

Translators without Borders: The Power of Words

Abstract

Translators without Borders (TWB), founded in 1993, began as a volunteer initiative to bridge language barriers in humanitarian crises. Its evolution into a global organization, culminating in its rebranding as CLEAR Global in 2021, showcases a commitment to innovation and impact. TWB has revolutionized crisis response by providing vital translations in over 250 languages, enabling marginalized communities to access life-saving information. Initiatives like Words of Relief have demonstrated how technology and collaboration can amplify humanitarian efforts. This case explores TWB's journey, highlighting the challenges of scaling, ensuring cultural sensitivity, and integrating technology, offering valuable lessons in innovation management and social entrepreneurship.

Executive summary

Translators without Borders: The Power of Words

In 1993, Lori Thicke and Ros Smith-Thomas founded Translators sans Frontières (TSF) in Paris with a simple yet profound mission: to break down language barriers in crises. What began as a grassroots initiative connecting volunteer translators with humanitarian organizations grew into a global movement addressing one of the most critical, yet overlooked, challenges in humanitarian aid—language.

Early Years: A Volunteer Effort TSF operated as a volunteer network, translating vital documents for organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières. However, coordinating a global team of volunteers proved challenging. As crises multiplied, the need for a more structured approach became evident.

A Pivotal Transformation In 2010, TSF became Translators without Borders (TWB), a U.S.-registered non-profit. This transformation enabled TWB to formalize its operations and secure funding. The 2010 Haiti earthquake was a defining moment, as TWB translated critical health information into Haitian Creole, demonstrating how language can save lives.

Innovation in Crisis Response The Words of Relief initiative, launched in 2011, marked TWB's proactive shift. This digital crisis translation platform connected aid organizations with volunteer translators during emergencies. From the Ebola outbreak in 2014 to the Nepal earthquake in 2015, TWB proved the life-saving power of timely and accurate translations.

Expanding Impact Over the years, TWB tackled language barriers in crises like the Rohingya refugee crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. They developed glossaries, trained interpreters, and leveraged partnerships with tech giants like Microsoft and Facebook to scale their impact. In 2021, TWB rebranded as CLEAR Global, incorporating technology and data-driven insights to address global language barriers comprehensively.

Timeline and Impact

- **1993:** Founding of TSF in Paris.
- **2010:** Rebranded as TWB, formalizing operations.
- **2011:** Launched Words of Relief initiative.
- **2014:** Addressed language needs during the Ebola outbreak.
- **2015:** Rapid response to the Nepal earthquake.
- **2017:** Assisted in the Rohingya refugee crisis.
- **2020:** Translated COVID-19 information into 70+ languages.
- **2021:** Rebranded as CLEAR Global, expanding focus on technology.

Key Figures:

- Over 6,000 volunteer translators.
 - Support in 250+ languages.
 - 50+ million words translated annually.
 - Impacting over 30 million people globally.
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Breaking Language Barriers: The Translators without Borders Story

Introduction

In the chaos of a humanitarian crisis, clear communication can mean the difference between life and death. Yet, for many affected populations, vital information arrives in a language they cannot understand. Translators without Borders (TWB) has spent three decades addressing this overlooked challenge. From its grassroots beginnings in Paris to its current role as CLEAR Global, TWB has revolutionized how language barriers are addressed in crisis response and development work.

The Early Vision: Founding Translators sans Frontières

In 1993, Lori Thicke and Ros Smith-Thomas envisioned a world where language barriers would no longer obstruct access to critical information. From their office in Paris, they launched **Traducteurs sans Frontières (TSF)**. Their initial focus was simple yet profound:

translating documents for humanitarian organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) to enable effective outreach.

Thicke later recalled the inspiration: *“We saw how even small translations of medical texts could have an immense impact. But it became clear that during crises, these barriers turned into walls, blocking life-saving information.”*

Initially a volunteer-driven effort, TSF faced logistical challenges. Coordinating translators across countries and continents, with minimal resources, was daunting. Yet the vision resonated: language could save lives.

Evolution: Translators without Borders (TWB)

By 2010, as global crises increased in complexity and scale, the founders recognized the need for a more structured organization. TSF transitioned into **Translators without Borders (TWB)**, a U.S.-registered non-profit. This change brought formal funding opportunities and streamlined operations.

The 2010 Haiti earthquake marked a turning point. Aid organizations struggled to communicate essential health and safety information to Haitians, most of whom spoke Haitian Creole. TWB’s network mobilized swiftly, translating critical messages. One relief worker noted: *“Without those Creole translations, we couldn’t have reached people. TWB didn’t just provide words—they provided hope.”*

This moment crystallized TWB’s mission: to be a first responder for communication in crises.

