

Rapid Guide to Localizing and Translating Survey Tools

Data collection is an essential part of humanitarian response. Accurate data gives aid agencies the information they need to design quality programmes and respond effectively to people's needs. One of the factors that influences whether the collected data is accurate and people can rely on it is the interaction between the data collectors and respondents. Translators without Borders, in collaboration with People in Need, prepared this guide to help aid agencies **prevent language and cultural biases that frequently occur when designing and administering surveys**. The field-based tips and tricks offered by this practical guide can help you and your colleagues to gain more reliable data. The guide is instructive, but not definitive. We know that variations in culture and context create different language issues as well as communication needs and therefore you might need to adjust some of the tips to the context you operate in.

Tips for Planning and Designing the Survey

1. **Formulate questions in linguistically and culturally appropriate ways** to avoid unintentional biases and misunderstandings.

<p>Avoid:</p> <p>Using globally developed survey questions word-for-word, without considering the need to adapt them to the local context, especially when translated to the local language.</p>	<p>Try:</p> <p>Working with local teams to ensure that all survey questions are culturally appropriate while retaining their original meaning. For example, when asking about various food groups, adjust the examples to what people eat locally.</p>
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2. **Use plain language** that data collectors and respondents can understand. Avoid jargon, abbreviations, and acronyms and use widely understood terms. Refrain from asking questions that assume a level of knowledge around a specific topic, except where relevant and appropriate.

<p>Avoid:</p> <p>"In the past trimester, did you receive any capacity-building support from the FTC agronomists?"</p>	<p>Try:</p> <p>"In the past three months, did you receive any training from the staff working at the local Farmers Training Centre?"</p>
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3. **Format questions to minimize open answers that will need translation**. When possible, use multiple-choice or yes/no answer formats. This will reduce the risk of translation and data analysis mistakes.

<p>Avoid:</p> <p>"What is your mother tongue?"</p> <p>Answer: _____</p>	<p>Try:</p> <p>"What is your mother tongue?"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Arabic <input type="checkbox"/> Kurmanji <input type="checkbox"/> Sorani <input type="checkbox"/> Turkish <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____
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4. For open-ended questions, allow the data collectors to **input the answers in the language that the survey is being conducted in.**

<p>Avoid:</p> <p>“¿Qué es lo que más te preocupa?”</p> <p>Answer (in English): _____</p>	<p>Try:</p> <p>“¿Qué es lo que más te preocupa?”</p> <p>Respuesta (en Español): _____</p>
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5. **Use graphic or visual aids, especially when conducting surveys among populations with low literacy levels.**

<p>Avoid:</p> <p>How would you say you feel about the quality of provided shelter materials? Would you say that you feel very satisfied, fairly satisfied, neutral, rather dissatisfied or very dissatisfied?</p>	<p>Try:</p> <p>Which of these pictures best represents how you feel about the quality of provided shelter materials?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very satisfied  • Satisfied  • Neutral  • Dissatisfied  • Very dissatisfied 
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6. **Use mobile phones or tablets instead of pen and paper, unless the data collectors are not used to typing on a phone / tablet or you use many open-ended questions. This helps reduce potential data analysis and translation errors caused by messy handwriting.**

<p>Consider avoiding:</p> 	<p>Try:</p> 
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7. Avoid putting translation or interpreting burdens on the data collectors: **Translate the questionnaire into the language(s) the data collectors are most comfortable reading and using with respondents.** Before you ask someone to translate the survey, ask experienced staff to read the original version of the questionnaire and highlight all parts that could be difficult to translate. Discuss and agree how to translate in the best possible way.

<p>Avoid:</p> <p>Requiring the data collectors to sight-translate the questions from English (or other language) into the local language during the interview.</p>	<p>Try:</p> <p>Planning the involvement of dedicated and experienced staff to translate the questionnaire into the relevant language(s).</p>
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8. Once a survey is translated into the relevant language(s), **test it first among the data collectors and only then among the target population.** Always keep in mind that the fact that you understand the content of your questionnaire does not mean that the respondents will understand it at all or in the same way as you do.

<p>Avoid:</p> <p>Underestimating the amount of training and preparation data collectors need and not testing your survey tool with them and the target population before doing the survey.</p>	<p>Try:</p> <p>Testing the translated version extensively with the data collectors and supervisors (ideally during their training), asking them questions such as: What is the meaning of the question(s)? Which parts of the question(s) are not clear? Which questions might be misunderstood by the respondents? Do any of the questions make you feel uncomfortable? If you were asking a friend or family member this question, how would you ask it? Are there some local words/phrases that would describe the actual meaning of the question in a better way?</p> <p>Furthermore, ask a staff that was not involved in the translation and survey design to translate the translated text (at least verbally) back to its original language and check whether this translation is correct. Make corrections accordingly without changing the original meaning of the survey questions.</p> <p>Pilot the questionnaire among the target population and finalize it only after you complete these steps.</p>
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Tips for Conducting the Survey

1. **Ask the respondent for informed consent in easy-to-understand language.** This means avoiding long sentences and words the respondents might be unfamiliar with. Emphasize primarily why you want to talk to the person and how you will use the data. When the interview is over, ask whether the respondent still agrees with the information being used. This helps to confirm that there wasn't any confusion during the initial consent process.

