

# Communicating with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities during disaster: Observations and recommendations from New Zealand's COVID-19 response

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## Rationale

CLING (Community Languages Information Network Group) was established after the Canterbury earthquakes of 2010-11 to advocate for the provision of information for CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) communities. The group comprises representatives from several key agencies working in this space in Canterbury.

Over the past nine years, CLING has continued to advocate for the inclusion of minority groups in disaster response, as well as the communications needs of CALD communities in times of 'normalcy'. The group has been recognised nationally and internationally for its work, most notably through its [Best Practice Guidelines: Engaging with CALD communities in times of disaster](#).

Throughout COVID-19 Alert Levels 4, 3 and 2, CLING undertook to collate COVID-19 materials for CALD communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. Most of these materials were translated, interpreted or same-language resources, but some were English-language resources of particular interest to CALD communities. These materials were posted to the group's [Facebook page](#) (as a publicly accessible platform), with a weekly summary of these materials circulated through sector mailing lists in Canterbury and around New Zealand.

In order to compile this information, CLING constantly checked key websites for new information, shared information circulated via sector mailing lists, and encouraged agencies to send through additional relevant information. This strategy ensured CLING was able to collate a lot of COVID-19 information for CALD communities. Although there were doubtless many resources of which the group remained unaware, the broad and repeated search for new materials, sustained over a period of 10 weeks, meant that CLING gained an in-depth oversight of COVID-19 materials available for CALD communities.

It is with this knowledge that CLING shares here its observations for the provision of materials for CALD communities during the particular period of COVID-19 Levels 4, 3 and 2, and recommendations resulting from this case study. This feedback is based on the experiences of a network of service providers; and as such, forms only part of the overall picture of disaster communication with CALD communities. We do not speak on behalf of these communities. For agencies wanting to further their understanding and provision of disaster communication to CALD communities, we urge you to build relationships with these communities and enable them to participate in the production of messaging.

CLING hopes this resource can be used to improve the provision of same-language, translated and interpreted materials for CALD communities during times of disaster - noting that disaster can take many forms - and reiterates that these same recommendations comprise communication best practice during 'normal' times as well.

## **Observations about COVID-19 information for CALD communities**

Translated, interpreted and same-language COVID-19 information was primarily produced for CALD communities by central government, non-governmental groups and health agencies. The majority of information was related to the health aspects of COVID-19, including promoting calls for good hygiene practices to help prevent the spread of the disease. There was also information detailing Alert Levels and expected behaviour at these levels, as well as information relevant to particular moments and/or communities during that lockdown period (e.g. information pertaining to the celebration of Ramadan).

There was quite a bit of COVID-19 information available for CALD communities during Levels 4, 3 and 2. Some of this information was highly accessible and effective, especially when it had been produced in partnership with recipient communities. Conversely, some COVID-19 resources for CALD communities were not created and delivered in line with communication best practice.

One positive language strategy was the inclusion of New Zealand Sign Language interpreters at all press conferences, with NZSL messages available on social media and other platforms soon after key announcements. Another great initiative was the regular and accessible written and video updates for Pacific communities, available in English and nine Pacific languages, produced by Ministry for Pacific Peoples working with regional Pasifika communities' networks. Similarly, [Manaaki20](#) from Te Pūtahitanga, the South Island's Whānau Ora commissioning agency, provided support for Māori whānau during lockdown. These resources were produced by Pacific and Māori people for Pacific and Maori people; in other words, the people who were the recipients of the messaging were involved in its development. Producing emergency response resources in partnership with communities is fundamentally different to translating mainstream messaging into a variety of languages.

Another example was the COVID Healthline. Though this line was advertised widely as being an accessible service which provided interpreters, upon calling the 0800 number, people had to listen to two minutes of an automated introduction in English, before being asked to choose between six options again in English, before talking to an English speaking person to ask for an interpreter. Thus, while Healthline was promoted as being accessible to non-English speakers, in reality this was not the case. Following user feedback, and only around the middle of April 2020, the system was eventually amended and the COVID Healthline number became more accessible for non-English speakers (a very brief and friendly message and just one number to press to indicate the caller needs language assistance). It is precisely for these sorts of reasons that it is necessary to work alongside people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds to design services to address their needs.

## **Observations about the government's COVID-19 website**

Appropriately, the best source of information for CALD communities was the government's COVID-19 website which had a page for written translations of key COVID-19 messages.

There were several positive comments to make about the website:

- By the end of the 10 weeks of its existence, the website hosted materials in 24 languages.
- The website was consistently promoted as the 'go to' place for COVID-19 information, and having a single source of information was very useful.
- The website was relatively clear and easy to use.
- Each language had its own tab, under which all the resources in that language could be found.
- Translations all used the same branding.
- The physical layout of the PDF translations was the same for all languages (i.e. there was consistency across the languages).
- The labelling of the translation URLs was logical and followed the same pattern for each translation in each 'series', which meant that a translation could be found by using the same URL stem and just changing the name of the language.

