



TRANSLATORS
WITHOUT BORDERS

COMPLAINTS AND FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

Effective communication is essential for true accountability:
Our experience with language in northeast Nigeria



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Translators without Borders believes that everyone has the right to give and receive information in a language and format they understand. We work with nonprofit partners and a global community of language professionals to build local language translation capacity and raise awareness of language barriers.

Originally founded in 1993 in France (as Traducteurs sans Frontières), TWB translates millions of words of lifesaving and life-changing information every year. For more information on our work, visit translatorswithoutborders.org/ or contact info@translatorswithoutborders.org

Speaking a minority language can increase vulnerability

Translators without Borders produced this guidance to help humanitarian responders engage in more effective dialogue with communities in their own languages. We looked at ways people access complaints and feedback mechanisms, such as complaint boxes, hotlines, and face-to-face communication.

In northeast Nigeria literacy levels are low, many languages are spoken, and women generally have less access to technology than men. Structural inequalities also place women, older people, and less educated individuals at a disadvantage for receiving and sharing critical information. This disconnect can limit humanitarian services' reach and impact and has broad implications for accountability.

Humanitarian organizations are used to looking at factors such as poverty, gender, age, and disability as drivers of vulnerability, often overlooking the compounding factor of language. As Figure 1 suggests, language and vulnerability are interconnected: speakers of minority languages often experience multiple layers of disadvantage – access to education and health care, nutrition, human rights, representation, access to technology. That means that minority-language speakers can be some of the people that humanitarian organizations most need to reach – but they can also be some of the most difficult.

In many societies, women get less access to education and fewer chances to learn other languages. Older generations have often not benefited from the educational opportunities younger people have and may be less likely to read and write, or to speak a national or international language. Poor educational provision for people with disabilities in many countries limits their communication options. The world over, poverty translates into low literacy and less access to the languages of wealth and power. So an impoverished older woman with disabilities who speaks a minority language could be the very last person to find out what services are available to her after an earthquake, or where to go for help, or to be able to let responders know what she needs from them.

