

Guiding note on communication via interpreters





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Introduction to this tool

Information presented in this tool is by no means exhaustive but represents a compilation of guidance and practical tips on topics related to communication via interpreters ⁽¹⁾. The objective is to support Member States of the European Union and Associated Countries (EU+) in their operational work with resettlement.

What is the purpose of this tool?

This document intends to promote and ensure the quality of interpretation services for resettlement countries. It provides guidance on considerations that resettlement practitioners may want to take when communicating with refugees via interpreters.

It contains an example of a code of conduct that can be used and discussed with interpreters prior to the selection interview. The code intends to provide guidance to interpreters on how to behave with the objective of guaranteeing the high quality of the interpretation of the interview. It also contains guidance to maintain a good working relationship between the interpreters, the interviewees, and the staff during the interview missions. The tool also contains a short guide with a collection of topics that can be addressed when preparing/briefing interpreters in preparation of a workday or work assignment.

Why was it created?

High quality interpretation services are key to the success of selection missions. That is

why it is important at every stage of the resettlement process to use interpreters with high-level professional skills.

This document takes the view that interpretation services should be an integral part of the selection mission planning and should be subject to quality controls agreed upon in advance. Therefore, the document presents a compilation of matters necessary to consider when using interpreters based on practices from different resettlement countries.

Who should use this tool?

This document aims at providing guidance to resettlement case officers and interpreters who work with them during resettlement interviews.

Which other training tools and sources can also be used?

This practical guide is best accompanied by the [Practical Guide for Planning and Implementing Selection Missions](#) and the [Practical Guide for Planning and Conducting Resettlement Interviews](#).

(1) This tool was originally developed within the framework of the *Facilitating Resettlement and Refugee Admission through New Knowledge* (EU-FRANK) project. The project was funded by the European Asylum Migration and Integration Fund lead by the Swedish Migration Agency. As part of the handover process from EU-FRANK, the European Union Agency for Asylum has conducted a quality assurance exercise of the resettlement operational tools developed in this project.





Guiding note: communication via interpreters

PART I. CODE OF CONDUCT – TOOL FOR INTERPRETATION

Interpretation will be needed during most resettlement interviews because it is probable that most refugees lack (sufficient) knowledge of your national language to be interviewed directly in this language. Interpreters may also be of help when there is a need to translate documents that are presented by the individuals being interviewed.

In order to ensure that interviews can be carried out in a successful way, attending to the need for interpreters and preparing them for their assignment is an important task for the mission team. A code of conduct can be used to describe the duties and roles of interpreters working for resettlement missions. It can also provide guidance to interpreters on how to behave with the objective of guaranteeing the high quality of the interview. It also contains guidance to maintain a good working relationship between the interpreters, the interviewees, and the staff during the selection missions.

The bullet points below represent suggested items to address with the interpreters when preparing for resettlement interviews. They can be used as a checklist or inspiration for any selection mission in which interpreters are used, regardless of the way these interpreters were recruited. The checklist can be shared with the interpreters before a mission as a reference document, or it can be provided orally by the mission team or mission leader. Some countries also ask the interpreters to sign a declaration in which they agree to work according to the principles of the code of conduct.

Interpretation

The interpreter's task is to translate the statements of the interviewer and the interviewee accurately, completely, and objectively without any additions, omissions or modifications. They may also be asked to sight-translate the content of written documents.

The interpreter should be prepared to apply bi-directional consecutive interpretation to accurately translate the speaker's words and meanings.

When a verbatim translation is not possible and a description is required for the interviewer and the interviewee to understand each other, the interpreter has to mention this. The translator/interpreter cannot, whether on their own initiative or on request, give information other than the information that has to be translated. The interpreter should never discuss the content of the interview.

- The interpreters must translate everything that is said by the different parties during an interview, including offending words, shocking colloquial speech, or unpleasant statements. They are not responsible for the content of the speaker's words. The interpreters must also translate words directly addressed to them by one of the parties as well as comments with no immediate bearing on the interview.
- Interpreters are allowed to take notes to make their work easier. These notes are to be handed over to the interviewer at the end of the interview. In particular, names of persons, places, political parties, military ranks, etc., must be rendered with



the utmost care and should be written down whenever possible. If necessary, the interpreter will ask the applicant to confirm this kind of information.

- The interpreter is to use the same grammatical persons as the speaker (e.g. 'I' fled from 'my' country and not 'He' fled from 'his' country).
- The interpreter must speak in a clear and understandable way.
- The interpreter must never interrupt the speaker except in the case that an exceptionally long utterance has to be interrupted in order to guarantee a proper translation or when the interpreter does not understand a word or an expression.
- Professional behaviour can be maintained only if the interpreter's level of linguistic competence, physical and mental aptitude, potential conflict of interest, and personal feelings do not represent an obstacle to such behaviour. In the presence of any of the above-mentioned obstacles, the interpreter is expected to inform the resettlement state and to give up their assignment.

