Words of Relief: Translators without Borders' local language translation for emergencies

Lydia Tanner and Alice Obrecht

CASE STUDY

HIF humanitarian innovation fund

ALNAP

The **Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF)** supports organisations and individuals to identify, nurture, and share innovative and scalable solutions to the challenges facing effective humanitarian assistance. The HIF is a programme managed by ELRHA. **www.humanitarianinnovation.org**

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Front and back cover: A woman looks at a Words of Relief information poster on Ebola in West Africa. Credit: Translators without Borders

Contents

HIF-ALNAP case studies on successful innovation

This study is one in a series of 15 case studies, undertaken by ALNAP in partnership with ELRHA's Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF), exploring the dynamics of successful innovation processes in humanitarian action. They examine what good practice in humanitarian innovation looks like, what approaches and tools organisations have used to innovate in the humanitarian system, what the barriers to innovation are for individual organisations, and how they can be overcome.

About the case studies

Case study subjects are selected from a pool of recipients of grants from the HIF, (£75,000-150,000). The HIF awards grants for each stage of innovative practice: grants of up to £20,000 are available for the recognition, invention, and diffusion stages, and grants of up to £150,000 can be obtained to support the development and implementation stages. The HIF selects grantees on the basis of a variety of criteria designed to achieve a robust representation of the range of activity in humanitarian innovation.

The case study subjects are chosen to reflect innovation practice in the humanitarian system. They cover information communication technology (ICT) innovations and non-ICT innovations, and they offer a balance between innovations that have reached a diffusion stage and those that have not. They also reflect the wide geographic range of the areas where innovations are being trialled and implemented. (For more information on the methodology and criteria used to select case study subjects, see the forthcoming 'Synthesis report' for the case study series).

About HIF-ALNAP research on successful innovation in humanitarian action

These case studies are part of a broader research partnership between ALNAP and Enhancing Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance (ELRHA) that seeks to define and understand what successful innovation looks like in the humanitarian sector. The ultimate aim of this research is to improve humanitarian actors' understanding of how to undertake and support innovative programming in practice. This research partnership builds on ALNAP's long-running work on innovation in the humanitarian system, beginning with its 2009 study, Innovations in International Humanitarian Action, and draws on the experience of the HIF grantees, which offer a realistic picture of how innovation actually happens in humanitarian settings.

Innovation is a relatively new area of work in humanitarian action, yet it is one that has seen exponential growth in terms of research, funding and activity at both policy and programming levels. While the knowledge base around innovation in the humanitarian sector is increasing, there remain a number of key questions for humanitarian organisations that may be seeking to initiate or expand their innovation capacity. The HIF-ALNAP research has focused on three of these:

Primary research questions

What does successful humanitarian innovation look like?

What are the practices organisations can adopt to innovate successfully for humanitarian purposes?

Secondary research question

What are the barriers to innovation in the sector and how can they be mitigated?

The case studies will be used to produce a synthesis document that addresses these three questions. The outputs of this research are aimed at humanitarian organisations interested in using innovative practices to improve their performance, as well as organisations outside the humanitarian sector, such as academic institutions or private companies, seeking to engage in innovation in humanitarian action.

1. About this case study

Organisation	Translators without Borders (TWB)
Partners	Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network; Digital Humanitarian Network (DHN); Microsoft Technology for Good and the Local Language Team
Project	Words of Relief

Grant	Development	Extension grant for Ebola response
Start date	December 2013	November 2014
Grant period	18 months	6 months
Total HIF budget	£132,414	£19,996
Location	Kenya	Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone

Words of Relief is a Translators without Borders (TWB) project designed to provide local language translation services to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UN agencies and other actors during humanitarian response.

The project included three strands:

1. An online multilingual library of location-specific disaster messages translated before a crisis into local languages, to be openly disseminated through digital platforms;
2. A spider network of professional diaspora and community-based translators who would provide voluntary rapid translation services through an online platform;
3. The Words of Relief digital exchange: an online platform funded by Microsoft Technology for Good that facilitates translation of content generated from the community affected by the disaster, via social media networks. The tool was also designed to incorporate a library of 300 translated messages in 18 languages, including the top disaster terms, medical terms, SMS messages and tweets.

Overall, the innovation process has been successful in creating enhanced learning and evidence around the importance of language translation in disaster response, and has succeeded in producing a measurably improved mode of communicating with affected people. The project has been less successful at establishing wider uptake of the innovation, largely because of lack of attention to this issue among humanitarian agencies. However, TWB is currently engaged in advocacy work aimed at addressing this issue.

Research for this case study was desk-based, drawing on a review of project documents and 11 interviews with key project and partner staff in early 2015.

2. The Problem

Information flow during a crisis is vital: relief workers scale up their work rapidly and they must be able to communicate with the local population to provide information on food, water, health and other life-saving issues, and to collect information from affected populations on the challenges they face.

The lack of local language information during crises has been a recurrent theme in humanitarian evaluations since 2005. In 2011, the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative noted the lack of appropriate translation as a 'perennial hidden issue' that results in delaying critical communications and disenfranchising affected populations.[2] A report for the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) on the 2004 Tsunami response noted:

> **Information is power, and the people affected by the tsunami do not have much of either. This failure has led to distrust toward aid providers and the government. Participation is important, but information about aid and development plans is the starting point for people to decide for themselves how they wish to get on with their lives.[3]**

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) Humanitarian Communications Unit has argued greater emphasis should be given to regional and local languages, as the most vulnerable families are less likely to be literate or to speak the country's official language. Drawing on lessons from Haiti, Pakistan and the Philippines, it reports that inaccurate or incomplete information leads to increased stress and suffering, an inability to influence decisions and a loss of dignity among communities in crisis.[4]

