

LANGUAGE AS LOGISTICS

The Impact of Multilingualism on Humanitarian Supply Chains

Abstract

This report explores the critical role of translation in shaping humanitarian logistics performance within multilingual crisis settings, focusing on Cameroon. It investigates how both formal and informal language practices influence logistical efficiency, community trust, and the overall effectiveness of humanitarian interventions. Using a qualitative, multi-sited case study approach across three linguistically diverse regions, Northwest, Far North, and East, the report draws on 49 semi-structured interviews and six focus groups involving logistics personnel, health workers, translators, and community leaders. Anchored in a theoretical framework that integrates acts of distinction, institutional logics, and transcultural crisis management, the findings reveal that translation is not merely a support function but a structural element in aid delivery.

The report demonstrates that formal communication tools often falter due to misalignment with local linguistic and cultural contexts, while informal translation networks, though absent from official frameworks, serve as essential infrastructure in last-mile logistics. These informal practices carry symbolic weight, highlighting that the meaning of language extends beyond semantics to influence perceptions of legitimacy and access. By reframing translation as a central component of humanitarian logistics, this study contributes a culturally attuned model to supply chain literature and offers practical guidance: humanitarian actors should integrate translation into strategic planning, recognize and support community-based interpreters, and co-develop communication tools with local populations to improve operational equity and efficiency.

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Introduction

Humanitarian supply chains play a critical role in delivering life-saving resources during crises, yet their success increasingly hinges not only on physical logistics but on the effectiveness of communication across cultural and linguistic boundaries (Kovács and Spens, 2011; Altay and Pal, 2014). Nowhere is this more evident than in multilingual contexts where aid recipients speak languages that differ from those used by humanitarian organizations. In such environments, translation is not simply a technical necessity, it is a cultural interface that shapes access, trust, and participation. Despite this, translation is often overlooked in humanitarian logistics planning, treated as a downstream support function rather than a strategic concern.

Cameroon presents a compelling case for investigating these dynamics. As a country with over 250 languages and a dual official language system (French and English), it epitomizes the logistical and communicative complexity of multilingual crisis response. Regions like the Northwest, Far North, and East face recurrent humanitarian emergencies, ranging from conflict displacement to epidemics, and present distinct linguistic ecologies and cultural histories. These conditions create systemic risks when humanitarian actors rely on standardized communication models that do not reflect local realities (Abimbola et al., 2014). Misunderstandings during registration, distribution, or medical triage, often due to mistranslation or language mismatch, can delay operations, fuel distrust, and ultimately jeopardize the effectiveness of aid.

This research investigates how translation practices affect humanitarian logistics performance in multilingual contexts, focusing on field-level operations in Cameroon. Specifically, it explores how language mediates logistical workflows, community compliance, and crisis sense-making across three culturally distinct regions. The research adopts a multi-sited qualitative approach and engages with frontline actors, including aid workers, interpreters, and community members, to analyze the role of both formal and informal translation systems. The research addresses the question: How do translation practices shape humanitarian logistics outcomes in linguistically diverse crisis contexts?

Theoretically, the research draws on a tripartite framework: acts of distinction in crisis communication (Hua et al., 2022), institutional culture and logic mismatches in humanitarian supply chains (Prasanna and Haavisto, 2018), and transcultural crisis management (Bajaj et al., 2021). This integrated lens allows the research to move beyond surface-level descriptions of communication failure and toward an analysis of how language interacts with power, identity, and institutional design. In doing so, the research contributes to current debates on localization, equity, and resilience in humanitarian logistics by reimagining translation as core infrastructure rather than auxiliary function.

Background

Humanitarian Logistics and Cultural Context

Organizational and local cultures shape collaboration between buyers and suppliers in humanitarian supply chains, affecting

outcomes like product development, inventory management, and service delivery. Key enablers of successful collaboration include trust, commitment, information sharing, and mutual respect, all of which are influenced by cultural context (Prasanna and Haavisto, 2016; Gupta and Gupta, 2019). Power relations in supply chain decision-making are often determined by local culture, especially through vested interests and lobbying with foreign donors. This can impact procurement and operational decisions during disaster relief (Siawsh et al., 2021).

Barriers such as corruption, political interference, and lack of social/environmental awareness are closely tied to local cultural and socio-political contexts. Addressing these barriers requires strategies like logistics outsourcing, performance management, and supply chain flexibility, which must be adapted to local cultural realities (Chowdhury et al., 2024). Sustainable supply chain design must align with both the relief organization's capabilities and the local population's long-term needs, including socio-economic and governmental factors, to achieve effective and sustainable outcomes (Kunz and Gold, 2017).

National culture influences operational decisions such as innovation, quality management, risk, and disaster management, as well as buyer-supplier interactions and governance mechanisms. Understanding these cultural dimensions is critical for effective supply chain management in humanitarian contexts (Gupta and Gupta, 2019).

Crisis Communication in Multilingual Environments

Frameworks such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede and Bond, 1984) highlight how cultural differences shape sense-making, decision-making, and meaning-making during all stages of crisis management. These theories emphasize the need for transcultural crisis management models that account for varying cultural responses and leadership styles in humanitarian crises (Bajaj et al., 2021; Diers-Lawson, 2017). Theories stress the importance of listening to and learning from the perspectives of others, rather than relying solely on strategic persuasion. This approach expands interpretive horizons and fosters more inclusive crisis communication (Fretheim, 2016; Bello and Bloom, 2017). Interactional sociolinguistics and moment analysis focus on how explicit marking of cultural differences (acts of distinction) influences group dynamics, power relations, and symbolic boundaries during crises (Hua et al., 2022).

Emergency responders must be aware of both their own and others' cultural perspectives, respect local values, and partner with affected communities rather than imposing external solutions (Pyle, 2014). Language and translation choices can reshape crisis narratives, influence perceptions of vulnerability and responsibility, and either mobilize or demobilize support for humanitarian action (Sidiropoulou, 2019). These theories of intercultural communication are applicable in humanitarian crisis response, emphasizing the need for cultural awareness, mutual respect, and adaptive communication strategies. Building shared understanding and

fostering intercultural dialogue are essential for effective and humane crisis management.

Translation becomes fundamental for enabling access to information and services during emergencies, especially for individuals with limited proficiency in the dominant language of the response setting (Tesseur, 2019; O'Brien and Cadwell, 2017; O'Brien and Federici, 2019; Federici et al., 2019). Research shows that providing crisis information in local or familiar languages significantly improves comprehension and the effectiveness of health communication, as seen in the Kenyan context with Kiswahili translations (O'Brien and Cadwell, 2017).

