

Words of Relief – Ebola Crisis Learning Review

1 Introduction

This review examines Translators without Borders' initiative aimed at improving communication with communities during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa from November 2014 to February 2015.

The review captures examples of good practice, gaps and suggestions for improvement in Translators without Borders' approach to the Ebola response. Among others, the review acknowledges that commitment by humanitarian agencies to address language barriers and information needs was seen during the Ebola crisis. However, more work remains to be done to advocate and raise awareness for the use of local language in humanitarian response. There is a need to change current approaches to ensure that providing information and communication in languages people can understand is considered a priority in humanitarian response.

2 Context

The Ebola epidemic that started in Guinea and subsequently spread to Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Senegal, and Mali, has caused over 10,000 deaths and affected more than 25,000 people.¹

With the populations of the three most affected countries, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia, speaking over 90 languages², the crisis rapidly became one of information – and especially communications in the right language – as much as anything else.

¹ Updated case counts as of 2 April 2015: <http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/outbreaks/2014-west-africa/case-counts.html>

² See: <http://www.ethnologue.com>

As Claudia Evers, MSF's Ebola emergency coordinator in Guinea, said: *"In the first nine months, if people had been given proper messages, all this could have been prevented."*



When trying to control an epidemic, the availability of material in languages that people understand can reassure communities, increase trust in aid workers and effectively promote behaviour change.

However, language quickly became one of the main difficulties faced by humanitarian workers responding to the crisis. The issue of illiteracy presented a real challenge for humanitarian organizations. The literacy rate for the adult population in the three most affected countries – Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea – is below 48% according to UNESCO. Additionally, the majority of the affected population, or most at risk populations in those countries, does not speak or read English. In Sierra Leone for example – a country where the official language is English – only 13% of women understand English. A greater proportion of the population in this country (90%) speaks Krio, Mende and Themne, particularly in rural areas.

The Ebola-related materials provided by aid agencies, which were largely in written form and mainly in English were not particularly helpful for the most affected populations.

Information in the wrong language can lead to serious misconceptions on how to contract the disease and how to treat the disease. As mentioned by one aid worker *'in the Ebola epidemic, rumours and misinformation were rampant and fuelled the spread of Ebola.'*³ In a survey published in late August, UNICEF found that in Sierra Leone, 30% believed Ebola was transmitted via mosquitos and another 30% believed it was an airborne disease. Moreover, four out of ten respondents (42%) believed hot salt-water baths are effective cure.

³ Global Health Media:from Translators without Border satisfaction survey

Knowing how critical language was in the fight against Ebola, Translators without Borders took the innovations it was testing in Kenya – Words of Relief⁴ – to West Africa.

In November 2014, the project received an extension from the Humanitarian Innovation Fund for four months to cover Ebola-affected countries. This was complemented with another grant from the Indigo Trust.

3 Good practices: Words of Relief for Ebola Crisis

The work completed by various teams of translators between November 2014 and February 2015 has helped demystify Ebola by ensuring that clear and consistent information is widely available.

With a network of half dozen translators the team produced over a hundred items. These were widely distributed for use by aid agencies. This section describes how the project was implemented.

3.1 Recruitment and training of translators

The success of Translators without Borders relies on an innovative approach to address language barriers: the creation of ‘Spider Networks’ of crisis translators. These are virtual teams of translators trained to rapidly respond to language needs. For example, in Kenya a ‘Spider Network’ of translators for 11 different Kenyan languages is able to respond to any crises such as flood, drought, cholera, conflict or Ebola.

The ‘Spider Network’ approach, which was also used to respond to the Ebola crisis, is a way to develop the translation capacity of the organisation and rapidly build a network of translators. There are very few professional translators for the West African languages. Therefore, the ‘Spider Network’ allows the organization to recruit translators where translation companies are not able to respond.

TWB used its vast network of supporters and advisors as well as social media to recruit about a half dozen translators for the Ebola-affected countries. They come from the United States, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Mali, France, Switzerland, Germany and Kenya. They were recruited because they are native speakers and have strong links to the country.

Their languages skills were vetted and they underwent an online training focussing on translation for Ebola. The training sessions addressed topics such as ‘What is Translation’ and ‘How to Translate’. They also included tips for translators and best practices for terminology problems and quality assurance.