Photo: A woman looks at a Words of Relief information poster on Ebola in West Africa. Credit: Translators without Borders

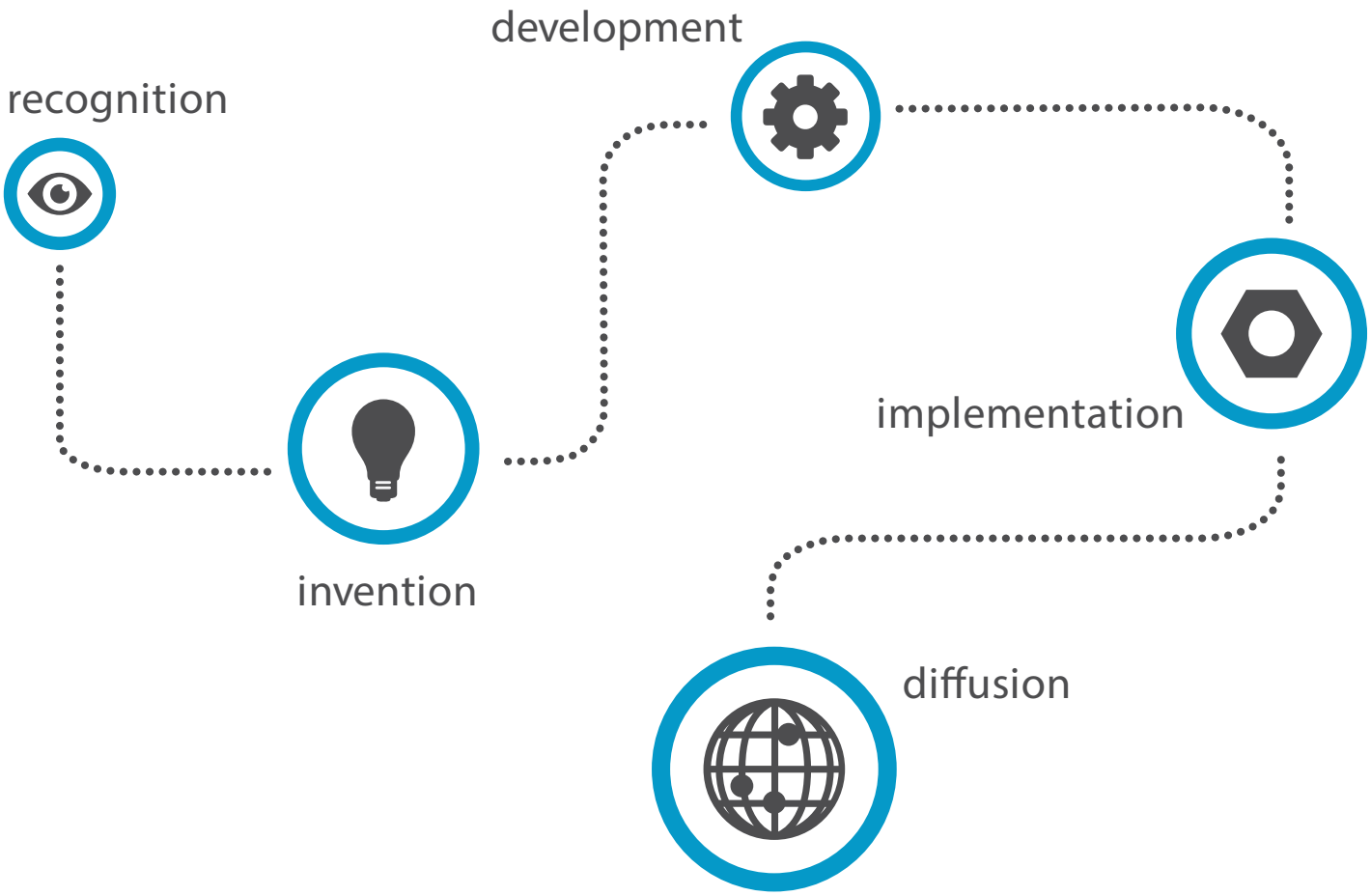
3. The innovation process

The stages through which successful innovations progress are often unpredictable and dynamic in nature, but there are often similarities. It is therefore useful to understand this innovation process when trying to capture why particular innovations succeed or fail.

There are various models to describe the innovation process, but HIF uses a model based on five stages:

- **Recognition** of a specific problem, challenge or opportunity to be seized
- **Invention** of a creative solution or novel idea that addresses a problem or seizes an opportunity
- **Development** of the innovation by creating practical, actionable plans and guidelines
- **Implementation** of the innovation to produce tangible examples of change, testing it to see how it compares with existing solutions
- **Diffusion** of successful innovations – taking them to scale and promoting their wider adoption

These five steps provide a useful archetype for the innovation process and are used in the HIF case study methodology. But they come with the caveat that innovation is complex and non-linear, and that identifying deviations from this model is just as important as (and possibly more so than) confirming the applicability of the model itself. The HIF-ALNAP case studies will seek to map in greater detail the chronology of these stages and how they overlap and interact for each HIF grantee.



3.1 Recognition

TWB has been operational since 1993. The organisation aims to remove the language barrier between aid workers and local populations, with its main focus on the development and human rights sectors. At the time of the innovation, TWB was translating over five million words per year for up to 60 development and human rights organisations using a crowd-sourced platform; this has since risen to eight million and the number of humanitarian, development and human rights organisations accessing the service has risen to 310.

According to TWB Director Rebecca Petras, the 2010 Haiti Earthquake was an important moment for the translation community. A number of translators with informal links to TWB were active in Haiti when the earthquake struck. They provided ad hoc translation services to humanitarian agencies and told TWB many humanitarian organisations had sent French speakers to assist with the response. Despite French being an official language, the affected population mainly spoke Haitian Creole, and aid workers were unable to communicate effectively.