Both professional translators and volunteer-driven, crowdsourced translation efforts play key roles. Volunteer translators, often organized via social media, can rapidly address urgent needs and complement official relief efforts (Tesseur, 2019; Zhang and Wu, 2020). Citizen translation, including collaborative models like Co-TEM, can help reach culturally and linguistically diverse communities, though challenges remain regarding message clarity and accuracy (Ogie and Perez, 2020).

However, humanitarian organizations often lack the resources, systematic processes, and clear ownership needed to provide consistent language access. There is no consensus on best practices, and language needs are often underestimated or overlooked (O'Brien and Federici, 2019; Federici et al., 2019). The effectiveness of translation is also limited by the clarity and quality of the original messages, which may contain jargon or ambiguity (Ogie and Perez, 2020).

Research Site: Cameroon

Sociolinguistic Profile

Cameroon is home to approximately 270–280 indigenous languages, making it a highly multilingual society (Takam and Fassé, 2020). The two official languages are French and English, a legacy of colonial rule by France and Britain. Pidgin English and Camfranglais (a hybrid of French, English, and local languages) are widely used as lingua francas, especially in urban areas (Yakpo, 2016). Indigenous languages are vibrant in rural areas, with some regions like Lower Fungom in the North West exhibiting high levels of local multilingualism (Carlo, 2018).

French remains dominant in administration, politics, and public signage, leading to feelings of marginalization among Anglophone communities. However, recent years have seen increased interest in English-medium education, even among Francophones, reflecting shifting language aspirations (Kuchah, 2018). Indigenous languages are largely excluded from formal domains such as education, administration, and advertising, limiting access and participation for many citizens (Laitin et al., 2019; Nkamta and Ngwenya, 2017). The dominance of French and English in public life has contributed to sociopolitical tensions, particularly the Anglophone Crisis, which is rooted in broader issues of marginalization and governance (Laitin et al., 2019). Efforts to include more foreign languages (e.g., German, Spanish, Chinese) in education have sparked debates about relevance and resource allocation (Ngouo, 2022)..

Humanitarian Crisis Response

Humanitarian interventions in Cameroon, such as the rapid response mechanism for internally displaced persons, often started late (sometimes a year after crisis escalation) and faced difficulties due to insecurity, poor telecommunication, and limited geographical access, especially in conflict-affected regions (Omam and Metuge, 2023). Therefore, there is a need for better coordination among sectoral partners and harmonization of benefit packages to improve preparedness and response during these crises.

Donor-funded projects in rural areas struggle with sustainability due to non-transparent processes, lack of collateral for loans, and insufficient local participation. Socio-economic factors like education, family size, and community ties also influence project continuity (Muluh et al., 2019). Humanitarian and health interventions are hampered by inadequate health infrastructure, insufficient local expertise, and financial constraints. Socio-political instability and recurrent conflicts further threaten the sustainability of specialized services, such as cardiac surgery centers (Mve Mvondo et al., 2022).

Community participation in interventions (e.g., environmental or health projects) is limited by management, financial, psychological, and informational barriers. Financial incentives and community education are needed to boost engagement (Ewane, 2024). Internally displaced populations, especially children, often experience poor dietary diversity and inadequate nutrition due to limited resources and poor caregiver knowledge, highlighting the need for targeted nutritional interventions and education in

Cameroon (Boh et al., 2023). Therefore, it becomes evident that Cameroon has faced significant challenges in previous humanitarian interventions, including responses to health crises and conflict-related emergencies, and these challenges have affected the effectiveness, sustainability, and reach of humanitarian aid efforts.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopts a constructivist qualitative design, grounded in theories that explain how linguistic and cultural diversity intersect with logistics and crisis management in humanitarian settings. The research is situated within a critical intercultural communication paradigm, recognizing that communication practices, including translation and interpretation, are not neutral but embedded in socio-political, historical, and power-laden contexts.

Drawing on Hua et al. (2022), this research incorporates the concept of acts of distinction, which highlights how cultural and linguistic differences are marked, negotiated, and operationalized during crisis responses. In multilingual humanitarian settings, these “distinctions” become operational barriers or facilitators in logistics chains, influencing identity, access, and perceived legitimacy. Translation is not just about conveying information, but about symbolic group inclusion or exclusion. Language choice can reinforce power asymmetries in humanitarian aid, shaping whose needs are visible and addressed.

Based on Prasanna and Haavisto (2018), the research also integrates an organizational culture framework where cultural alignment

between humanitarian actors and local communities influences collaboration and supply chain outcomes. Translation practices reflect institutional logics and cultural assumptions about knowledge, authority, and trust. Misalignment between central aid institutions (e.g., UN agencies) and community norms often leads to communication breakdowns and logistics inefficiencies.

The research also uses Bajaj et al. (2021)'s conceptual model of Transcultural Crisis Management, which emphasizes how cultural variables influence leadership, sense-making, and meaning-making during crises. It investigates how sense-making processes during health crises (e.g., epidemics) differ between organizations operating in official languages and populations that rely on local languages, and how translation mediates or distorts these processes.

Just like transport or warehousing, language services (translation, interpretation, localization) are infrastructural elements that affect flow and access in supply chains. Perceptions of risk, trust, authority, and urgency are mediated by cultural norms, which must be accounted for in humanitarian supply design and communication. Translation encodes power, identity, and access, not just meaning. The research assumes that effective crisis communication must engage with linguistic equity and cultural inclusion.

This research is structured around the proposition that: "In the Cameroonian humanitarian context, the effectiveness of last-mile healthcare and aid delivery is significantly shaped by the presence or absence of culturally and linguistically

embedded translation services." This proposition is explored by examining how communication failures and translation practices influence outcomes such as service uptake, community trust, operational delays, and resource wastage. Since Cameroon presents a complex sociolinguistic environment where state-level monolingual planning (French/English) contrasts with grassroots multilingual realities, this creates a fertile ground for testing the theoretical relationship between institutional culture, language practices, and humanitarian logistics performance.

Methodology and Data Collection

To ensure that this research meaningfully captures the operational implications of multilingualism in humanitarian logistics, three linguistically and culturally diverse regions in Cameroon were purposefully selected as case sites. These regions, Northwest, Far North, and East, exemplify the country's extreme sociolinguistic heterogeneity and present distinctive humanitarian challenges, thereby offering a robust context for grounded comparative analysis (Kamdem et al. 2025).

The Northwest region, predominantly Anglophone, includes communities such as the Nso' and Kom, where Pidgin English and local dialects are prevalent. This area has been heavily affected by the ongoing Anglophone crisis, which complicates humanitarian access and accentuates the symbolic and operational role of language in aid distribution and coordination (Echu, 2004). The Far North, characterized by Fulfulde and Kotoko-speaking populations, is marked by historical marginalization, limited state infrastructure, and a dense humanitarian presence due to conflict spillovers from neighboring countries.

