



TRANSLATORS
WITHOUT BORDERS

LANGUAGE MATTERS: IMPROVING ACCOUNTABILITY AND OPERATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA

August 2018

This policy brief presents evidence for increasing the focus on language in northeast Nigeria. It includes recommendations for overcoming language barriers for an effective and accountable response.

Language barriers are a critical but neglected factor in responding to the needs of the more than 7.7 million people affected by the humanitarian emergency in northeast Nigeria. Internally displaced people speak over 30 languages as their mother tongues. Yet humanitarian responders are largely communicating with them only in Hausa and to a lesser extent in Kanuri. Low literacy levels, particularly among women, compound communication challenges for internally displaced people and host communities. In these circumstances, effective accountability, participation, informed decision making, and meaningful access to services remain a distant prospect.

Concerted and coordinated efforts by donors and humanitarian agencies are needed to improve communication and community engagement in the right languages.



Vulnerable people in northeast Nigeria are not receiving information they can understand

Data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) demonstrates that 93 percent of internally displaced people in northeast Nigeria are receiving information in Hausa or Kanuri. Thirty-eight percent - over 700,000 people - are not receiving information in their mother tongue. Speakers of some minority languages are particularly affected: just eight percent of internally displaced Marghi speakers are receiving information in their own language. A lack of information is reported to be a serious problem for 53 percent of the individuals at sites primarily speaking Marghi.

Comprehension studies carried out by Translators without Borders (TWB) confirm that the current focus on Hausa and Kanuri is excluding large sections of the affected population, especially some of the most vulnerable. Only 23 percent understood a simple message in either of those languages when provided in text format. Comprehension rates improved to 37 percent when a simple drawing accompanied the text. Research found audio messaging to be the most effective format. This tallies with a very strong preference (more than seven in 10 people) for word-of-mouth as the means of receiving information. Less-educated women whose mother tongue was not Hausa or Kanuri were the least likely to understand messages in any format in those languages.

Widespread communication gaps affect data collection and access to services

A TWB assessment in July 2017 found that aid workers widely recognize a lack of attention and resourcing for language support. This has far-reaching implications for informed decision making among affected people and responders. Without data on language and communication needs, field workers reported particular difficulty communicating with speakers of minority languages, and lacked the support of trained and impartial interpreters. Humanitarian staff voiced fears that this could impact the accuracy of needs assessments, the effectiveness of program design, accountability to affected people, and conflict sensitivity.

Research suggests a lack of adequate language preparation for enumerators is likely influencing the quality of humanitarian data on which key decisions are based. TWB's comprehension testing with enumerators in Maiduguri showed that as few as 35 percent of words tested were understood. The scores improved slightly with experience, but almost all those interviewed felt that language was a serious problem in their work.

The use of technical terminology that is not readily conveyed in local languages can cause confusion and misunderstanding. Ultimately it can constrain uptake of available services and undermine efforts to protect affected populations and their fundamental rights. TWB's research found that concepts such as "safe space" and "food security" were being misinterpreted in the context of conflict. Culture is a related factor; for example, the stigma attached to standard translations of "mental health" may lead to underreporting of cases and underutilization of mental health and psychosocial support services.

Overall, language barriers have impeded effective planning and implementation, and led to unknown levels of information loss. Language bias has affected the ability to source accurate data comprehensively. Internally displaced people now considering returning to their places of origin will need objective and accurate information in the right language - essential to uphold the principle of voluntary return in safety and dignity.



Practical action can make the difference

The problems outlined above impede implementation of international policies and commitments on improving the quality and accountability of humanitarian action, in particular the Grand Bargain commitments on participation and localization and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

TWB therefore urges donor governments, the United Nations, and other humanitarian aid organizations involved in the response to take the following action:

1. Understand the language and communication needs of the affected population

Operational agencies can do this by including a small number of language and communication questions in ongoing standard data collection efforts. IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix surveys have been collecting site-level language data in northeast Nigeria since mid-2017. REACH has also included questions to map languages spoken and understood in its latest multi-sector needs assessment. Comprehension testing of the kind conducted by TWB can fill in a lot of the detail and dig deeper into specific vulnerabilities.

2. Develop evidence-based communication strategies

Aid organizations should use that improved data to determine the best combination of language, format and channel to reach a given target group and identify the language skills to recruit. They should tailor community feedback mechanisms to the language and communication needs of the affected population, including the most vulnerable people. Developing simple content in plain language and using pictures and audio can help ensure the widest possible comprehension, including among second-language speakers.

3. Improve resourcing for translation and interpreting support in relevant languages

Donors should include budget lines for translation and interpreting in partnership agreements, and fund an increase in language support capacity for humanitarian action in northeast Nigeria. Support will be needed to build capacity in languages for which there are no professional translators. Humanitarian staff should have the appropriate knowledge, resources and tools to communicate with affected people in the relevant languages. TWB's Glossary for Northeast Nigeria, funded by ECHO and developed in partnership with IOM, is one example. This free mobile app helps ensure use of consistent, accurate, and easily understood words in local languages.

4. Raise the profile of language across the response

Sector lead agencies and OCHA can lead on language data collection and dissemination. They should also ensure language, as a vital component of community engagement and operational effectiveness, is factored into the 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan. Existing national coordination systems and frameworks, such as the Returns Policy Framework endorsed in June 2018, should ensure provisions for communicating in the right languages and formats. This also entails addressing language barriers to improve the representation and contribution of local and national responders in coordination structures.

For more information about TWB's research and language support for the response in northeast Nigeria, contact info@translatorswithoutborders.org