

Working through interpreters

(Adapted from Hygiene Promotion, a practical manual for relief and development, ITDG Publishing)

In many cases it will be necessary to work through interpreters in order to communicate with community members and sometimes even with officials or others. This can make the natural flow of discussion extremely difficult – especially when working in the community. In most cases it will also be unlikely that you are able to employ fully trained interpreters. However, if possible, interpreters should be native speakers, preferably from the same social group as the target community. In societies where it is not appropriate for men to talk to women they don't know, both female and male interpreters are needed. When the ideal interpreter is not available, it is important to be aware of the dangers of using interpreters from a different group, class or gender; these include misinterpretation, misunderstandings, suspicion, guarded responses and so on. Where translation cannot be avoided, the following suggestions may help to reduce problems:

- Ensure that you brief the interpreter on how you will communicate and what you are hoping to achieve. Explain that it is very important to have the responses of the individuals you are talking to in as close a translation as possible and that the interpreter must try to keep his/her own ideas and beliefs separate. (The interpreter may be able to give you valuable information about the culture and customs of the area but when talking to others, must stick to interpretation only).
- If you are employing more than one interpreter you could brief them together and role-play a particular situation with one interpreter. The other interpreter(s) must then listen out for 'interpreter bias'.
- Discuss the overall content of what you want to understand and ensure that the interpreter is familiar with the words that will need to be interpreted.
- Ask the interpreter to translate what you say and the response of the other person(s) as closely as possible and explain that what people say is like a kind of evidence and you need to ensure that this is as reliable as possible.
- Talk naturally, maintain your natural eye contact (as normal) with the person you are talking to rather than talk to the interpreter. People may initially look confused and avert their eyes as they do not understand you but this direct contact will enable greater trust to be built up between you and the person you are interviewing.
- Allow the interpreter to translate what you have said after a sentence or two.
- Keep your conversation simple and clear. Be aware that the interpreter may elaborate on what you say and may sometimes have difficulty in translating particular words or phrases – especially when translating into a language that is not their 'mother tongue'.