Finally, the East region, home to Maka and Baka communities, represents a context with significant indigenous language use, limited literacy in official languages, and low access to healthcare, thus presenting critical language-access challenges for humanitarian actors. These three regions collectively provide a cross-section of Cameroon's cultural geography and humanitarian needs. They allow the research to observe how translation practices, communication breakdowns, and logistical coordination vary not only by geography and crisis type but also by the linguistic and cultural alignment (or lack thereof) between humanitarian agencies and local communities (Anchimbe, 2013).

To gather data on these dynamics, this research employs a qualitative case study methodology with triangulated sources to ensure depth and validity. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders involved in logistics planning, communication, and service delivery. Data collection was conducted between February and August 2024, encompassing a total of 49 individual semi-structured interviews and 6 focus group discussions. These include NGO logistics officers (n=12), humanitarian translators, both professional and informal (n=11), local healthcare providers (n=14), and community leaders (n=12). These interviews explore participants' experiences with language use during humanitarian interventions, challenges in translation accuracy, and perceived impacts on service effectiveness and community trust (Omam et al., 2023). A purposive and snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit these participants. Initial contacts were established through professional networks with local NGOs, and local field offices especially through health

partners in Cameroon. These gatekeepers assisted in identifying key informants across stakeholder groups. Further participants were identified through referrals. Participants were included based on their role in or experience with humanitarian logistics, translation, or aid reception in the selected regions (Elit et al., 2022; Dozio and Jaccard, 2024).

Data were collected entirely online between February and August 2024, in response to logistical constraints, infrastructural instability, and safety considerations in some regions. This approach enabled broader geographical reach, reduced costs, and allowed for the inclusion of both urban-based and rural-affiliated stakeholders who could access internet connectivity via mobile networks. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes, was recorded (with informed consent), and transcribed verbatim. Importantly, many participants were interviewed more than once, typically in two to three intervals over a three- to four-month span. These follow-up interviews allowed the researchers to clarify earlier points and fill gaps in the evolving coding structure, validate emerging themes with participants (member checking), and capture shifting dynamics in humanitarian operations as new interventions unfolded (e.g., vaccine campaigns, food aid adjustments) (Elit et al., 2022; Omam et al., 2023).

Two online focus group discussions (FGDs) were held per region (6 in total), each involving 5–8 participants, including aid recipients, youth volunteers, and women caregivers. Local facilitators supported the FGDs and helped translate where needed, ensuring dialectal clarity. These sessions explored perceptions of health messaging,

understanding of crisis information, and trust in aid providers, especially in relation to language use.

Complementing the interviews, online focus group discussions were organized with aid recipients across each region. These were conducted with the assistance of local translators to ensure full participation and accurate representation of local linguistic realities. The focus groups provide insight into how language mediates beneficiary understanding, compliance with medical advice, and willingness to engage with aid providers (Dozio and Jaccard, 2024). This analysis is suitable to assess language accessibility, cultural resonance, and the inclusion or exclusion of indigenous language content (Lefort-Rieu, 2024). The integration of perspectives from both aid providers and recipients ensures that the findings reflect not only organizational views on efficiency and coordination but also lived community experiences of inclusion, access, and dignity in crisis response.

All collected data were subjected to systematic thematic analysis, guided by the research theoretical framework that integrates institutional culture (Prasanna and Haavisto, 2018), transcultural crisis management (Bajaj et al., 2021), and intercultural communication theory (Hua et al., 2022).

Interview and focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim. Where segments occurred in Pidgin, Fulfulde, or indigenous dialects, bilingual assistants provided English translations, preserving cultural nuance and terminology. All transcripts were anonymized. A codebook was developed based on theoretical categories and emergent concepts. Key preliminary codes included: linguistic

misalignment, translation workarounds, aid distrust linked to language, community-led interpretation, and institutional rigidity in communication.

In the second stage, axial coding identifies relationships between these codes, forming higher-order categories and subthemes. For example, interviews describing delays in aid delivery due to the lack of interpreters may be linked across data points under a category like “logistical failures from linguistic gaps.” themes such as “symbolic exclusion through language,” “improvised community translation mechanisms,” or “institutional resistance to localization” are anticipated. This process allows the research to test and refine the central proposition: that the effectiveness of humanitarian logistics in Cameroon is significantly shaped by the integration, or neglect, of localized translation services.

Triangulation across the three regions ensures that observed themes are not artifacts of a specific location, but reflective of systemic patterns in how language and cultural logics interact with supply chain structures. For example, informal translation support may be more prevalent in the East (due to the absence of state structures), whereas the Northwest showed signs of politicized language skepticism due to the Anglophone crisis.

Finally, the themes were directly connected and interpreted through the theoretical lens of institutional logic mismatch, acts of distinction, and transcultural decision-making breakdowns, and the language was thus analyzed not just as a channel, but as a symbolic and operational actor within the logistics chain.

Findings

The core empirical findings showcase how multilingualism influences humanitarian logistics performance in Cameroon. The analysis, rather than offering a list of observed challenges, traces how language, through translation practices, omissions, and improvisations, interacts with institutional culture, community sense-making, and operational workflows. Table 1 provides an overview of the major patterns across regions and their theoretical grounding.

Table 1. Linguistic and Cultural Misalignments in Humanitarian Logistics: Evidence from Cameroon.

Theme	Empirical Illustration	Regional Manifestation
Symbolic Inclusion/Exclusion	“When they came with posters only in French, people here just looked at them and said, ‘It’s not for us.’” – Teacher, Northwest Region	Northwest: use of French interpreted as exclusionary and politicized. East: use of local idioms improved trust.
	“We had SOPs in French, but the volunteers only spoke Fulfulde. It delayed everything because no one knew what step came next.”	Far North: SOPs in French unusable by field workers. East: no SOPs; ad hoc improvisation instead.

Theme	Empirical Illustration	Regional Manifestation
Informal Translation Networks	– NGO logistics officer, Far North	
	“We rely on young girls who speak both Maka and French. They explain things in the market because no one reads those flyers.” – Nurse, East Region	East: informal peer translation through local youth. Far North: traders and mosque leaders help interpret.
Sense-Making Fractures	“They said it was a disease of the whites. We called it a curse, not corona.” – Community elder, East Region	East: COVID-19 reframed using spiritual terms. Northwest: vaccine hesitancy rooted in language of colonialism.
Operational Disruptions via Language	“Names were written wrong, people missed their aid tokens. All because the intake form was only in French.” – Volunteer, Northwest Region	Across all regions: registration errors, delay in resource delivery due to miscommunication.

Source: Research Analysis.