Shortly afterwards, between 2011 and 2013, several TWB members were involved in crisis mapping exercises with the crowd-sourcing platform Ushahidi in Kenya and the Digital Humanitarian Network (DHN) in the Balkans and northern India. This involved analysing tweets in English, as they were unable to understand valuable tweets in local languages. Therefore, TWB Board of Directors thus began to discuss the need for a new way of translating language for improved response in the humanitarian sector.

During this phase, TWB identified two key challenges to providing local language translation in humanitarian scenarios:

1. Language is intimately linked with the location of a disaster: unlike most aid agencies, TWB would not be able to rely on moving its responders from one location to the next. Fast training of location-specific volunteers would be necessary

2. Volunteers would be linked to the location of the crisis, therefore volunteers would be affected themselves in some way.

3.2 Invention

A handful of small initiatives had previously tried to address the lack of local language translation in humanitarian response. Following the 2010 Haiti Earthquake Mission 4636 provided a free translation platform[5] and the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC) developed a digital platform for automated translation into local languages.

In September 2012, TWB's new Director, Rebecca Petras, wanted to expand its work into humanitarian response. She attended a conference presentation by Will Lewis, from Microsoft, on lessons learnt from their project Mission 4636, which she describes as a catalyst in her – and TWB's – understanding of how to build a real-time crisis response team for translation.

For Petras, the presentation sparked the identification of a potential solution for translation during disasters. On completion of its Haiti response, Mission 4636 developed a model for a 'standing crisis translation network', but lacked the resources to implement or scale the concept. TWB invited Mission 4636 coordinator Robert Munro to join an advisory committee alongside specialists from the Microsoft Machine Translation Team, the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network and DHN. The advisory committee would support the design and implementation phases of the project.

The process was informed by the experience of people within TWB's informal network. TWB was connected to translators involved in the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan response and observed language needs in each location. It developed a model of partnering with aid agencies, to support aid workers through free, online, location-specific content in under-resourced languages.

This invention process developed organically out of a relationship between staff at TWB and staff at Microsoft. Microsoft has a strong language and translation department. Several members of the TWB Board of Directors had links or experience with staff at Microsoft. However, the relationship became more important after Petras heard Lewis' presentation on Mission 4636. Later, after TWB was awarded the HIF grant award, Microsoft also began to fund elements of their digital exchange.

Table 1: Example message from the English-Swahili CDAC Network Message Library

Ebola can be caught from both humans and animals. It is not an air-borne disease. Human to human transmission occurs through close contact with blood, secretions, or other bodily fluids of an Ebola-infected person.	Ebola inaweza kupatikana kutoka kwa binadamu na wanyama. Si ugonjwa unaoenezwa kwa hewa. Maambukizi kati ya binadamu na binadamu hutokea kupitia mgusano wa karibu na damu, vinyeso, au viowevu vingine vya mwili wa mtu aliyeambukizwa na Ebola.

The three strands of the Words of Relief project were designed as a result of a series of detailed conversations between Petras and Lewis at Microsoft, Rob Munro at the language processing service, Idibon, Andrej Verity at UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and DHN, and Patrick Meier at DHN and the Qatar Computing Research Institute (QCRI). The concept of the multilingual library was based on the TWB approach to development and human rights messaging. However, the spider network and digital exchange elements were inspired by the experiences of Mission 4636. The spider network was developed from a recommendation to train community translators that arose directly from an evaluation of the Mission 4636 programme by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative.[6]

There has been a large emphasis on crowd-sourcing within the translation community in recent years, and the Words of Relief project built on this momentum, as well as one of the key lessons from Mission 4636 on the importance of using technology to engage a wider community of translators.

In this sense, the Words of Relief project was a new iteration of an innovation Mission 4636 had piloted in Haiti. Viewed through the lens of the innovation process, the Mission 4636 project was a successful pilot of a crowd-sourced translation system for local languages. The focus of Words of Relief was then primarily one of scale: given this model of translation service had previously worked well in Haiti, how would it be best to standardise it so it can be applied globally, to multiple response contexts?

Photo: 'What is Ebola and how does it spread?' poster translated by Words of Relief into Hausa. Credit: Translators without Borders

3.3 Development

Words of Relief was piloted between December 2013 and May 2015 in Kenya. TWB had experience and an office in Nairobi. The project focused on areas prone to disaster, which the National Disaster Operation Centre (NDOC) and the Water and Environmental Sanitation Coordination Department (WESCOORD) identified. It selected northern Kenya, which suffers frequent drought and food insecurity, and western Kenya, which has suffered repeated flooding and cholera outbreaks.

Eight translators worked out of the Nairobi office, translating over 400,000 words of crisis-related content into Swahili. Key messages were obtained from a wide range of sources: NDOC, the SPHERE[7] Handbook 2011, International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) beneficiary communications SMS messages, Kenya Initial Rapid Assessment (KIDA) tools, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) public service announcements on landslides, floods and tsunamis, and the CDAC Network/ infoasaid Message Library. The majority of these relationships were formed locally when TWB attended humanitarian coordination meetings or presented its work. The translated messages were then disseminated via the CDAC Network member website.

A pilot spider network of 11 volunteer community translators was established to translate crisis messaging from English into 11 local languages. The translators received a three-day training course in real-time translation support and a one-day 'refresher' course several months later. In feedback, translators said they enjoyed the opportunity to interact with other translators and to grow in confidence.[8] A code of conduct was written and a Facebook page set up to support communications within the network.

