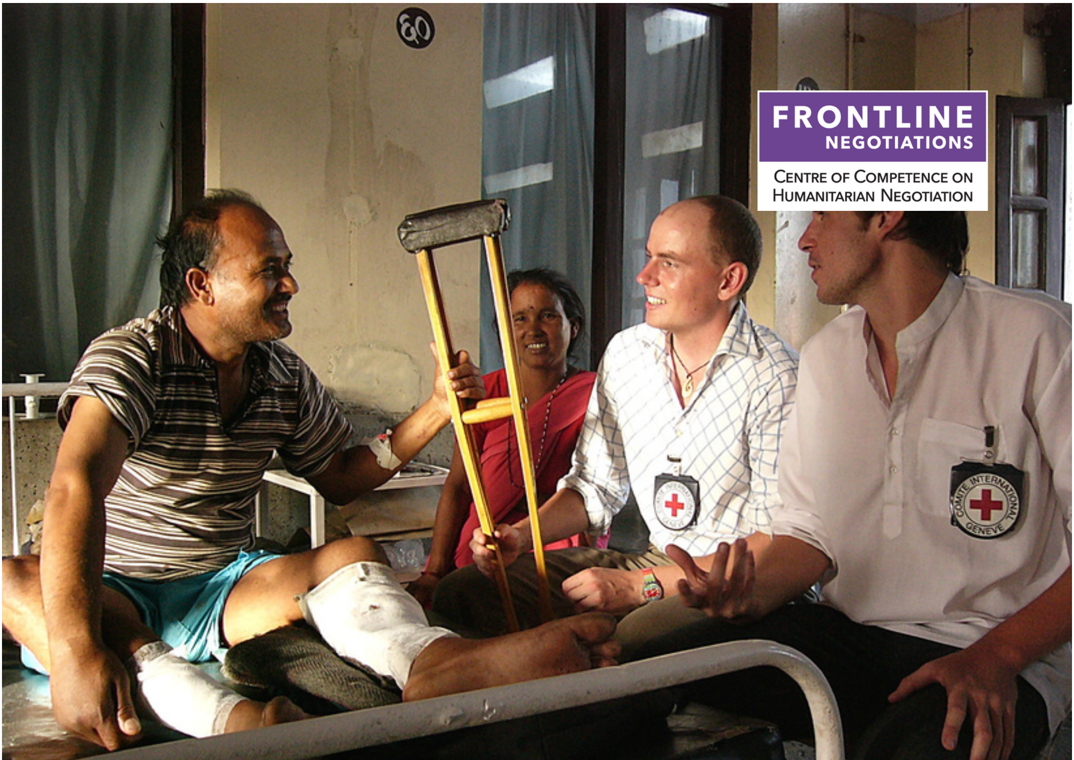

FRONTLINE NEGOTIATIONS

Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation

Interpreting in humanitarian negotiations

A guide for humanitarian negotiators and interpreters

In partnership with

UNIVERSITÉ DE GENÈVE

FACULTÉ DE TRADUCTION ET D'INTERPRÉTATION

About CCHN

The Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) is a joint endeavour of our five Strategic Partners: ICRC, WFP, UNHCR, MSF Switzerland and HD. We were established in 2016 in Geneva, Switzerland. We are mandated to facilitate the capture, analysis, and sharing of humanitarian negotiation experiences and practices with a view to supporting a more systematic approach to frontline negotiation. We also provide a space for multiagency dialogue and intend to foster a global community of practice among humanitarian negotiators.

During a five-year incubation phase, we are hosted by the ICRC. With the support of the five Strategic Partners and our donors, the CCHN organizes dedicated events, peer-to-peer exchanges and carries out research on global and regional issues identified by our Community of Practice.

A strategic partnership between:

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Aknowledgements

We would like to extend our many thanks to the CCHN community members who took the time to participate in our interviews and share their experiences with us.

Big thanks to the members of our working group on humanitarian interpreters:

Amir Khan Haqmal
Ayoub Elkaroubi
Mariana Hasbie
Ola Al-Shami
Rana Nader
Rita Gedeon
Tatevik Hambaryan
Vincenza Romano

This guide wouldn't exist without your valuable experiences and observations!

And of course, we would also like to extend our thanks to Prof. Lucía Ruiz Rosendo from the Interpreting Department at the University of Geneva for her relevant, insightful, and timely contributions to this project.

About this guide

The objective of this guide is to provide practical advice for humanitarian negotiators and interpreters on how to best work together and reach a good negotiation outcome.

The advice presented in this guide is the result of interviews conducted by the CCHN with humanitarian experts, experiences shared by members of the CCHN, and the collaboration with Prof. Lucía Ruiz Rosendo from the Interpreting Department at the University of Geneva.

Why did we write this guide?

Negotiating is hard, and negotiating with the help of interpreters is even harder. Humanitarian practitioners can find themselves in this situation when they are deployed to regions where they don't speak the local language and need the help of interpreters to communicate and do their job.

At the CCHN, we identified different challenges that both humanitarian negotiations and interpreters face when working together. One of the main challenges happens when the person who is interpreting speaks the local language, but hasn't been actually hired to do that job or received formal training in interpreting.