⁴ Words of Relief (WoR) is the first translation crisis relief network in the world intended to improve communications with communities when aid organisations and affected population do not speak the same language. The 15-month project, which started in January 2014, is funded by the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) and Microsoft, and is currently being piloted in TWB’s translator training centre in Nairobi, Kenya.

3.2 Translation

Translators without Borders worked with about a dozen partners to collect, translate and help disseminate Ebola-related materials into West African languages for the most affected populations in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. Partners included the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), International SOS, WHO/UNICEF, IntraHealth, Chocolate Moose Media, Global Protection Cluster, International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Scientific Animation without Borders (SWABO), and the Communicating with disaster affected communities (CDAC) Network.

Between November 2014 and February 2015, a total of **106 items** – such as posters, social mobilisation and SMS messages, Ebola videos, Ebola cartoons, maps, etc. – were translated in **30 languages**.⁵ In total, about **81,000 words** were translated.

Table 1: List of Ebola-related material translated

Partner organisation	Type	Number	Languages
@EbolaPhoneMap	Maps	12	Afrikaans, Amharic, Bengali, Greek, Hausa, Hebrew, Hindi, Kinyarwanda, Russian, Somali, Swahili, Thai
CDC (signs & symptoms)	Posters	2	Krio, Malinke
CDC (stigma)	Posters	6	Bambara, Fula/Pular/Fular, Krio, Mende, Swahili, Themne
International SOS (hand washing)	Posters	13	Bambara, Swahili, Themne, Arabic, Krio, Mende, Portuguese, Kinyarwanda, Yoruba, Somali, Hausa, Spanish, Igbo
International SOS	Posters	14	Amharic, Bambara, Fula/Pular/Fular, Hausa, Igbo, Kinyarwanda, Krio, Malinke, Mende, Nko, Somali, Swahili, Themne, Yoruba
Global Protection Cluster	Documents	11	French
IOM	Cartoon	3	Bambara, Fula/Pular/Fular, Malinke
ChocolateMoose Media	Video	5	Bambara, Fula/Pular/Fular, Mende, Swahili, Themne
Scientific Animations without Borders	Video	6	Swahili, Mende, Limba, Kono, Koranko and Kissi
Halt!Ebola	SMS	3	Mende, Themne, Krio
IntraHealth	SMS	3	Krio, Themne, Mende
Global Protection Cluster	Messages	4	French, Krio, Themne, Mende
CDAC Message Library	Messages	1	Krio
CDAC Message Library	Support messages	6	Krio, Themne, Mende
WHO/UNICEF	Messages	5	Fula/Pular/Fular, Krio, Mende, Swahili, Themne
IFRC Ebola animation	Video	3	French, Portuguese, Arabic
Global Health	Video	9	Swahili, French, Portuguese, Krio, Themne, Mende, Fula/Pular/Fular, Malinke, Kissi
Number of items translated:		106	

⁵ Words of Relief Ebola extension ended on 28 February 2015. Some translation were on-going at the time of writing this report.

The objective was to focus on the translation of well-established messaging. One of the most effective outputs has been a series of simple informative posters from International SOS suggesting ways to prevent the spread of Ebola, describing symptoms of infection and emphasising the urgency of seeking medical attention (see photo 1).

Other key documents translated included the key social mobilisation messages from the World Health Organisation and UNICEF (see example in Table 2), and a series of messages for children and caregivers provided by the Global Protection Cluster. These were typical messages focusing, for example, on behaviour to adopt when someone is sick, information for those who have had contact with a person with Ebola, advice on burials, where to get help, and more.