Translation as Symbolic Inclusion and Exclusion

In humanitarian logistics, language is more than a medium of communication; it is a signal of inclusion, legitimacy, and social recognition. Across all three regions, translation practices, or their absence, functioned as acts of distinction (Hua et al., 2022), shaping who was acknowledged as a rightful recipient of aid and whose voices were systematically marginalized. These acts were not always deliberate; often, they were embedded in everyday logistical routines, yet they had powerful social effects on trust, participation, and aid outcomes.

In the Northwest region, where the political crisis has heightened linguistic sensitivities, language use became a proxy for allegiance. Humanitarian workers who issued COVID-19 and cholera communication materials exclusively in French were perceived by local communities as representing a distant, untrusted authority. As one schoolteacher explained: “When they came with posters only in French, people here just looked at them and said, ‘It’s not for us. That’s for the other side.’ They didn’t even read them.” This case reveals that the use of a national language, meant to ensure wide understanding, can instead be interpreted as a symbolic act of exclusion, disqualifying the message before its content is even considered. The rejection was not of the health message itself but of its political-linguistic framing, rooted in the region’s long-standing sense of marginalization within Francophone-dominated state structures.

By contrast, in the East region, translation into local idioms and conceptual frames fostered community engagement and trust. A mobile nurse serving the Maka-speaking population recalled how reframing the concept of vaccination in culturally resonant terms led to increased uptake: “We changed the word ‘vaccine’ to a word that means ‘sacred medicine’ in their language. That’s when they started listening. They told each other it was a kind of blessing.” This illustrates that effective translation is not literal, since it is cultural and symbolic. By embedding biomedical messages within local cosmologies, health workers transformed a foreign concept into one perceived as protective and meaningful. In this context, translation becomes a tool of inclusion, aligning the operational goals of the humanitarian supply chain with the cultural identity of the target population.

Meanwhile, in the Far North, audio translations in Fulfulde disseminated through mobile speakers had some success in reaching dispersed and often illiterate populations. However, as a female participant in a focus group pointed out, access to this information was still filtered through gendered communication hierarchies: “The men heard it and told us it was about washing hands. But we could not ask questions. If you missed it, you just missed it.” Here, translation was technically present but structurally limited. The delivery mode prevented dialogue, and access to meaning remained mediated by household or social power dynamics, especially for women. Thus, even when translation was provided, its symbolic power was constrained by the social architecture of information control.

Across all three regions, the use, or absence, of local languages and culturally embedded translation practices directly influenced the perceived legitimacy of aid interventions. Language emerged as a proxy for community membership: being spoken to in one's own language signaled recognition and worth, while exclusionary language use reinforced social distance and mistrust. These show the deep symbolic weight of translation in humanitarian contexts: far from being a neutral or technical act, it is a cultural performance that can either open or close the door to participation and care.

These symbolic boundaries have tangible logistical consequences. In the Northwest, for example, vaccine hesitancy was not solely a product of misinformation, but of symbolic alienation, people distrusted messages they believed were not meant for them. In the East, conversely, localized translation helped convert health messaging into culturally intelligible narratives that people could act on. In all cases, the symbolic dimension of language operated upstream from logistics, shaping who would receive, trust, and respond to aid.

Institutional Logic Mismatches in Communication Practices

While translation gaps are often attributed to resource shortages or oversight, a deeper structural problem is revealed: institutional logic mismatches between humanitarian organizations and the communities they serve. Institutional logic refers to the ingrained assumptions, norms, and priorities that shape how organizations operate (Prasanna and Haavisto, 2018). In Cameroon, these mismatches were especially apparent in the

design and deployment of communication protocols, many of which failed to account for local linguistic diversity or cultural frameworks of communication.

A clear example emerged in the Far North, where the majority of humanitarian fieldwork is carried out in Fulfulde-speaking communities. Despite this, core operational documents, including Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), emergency checklists, and intake forms, were typically issued only in French. An NGO logistics officer based in Maroua explained the consequences: “We had SOPs in French, but the volunteers only spoke Fulfulde. It delayed everything because no one knew what step came next. We lost an entire day trying to explain a 5-step form.” This breakdown was not due to an absence of translation per se, but to a failure of organizational design. SOPs assumed that field actors would either understand French or have the capacity to translate it, an institutional logic rooted in national-level assumptions, not ground-level realities. This reflects a deeper cultural disconnect: centralized humanitarian actors planned logistics through a linguistic homogeneity, while on the ground, multilingualism and oral communication dominated.

In the East region, this misalignment manifested differently. There, field teams abandoned formal SOPs altogether, relying instead on improvised workflows. A local nurse described the shift: “No one here uses those documents. We just talk and decide with the community heads. It works better that way.” This adaptation shows both the flexibility and fragility of frontline logistics. On one hand, the nurse's strategy allowed for rapid, context-sensitive decision-making. On

the other, it highlights a complete decoupling between central planning and field-level execution. What was designed as a system of order and accountability became irrelevant due to cultural and linguistic misalignment.

In the Northwest, the logic clash was further compounded by political tensions. A project coordinator from an international NGO recalled how their initial reliance on bilingual (French-English) materials backfired: “We thought English and French would be enough, but the community saw it as coming from ‘outsiders.’ They told us, ‘That’s the government’s language, not ours.’ So they ignored it.” Here, the institutional assumption that official bilingualism guarantees reach and neutrality was directly contradicted by local interpretations of language as political alignment. This is not merely a linguistic issue but a clash of cultural logics: one that privileges institutional neutrality and another that reads language through historical and identity-based lenses.

These examples illustrate that miscommunication is not always a failure of translation; it is often a failure of institutional imagination. Organizations design supply chains and communication tools with certain cultural assumptions about who their users are, what languages they use, and how they make decisions. When these assumptions do not align with local realities, logistical tools, such as forms, protocols, and campaign strategies, become unusable, misinterpreted, or even counterproductive.

Importantly, these mismatches had cascading effects on logistical performance. In the Far North, SOP confusion delayed aid disbursement; in the East, ad hoc systems led to record-keeping gaps; in the Northwest,

materials were rejected altogether. In all cases, language became the visible symptom of a deeper disjuncture between humanitarian models and the complex cultural-linguistic systems in which they were implemented.

Informal Translation Networks and Local Adaptation

In the absence of formal translation infrastructure, communities across Cameroon have developed informal translation systems that play a critical, but often unrecognized, role in sustaining humanitarian logistics. These local networks, composed of youth, religious leaders, market vendors, and bilingual caregivers, act as cultural intermediaries, translating not just language, but meaning and legitimacy. Their presence highlights both the ingenuity of local adaptation and the structural gaps in institutional planning.