Similarly, humanitarian negotiators aren't used to negotiating with the help of interpreters, which requires adapting the way you communicate, such as speaking slower, using shorter sentences, or limiting how much jargon they use.

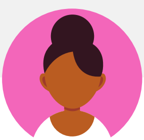
Considering this, the CCHN decided to collect the best practices used by negotiators and interpreters working together in humanitarian settings and create this guide. In it, you will find practical advice on what to do and what not to do before, during, and after a negotiation. We suggest both negotiators and interpreters use it as a support document to prepare their negotiations - preferably together!

Who are humanitarian interpreters?

The interviews and consultations with experts conducted by the CCHN showed that there are six different types of humanitarian interpreters:

- Language specialists who studied interpreting, and work full-time as interpreters with humanitarian organizations.
- Language experts who specialized in interpreting through different means, such as professional experience or further education, and who work full-time as interpreters with humanitarian organizations.
- Freelance interpreters, both formally trained or not, who work with humanitarian organizations on occasion.
- Humanitarian workers –both local or mobile– who interpret for their colleagues due to their language skills but have other technical responsibilities. Some of them may even be negotiators of their own.
- Members of local communities who are hired by humanitarian organizations to interpret due to their language skills.
- Members of local communities who volunteer to interpret for humanitarian workers on an ad hoc basis.

> The interpreter plays a very important role in the flow of the conversation, and whether the parties can find an "island of agreement" or drift apart. The interpreter "leads the ship"; either the parties will go with or against the wind depending on the interpreter.



Professional interpreter, local staff

Best practices

Clarify the role of the interpreter

As mentioned in the previous section, humanitarian interpreters can actually wear different "hats" and work in many different capacities, including as a negotiator. Therefore, the first challenge is to clarify the role of the interpreter within the negotiation team.

To do so, it is important to keep in mind that:

- ✔ The role of the interpreter is only to communicate across language barriers and not to intervene as a party to the negotiation.
- ✔ Interpreting is a profession with its own professional standards, and the interpreter should observe them even when they have different roles (e. g. negotiator, program manager, etc.).
- ✔ The interpreter represents the organization and should be included during the preparation of the negotiation to the extent possible.
- ✔ During the negotiation, the interpreter will manage the flow of the conversation and work as a moderator by indicating turn-taking between the interlocutors.

When the interpreter's role is unclear it can lead to:

- ✘ Interventions from the interpreter as a party to the negotiation, which can confuse the counterpart and undermine trust.
- ✘ Frustration for the person interpreting because they have to juggle different roles at the same time.
- ✘ A lack of trust from the counterpart, if the counterpart has already met the interpreter in their capacity as a negotiator.

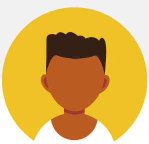
Best practices

Before a negotiation

Once the role of the interpreter has been clearly defined, the next step is for negotiators and interpreters to have a briefing about the negotiation.

- Whenever possible, have a joint preparation meeting to provide contextual information and documentation, share information about the counterpart, and go over the negotiation strategy.
- Establish a common vocabulary, clarify terms and acronyms, and determine their translation to ensure higher accuracy.
- Understand that the conversation flow will be different. It is important to speak slowly, use short sentences, and use simple language (avoiding jargon whenever possible).
- Keep in mind that asking to clarify, repeat, or rephrase a message when interpreting is normal and often necessary to get the message across accurately. Taking breaks might also be necessary for the interpreter.

> What some mobile staff do not understand is that some words can not be interpreted one on one, but that you have to explain a word in several sentences. When this happens, you can get angry looks from the negotiator as they think that you are not interpreting accurately. Also sometimes, I find myself being pulled into a high-level meeting to interpret without any preparation about the topic beforehand. Yes, I am a native speaker but some technical terms need to prepared before, especially if you are dealing with dialects.



Resident local staff who is asked to interpret on occasions

Best practices

Before a negotiation (continued)

Once the role of the interpreter has been clearly defined, the next step is for negotiators and interpreters to have a briefing about the negotiation.

- ✓ Share any security concerns and establish a signal to indicate an unsafe situation, e. g. if the interpreter is being harassed by the counterpart.
- ✓ Share information about relevant cultural norms and dress codes.
- ✓ If possible, avoid side conversations within the negotiation team, including between interpreter and negotiator. Side conversations can make the counterpart feel excluded from the conversation and create mistrust. A side conversation could also hinder the interpreter's hearing and understanding of what is being said.

Having a briefing before going into a negotiation helps avoid:

- ✗ An inaccurate interpretation because the interpreter doesn't understand the context or the terms used.
- ✗ A lack of trust that the counterpart's or negotiator's message is being communicated correctly if the interpreter takes longer or shorter to communicate what was said.
- ✗ Being unintentionally disrespectful to the counterpart due to a lack of awareness of the cultural norms.

Best practices

During a negotiation

The time has come to conduct the negotiation. Most of the work has been done during the preparation, but there are still some indications to follow.