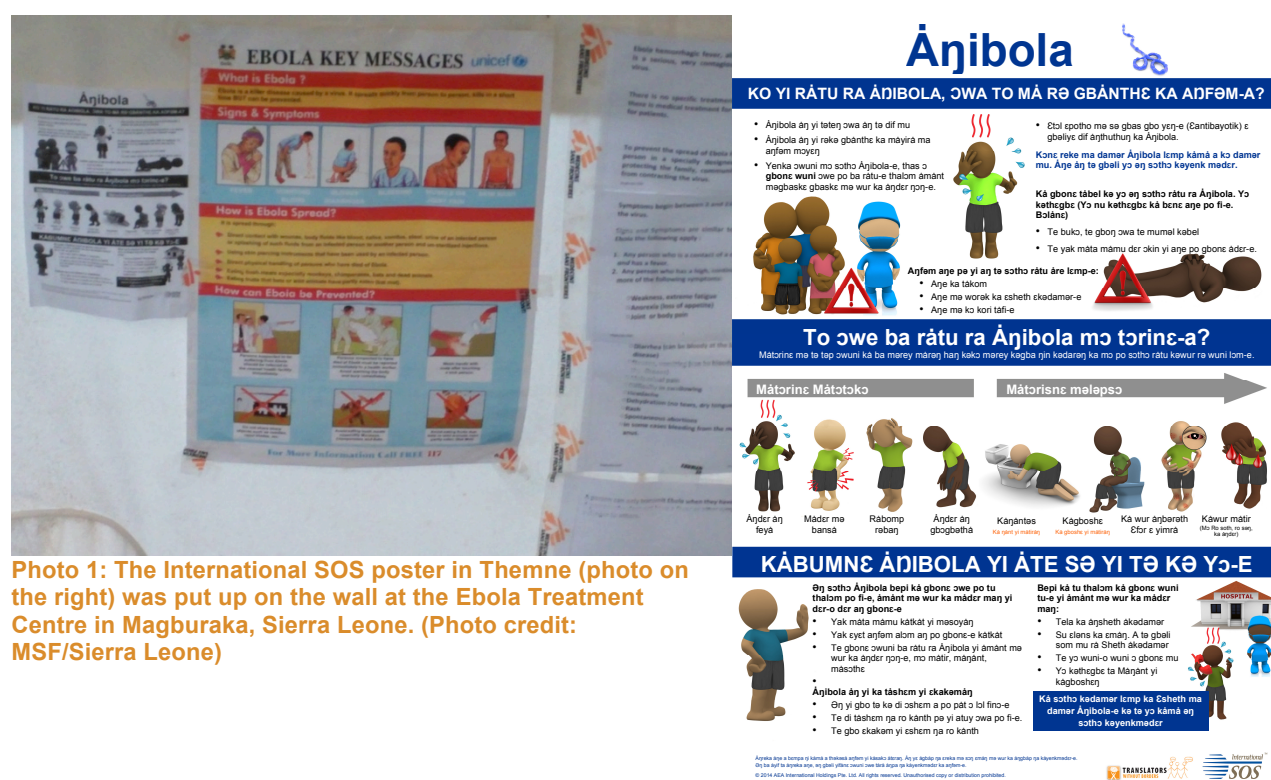


Photo 1: The International SOS poster in Themne (photo on the right) was put up on the wall at the Ebola Treatment Centre in Magburaka, Sierra Leone. (Photo credit: MSF/Sierra Leone)

Table 2: Example of key social mobilisation messages translated in Krio (Excerpt from: WHO/UNICEF Key Messages for Social Mobilisation Community Engagement in Intense Transmission Areas)	
Safe Burial Practices: Information for those handling a person with Ebola who has died	Aw ɛn wetin Fɔ du Fɔ Bɛr we Prɔblɛm nɔ go de: Mɛsɛj fɔ yu we de dil wit pɔsin we Ebola kil
If somebody in your family dies with suspected Ebola, immediately call the toll free Ebola Hotline at XXXX for disinfection of the house and removal of the body.	If Pɔsin we na yu fambul day we dɛn fil se gɛt Ebola, Kɔl the Ebola nɔmba na 117 so dat dɛn kin kam spre yu ose ɛn pul di dede bɔdi de.
Pay your respects without touching, kissing, cleaning or wrapping the body before burial or cremation. The body can be prayed over to complete religious practices, but at a safe distance or one meter, without touching. Ebola is very infectious even after death.	Yu kin sho se yu rɛspekt di day pɔsin bɔt nɔ fɔ tɔch am ɔ kis am ɔ nɔ klin ɔ rap di bɔdi bifo dɛn bɛr am ɔ bɔn am. Dɛn kin pre pan di bɔdi fɔ sho se di pɔsin na kristien ɔ muslim bɔt yu fɔ de far we lɛk wan mita so we yu nɔ go tɔch di bɔdi. Ebola na bad sik ivin we pɔsin dɔn day.