In the East region, where Maka, Baka, and Gbaya languages dominate and literacy levels in French are low, translation frequently occurs in public, everyday settings. One health worker described the importance of informal peer translation during outreach: “We rely on young girls who speak both Maka and French. They explain things in the market because no one reads those flyers. We give them the message, and they pass it in their own way.” These young interpreters do more than convey content, they mediate cultural tone, inflecting official messages with local idioms and adjusting the delivery to fit social norms. As such, they serve a role akin to community logistics agents, ensuring that the “last mile” of communication is navigated not only physically but socially and linguistically. Yet,

their work remains invisible and unsupported in formal supply chain models.

In the Far North, informal translation is deeply embedded in religious and gendered community structures. A program coordinator described how male leaders at mosques serve as trusted interpreters: “The imam will explain it after Friday prayers. He says it in Fulfulde, and people believe him more than us.” This example reveals the credibility advantage that local intermediaries carry. Translation here is not simply functional, it is socially authorized, embedded in relationships of trust that international actors cannot replicate.

However, reliance on such gatekeepers also introduces selective filtering and raises issues of equity, particularly for women, who may be excluded from the interpretive chain.

In the Northwest, where political tensions and distrust of government-affiliated language are high, informal translators often include youth activists and community mobilizers who reframe official messages into locally acceptable narratives. A former student activist turned humanitarian volunteer explained: “We never say ‘government vaccine.’ We say ‘protection for the community.’ That’s how people listen. If we use their words, they walk away.” Here, translation becomes an act of discursive negotiation. Community translators adjust not only the words but the ideological packaging of information, filtering institutional narratives through locally resonant frames. In this way, informal translation is not just a workaround; it is a form of political and cultural brokerage.

Across all regions, informal translation networks filled critical gaps created by institutional neglect. However, this adaptive

strength also reveals a systemic vulnerability: these networks are not coordinated, not trained, and not compensated. As a logistics officer from an international NGO in Bertoua admitted: “Honestly, our system assumes people will just translate for us. But we’ve never trained or paid anyone to do it. It just happens, or not.” This “just happens” approach reflects a dangerous institutional logic, one that externalizes the cost and responsibility of translation to already-burdened communities. While informal translation networks have undoubtedly increased reach and relevance of humanitarian services, they also introduce variability, inconsistency, and potential for misinformation, particularly in health communication.

The reliance on informal translators also has implications for accountability. Without formal recognition, these actors fall outside monitoring and evaluation frameworks, meaning that the most critical communication interfaces in the logistics chain are also the least visible and least supported. From a theoretical perspective, these informal systems exemplify local cultural logics of resilience in action, but they also expose the failure of dominant humanitarian frameworks to institutionalize linguistic infrastructure. Rather than recognizing translation as part of core logistics planning, it is treated as a “soft issue,” to be handled organically or not at all. The result is a two-tiered logistics reality: one imagined in institutional plans, and one enacted through local improvisation.

Fractures in Crisis Sense-Making

Beyond language comprehension, translation in humanitarian settings plays a crucial role in shaping how communities interpret crises,

assign meaning to risk, and decide how to act. Drawing on Bajaj et al.'s (2021) model of transcultural crisis management, this section explores how failures in translation created not just misunderstandings, but fundamental fractures in sense-making between aid providers and affected communities in Cameroon. In many cases, humanitarian messaging assumed that once information was linguistically accessible, it would be culturally intelligible. However, this research shows that words translated are not always concepts understood. This became especially visible in the context of COVID-19 and cholera interventions.

In the East region, for instance, biomedical descriptions of COVID-19 as a viral disease were misaligned with local cosmologies that framed illness as spiritual or moral disruption. A village elder recalled: “They said it was a disease of the whites. We called it a curse, not corona. That’s why people were not afraid at first. We needed the chief to talk before we listened.” This quote highlights a fundamental divergence in cultural logics of health. The translated term “virus” lacked resonance because it did not map onto existing understandings of illness. Until the message was reframed by a trusted cultural figure in familiar terms, it failed to mobilize any change in behavior. Translation, in this case, was technically correct but culturally meaningless.

In the Far North, a health campaign used Fulfulde audio messages to promote hygiene practices. While the messages were heard, they were often reinterpreted through existing social scripts. A local trader explained: “They said wash your hands, wear masks. We thought maybe they just wanted us to buy more soap. Some said it was a business trick.”

Here, a crisis communication effort collided with economic suspicion and market logic. The translated content was not rejected for linguistic reasons, but because it was inserted into a mistrustful frame of reference. This illustrates how translation is not a one-way transmission but a site of negotiation between competing worldviews.

In the Northwest, sense-making breakdowns were intensified by political tensions. One former teacher noted how the language of vaccination was perceived through the lens of state coercion: “They said ‘mass vaccination’ and people heard ‘forced injection.’ We had to say ‘community protection’ instead. Words matter here.” This example clarifies that even familiar words carry political weight in contested regions. The literal translation was understood but associated with state violence, triggering resistance rather than compliance. Local aid workers had to recode messages entirely to make them culturally palatable, using phrases that emphasized collective well-being and community agency.

What emerges across these cases is a recurring pattern: when crisis messages are translated but not transculturally reframed, they fail to generate the intended response. The failure is not just operational; it is epistemological. It reflects a disconnect between institutional knowledge systems and community frameworks of understanding. Moreover, the consequences of these fractures were material. In the East, delayed recognition of COVID-19 as a threat meant that preventative measures were adopted too late. In the Northwest, vaccination hesitancy led to coverage gaps that undermined herd immunity. These are not simply failures of delivery, but of mutual intelligibility. From a

theoretical perspective, these findings confirm that crisis management must account for cultural sense-making processes. It is not enough to translate instructions.

Humanitarian actors must recognize that meaning is co-produced in interaction, shaped by local beliefs, social power structures, and historical memory.

Operational Disruptions Due to Language

While the symbolic, institutional, and cultural consequences of translation gaps are significant, this section shows how these breakdowns also generate tangible operational inefficiencies in humanitarian logistics. Across all three regions, failures in linguistic alignment led to delays, misallocations, and data integrity issues that directly undermined the effectiveness of aid delivery. These effects were not incidental. They reveal how language is embedded in the core mechanics of supply chains, not as an accessory, but as a structural determinant of flow, coordination, and accountability.

In the Northwest region, registration procedures during a hygiene kit distribution campaign were disrupted when intake forms provided by the coordinating NGO were available only in French. Many local beneficiaries spoke Pidgin English or indigenous languages and could not accurately fill out the forms. A youth volunteer involved in the campaign explained: “Names were written wrong, people missed their aid tokens. Some even got registered twice. All because the intake form was only in French, and people guessed or stayed silent.” The result was not only under-coverage of some households and duplication in others, but also

confusion during the distribution phase. Field workers had to spend additional time correcting the lists, which delayed delivery and increased administrative burden.