- ✓ After introducing themselves, negotiators should also introduce the interpreter. State their independence, neutrality, and confidentiality.
- ✓ Explain that the interpreter is there only to facilitate communication between interlocutors and not intervene in the negotiation, especially if the counterpart has met the interpreter in another capacity.
- ✓ Inform the counterpart that the interpreter will be taking notes to help their work. If they have any concerns about confidentiality, offer to destroy the notes after the negotiation takes place.
- ✓ If the counterpart brings their own interpreter, establish an agreement, e. g., the counterpart's interpreter will interpret what the counterpart says and the organization's interpreter will interpret what the negotiator says.
- ✓ For interpreters: Use the 1st person singular when interpreting what is being said by the interlocutors. Use the 3rd person singular if you need to intervene in your capacity as interpreter, e. g. "The interpreter would like to clarify..."

Making sure these points are understood by both parties helps avoid:

- ✗ Unsettling the counterpart, given the different communication dynamics when using an interpreter.
- ✗ A lack of trust from the counterpart regarding the interpreter's skills to accurately communicate their message.
- ✗ A lack of legitimacy in the face of the counterpart from the negotiation team to conduct and interpret the negotiation.

Best practices

After a negotiation

Exchanging experiences after a negotiation helps both the negotiator and the interpreter in their future encounters.

Here are some tips on what to look out for after a negotiation:

- ✓ Debrief about how the interpretation went and how it impacted the outcome of the negotiation.
- ✓ Exchange impressions on the counterpart's reactions, body language, and emotions.
- ✓ If asked by the counterpart, destroy or hand over notes.

Following these pointers helps prevent:

- ✗ Overlooking each other's working preferences.
- ✗ Having a superficial relationship. The deeper the trust between negotiator and interpreter, the better the outcome of the negotiation.
- ✗ Having the wrong impression of how the negotiation went. The interpreter can clarify if the counterpart was happy or not with the outcome of the negotiation.
- ✗ Any cultural mistakes that could make building a relationship with the counterpart more difficult.

Best practices

For interpreters

Recognizing that interpreting is a profession of its own can help humanitarian staff define more clearly the boundaries between their job as a humanitarian professional and their job as interpreters. So, here are a few recommendations for humanitarian interpreters:

- To interpret well and accurately, good working conditions are required. Whenever possible, make sure your professional needs are covered (e. g., asking for clarification, documents, glossaries, taking breaks, having a notepad and pen, respecting working hours, etc.)

- Familiarize yourself with the ethics of interpretation and the principles that accompany the profession (see more about this in the reference section of this guide).

- Interpreting in conflict settings is by nature stressful. Make sure to know some stress management techniques to take care of your mental health. During difficult and sensitive negotiations, use self-regulation techniques.

- Don't hesitate to ask for clarification if you don't understand something or hear discrepancies in what is being said. This helps you prevent counterparts or negotiators from attributing these mistakes and possible misunderstandings to you.

- Expect the unexpected (difficult accents, fast speakers, unknown acronyms, etc.) and stay concentrated on your work. Separate the interpreting work from incidents happening during the negotiation.

- Some negotiators have very little experience working with interpreters. Be aware that you might need to explain to them what it means to negotiate with the help of an interpreter (you can always give them this guide!).

Best practices

For negotiators

Negotiating with the help of an interpreter changes the dynamic of a negotiation. Your negotiation strategy will need to reflect this and take into account the different working conditions. Here are some tips for humanitarian negotiators working with interpreters:

- Think of your negotiation as a process. Even if you are called to an emergency negotiation, prepare as much as possible. Ensure continuity in your negotiations and keep interpreters in the loop about what is going on.

- Whenever possible, include your interpreter in your preparation work. Share as much contextual information and terminology as possible and make sure they are aware of your negotiation strategy.

- Always talk to your interpreter and make sure you are on the same page (e. g., What is the context you are working in? How do you both like to work? How will you tell each other if something is wrong?)

- To the extent possible, make sure it is safe for your interpreter to work with you. For example, local staff are exposed to higher risks since they don't have the possibility to leave the country.

- Establish a de-escalation strategy with your interpreter in case things get out of control.

- Understand that interpreting in humanitarian settings is very stressful and adapt the working conditions accordingly (e. g., make sure the interpreter can take breaks, ask for clarifications when necessary, etc.)

Best practices

For organizations

Organizations are responsible for recruiting their staff based on the necessary skills to perform the job, and this includes humanitarian interpreters. Selecting the right people to interpret during humanitarian negotiations is not easy, which is why we have also included some recommendations for organizations:

- Choose interpreters carefully. Besides linguistic skills, interpreters need to have technical skills (such as note-taking or doing research), as well as cultural skills.

- To the extent possible, build an interpreter roster before an emergency strikes.

- Whenever possible, prioritize using in-house interpreters. This allows continuity in the negotiation process and is especially important for medium and long-term humanitarian responses.

- If you hire freelance interpreters, try to use the same interpreter when the negotiation team meets with the same counterpart. This will help create a relationship of trust with the counterpart.

- To the extent possible, offer training both on negotiation and interpreting to staff involved in humanitarian negotiations which require the help of an interpreter.

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