TWB ran two simulation exercises to assess the quality of translation through the spider network and to find ways to incrementally improve the model:[9] four messages were sent to each translator for translation. For example, the scenario in one simulation was: 'There is a conflict outbreak between your tribe and the neighbouring community. A few deaths have been reported and the roads are not safe.' Translators were asked to translate the following messages for their community:

1. 'Do not go to Furaha Shopping Centre after 6pm. Avoid using Ruvuma Road.'
2. 'Food will be available from the Red Cross at Furaha CDF Hall at 9am tomorrow.'

Sharon O'Brien from Dublin City University conducted a study on the effectiveness of the translation training and exercises on improving the quality of translation. The study reported high confidence levels in translating quickly and accurately, determining the importance of messages and overcoming cultural and language issues. Language experts analysing the simulation exercise reported an average score of 7.7-7.9 for ten translators. In addition, TWB saw an improvement in the response time for the second simulation exercise. Only one out of 11 of the rapid response translators was removed from the team because they didn't respond in the time given.

The main challenge during the simulations was internet connectivity. This had been identified as a potential risk, mitigated by providing members of the spider network with mobile internet credit, to be accessed through the translators' personal devices.[10] TWB also pre-arranged times to contact translators working in remote locations with limited mobile coverage.

The development phase involved ongoing refinement of the concept. TWB integrated its new digital exchange Application Programming Interface (WoRDE) with Ushahidi, though the digital exchange has not yet been tested. A late development was the inclusion of an enhanced Swahili automated translation engine hosted by Microsoft. TWB programmed the translation engine with over 425,000 words of crisis-related information to improve its accuracy. As a result of the increased corpus, the engine's Bleu Score – a measure of translation quality – increased from 0.33 to 49.73 (out of 100).[11] The automated translation engine provides an initial translation that translators can 'edit', rather than translating directly, which has been shown to improve the speed and efficiency of translation. For example, TWB staff found it took 4:45 hours to translate 1,000 words of text directly and 30 minutes to translate the same text using the Microsoft tool.

3.4 Implementation

In July 2014, a study by the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) indicated poor information was fuelling the spread of Ebola.[12] TWB described it as a 'crisis of language'.[13] The UNICEF study found only 13% of women in the affected population could speak English. In rural areas of Sierra Leone, the main languages are Krio, Mende and Themne. In November 2014, TWB was granted additional funding from HIF to implement Words of Relief in West Africa, complemented with a grant from the Indigo Trust.

TWB set up a spider network of around 12 translators and translated information on the Ebola virus into local languages in Guinea, Mali and Sierra Leone. Three teams of translators were recruited through community and translation networks. They received TWB's Rapid Response Team online orientation followed by further training, via Skype, on crisis translation. Over 100 items – approximately 81,000 words – were translated into 30 languages.

As in Kenya, the translators filled in a survey on confidence with their translation skills before and after training: they reported scores of six to eight out of ten, with the lowest scores given to confidence pertaining to the speed of their translation. After training, all scores rose to eight, with the exception of confidence in overcoming differences in original language and local language (being a cultural mediator).

A major challenge in West Africa was keeping volunteers motivated throughout the extended crisis period. This is likely to be a challenge in future protracted crises and learning from the implementation phase will inform the development of future spider networks.[14]

A second significant challenge was internet connectivity, which had not been anticipated as a risk in this location. TWB found several of the professional translators were not able to access the internet and were unable to leave their homes to top up phone credit because of lock-down in parts of Sierra Leone.

TWB worked with more than ten partners to collect, translate and disseminate local language materials. Although a UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) study indicated that adult literacy rates in the most affected countries were below 48%, TWB primarily provided translation for written materials. This is because TWB's partnership model means that their translation service is reliant on communication formats chosen by the NGOs that use it, and most of these partners continued to work with written materials despite the low literacy rate.[15] A video, 'Ebola: A Poem for the Living', which TWB provided translation for in seven local languages, proved more successful in reaching an audience. The video was shown on national television in stadiums and churches and was viewed over a million times. Interpretation for radio and voice is likely to play a greater role in future crises. The video producer noted:

> **Even today, over a year after the Ebola crisis [started], we have the only visual media in some languages. The only information [people] can access in the local language is this Ebola video. Translation is absolutely essential – it will ultimately save lives!'**[16]

3.5 Diffusion

TWB is using learning from Kenya and West Africa to refine the Words of Relief innovation and promote its wider use. In particular, at the time of writing, TWB had just secured funding from LinkedIn to digitise its community translator's training package. In addition, TWB is working to refine its support model, including exploring options for in-country TWB personnel, a 24-hour support network for the first 72 hours of crisis and options for incentivising volunteers.

TWB is taking an iterative approach to developing the Words of Relief model, by using the experiences of the development and implementation stages to inform the next phase of the project. The organisation is debating the best way to scale the innovation: to work intensively in a second crisis-prone country such as South Sudan or to focus on responding to sudden-onset disasters globally. At the time of writing, TWB was supporting the response in Nepal by developing a spider network of 45 translators and creating a library of crisis messages and needs assessment questions in Nepali.

Through Words of Relief, TWB learnt networks could play a valuable role in supporting their work. CDAC Network, for example, facilitated introductions to NGOs, workshops and webinars on Words of Relief and supported the evaluation of the project in Kenya. Similarly, DHN was able to provide introductions to relevant relief agencies. Nicki Bailey noted the work of TWB is valuable because, in addition to providing translation services, it brings together people who care about communicating with communities.[17]

The innovation has been presented in a range of websites and forums. Presentations were given at the Interagency Working Group on Disaster Preparedness for East and Central Africa (IAWG), WESCOORD in Kenya and Aidex 2014 Africa.

The success of diffusion will be dependent on convincing NGOs of the importance of reserving time and budgets for local language communication.[18] TWB argues these changes need to be achieved at donor level to ensure international agencies are prioritising and measuring the effectiveness of their communications.