In the Far North, similar disruptions occurred when instructions for setting up temporary shelters were delivered to local workers in written French. Many of the workers were Fulfulde-speaking and had low literacy in French. A local logistics officer recalled: “We showed them diagrams and gave the SOPs, but nothing moved for half a day. Then someone explained it in Fulfulde, and suddenly the tents went up. We lost hours because no one thought to translate.” Here, a simple task, erecting standardized tents, was delayed not due to supply or terrain, but because of linguistic oversight in procedural communication. What should have been a two-hour setup extended into a full-day operation, affecting subsequent deliveries to nearby villages.

In the East, logistics failures emerged during the roll-out of a nutritional assessment program for internally displaced children. Health workers were required to conduct screenings and record data using a digital tool configured in French. Many of the frontline workers could navigate spoken French but struggled with technical vocabulary, leading to data entry errors. One nurse described the situation: “We had to input height and weight, but the instructions said ‘périmètre brachial’ and some didn’t know it meant arm. So the data got mixed. We had to redo the entire batch.” This caused a systemic error in the beneficiary database, requiring staff to revisit households and remeasure children, delaying both reporting and the delivery of nutritional supplements. The cost of miscommunication

here was not just inefficiency but a delay in life-sustaining support for vulnerable populations.

These cases reveal that operational disruptions stem directly from linguistic misalignments at multiple levels, from design, task instructions, intake tools, and digital systems. Importantly, these failures are often misattributed to poor training, lack of education, or low motivation. What they actually reflect is a failure of institutional planning to embed language access into the operational infrastructure of logistics. Unlike the adaptive workarounds observed in informal translation networks, these disruptions occurred in structured, top-down processes, where improvisation was discouraged or unavailable. As a result, the cost of linguistic exclusion was borne by frontline workers and beneficiaries, those least equipped to absorb it. From a logistical standpoint, these examples underscore that translation must be treated as a primary vector of efficiency, not a secondary support. A logistics chain is only as strong as its communicative links. When those links are fractured by language mismatches, the entire system slows, stumbles, or fails.

Regional Contrasts in Language Logistics

Although language emerged as a cross-cutting challenge in humanitarian logistics across all sites, the nature, consequences, and adaptations to linguistic barriers differed markedly by region. These contrasts were shaped by local political history, linguistic diversity, institutional presence, and community translation ecosystems. This section synthesizes these differences to illustrate how context-specific configurations

of language and culture produce distinct logistical outcomes.

In the Northwest region, language use is inseparable from the legacy of the Anglophone crisis. French is widely rejected as a symbol of political oppression, while English is only conditionally accepted, depending on who delivers the message. Pidgin English was the most effective for engaging local populations, but even that required community validation. A local youth mobilizer explained: “When someone from the government speaks English, people don’t trust it. But if I say the same thing in Pidgin, they listen, because I’m from here.” This highlights how language is not only about words, but about identity and relational trust.

In the Far North, Fulfulde is the dominant spoken language, and most humanitarian actors recognized the need to translate materials. However, the issue was less about resistance to language and more about access and usability. For instance, posters in Fulfulde were still ineffective due to low literacy rates. Audio messaging had better reach, but as one logistics officer acknowledged: “When we give instructions, we still need someone nearby to explain in simple Fulfulde. It’s not just about language, it’s about making it make sense.”

The East region presented the most fragmented linguistic landscape. There was no single lingua franca, and the presence of multiple indigenous languages, Maka, Baka, Gbaya, meant that even within small catchment areas, multiple translation paths were needed. One community nurse reported: “Even when we translated a poster, we had to explain it three different ways. Sometimes we just stopped using the poster and talked instead.” This reliance on oral, relational

communication placed enormous responsibility on local volunteers, especially young women and church leaders, who were rarely trained or compensated for their linguistic labor.

To summarize these region-specific patterns, Table 2 contrasts the main characteristics of language use and logistical outcomes across the three research regions.

Table 2. Regional Contrasts in Language-Related Logistics Outcomes

Region	Dominant Language(s)	Key Challenges	Common Translation Modalities	Logistics Impact
North-west	Pidgin English, Indigenous (Nso', Kom), English	Language is politicized; French rejected; English distrusted if state-associated	Pidgin, informal spoken translation by trusted community actors	Message rejection; vaccine hesitancy; distrust in registration processes
Far North	Fulfulde, Hausa, French (official)	Low literacy; institutional materials in French; formal Fulfulde too complex	Audio broadcasts, mosque-based explanations	Setup delays; intake confusion; SOP non-compliance
East	Maka, Baka, Gbaya, French (official)	Linguistic fragmentation; no lingua franca; extreme reliance on volunteers	Peer translation by youth, caregivers, oral storytelling	Inconsistent message delivery; data entry errors; ad hoc logistics coordination

Source: Research Analysis.

These contrasts demonstrate that translation must be contextually embedded, not centrally standardized. What works in the Far North, a broadcast in Fulfulde, may fail entirely in the East, where oral networks are more trusted.

Similarly, a message in English may be clear in the Northwest linguistically but still provoke resistance due to political associations. From a strategic standpoint, these cases reinforce the need for decentralized, culturally grounded translation strategies in humanitarian logistics. Regions differ not only in what languages they speak but in how language mediates power, trust, and action. Designing effective aid delivery mechanisms in such environments requires region-specific translation protocols, co-developed with local actors who understand the symbolic and social weight of language in their communities.

Discussion

Translation as a Site of Symbolic and Operational Power

It is demonstrated that translation in humanitarian contexts is not merely a linguistic act; it is a symbolic practice that organizes access to aid, constructs group identities, and shapes the perceived legitimacy of interventions. Drawing on Hua et al.’s (2022) concept of acts of distinction, it can be found that the presence or absence of language recognition serves as a communicative boundary between those who are seen and those who are rendered invisible within the humanitarian apparatus. In multilingual regions such as Cameroon’s Northwest and East, translation becomes a mechanism of cultural inclusion or exclusion, with direct implications for trust, participation, and logistics performance.

Across all three regions, translation choices were not neutral but loaded with social and political meaning. In the Northwest, for example, messages issued solely in French were not merely ineffective; they were rejected

as politically charged symbols of exclusion. This reflects Hua et al.'s (2022) argument that language practices in crisis are performative, functioning as markers of insider/outsider status. In this case, French was interpreted as the language of state authority and historical marginalization, reinforcing community distrust toward aid providers. Even English, typically assumed to offer wider accessibility, was sometimes viewed with suspicion unless mediated through local actors using Pidgin English. The linguistic channel, in other words, indexed identity and power, shaping how messages were received, or resisted.