There were, however, many causes for concern:

- **Translations were not uploaded quickly enough**

There was unfortunately often a significant delay between a COVID-19 announcement and the appearance of translated information on the website. This delay seriously affected the usefulness of the messaging, especially in an environment when things were changing so rapidly; some materials were uploaded so far after an announcement as to make them basically redundant.

In some cases, it seemed like this delay resulted from a late decision to include a new language on the website (e.g. the Tagalog translation of "Alert Level 4" was the first Tagalog-language resource on the website, and it appeared three weeks into Alert Level 4).

However, delays in uploading information to the website were not only related to decisions to include new languages. For example, information for Muslim communities about the observance of Ramadan during lockdown was uploaded to the website more than one week into Ramadan - which was almost one week after CLING members had received this same information (the very same translated PDF messages) via email through a sector mailing list. In other words, the translations had been completed at least one week in advance of them actually being uploaded

to the website. The delay in putting this information onto the COVID-19 website was also disappointing because although things were uncertain in regards to which Level we would be at during Ramadan, we still knew Ramadan was approaching and that we would be in some sort of lockdown; messages should have been prepared and made public well before Ramadan started, not partway through its observance.

- **There was inconsistency around which languages information was translated into**

Not all information shared on the COVID-19 website was translated into each of the 24 translated languages.

In some cases, the translation of information into only some of the 24 languages was justifiable because it was targeted at particular communities. For example, information about the observance of Ramadan was primarily for Muslim communities and so this information was translated into key languages for these communities. Similarly, “Golden Rules for business at Level 3” was translated into only a few Asian languages (presumably languages of communities most likely to own their own businesses).

At other times, however, the translation of information into only some of the 24 languages was hard to understand. For example, there were Thai translations of “Golden Rules for Alert Level 3” and “Life at Alert Level 2,” but not “Level 4: Your stay at home plan” or “Alert Level 3 factsheet,” despite the fact that these four documents were translated into most of the other 23 languages. In some instances, it actually seemed like certain translations may have been ‘forgotten.’ For example, there was no translation of “Life at Alert Level 2” in Niuean, despite the fact that most COVID-19 information was translated into key Pacific languages, including Niuean.

The inconsistency of language selection, and/or omission of certain languages, raise serious questions about how languages were selected for translation. Some of these questions include: Were there issues accessing translators for some languages? Was it a cost-saving measure to only include certain languages? What were the criteria for determining languages for translation?

The seeming lack of consistency around language selection was also problematic as it was hard to know which languages new released information would be translated into.

- **Translations were not dated**

Translations on the COVID-19 website were not dated. The only indication of date was the ‘Page last updated’ date, which referred to the entire ‘Translations’ page of the COVID-19 website and was thus not helpful for determining when individual translations had been uploaded.

Recording a date on the translation itself (in English and in the language of the translation), or at least providing an indication of when each translation was uploaded onto the website, would have been very helpful, particularly in light of the very fast-changing situation but also as a means of enabling easier tracking of newly uploaded material.

- **The website layout made it difficult to find newly uploaded translations**

The COVID-19 website was set up so that people could access translations by language i.e. by clicking on 'Hindi,' people could find all the translations in Hindi. This system worked well for people seeking resources in a particular language but was problematic for people wanting to find the most recently uploaded information. In fact, the only way to find new resources was to click into each language tab and check whether new information had been uploaded for that language.

### **Observations about information produced by government agencies**

In addition to the COVID-19 website, government agencies also produced translated and same-language information. These agencies included the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry for Pacific Peoples (MPP), the Office of Ethnic Communities (OEC) and the New Zealand Police. The information produced by these agencies was often specific to their areas of work (e.g. MoE produced information about learning from home and returning to school and New Zealand Police produced same-language videos about Alert Levels) or targeted to the communities they serve (e.g. MPP and OEC).

It was great to see these agencies produce information for CALD communities. It was also great to see them having 'fun' doing so; especially the same-language videos produced by the Police, and MPP's regular 'COVID-19 Update for Pacific Peoples' videos, were vibrant and engaging, but with a serious message.

There were, however, some issues with the material. Timeliness was again a real cause for concern, particularly with materials produced by OEC which were sometimes uploaded two or three weeks after changes had been instigated.

Another issue was that the information source was often unclear. For example, OEC videos showed staff members and community representatives delivering COVID-19 messages in their language, but it was uncertain whether this message was from the individuals as representatives of OEC, whether they were reading a translation of a message from the OEC as an agency, or whether they were reading a translation of a government COVID-19 message.