Innovating for Impact: The Words of Relief Initiative

In 2011, TWB launched **Words of Relief**, the world’s first crisis translation network. The initiative preemptively translated key humanitarian messages into multiple languages, ensuring preparedness for future crises. Funded by organizations like the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) and supported by Microsoft, the program demonstrated how technology could transform crisis communication.

One story from the **2014 Ebola outbreak** in West Africa underscores the initiative’s importance. Over 90 languages were spoken across the affected regions, creating an information bottleneck. TWB translated essential materials into local languages, enabling communities to understand disease prevention measures. A study in Kenya showed that comprehension of Ebola warnings jumped from 24% to 92% when materials were translated into local languages.

Jacobo Quintanilla of the Red Cross emphasized: *“Information is aid. And if people can’t understand it, they can’t act on it.”*

Building Capacity: Local Empowerment

Beyond emergency responses, TWB invested in long-term solutions. The **Words of Relief Spider Network**, piloted in Kenya, trained local translators in Swahili and Somali, building indigenous capacity for future crises. By developing glossaries and standardizing terminology, TWB ensured consistency and cultural relevance.

For instance, during the **Rohingya refugee crisis**, TWB created the first-ever glossary of humanitarian terms in the Rohingya language. One aid worker reflected: *“We used to struggle explaining basic concepts like ‘shelter’ or ‘hygiene.’ The glossary became an invaluable tool.”*

Scaling Challenges: Funding, Technology, and Growth

TWB’s rapid growth brought challenges. Balancing the agility of a grassroots movement with the systems required for a global operation proved complex. Funding was a persistent concern. Despite widespread support, TWB needed consistent resources to sustain operations and invest in innovations like machine translation.

Aimee Ansari, TWB’s Executive Director, highlighted the tension: *“Technology can amplify our work, but we must ensure the human touch remains central. Accuracy, cultural nuance, and empathy cannot be automated.”*

Reinvention: CLEAR Global and the COVID-19 Test

In 2021, TWB rebranded as **CLEAR Global**, signaling its expanded mission. This new identity encompassed TWB’s humanitarian work, CLEAR Tech’s technological innovations, and CLEAR Insights’ data-driven research. The shift positioned CLEAR Global as a leader in addressing language barriers at scale.

The **COVID-19 pandemic** tested this vision. TWB translated health information into 70+ languages, ensuring marginalized communities could access life-saving guidance. A Somali healthcare worker remarked: *“When COVID-19 hit, TWB’s translations helped us communicate essential measures to our community. It was a lifeline.”*

Stories of Impact

The Nepal Earthquake (2015)

Within hours of the devastating earthquake, TWB activated its Rapid Response Team. They translated over 500 terms into Nepali and Hindi, including critical phrases for search and rescue operations. Local social media platforms disseminated these translations, reaching thousands. A volunteer shared: *“We weren’t on the ground, but our words were saving lives.”*

The Rohingya Crisis (2017)

For displaced Rohingya communities in Bangladesh, language was a significant barrier. TWB created audio translations of critical health information, catering to a population with low literacy rates. A refugee mother shared: *“Hearing the messages in my own language gave me clarity and comfort.”*

Conclusion

From its modest beginnings in Paris to its role as a global leader, Translators without Borders has shown how language is not just a tool but a lifeline. Through innovation, collaboration, and an unwavering commitment to breaking barriers, TWB exemplifies the transformative power of words.

Lessons in Innovation Management

TWB’s journey offers rich lessons in innovation management:

1. **Adaptability:** From a volunteer model to a global organization, TWB adapted to meet growing demands.
2. **Recombination:** TWB blended existing technologies (like online platforms) with new approaches to create scalable solutions.
3. **Cultural Sensitivity:** Ensuring translations respect local nuances was central to TWB’s success.
4. **Collaborative Ecosystem:** Partnerships with tech companies, humanitarian agencies, and local communities amplified impact.

Reflection and Discussion Questions

1. How did TWB balance scalability with cultural sensitivity in its operations?
2. What role did technology play in TWB’s evolution, and what are its limitations?
3. How can social ventures like TWB ensure sustainable funding without compromising mission integrity?

4. What strategies might TWB use to address future challenges like climate-related displacement?
 5. In what ways can TWB's model inspire other organizations addressing social divides?
 6. How did TWB's evolution from a volunteer-driven network to a structured organization enhance its impact?
 7. What challenges did TWB face in balancing scalability with maintaining cultural sensitivity?
 8. How does TWB's use of technology enhance or hinder its mission?
 9. What lessons can social ventures learn from TWB's approach to innovation and collaboration?
 10. How can TWB measure long-term impacts beyond immediate crisis response?
 11. In what ways can partnerships further expand TWB's reach and effectiveness?
 12. What strategies could address TWB's funding challenges while maintaining its core mission?
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References

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 - CLEAR Global: <https://clearglobal.org>
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 - [YouTube talk by Lori Thicke](#)
 - **Humanitarian Practice Network Reports:** [Language in Crisis](#)
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