Impartiality

- The interpreter is bound by professional secrecy and adopts a position of complete objectivity, neutrality, and independence with respect to both the applicant and the interviewer.
- The interpreter must never try to influence the process by taking sides and must not allow their own views, opinions, or feelings to influence the process. They must refrain from any comment, except when relevant for the interpretation task. If need be, they may intervene by referring to themselves as 'the interpreter':
- to ask for clarification in case something is not clear;
- to indicate that one of the parties misunderstood or did not understand;
- to indicate that they can no longer function properly as an interpreter, for

instance, because of fatigue, illness, or excessively long sentences.

- Interpreters must declare conflicts of interest (for example, that they personally know the individuals who are being interviewed).
- The interpreter must never act as an advisor to either of the two parties.
- The resettlement state guarantees that the interpreter's anonymity is preserved. To this end, the resettlement state never provides the applicant to be interviewed with any personal data regarding the interpreter.

Confidentiality

- Under no circumstances should the interpreter disclose or repeat orally or in writing any information obtained in the course of their work to a third party for any reason, unless this is required by law enforcement.
- Under no circumstances should the interpreter disclose any knowledge they might have of the interviewee regarding their case, background, position, status, or similar.

Integrity

- The interpreter must behave in a proper and respectful manner towards the staff of the resettlement country, other interpreters, the applicants, and other staff present during the selection mission regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, religion, sex, or sexual orientation. The interpreter will always avoid any kind of judgmental attitude.
- The interpreter must respect the working hours agreed upon.
- The interpreter must have a neat appearance and should wear appropriate, unobtrusive, and unprovocative clothing.
- Interpreters shall under no circumstances avail themselves of their position to receive gifts or compensations of any kind from the parties involved.



- The interpreter must be of irreproachable conduct and be acquainted with the rules and legal provisions governing their profession and tasks.
- Interpreters may ask the interviewers for a break whenever they feel that fatigue is beginning to interfere with their accuracy.
- While showing a degree of empathy necessary to carry out their task, interpreters must keep a proper professional distance towards the different parties and
- must treat all information confidentially.

Restrictions

- The interpreter accepts that it is the interviewer of the resettlement state who conducts the interview and decides what is relevant or not for the applicant's case. The interpreter should not impose on this in any way. Neither should they try to influence the content or steer the course of the interview, for instance, by suggesting questions to the applicant or asking for additional explanations.
- Interpreters should never react on their own initiative to unpleasant, shocking, or offensive remarks or show their emotions in any way.
- If an interpreter realises that the applicant is a relative or an acquaintance, or there is any other kind of link between them, they must immediately inform the interviewer of this fact. This could happen during the course of an interview or while translating a document for a dossier. As a rule, the interpreter must switch off their mobile phone during the interview. In consultation with the interviewer, the phone may be kept in a vibrating mode if needed. Phone calls should in principle only be made during the breaks.

Reminder: ethical principles for interpreters working in the field of asylum

Confidentiality. As an interpreter you should:

- not disclose information to others (e.g. a representative of the applicant's country of origin, family, friends, etc.) about the applicant or the case officer;
- keep in mind that disclosing information may have negative effects on the applicant's safety.

Impartiality. As an interpreter you should:

- be neutral and objective;
- not take sides or express your personal views;
- avoid becoming personally involved;
- declare possible conflicts of interest and refrain from accepting the assignment if necessary;
- not make fun of others, not be disrespectful;
- refrain from judging the credibility of the claim.

Accuracy and completeness. As an interpreter you should:

- not summarise, omit, or add content;
- interpret everything that is said, including side conversations/comments;
- not change the content or the style of a message;





- only try to paraphrase if there are no words for a term (always inform the participants of this);
- point out/explain terms that are culture-specific (always inform the participants of this);
- request for clarification if you do not understand (a term, concept, dialect).

Integrity. As an interpreter you should:

- only accept assignments for which you have the necessary language skills and knowledge;
- in the event of a mistake during the interpretation, inform the participants and correct your mistake/ ask for clarification;
- not accept/give any rewards, gifts, or money;
- not communicate with the applicant apart from the assignment about their asylum procedure and should tell them to refer any questions to the national asylum authorities.

Professional conduct. As an interpreter you should:

- be on time;
- dress appropriately;
- prepare in advance for the assignments (on the subject and physical and mental preparation);

- be aware of your own competencies and limitations;
- inform the national authority if you do not feel comfortable interpreting for the applicant;
- inform the interviewer of any threats or offers of bribery;
- ask for a break if you need one;
- speak clearly and with adjusted speed;
- keep your emotions under control;
- ask for the support of the case officer if the applicant becomes aggressive, does not answer the question, criticises your interpretation, or questions your objectivity.