Translators without Borders also contributed to the translation of the video ‘*Ebola: A Poem for The Living*’⁶, produced by Chocolate Moose Media. The video currently exists in 17 languages and has a potential audience of 400 million Africans, according to Chocolate Moose Media’s Firdaus Kharas.

3.3 Dissemination

Another objective of the project was to make the materials translated in local languages widely available to aid agencies on the ground. Partners consented to their content being shared with the wider humanitarian community. Once translated and reformatted, TWB disseminated the documents through various humanitarian networks including Ebola Communications Network⁷, Humanitarian Response Info⁸, ReliefWeb⁹, BOND Ebola working group¹⁰, and the CDAC Message Library¹¹.

Table 3: Dissemination table	
Websites	Number of items posted
International SOS	18
Humanitarian Response website	33
CDAC DropBox	38
Ebola Communications Network website	33
ReliefWeb	10
BOND - Ebola Programming Group	17
CDC website	07
TWB Facebook and Twitter/Swahili Wikipedia	47
Others (social media, vimeo, other websites)	45

The International SOS Ebola page generated more than 46,000 views¹², while the Humanitarian Response portal generated more than 15,000 page views from October 2014 to January 2015¹³.

3.4 How has the material been used?

Translated materials made available by Translators without Borders containing medical advice or prevention messages on Ebola helped many organizations that otherwise would not have had the resources to provide material in multiple languages. As such, organisations working in the region were able to access resources in variety of languages.

“It [translation] allows us to reach a greater number of people. It is fundamental to use messages that are translated in a wide variety of local languages.”

⁶ See: <http://vimeo.com/user33201638/videos/sort:alphabetical/format:thumbnail>

⁷ See: www.ebolacommunicationnetwork.org

⁸ See: <http://www.humanitarianresponse.info>

⁹ See: <http://reliefweb.int>

¹⁰ See: <http://my.bond.org.uk>

¹¹ See: <http://www.cdacnetwork.org/tools-and-resources/message-library/>

¹² Statistic provided by International SOS

¹³ Statistic provided by Humanitarian Response

For organizations that have been using TWB materials there is no doubt that having reliable information accessible in local languages was the best way to reach out to local communities. *‘In health education, if interventions are done in local languages there is a better understanding’*, explains one health worker.

Agnès Matha from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) believes that the use of local languages is fundamental. *“It allows us to reach a greater number of people. It is fundamental to use messages that are translated in a wide variety of local languages.”*

Medecins Sans Frontieres/Doctors without Borders (MSF) in Sierra Leone used International SOS and CDC posters for prevention activities in its treatment centres and in the community. They found that translated materials were simple tools to use and were very effective as the audience could recall the messages. *“The message [on the CDC stigma posters] coincides with the role-play we have been doing in the community on how to help people in quarantined homes. It is very useful that after the role-play we leave them with information on posters to reinforce the behaviours”*, said one MSF field worker.