In the East, by contrast, community-based health workers who rephrased biomedical terms into local idioms found that translation enhanced legitimacy. For instance, calling a vaccine “sacred medicine” created resonance within local cosmological frameworks and helped reposition the intervention as culturally meaningful. This is not simply a case of linguistic equivalence but of semantic transformation, where translation aligns technical discourse with community values. As argued by Inghilleri (2013), interpreters in humanitarian contexts often function as moral agents, negotiating meaning across radically different knowledge systems. In this context, translation served not only to transmit information but to construct social reality, determining what counted as credible, urgent, and worthy of response.

What makes these symbolic acts operationally significant is their impact on logistics efficiency and reach. Messages that are rejected or reinterpreted due to symbolic misalignment can stall registration, delay response, or prompt non-compliance with health protocols. In this way, translation

functions as a logistical gatekeeper, mediating flows of goods, services, and personnel. Communication architecture in complex organizations is not ancillary but foundational: when the communicative interface fails, the entire operational structure becomes vulnerable to breakdown (Burton and Obel, 2018). In multilingual humanitarian settings, translation is that interface, and its quality determines the integrity of the entire delivery chain.

Despite this, translation is still often treated as an afterthought in logistics planning, reduced to the mechanical task of converting written documents or recruiting ad hoc interpreters. This approach ignores the reality that language is entangled with power relations, identity politics, and historical memory. It also assumes that logistical efficiency can be pursued independently of cultural legitimacy, a notion increasingly challenged in the academic literature (Kovács and Spens, 2011; Sandwell, 2011).

By reframing translation as both symbolic infrastructure and operational enabler, this research contributes to a growing recognition that communication in humanitarian logistics is not a technical detail; it is a strategic function. Translation must be designed intentionally, not as an add-on to communication campaigns, but as a core element of equitable and efficient supply chain architecture. This requires not only multilingual materials but also deep engagement with how communities interpret, own, and act on those messages.

Institutional Cultures and the Cost of Linguistic Misalignment

The misalignment between institutional culture and local linguistic realities creates persistent bottlenecks in humanitarian logistics. Building on Prasanna and Haavisto's (2018) organizational culture framework for humanitarian supply chains, this research demonstrates how rigid institutional assumptions about language, communication, and training result in operational inefficiencies and community disengagement.

In all three regions in Cameroon, top-down communication tools, such as SOPs, intake forms, and digital instructions, were frequently designed without reference to the actual linguistic environments of their intended users. This reflects what Prasanna and Haavisto (2018) describe as a dominant logistics logic, wherein standardization and speed are prioritized over contextual adaptation. While such logics may serve high-volume emergency contexts, they falter in multilingual environments where communication must be both intelligible and culturally appropriate.

In the Far North, for example, field-level volunteers were expected to follow SOPs in French despite lacking fluency. Delays in aid distribution were not due to lack of motivation or incompetence, but to a disconnect between the written institutional logic and the oral-local mode of communication. This gap reflects what Greenwood et al. (2011) call "institutional complexity" where overlapping logics (e.g., global professional norms vs. local vernacular practices) create friction within implementation. Humanitarian organizations

often assumed that official bilingualism (French/English) would suffice, overlooking the need for operational multilingualism, especially in regions where Fulfulde, Baka, or Maka are dominant.

Moreover, these assumptions are often baked into digital systems. In the East, health workers were provided with digital nutrition screening tools pre-loaded in French. These tools required entering terms like *périmètre brachial* (mid-upper arm circumference), which caused confusion among local workers unfamiliar with such terminology, resulting in misreported data. This reflects a classic case of technological lock-in, where tools are designed for uniformity, not usability. The failure to adapt these tools linguistically had direct implications: vulnerable children were missed in the aid targeting process due to erroneous entries (Schneider et al., 2019).

These breakdowns are not simply examples of poor design, but they reflect deep-seated institutional cultures that often equate professionalism with formality, and formalism with French-language documentation. Many humanitarian organizations still operate on inherited colonial administrative norms that are ill-suited to grassroots realities (Sandwell, 2011; Beresford and Pettit, 2021). This contributes to what Heaslip et al. (2012) describe as "knowledge misfit" where organizational systems and tools fail to align with the knowledge systems of the field-level actors executing the response.

Importantly, communities themselves perceive this misfit. In the East region, health volunteers stopped using SOPs altogether, relying instead on oral coordination with village elders. While this approach improved local understanding, it also introduced new

risks, such as inconsistency, lack of accountability, and unrecorded decisions. This reflects not an outright rejection of institutional processes, but a substitution with culturally congruent alternatives when the provided tools were inaccessible. Yet these workarounds remain invisible in official reporting, making it difficult for organizations to learn from or institutionalize them.

From a theoretical perspective, these cases demonstrate that institutional logics are not universal. Organizations must move from monologic models of logistics coordination, which rely on one-way information flow and standardized documentation, to dialogic models, which recognize local actors as co-creators of operational success. This requires not only language adaptation, but rethinking what constitutes valid logistics knowledge, including oral expertise, relational leadership, and culturally embedded communication strategies.

This shift has significant implications for training, tool development, and evaluation. Instead of assuming that translation occurs downstream, once tools are finalized, language and communication design must be integrated upstream in logistics planning. This includes budgeting for professional translation, developing flexible SOP templates, and engaging local staff in the co-creation of forms and procedures. Logistics agility in humanitarian operations depends not just on resource speed, but on informational responsiveness, the ability to communicate effectively in dynamic and diverse contexts (Tatham and Pettit, 2010; Sentia et al., 2023).

In conclusion, linguistic misalignment is not a surface issue, but it is a symptom of deeper institutional culture gaps, and addressing it

requires transforming how organizations conceptualize knowledge, authority, and efficiency in humanitarian logistics. When logistics systems are designed with linguistic uniformity but implemented in environments of linguistic plurality, failure is not only possible; it is predictable.

Informal Translation as a Form of Local Crisis Governance

While formal humanitarian systems often overlook translation or treat it as a marginal task, informal translation networks can also play a central role in the operational viability of humanitarian logistics in multilingual contexts. Particularly in linguistically diverse regions such as the East and Far North of Cameroon, local actors, youth, community health workers, and religious leaders, serve as embedded linguistic mediators who enable the communication necessary for aid coordination and delivery.

These actors function as part of what recent literature terms community-anchored crisis governance, adaptive systems of knowledge exchange and local action that emerge when formal structures are fragmented or slow to respond (Krause and Schmidt, 2020; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018). In this research, young bilingual women in the East region were seen translating health guidance spontaneously in public spaces, including churches and markets. This kind of translation is not merely informational, but it is relational and trusted, grounded in proximity, shared identity, and social capital. These informal actors do not only relay messages; they also interpret and reframe them in ways that resonate culturally, which significantly

improves uptake and compliance with humanitarian programs.