The selection of languages was another issue. The New Zealand Police videos featured bi-/multilingual staff, and the OEC videos featuring bi-/multilingual staff and

community representatives. While utilising the language skills of staff has some benefits (not least because it showcases the diversity of the agency), the languages present amongst staff should not be the determinant of which languages to deliver information in.

### **Observations about information produced by non-governmental and health agencies**

Some non-government and health agencies also produced information for CALD communities. It seems likely that the information produced by these agencies was intended to fill a gap in the government's CALD language material; either to provide information in a language not included in the government's work (e.g. New Zealand Red Cross produced translated information in several refugee languages and Plains FM worked with Interpreting New Zealand to provide on-air translations of key information in several minority languages), or to provide information about an aspect of COVID-19 not covered by the government's CALD language work (e.g. Pegasus Health produced same-language videos setting out details about the process of undergoing COVID-19 testing). Some CALD groups also produced translated or same-language materials specifically for their communities (e.g. the United Afghan Association in Canterbury produced a COVID-19 newsletter in English and Farsi).

Again, much of this material was not dated. One further issue with some of this material (e.g. Red Cross and Plains FM) was that translated information was uploaded to a website as one long 'list,' meaning people had to scroll through all languages/audio files to see what was available.

## Recommendations

The following list of recommendations is based on the observations noted above and also draws on communication best practice. CLING again emphasises that these recommendations constitute best practice in times of 'normalcy' as well as times of disaster.

### Before disaster

1. Employ a diverse workforce so that cultural and linguistic knowledge is embedded in your organisation, including your communications team.
2. Establish strong relationships with CALD communities and enable them to get involved in the production of messaging for their own communities.
3. Research the key languages of communities in your locality.  
Use a variety of sources to determine these key languages, and ensure your decision is equitable. The size of the language community is not the only factor in determining a language's importance, so use knowledge of communities' circumstances and contexts alongside Census and local demographic data.  
This research will minimise assumptions of which languages are the most important and also minimise reliance on 'easy to source' languages e.g. among staff.
4. Know how to get information out to CALD communities using established networks and systems e.g. via community leaders, ethnic media and community media such as local radio.
5. Know who to contact to carry out translation and interpreting work.  
Translation and interpretation are highly skilled tasks, and as such should be carried out by professionals.
6. Because translation and interpreting require the services of professionals, ensure these costs are worked into your budgets.

### Disaster communications - What

7. Produce resources that are universally accessible, written in plain English and incorporating visuals / infographics.  
These resources are more comprehensible to everyone, including people with limited English language competency.



8. Deliver information in the key languages of your locality i.e. in the languages determined by your pre-disaster research.
9. If you are translating information, ensure the original English language document is easily accessible so that English speakers are aware of the exact content of the messaging.
10. Ensure the source of your translated/interpreted/same-language resource is clearly stated, both in English and in the other language.  
For YouTube videos, this information could be detailed in the 'Description' box beneath the video.
11. Consider publishing both written and oral translations (either audio-only or video).  
While written translations are great, the diversity within CALD communities includes people of all skill levels including those with lower literacy.

#### **Disaster communications - Who**

12. Where possible, work with language communities to produce resources which are relevant to them rather than translating or interpreting mainstream messaging.
13. Avoid wasted resource and duplication by liaising with other agencies about the production and dissemination of information for CALD communities.  
In a country the size of New Zealand, it is likely that much of this work will be carried out by central government for capacity reasons; in which case, there also needs to be scope to amend this information to make it appropriate for local contexts.
14. If you undertake translation or interpreting, engage professionals.
15. Avoid asking community representatives to deliver messages on behalf of agencies.  
Because community representatives lack the professional boundaries and support of agency staff, such requests potentially place them at risk of pushback from their own communities e.g. if something goes wrong.

## **Disaster communications - When**

16. Ensure information for CALD communities is made publicly available in a timely manner.  
Timeliness requires prioritising the dissemination of information to CALD communities.
17. As much as possible, plan for events and produce resources in advance so that there is adequate time for resources to be developed and/or translation and interpreting to be completed.

## **Disaster communications - How**

18. Ensure actual translation documents are clearly dated, in English and the other language.  
On websites, consider also including the date beside the link to each translation.
19. Ensure website “Last updated” information remains current.
20. Consider removing or archiving redundant messaging to avoid confusion (or at least make it very apparent which messages are no longer relevant or up-to-date).
21. Use consistent branding for all resources in a series.
22. If you upload resources to a website, consider uploading them under both the relevant language and a topic heading.  
People can then search for translations either by language or by topic.
23. Make it obvious on the landing page of a website where to find translated resources, and provide ‘click-through’ buttons in the translated languages.
24. Avoid listing all translated languages under one website page; rather, use separate pages and tabs to facilitate people finding and using the resources.