In West Africa, agencies were not prioritising language needs, and TWB funded an advocacy video to try to address agency mindsets on the value of local language translation. Its staff stress they need to spend more time creating awareness of the need for translation as a critical part of agencies' disaster responses. TWB is working to communicate the importance of local language through a published impact study and infographic (see more below under 'Was this a successful innovation process?')

4. Was this a successful innovation process?

Inherent in all innovation processes is some degree of failure. This presents a challenge to understanding what contributes to a good innovation process: even successful processes will experience difficult pilots or setbacks in design or diffusion. The HIF-ALNAP research on innovation processes therefore distinguishes between a good innovation – an output of an innovation process that leads to measurable gains in effectiveness, quality and efficiency – and a good innovation process. This research defines a successful innovation process through three criteria:

Table: Criteria of success for innovation processes

Increased learning and evidence	There is new knowledge generated or an enhanced evidence base around the problem the innovation is intended to address, or around the performance of the innovation itself.
Improved solution	The innovation offers a measurable, comparative improvement in effectiveness, quality, or efficiency over current approaches to the problem addressed by the innovation.
Adoption	The innovation is taken to scale and used by others to improve humanitarian performance.

Through the research process for the case studies, ALNAP and HIF are also seeking to understand how HIF grantees define success in their work, in order to identify unexpected or unacknowledged benefits from engaging in innovation.

The research team used evidence collected for this case study to assess the success of the Appropriate and Affordable Emergency Wheelchairs innovation process against the above three criteria.

Overall, the process was successful in developing a product and training package that to a large degree fulfils the initial brief. While no studies have been carried out to compare the emergency wheelchair with a standard orthopaedic wheelchair, wheelchair users have scored the emergency wheelchair highly in terms of satisfaction. As Motivation has only recently begun diffusion, it is too soon in the lifespan of the project to determine whether it will be successful in securing wider adoption of the wheelchair and training package.

Specifically, findings for the three success criteria were as follows:

Increased learning and evidence

Research conducted during the pilot phase in Kenya has provided evidence of the value of local language translation in emergency response.

Improved solution

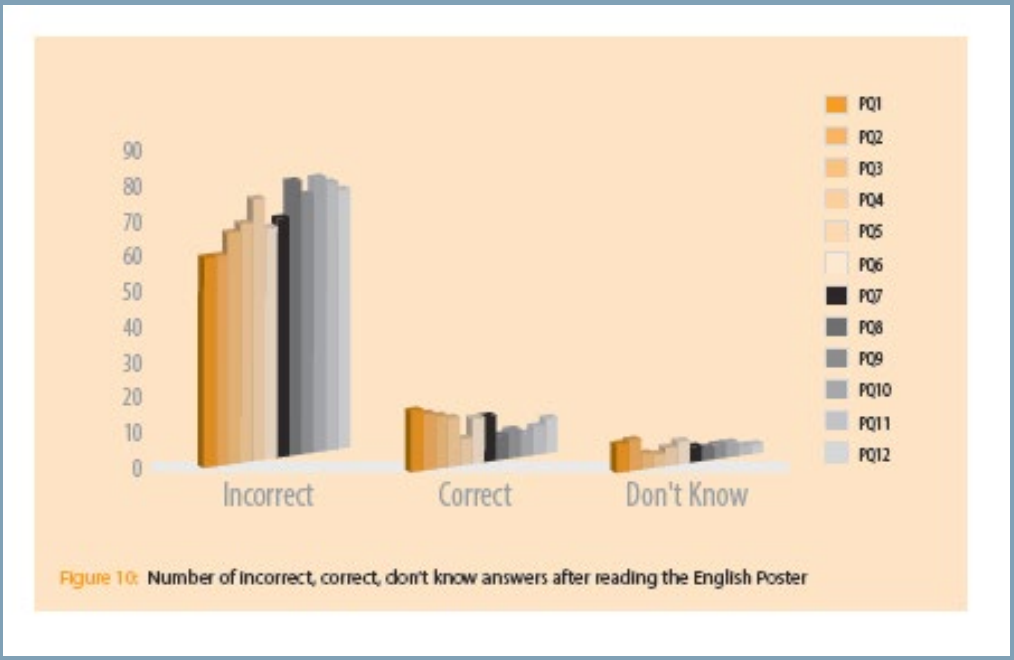
The Words of Relief project appears to offer a viable solution for humanitarian translation. During the pilot stage, over 428,000 crisis messages were translated and made available on the CDAC Network website. The messages were mostly translated into Swahili, Somali and Krio, with specific cholera messaging translated into Kirundi, and Ebola messaging translated into Themne and Mende. There is evidence of some uptake of the message library in Kenya: at its peak (outside of crisis), the message library received 450 views per month.

More importantly, the HIF-ALNAP case studies seek to establish whether an innovation offers an improved solution: a measurable improvement in quality, efficiency or effectiveness over the previous approach to the problem the innovation seeks to address. Words of Relief stands out as one of the few projects that has undertaken a comparative study between the innovation and the status quo approach – in this case the provision of information in English.