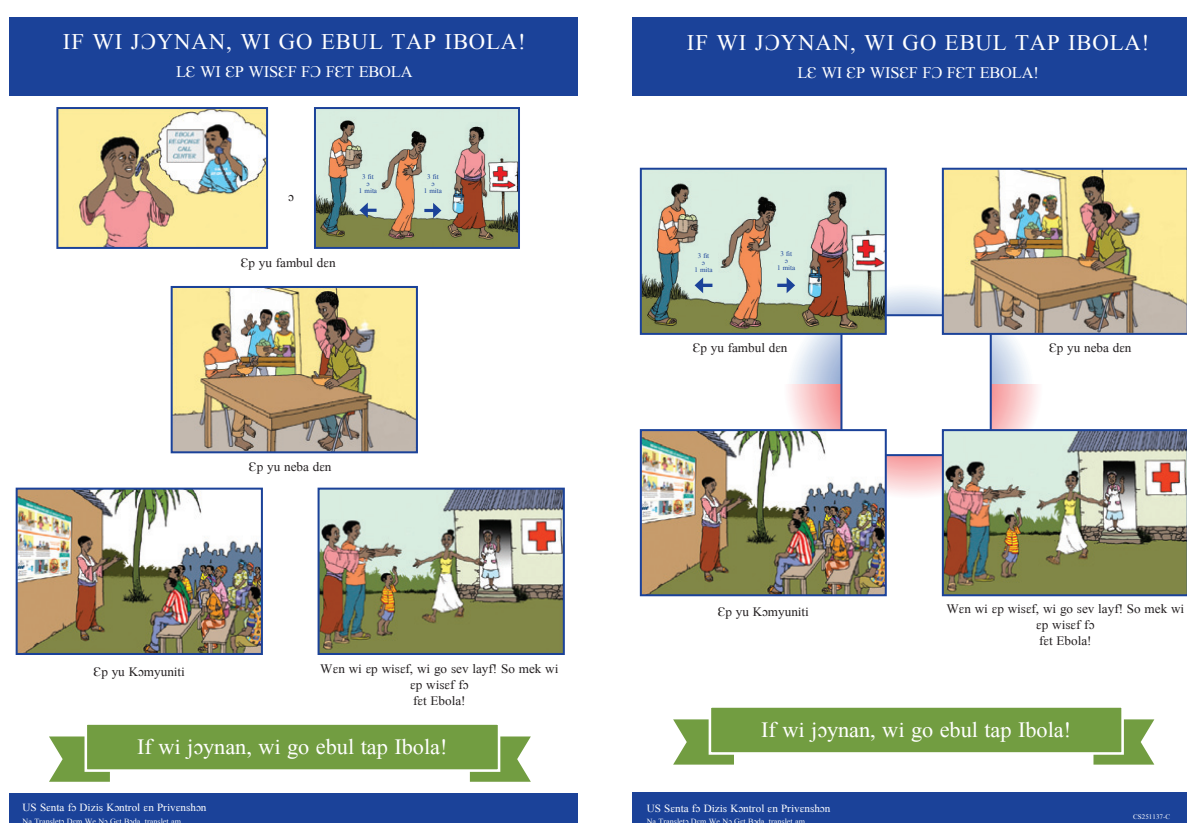


Photo 2: CDC stigma poster. *“The messages coincide with the role play we have been doing in the community on how to help people in quarantined homes. After the role-play we leave them with information on posters to reinforce the behaviors.”* - MSF field worker

4 Key learning from the Ebola translation project

TWB faced some obstacles during the implementation of the project. These challenges did not affect the planned activities but may have impacted the overall productivity, including the dissemination of products.

4.1 Translation is not a priority for aid agencies

Although many agree that communications with communities in the right language is critical, the experience reveals that translation is not always considered a priority by governments and NGOs.

TWB expected more content from aid organisations, especially at the beginning of the project. Unfortunately, reaching out to aid organizations and getting content to translate has proven to be more difficult than anticipated. For example, multiple attempts to contact the UNICEF country office in Sierra Leone were unsuccessful.

TWB directly contacted responding organizations to create awareness. The team also used various platforms such as the Communicating with Disaster-Affected Communities Network (CDAC) Skype group, OCHA and UNMEER focal points, humanitarian websites and social media, to inform partners about the project. The Global Coordinator for WoR and the Communications Officer based in Dakar, Senegal established a strong network of partnerships.

In the cases in which it was possible to have a direct contact within an organization and there was demonstrated interest, follow through, in which the organization actually provided content to be translated, was weak. Often that contact person did not have access to the material used in the field or could not take decisions on which material could be translated. As a result, the requests often got lost in emails with the multiple actors.

Translators without Borders hypothesizes two factors to explain the lack of follow through and difficulties in reaching out: 1) aid organizations are stretched too thin during the crisis; and, 2) the lack of incentive as projects are not measured on whether they provide communication materials/activities in local language. It is also possible that organizations do not produce their own content or do not have pre-packaged key messages ready. Some rely on materials provided by other sources such as the Ministry of Health.

The presence of a physical point of contact in the field, either at regional or national levels, that could have had direct contact with partners and advocate for translation, could have generated more interest. For example, there was a greater interest when the Communications Officer attended a BBC Media Action workshop in Senegal in December 2015. Discussions with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) during the workshop led to the translation of an Ebola cartoon developed by the organization.