<p>Avoid:</p> <p>"For the purposes of this research, we will be collecting various pieces of your personal identifiable information. This PII data will be aggregated and anonymized prior to sharing</p>	<p>Try:</p> <p>"Hello, my name is ___ and I am part of a study team of organization XYZ that conducts research on [specify the topic]. We are doing this research to [explain why you need the data]. As part of this research, I would like to interview you for about ___ minutes. We would like to collect information about you, like your name, age, and location, and about your experience with [specify the topic].</p>
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<p>publicly. The raw data will be stored in an encrypted database before being destroyed permanently in accordance with our data management and storage policy. If at any point you wish to rescind your consent to this survey, please contact the Data Management and Ethics Committee at the following address: _____.”</p>	<p>We will never publicly share this information in a way that allows other people to identify you or your responses to this survey. We will store the information you provide securely for [specify how many] years before destroying it. If you no longer want us to store this information, you can contact us at this phone number ____ [give a contact card].</p> <p>You do not have to participate in this research and nothing will happen if you decide not to. Likewise, if you decide to be interviewed, you will not receive any material or other benefits for participating. Do you understand what I explained? Can I continue with the interview?”</p> <p><i>At the end of the interview, ask:</i></p> <p>“That is the end of this interview, thank you very much for your time. Is there anything you would like to ask me about?</p> <p>Do you still agree with us using your answers to this survey or is there any information you would like us to delete from the survey?”</p>
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2. Recruit data collectors who speak the preferred language of the survey population. This is especially important for surveys that contain sensitive questions - it can jeopardize the privacy and comfort level of the respondents if they have to rely on a neighbour or family member to convey their answers to these questions.

<p>Avoid:</p> <p>Relying on informal interpreters or family members.</p>	<p>Try:</p> <p>Planning and resourcing the involvement of people with the relevant language and communication skills. Start early – finding them takes time.</p>
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3. In many cultures, it is not culturally appropriate for men to be asking women about certain issues (and the other way round), resulting in neither the data collector nor the respondent feeling comfortable. This is likely to affect their ability and willingness to express themselves openly, reducing the quality of collected data. The same can apply if a person from one ethnic group interviews a person from another group.

<p>Avoid:</p> <p>Recruiting data collectors without considering what types of data will be collected and from whom.</p>	<p>Try:</p> <p>Discussing with your team whether the survey contains any topics the respondents and the data collectors might be reluctant to discuss openly with a person of the opposite sex or a different ethnic group. If so, insist on hiring collectors of the same sex and/or ethnicity.</p>
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4. Debrief the data collectors regularly during the survey process and address the identified weaknesses.

<p>Avoid:</p> <p>Waiting until the end of the survey to ask data collectors about any difficulties they encountered.</p>	<p>Try:</p> <p>In addition to the ongoing feedback provided by survey supervisors (based on using checklists), discuss with the data collectors at the end of each day:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What went well and what was difficult today? - What questions did people find most difficult to understand? - What explanations did you give to help them understand? - What can be done to improve the survey process?
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Tips for After the Survey

1. **Translate the answers into a language the data analysis team understands.** The data collectors should assist with clarifying the meaning of the recorded answers - the sooner after the interviews, the better.

<p>Avoid:</p> <p>Requiring your staff to analyse the data without the participation of data collectors.</p>	<p>Try:</p> <p>Planning for the engagement of experienced (internal or external) staff who cooperate with the data collectors on clarifying and translating the respondents' answers.</p>
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2. **At the end of the survey, debrief data collectors** to discuss any overall language-related and other issues in the survey process. This will help you to provide more appropriate tools in the future.

<p>Avoid:</p> <p>Finishing your data collection process without time to ask for feedback from your data collectors.</p>	<p>Try:</p> <p>Allocating time to debrief data collectors after the survey is completed and ask them for recommendations on what could be improved next time (e.g. regarding translation, terminology use, interactions with respondents, etc.).</p>
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Additional Resources:

- ACAPS, [Questionnaire Design: How to Design a Questionnaire for Needs Assessments in Emergencies](#)
- ICRC, [Professional Standards for Protection Work](#) (Chapter 6)
- KoBoToolbox, [Adding Another Language to Your Form](#)
- Protection Information Management, [Common Terminology](#)
- Protection Information Management, [Principles of Protection Information Management](#)
- OHCHR, [A Human-Rights Based Approach to Data](#)
- Oxfam, [Responsible Data Management Training Pack](#)

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Translators without Borders envisions a world where knowledge knows no language barriers. Since 1993, we have connected non-profit organizations with a community of language professionals, built local language translation capacity, and raised awareness of language barriers. We have a deep understanding of the impact of language bias on the ability to source reliable data for effective humanitarian responses.

People in Need is a Czech relief and development organizations operating in over 20 countries worldwide. Our on-line guidance www.indikit.net enables aid workers from various countries and organizations to correctly collect and analyse meaningful data that can help them improve the quality of their programming.