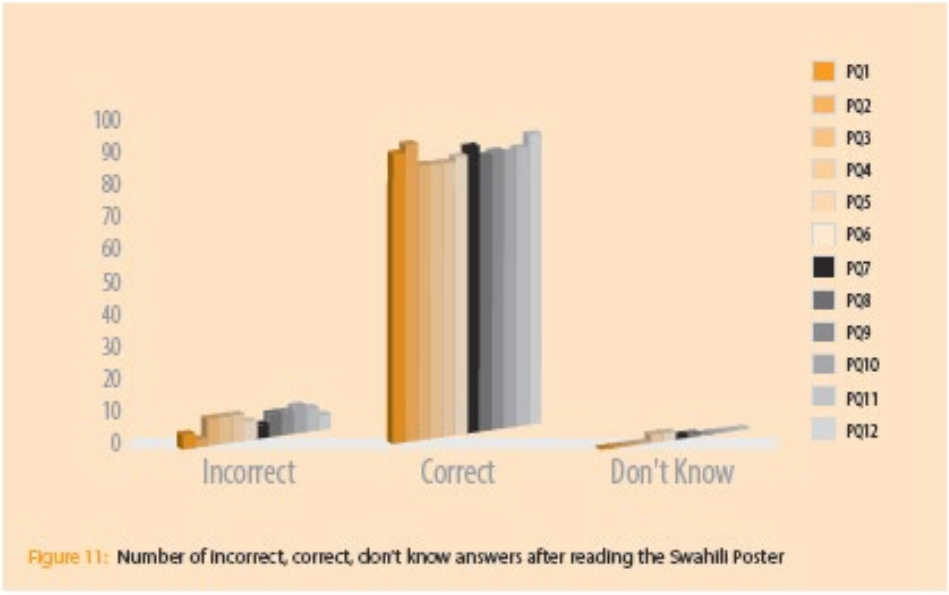
Dr Sharon O'Brien conducted an impact study of the project by comparing two posters on Ebola, one produced in Swahili and one in English. She assessed 197 multilingual people living in crisis-affected areas of Kenya and found the poster was not understood in Swahili by 8% of the group and was not understood in English by 76% of the group (see figure 1 opposite).[19] It was also notable that 82% of those tested said they would prefer to receive crisis health messages in spoken format.[20]

While this study demonstrates comprehension of messages is greater when conveyed in a local language, it does not go so far as to measure what some might view as the 'true' impact of local language translation: the changes in behaviour and practice such messages are intended to bring about. This remains an area that TWB may wish to pursue in order to demonstrate the broader impacts of communicating key educational messages in local languages. Moreover, TWB does not have a mechanism for assessing its reach: if, how and how often partners are using translated material in their communications. The need to introduce comprehension testing more widely across the communications of the aid agencies that use Words of Relief is an issue TWB has discussed with its partners and hopes to make progress on in the coming year.

Figure 1: Results of Words of Relief impact study



Graph 1: Number of correct responses given to questions about Ebola after having read posters translated by Words of Relief in English



Graph 2: Number of correct responses given to questions about Ebola after having read posters translated by Words of Relief in Swahili

Adoption

TWB has struggled to establish measurable evidence of the uptake of the Words of Relief project, or to trace its impact on relief agencies and beneficiary communities. Another strand of the project, the digital exchange (WoRDE), is not yet completed and requires testing by aid workers and humanitarian information aggregators.

Despite the impact report mentioned above, and numerous research and evaluation reports emphasising the need for humanitarian agencies to give greater prioritisation to local language translation, Words of Relief has not yet achieved significant adoption in the sector. The need for local language translation is not typically prioritised at the organisational level (i.e. it is not included in budgets) or amongst field workers. Most of TWB's engagement to date has been limited to those within the humanitarian sector who already recognised the importance of translation.

As the experiences of several of the HIF grantees indicate, a critical barrier to fully successful innovation in the humanitarian system – innovation that leads to step changes in system-wide quality, efficiency or effectiveness – is unwillingness among aid agencies to recognise the performance problems innovators are seeking to address. This means grantees must often devote as many, if not more, resources and attention to a diffusion strategy as they do to the development and implementation of an innovation. An emerging critical component to a successful diffusion strategy is an advocacy campaign aimed at getting aid agencies to address problems in the system that are currently ignored.

6. What are we learning about innovation?

Drawing on research from the humanitarian sector and beyond, including previous case study material, HIF has identified a range of factors generally held to be fundamental to successful innovation processes. An important part of the case study research lies in testing, through the experience of the HIF grantees, the extent to which these propositions hold true in humanitarian settings.

- **Managing relationships and setting common objectives**

  Innovation always involves multiple actors – partners, implementers and end users – all of whom can change over the different stages of an innovation process. Assigning specific time and resources to managing these relationships and ensuring common objectives across the different stakeholders of an innovation will contribute to a successful innovation process.

- **Dividing tasks and responsibilities**

  Given the complexity of many innovation processes, a clear division of tasks and responsibilities between individuals and organisational units is important for developing a successful innovation.

- **Resourcing an innovation**

  Working in innovation requires flexibility to deal with the unknown, and this is particularly so with an innovation in the humanitarian sector. Budgets and resource plans therefore need to be suitably flexible to accommodate several possible outcomes (e.g. the need for further trials) as well as likely deviations from the original plan.

- **Flexibility of process**

  At its heart, managing an innovation process is about creating space for flexibility. Processes featuring flexible timelines, feedback loops for adaptation during the piloting phase and individuals resourced to execute changes in response to emerging results will be more likely to succeed.

- **Assessing and monitoring risk**

  Innovation processes in humanitarian action need to have an appropriate relationship to risk. We expect processes will be more likely to produce improved solutions and achieve uptake when they include an assessment of the different risks that might have an impact on the effectiveness of the innovation, as well as a strategy or plan to monitor and adjust development in light of changes in these risks on an ongoing basis.

- **Drawing on existing practice**

  Knowledge of existing practice and experiences is expected to contribute to more effective innovations through a better understanding of past attempted solutions, an accurate initial understanding of the problem or opportunity addressed by the innovation and an awareness of potential users and their needs.

Findings for these six propositions are presented in the following pages.