One of the ways to address this issue is to encourage aid agencies to take the extra step to improve communications with communities. There is a need to adopt new methods of working and establish structures to integrate communicating with communities in local language.

This can be as simple as being able to quickly reformat documents after they have been translated. For example, one partner, the CDC, could not reformat the translated posters. TWB had to find a "work around" using FrontLab, a proofing software, to input the translated text into the design file. However, this was done with great difficulty, as it was not possible to modify the original design of the text boxes to accommodate more words.

Recommendations for advocacy

- **Use marketing campaigns targeting the humanitarian community** to share our work and explain how we can help them achieve their goals of communicating with communities. This could be done in the form of a social media campaign or written material. TWB has produced an advocacy video to create greater awareness about the importance.
- **Share lessons learned** from the Words of Relief project. TWB recently conducted an Impact Study asking Kenyans specific questions about transmission and treatment of Ebola. When the health information was presented in English, 76% were incorrect. But when information was provided in Swahili, 92% of answers were correct. *Reading information in Swahili led to a significant increase in comprehension of the health issue.*
- **Facilitate meetings with aid organizations** to sensitize them about the importance of translation during humanitarian response and encourage them to adopt new methods of working that could facilitate translation of communication materials.
- **Lobby donors** to prioritize Communicating with Communities.
- **Participate in international meetings for the humanitarian community**, such as the World Humanitarian Summit 2016 in Istanbul, Turkey.

Recommendations for collaboration with aid organisations

- **Develop a library of key messages** that can quickly be translated during crisis.
- **Develop WoRDE** to provide an ‘easy to use’ workspace for aid agency to send direct requests for translation.
- **Develop a database of key contacts or designated people** that could easily be reached during a crisis. This is to avoid talking to multiple actors who are not in position of making decision regarding the material to translate.
- **Have a physical presence on the ground** during crisis at regional and/or national level. Use the “Spider Network” translators or recruit local representatives/ambassadors who could attend coordination and programming meetings (regional and national level) to facilitate direct contact with aid organisations.

4.2 Illiteracy should not be overlooked

A major concern faced during the project that should not be overlooked is illiteracy. According to the most recent data from UNESCO, the adult literacy rates in the three most affected countries are below 48%¹⁴. The majority of the material translated was in the written form (i.e.: posters).

However, even in the right language and using graphics elements, posters and other written materials are not effective if people can’t read them. An aid worker from MSF Sierra Leone reported that people preferred looking at English posters because they are not used to seeing their written language.

On the other hand, audio and video materials can have a greater impact. For example, the video ‘*Ebola: A Poem for The Living*’ had over 45,000 views, was uploaded over 500,000 times and had more than 600,000 embeds¹⁵. It was broadcasted on TV in Liberia and was also passed via Bluetooth from mobile phone to mobile phone in Guinea. As such, priority should be given to audio and video materials in local languages for the next Words of Relief deployment.

Recommendations for illiteracy

- **Focus and prioritize simple messaging in audio and video**, which could meet the information needs of illiterate people.
- **Find partners who can produce audio/video**, as most NGOs do not have this capacity.
- **Consider incorporating text-to-speech technology** into translation tools developed by TWB, which allows an aid worker to provide a written message in audio form.

¹⁴ See:

http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=EDULIT_DS&popupcustomise=true&lang=en

¹⁵ Statistics from 8-Dec-2014

4.3 The lack of experience and availability of translators may affect the translations

Finding translators for African languages has been challenging. Professional translators in many West African languages do not exist. To that extent, the 'Spider Network' approach facilitated the recruitment of non-professional translators.

The non-professional translators recruited from diaspora often lack experience in translating. Their inexperience could have potentially affected the quality of translation. Throughout the project TWB acknowledged that a bad translation could potentially be more harmful. To help address potential issues with translations, TWB created training tools and implemented a verification process to ensure quality of translation.

Translators without Borders transformed the three-day on-site training from the Words of Relief pilot project in Kenya into online basic translation training. This tool intended for diaspora can be used for any languages and crisis or activation. The training was conducted on Skype with language expert trainers. Another online orientation training, which provides contextual information and the key aspects of rapid response translation, was developed. These tools are available in multiple languages (e.g.: French, Spanish and Portuguese) and will be key in meeting future crises around the world.