In the Far North, Fulfulde-speaking religious leaders provided similar support, especially through mosques and prayer groups. Their legitimacy as community figures enhanced the perceived credibility of the translated messages. This aligns with evidence that translation delivered through socially recognized intermediaries, rather than anonymous institutional broadcasts, can increase compliance with humanitarian directives, particularly in public health (Abimbola et al., 2014; He et al., 2022).

Despite their critical role, these translation actors often remain unrecognized in formal operational models. They are not included in training sessions, budgets, or evaluation metrics, creating a systemic blind spot in humanitarian planning. This exclusion reflects the institutional invisibility of informal actors, a condition that makes response efforts appear more centralized and technocratic than they are in practice (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018).

This invisibility also poses risks. Without training or institutional guidance, informal translators may unintentionally misinterpret technical content, especially medical information, or apply selective filtering based on local hierarchies or biases. Still, the benefits of informal translation in humanitarian settings are undeniable. They offer flexibility, legitimacy, and proximity, qualities that formal communication systems struggle to replicate. Supply chain agility is defined not just by the ability to move goods, but by the capacity to adapt informational flows to changing realities (Sentia et al., 2023). Informal translation networks offer exactly this kind of responsive adaptation, aligning

messages with lived realities in ways that formal SOPs or digital broadcasts cannot.

From a theoretical standpoint, these networks represent a form of vernacular logistics governance, wherein communities supplement or reshape institutional processes to ensure functionality. As Bajaj et al. (2021) propose in their transcultural crisis management framework, successful crisis response is co-produced, not just implemented, and these translators embody that co-production by mediating across epistemic, linguistic, and cultural divides.

Therefore, recognizing informal translation as a form of local governance, not a workaround, provides a more realistic and inclusive account of how humanitarian logistics actually operate in multilingual environments. The task ahead is not to formalize these networks in ways that strip them of their responsiveness, but to support and strengthen them, through training, partnership, and recognition, as part of a broader move toward culturally grounded humanitarian systems.

Toward a Culturally Anchored Humanitarian Logistics Paradigm

The findings make clear that translation in humanitarian logistics must be understood not simply as a linguistic function, but as a cultural and strategic infrastructure, one that determines how crises are interpreted, responded to, and resolved. As illustrated throughout the regional cases, fractures in meaning-making, disjointed institutional assumptions, and variations in local language ecologies all converge to shape how humanitarian supply chains succeed, or fail, in practice.

At the heart of these challenges is the issue of sense-making. As shown in the East region, biomedical concepts such as “virus,” “infection,” or “vaccine” were frequently recoded through spiritual or kin-based frames. When crisis messages are translated literally but not transculturally adapted, they fail to resonate. Bajaj et al. (2021) emphasize that transcultural crisis management requires humanitarian actors to engage not just with surface-level terminology but with deeper cultural scripts and epistemologies that shape how communities assign meaning to risk.

The implications of these disconnects are both symbolic and material. In the Northwest, for instance, government-affiliated messaging, even in English, was mistrusted due to its association with state coercion, a pattern similarly observed in other politicized humanitarian settings (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018). These examples suggest that successful communication is not determined solely by language choice, but by who speaks, in what context, and with what perceived authority.

Furthermore, regional variation across Cameroon reinforces that linguistic logistics must be locally differentiated, not centrally standardized. In the Far North, audio messages in Fulfulde proved relatively effective, while in the East, peer-based oral interpretation networks outperformed printed materials. These differences underscore the need for context-specific communication architectures, rooted in local language dynamics, trust structures, and communicative norms. Rigid, one-size-fits-all information strategies are incompatible with the lived complexity of humanitarian fieldwork (Krause and Schmidt, 2020).

Theoretically, this research also contributes to a growing body of literature that calls for a culturally grounded logistics paradigm. The dominant models of humanitarian supply chain management emphasize efficiency, speed, and standardization, but often at the expense of linguistic and cultural fit. Yet as this research shows, logistical systems that neglect cultural infrastructure, especially translation, introduce friction, reduce participation, and can ultimately compromise their core objectives.

To address this reframing translation is proposed as a logistics-critical asset, akin to warehousing or transport routing. It must be resourced, integrated, and evaluated as such. This involves not only providing multilingual materials but ensuring early-stage co-design of communication tools, embedding local actors in translation processes, and recognizing informal translation networks as legitimate components of humanitarian governance. These recommendations align with emerging calls for inclusive humanitarian design that foregrounds community agency and knowledge systems (Abimbola et al., 2014; Krause and Schmidt, 2020).

In conclusion, this research repositions translation as both a symbolic and operational cornerstone of humanitarian logistics. By viewing language not as a neutral carrier of meaning, but as a site of power, identity, and negotiation, we better understand why logistical systems falter, and how they can be improved. Humanitarian actors operating in linguistically diverse contexts must move beyond functional communication models and embrace a culturally embedded logistics framework, one that centers translation not at

the margins, but at the very heart of crisis response.

Conclusion

Translation in humanitarian logistics is not a peripheral concern, but a central determinant of operational effectiveness, equity, and community engagement. In the linguistically diverse context of Cameroon, language barriers shaped not only the clarity of humanitarian messaging but also its legitimacy, reception, and practical outcomes. Whether through symbolic exclusion, operational inefficiencies, or fractured crisis sense-making, the absence of culturally grounded translation practices routinely undermined the effectiveness of aid delivery. Conversely, when translation was locally embedded, especially through trusted informal networks, it served as a critical enabler of participation and logistical performance.

By drawing on theoretical frameworks including acts of distinction, institutional logics, and transcultural crisis management, this research reframes translation as a logistics-critical infrastructure. Humanitarian organizations often operate with the assumption that bilingual communication (in French and English) is sufficient. However, this research reveals the operational cost of such assumptions in a country where over 250 languages structure community life and crisis response. When communication tools, forms, or protocols fail to align with local language ecologies, they not only reduce efficiency but also erode trust and legitimacy. Informal translation systems, though unrecognized, often compensate for these institutional blind spots and deserve strategic attention.

Practically, this research points toward several immediate interventions. Translation should be integrated into logistics planning at the design phase, not treated as an afterthought. Humanitarian actors should co-develop communication tools with local stakeholders and resource informal translation networks through training, recognition, and support. Moreover, monitoring and evaluation systems should include indicators that capture linguistic inclusion, message accessibility, and community understanding, not just material throughput. This would enhance both transparency and responsiveness in complex multilingual settings.

Future research should expand on this research by exploring how similar dynamics play out in other African or postcolonial multilingual contexts, where institutional language policies often diverge from grassroots realities. Comparative studies across countries could identify commonalities and distinct patterns in how language intersects with crisis communication, logistics, and community governance. Ultimately, this research urges humanitarian actors to move beyond translation as mere communication and toward translation as cultural logistics infrastructure, central to equity, resilience, and the ethics of aid.

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