Managing relationships and setting common objectives

How this factor worked in this case study

TWB was aware of the need to prioritise coordination with potential partners from the outset. In the pilot in Kenya, a launch workshop was held to identify the language needs of first responders, to discuss relevant messages for translation and to build links with potential partners.

The Words of Relief global coordinator was responsible for relationships with NGO partners, technology partners and government agencies. NGO partners are critical to the success of the innovation: TWB acts as a service provider, collecting content from NGOs and then translating and disseminating the messages to NGO staff for their use.

The TWB Kenya manager (who reports to the program director and works with the global coordinator) was responsible for the relationships with community leaders, health-workers and volunteers. He explained successful recruitment of engaged and motivated volunteers had been a primary factor in the success of the pilot in Kenya.[21]

Challenges

In the surprise simulation exercise in Kenya, the response rates of volunteer translators was high. Nevertheless, the long-term motivation of volunteers was a major challenge in first implementation in West Africa. TWB are in ongoing discussions about whether it should incentivise volunteers and whether to pay for internet access to facilitate engagement and good response times.

A challenge for TWB is that NGO partnerships during the pilot phase were informal: NGOs responded to requests for information rather than being fully integrated into the project development.[22] TWB attempted to deepen NGO engagement by inviting partners to launch events, focus group discussions and an evaluation, but were disappointed by low attendance. Nevertheless, both NGO and technology partners were very positive about the relationship, noting regular communication and a professional approach.[23]

Despite this, TWB's greatest challenge was sourcing crisis content for the message library. NGOs and government agencies were slow in responding to requests for content. The need for translation for needs assessment, communicating life-saving information and ensuring accountability to the population has been well established.[24] Yet, in the heat of an emergency, NGOs are often focussed on programmatic issues, and individual aid workers do not see language as a priority. The organisations rely on local staff members or on delivering messages in major languages such as English or French. Even when they expressed a need for local translation support, partners were slow to follow through with content. Nicki Bailey from CDAC Network suggests organisations are still unclear on the information they need translating: further research is required to see the type of local language information that communities want.[25]

How this factor related to the performance of the innovation process

Managing relationships and setting common objectives were highly relevant to the success of this innovation process. The TWB team ensured specific staff members were assigned to managing external stakeholder engagement.

However, they underestimated the extent of the challenge of obtaining buy-in from NGOs, and this resulted in lower engagement in the project at the outset as well as challenges in diffusion.

Dividing tasks and responsibilities

How this factor worked in this case study

Internally, the Words of Relief team is small and nimble. The organisation decided to recruit local staff because it was 'important that the people who are telling the story understand the problem'.[26]

Working as a remote team forces the organisation to clearly delegate responsibility and be rigorous in internal communication. The innovation involved three distinct components: delegation of tasks was facilitated by clear distinction between the components.

Grace Tang, Global Coordinator, notes online resource-sharing has facilitated their work as a global team.[27] Digital technologies are used to facilitate communications, document-sharing and project management. The organisation uses Basecamp©, a virtual online platform that allows for project planning, delegation of tasks, document-sharing and centralised communication.

Challenges

None identified by research.

How this factor related to the performance of the innovation process

Words of Relief benefited from clearly defined roles both internally and in partnerships.

Clear communication with partner organisations was seen as a priority. In interviews, staff at the Red Cross, CDAC Network, the University of Dublin and Chocolate Moose Media each noted TWB had a very professional approach, setting out expectations at the outset, relying on clear timelines and agreeing individual and organisational roles.

Several TWB staff noted their organisational culture was very similar to that of some of their technology partners. A Technology Committee was set up to meet monthly and coordinate digital components of the innovation. The committee developed an initial design that integrated with TWB's existing technology platform but allowed for flexibility during the innovation process.

Resourcing an innovation

How this factor worked in this case study

TWB has recognised its limited organisational, funding and human resource capacity. It has developed a model for choosing interventions based on the language needs of the location. TWB restricts itself to working in locations with multiple minor languages where the majority of the population are not bilingual. By limiting its work to a small number of emergency response situations, TWB ensures it can maximise resources available in crises with significant language challenges.

Challenges

The staff learnt about the limitations of digital communication in humanitarian response. TWB is a virtual, digital network and does not have a physical presence in West Africa. Indigo Trust funding provided for a local communications staff member. Nevertheless, the leadership at TWB noted the increased challenge of communicating remotely with relief workers already operating under great time pressures and not inclined to prioritise language. The Ebola response taught TWB it would be necessary to have an in-country presence: in future, resources should be reserved for a presence in the field to allow face-to-face contact with partners, advocacy on the importance of language and assessing the uptake of translated materials. As a small team, TWB is currently exploring how it can provide the necessary framework in place to ensure the safety of staff deployed into crises.

How this factor related to the performance of the innovation process

Project staff emphasised the value of resourcing pilots in sudden-onset emergency responses. For TWB, practical experience provided important lessons in how to create a global team that could respond to translation requests 24-7 from different time zones and in multiple languages.

Flexibility of process

How this factor worked in this case study

TWB is a small organisation able to respond quickly to learning: for example moving volunteer training online, shifting its focus from Liberia to Sierra Leone where language needs were perceived to be greater and responding to new opportunities, such as translating the video on Ebola.

Challenges

None identified by research.

How this factor related to the performance of the innovation process

There were three lessons relating to how organisations can build flexibility into the innovation process. First, in order to stay flexible, TWB controlled the rate of the project's growth. At the outset of the Words of Relief project, TWB was a small organisation with a small team and small budget. It has controlled growth by focusing its efforts on a small number of interventions while building organisational processes and structures that allow it to react quickly to new opportunities (including governance processes, diversifying funding pools and restructuring the Board of Directors).