Each translation provided by new recruits had to be reviewed by a second and/or a third person. Besides ensuring a good quality of translation, the review process helped addressing the issue associated with the multiple dialects of a language. For example, Fula is also known as Fulani and Pulaar in Guinea is very different from Pulaar in Senegal, which means that editors were also needed to ensure the correct dialect of a language was used.

Other challenges that affected the project are the engagement of translators and the limited Internet connectivity. Most translators have full time jobs and as such it was difficult to maintain their engagement over the four months of the project. This affected the rapidity in which translation were provided.

The limited Internet connectivity and lockdown periods, especially in Sierra Leone, also caused delays in getting translations. For example, Themne audio files for the Ebola video were outstanding for almost two months. The translator had to send the files by courier to Ghana.

This is a reason why the 'Spider Network' of translators is more effective when they include members from the affected location as well as diaspora who are not impacted by the current situation.

Recommendations for the 'Spider Network' of translators

- Continue to **use and improve the Spider Network** approach.
- **Connect with NGOs that have staff in the field that could be trained** as translators.

4.4 The multiple languages and dialects makes it more difficult to respond to the needs of organisations

The project had to focus on the more widely spoken languages due to the difficulty of finding translators for the less spoken languages. This means that requests for languages like Susu, Kpelle, Bassa, Mano, Mandingo, for example, could not be met.

The online training for diaspora created during this project can help address this issue in future response. This tool is available in multiple languages and will be key in meeting future crises around the world. However, this does not mean that the demands for the more obscure languages will be met, as finding translators for these languages will remain a challenge.

4.5 A better monitoring system is needed to ensure that the translated material is used

There was a risk that the local language messaging produced by TWB is not used. To mitigate that risk we focused on aid organisations who know us, and who are directly communicating with affected population. However, trying to track down who is using the translated material and how they are being used has been challenging. For example, a satisfaction survey to evaluate the project was sent out to more than 20 people, but only seven people actually responded. Also, some partners do not monitor this type of information and therefore it is not available.

The content was disseminated on various platforms administered by other organizations. Therefore, it was difficult to collect data on the number of hits or downloads on the platforms.

The project also had to rely on feedback from organizations to get details about how they were using the material. Throughout the project, positive feedback from partner organizations was received. However, unless we had direct contacts with field workers, it was difficult to know which other organizations were using our materials.

Recommendations for dissemination of translated material

- **Create a centralized space** to disseminate the material (e.g.: TWB website, Public DropBox managed by TWB). Dissemination should not just be about posting the material on multiple platforms, but also have a centralized space where material could be downloaded.
- **Use automatic email distribution list** to alert people when new documents are available.
- **Share a list of all material available** on weekly basis (newsletter style).

5 Conclusion

Building on this experience, it is clear that a greater focus on translation is needed to help control crises such as the Ebola outbreak. When trying to control an epidemic, the availability of material in languages that people understand can reassure communities, increase trust in aid workers and effectively promote behaviour change. To that extent, the work completed by various teams of translators has helped demystify Ebola by ensuring that clear and consistent information is widely available.

Despite the challenges, the project was successful in raising greater awareness for translation during humanitarian responses. However, the difficulties in getting humanitarian organizations and governments to collaborate and provide content for translation, clearly confirm that more work remains to be done to advocate and raise awareness for the use of local language in humanitarian responses.

It appears also imperative for aid organizations to reflect on the role of translation and communication in managing humanitarian crisis. Concrete changes need to happen in the way they communicate with communities during crisis, and translation needs to become part of the strategy. As Claudia Evers, MSF's Ebola emergency coordinator in Guinea, said: *"In the first nine months, if people had been given proper messages, all this could have been prevented."*¹⁶

While Translators without Borders continues to improve its various tools for crisis translation, there is an opportunity for aid organizations to review their response mechanisms and consider ways in which translation can be integrated as a full component of their humanitarian response.

¹⁶ See: MSF says lack of public health messages on Ebola "big mistake", published on 4 February 2015 at: <http://www.trust.org/item/20150204150344-h8zyb/>