Code of conduct – declaration

Some countries provide their interpreters with a code of conduct as a quality assurance. If possible, this type of document can be sent to the interpreters through the IOM or UNHCR prior to the selection mission. It can also be explained or referred to when the mission team or leader meets with interpreters, preferably during the initial briefing with the interpreters. On this occasion, the interpreters could be asked if they have read the document. Some countries ask interpreters to sign a declaration in which they confirm that they have read the code and are ready to work according to the principles described in it. An example of this type of declaration is presented on the next page.





Example: Code of conduct – declaration

I confirm that I have read the code of conduct for interpretation and that I understand the principles described in this code. I declare that I accept the terms and conditions of my assignment as described in this code.

I undertake that while engaged as an interpreter by

.....

I will interpret in both languages faithfully and accurately using the same words wherever possible and that I shall do so impartially and professionally. Any information that may become known to me during the course of my work will be treated in the strictest confidence.

Full Name (in capital letters):

.....

Contact details:

.....

Signature:

.....

Date:

.....

Place:

.....





PART II. INFORMATION SESSION – BRIEFING INTERPRETERS

Because the role of the interpreter is important for the success of the interviews, some states bring their own interpreters or appoint interviewers who can interview directly in the refugees' language. Another option is to ask UNHCR or IOM to provide interpreters for the mission. This should be done well in advance. For the protection of the interviewees, it is crucial that the communication between the interviewee, the interviewer and the interpreter functions well.

In the event of interpreters being provided by UNHCR or IOM, resettlement practitioners are advised to make sure that they are properly briefed in advance of the interview and understand what to do. It is important to commit sufficient time to meet with the interpreters and introduce yourselves to each other. The Head of Mission can normally provide the necessary information during a briefing session once the mission arrives at the field location.

The purpose of a briefing session is to inform the interpreters of their assignment, as well as of any specific routines or considerations that are of importance to the resettling state or mission. Because different resettlement countries have different ways of working, you may want to discuss with the interpreters certain topics that are important to your team. You may also want to team up one case officer with one interpreter. Some countries inform interpreters of the standards of confidentiality and professionalism that are expected (as described in the section above).

A briefing session is a good opportunity to address whatever code of conduct your team and the interpreters are expected to abide by. **This briefing session can also cover** any sensitive cases or topics that may come up during your work together and to address logistical issues (working hours, payments, schedules, etc.). Some explanations on the refugee determination process and common terminology may also be helpful. In all cases, you should provide guidance as to the code of ethics expected of the interpreter. An example of a briefing session with interpreters **can be found** on the **next page**.





Example – Briefing session with interpreters

Introduction

Introduction by mission representative

My name is

.....

I am from I work at
the

I am here together with the (country) Selection Team.

Our mission is to examine refugee cases for possible resettlement in
in cooperation with UNCHR.

Introduction of interpreters

IOM interpreters (names)

UNHCR interpreters (names)

Provide name badges for the interpreters and for the team.

Schedule

- We start each morning at (time) with an information session for all persons who are going to be interviewed before lunch. Interviews are held from to
- Lunch will take place at –
- The information session for the afternoon cases is held at (one interpreter)
- The afternoon interviews are held from to
- The schedule will be flexible depending on how long the interviews last. You will also have short breaks between the different cases/families.

Expectations

The most important things for you to know:

- You have professional confidentiality, which means you are not allowed to speak to anybody about what has happened during the interview.





- We expect you to translate the exact words the refugees use. If the refugees do not understand the question, it is not up to the interpreter to explain but for the interviewer to repeat the question or to explain the question. You should not add or leave anything out. If the refugee has any questions, it is important that we answer them.
- Interpret for all in the family, including children. We will not interview the youngest children, and the parent must give us their consent to let us talk to the children.
- You will be interpreter for the same person/interviewer for days.

We expect you as an interpreter to:

- interpret everything that is said, without adding or subtracting any information;
- be neutral/impartial;
- be bound by confidentiality;
- speak in the first person ('I', 'me', 'my').

For further reference on expectations regarding the code of conduct, please refer to the section 'PART I. Code of conduct – tool for interpretation'.





PART III. RECOGNISING QUALITY INTERPRETATION STANDARDS

If the mission uses local interpreters, some resettlement countries provide those whose services are considered satisfactory with a letter of appreciation or a certificate. This can be helpful as reference for future interpretation assignments.

If the mission team is not satisfied with the interpreting arrangement, they need to determine together with the Head of Mission if the interview should proceed. If necessary, the case officer can refer to the code of conduct to point out some principles. If the mission uses interpreters that have been arranged by operational

partners, feedback should be provided to these partners on the perceived quality of the interpretation. This can be done orally at the end of the mission, during a debriefing session, or in writing after the mission. Naturally, the mission should look for other interpreters should they experience that certain individuals are not providing high standard interpretation or that the working relationship is not functioning for other reasons.



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