Second, the opportunity for flexible funding allowed TWB to access an additional small grant for implementation of Words of Relief in West Africa. Implementing the innovation in an emergency setting allowed TWB to test its work, to learn quickly the strengths and weaknesses of its approach and to refine the solution.

Third, TWB has a small team that collectively built learning into its processes. For example, TWB conducted studies on the sources of information that pilot communities most trust, the effectiveness of translation during crisis simulation exercises and an evaluation of its translator training. TWB allowed for iterative improvements to the project design in order to respond to the findings of research.

For example, in Kenya, the pilot was originally planned to work more closely with diaspora translator networks, but research highlighted that community translation was of a high quality and allowed for closer interaction with those affected by a potential crisis. In West Africa, TWB responded to challenges in uptake by reallocating funding into advocacy work on the importance of agencies providing information in local languages.

Assessing and monitoring risk

How this factor worked in this case study

A formal risk assessment was conducted as part of the project proposal for HIF. Staff at TWB had worked in translation for humanitarian response in the Philippines and Haiti and had a good understanding of the risks for the innovation:

1. Reliance is on implementing agencies in order for the innovation to be effective. In particular, translating content that was not used was seen as a significant risk. In West Africa, TWB tracked downloads of messages to gain experience in the content that was most useful. However, it does not have a means of tracking use of those messages.

2. Literacy rates in the population. Lack of literacy in the pilot and emergency deployment in West Africa has underscored the need for audio and visual translation for future interventions.[28] In future, this risk will be reduced by partnering with radio stations and video-makers.

3. Recruitment of volunteers. The concept of voluntary translation was new in Kenya. TWB has learnt the value of training to teach why both translation and volunteerism are valuable during times of crisis. A formal code of ethics has been introduced to ensure volunteers understand and comply with humanitarian principals.

During development and implementation, TWB identified an additional risk to success: it perceived a bias of humanitarian agencies away from innovation in the midst of emergency response. Aid organisations often work within constraints of tight project budgets and demanding timelines. They were often unwilling to take external direction or to experiment with new approaches, particularly where it did not directly impact on project indicators.

Challenges

While TWB had a good understanding of the risks faced by the project, it lacked a strong mitigation strategy. As a result, several of the risks, including the challenge of providing written communications in societies with low literacy rates, came to fruition and had an arguable impact on comprehension of the translated messages, despite Words of Relief being aware of this risk at the outset of the project.

How this factor related to the performance of the innovation process

While a more formal and proactive approach to risk monitoring and mitigation may have helped address some of the challenges around early diffusion, in general such risk management practices seemed less relevant to the success of the innovation process than maintaining a flexible approach to planning and implementation.

TWB is small enough to be nimble in responding to problems. The team was able to anticipate and respond flexibly to risks as they arose (an example was promoting its work to NGOs by creating an advocacy video for organisations working in West Africa).

Drawing on existing practice

How this factor worked in this case study

The Mission 4636 coordinator provided insights into carrying out a translation project using crowd-sourcing tools in a large-scale humanitarian response. More broadly, the experience of Mission 4636 in Haiti served as the pilot for this innovation, enabling Words of Relief to build meaningfully on lessons learnt. Research and evaluations on humanitarian response in the past decade have highlighted the challenge of cross-sector collaboration. In Haiti, poor understanding of the two cultures made it difficult to integrate new tools to improve relief efforts. This lesson was addressed explicitly by the Words of Relief project, enabling TWB to learn from past challenges.

TWB also drew on its own experience of providing rapid and real-time support in two emergency scenarios:

- In March 2013, TWB partnered with Ushahidi's Uchaguzi project to provide 24-7 translation before, during and immediately after the Kenyan elections. TWB translated approximately 38,000 messages in at least 11 languages.
- TWB partnered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to translate information for Syrian refugees.

Challenges

None identified by research.

How this factor related to the performance of the innovation process

External knowledge was important in creation of this innovation. The Words of Relief project drew heavily on experience of its staff, the staff of Mission 4636 and the translation community more broadly to design the innovation.

Existing practice influenced the choice of NGO partners, informed the type of messages chosen for the library and was critical in designing training for the spider network translators. The Haiti response, which essentially served as the first pilot for this innovation, also highlighted the importance of radio for local language communication. The need for verbal information was again noted in the Ebola response and will inform future Words of Relief projects.

Additional potential contributing factors to successful innovation found in this case study

Providing evidence of effectiveness

An important theme arising from this innovation is the necessity, and difficulty, of demonstrating impact. TWB works through relief workers and has struggled to quantify the uptake of its three products and the difference it makes to agencies and populations. For example, NGOs were not responsive to surveys for evaluation. TWB has established an evidence base for the importance of translation in crisis but evidence of the impact of the Words of Relief products is largely anecdotal. For example, Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), which used Words of Relief posters in its treatment centres, commented:

> **The message [the CDC stigma posters] coincides with the role-plays we have been doing in the community on how to help people in quarantine homes and receiving survivors. It is very useful that after the role-play we leave them with information on posters to reinforce the behaviours.**[29]

TWB has conducted an impact report and is currently engaged in an advocacy campaign to raise awareness of its results. In interviews, NGO partners also discussed the need for greater clarity for humanitarian networks on how to access and use the message library and spider network and on the associated costs.

7. Emerging lessons for best practice in innovation

- Awareness raising around the problem that an innovation aims to address is a critical part of a diffusion strategy and can be as time-consuming as the development of the innovation itself.
- Cross-sectorial relationships can spark interesting ideas and fuel innovation: the consistent challenge is that organisational culture, language, and widespread use of acronyms in the humanitarian sector make it difficult for externally-derived innovations to integrate quickly.
- For technology-driven innovations, participative design and a good understanding of the user community is vital for achieving wider use.

Endnotes

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