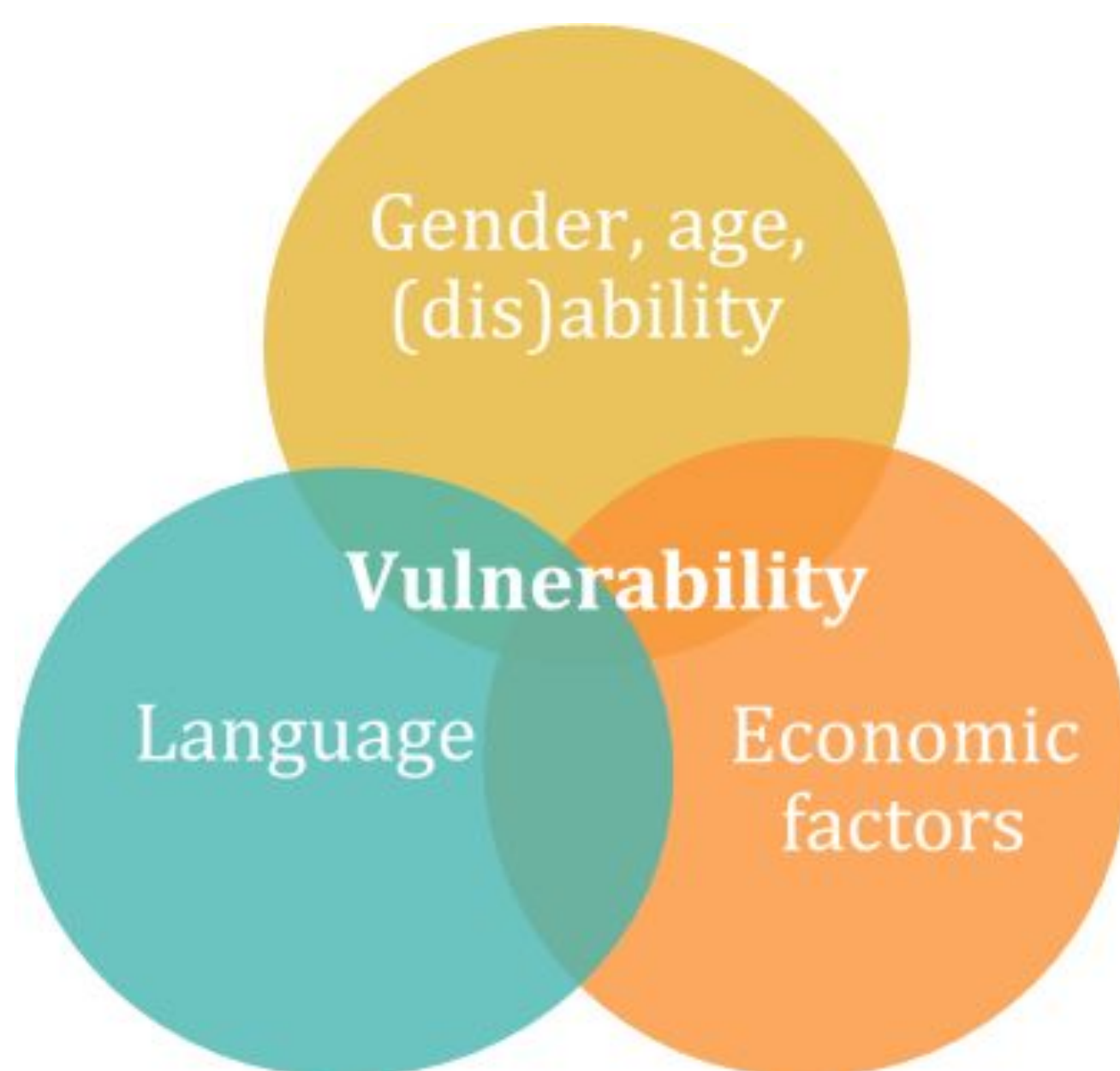


Figure 1: Language intersects with other drivers of vulnerability

Accountability to affected populations in northeast Nigeria – shrinking spaces

Accountability to affected populations (AAP) calls for active and genuine participation by communities in all humanitarian interventions. When people are unable to access information in a format and language that they readily understand, it impacts their ability to make the best decisions for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Language is particularly important when managing and maintaining a formal complaints and feedback mechanism (CFM). A CFM is a system for receiving, processing, and responding to any feedback or complaints made by affected people about the work or behavior of humanitarian organizations. Having a working, trusted CFM through which organizations can receive information from communities about their performance is a vital part of being accountable. The mechanism should meet the basic criteria of being safe, accessible, and responsive.

Between December 2020 and March 2021, TWB carried out a qualitative study to understand:

- The preferred languages and formats for CFMs and for receiving responses to complaints and feedback in the humanitarian response in Borno, specifically Maiduguri and Jere.
- How languages, dialects, and formats are considered in CFMs.
- What languages and formats are available for affected people to submit their complaints and feedback.
- Which formats and channels are the most used and relied on by community members to submit complaints and feedback, and by the humanitarian community to close the feedback loop.
- The preferred languages of communication of the various population groups.
- If people prefer to communicate in writing or verbally when giving complaints and feedback.
- Which formats and channels people trust for submitting complaints and feedback and receiving responses to complaints.
- How this differs depending on age and gender.

This report summarizes key findings and recommends actions to improve accountability in northeast Nigeria through more effective and responsive complaints and feedback mechanisms.

TWB found that humanitarian organizations are largely prioritizing verbal communication in a context of low literacy, particularly among women and older people. A reliance on spoken Hausa and written English (including for suggestion boxes) continues to make it difficult for all but the most educated, and native Hausa speakers to engage in real dialogue with humanitarians and access and engage with the complaints and feedback system.

Gender influences the extent and effectiveness of accountability mechanisms, which may not necessarily reach women. Internally displaced women told us their biggest concern is their exclusion from information and communication. While some women, especially those who work for humanitarian organizations, can overcome this, women in solely domestic roles find it more difficult. Information sharing in the camps predominantly occurs in public spaces, such as in markets and other shared spaces. Many women are excluded from these due to religious and cultural barriers.

The underlying issue is that CFMs are neither transparent nor effective.

Who was involved in the research?

This qualitative study was funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) through the ProSPINE+ Consortium. TWB partnered with Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Plan International, and Danish Refugee Council (DRC) to conduct a qualitative study with 377 conflict-affected adults (excluding children and adolescents) living in camps and host communities and 28 humanitarian staff between December 2020 and March 2021. Those staff specialized in protection; child protection; gender-based violence; housing, land, and property; and camp coordination and camp management. The research locations were Bakassi Camp, Muna Garage Camp (Figure 2), Farm Centre Camp, Gubio Camp, Sulumbri (Kori Camp), Gwange host community, Stadium Camp, and Bulabulin Ngarnam host community in Maiduguri and Jere.



Figure 2: AAP community consultation with women in Muna Camp conducted by TWB and DRC staff (credit: TWB)

Means of communication are not appropriate and tailored to local circumstances

We found that humanitarian organizations largely prioritize verbal communication in a context of low literacy, particularly among women and older people. This is positive. But a reliance on spoken Hausa, Kanuri, and written English makes it difficult for all but the most educated and native speakers to engage in real dialogue with humanitarians.

Solutions lie in:

- Having a CFM structure supported by staff responsible for handling complaints/feedback and providing feedback and responses to the affected population.
 - Including language considerations in all CFM Standard Operating Procedures and ensuring prompt translations and responses to all language speakers.
 - Creating reporting mechanisms for confidential and sensitive issues (fraud, misconduct etc.).
 - Strengthening the inter-agency and inter-sector coordination on CFMs from camp level to working group coordination.
 - Recruiting more gender-diverse humanitarian staff who speak local languages.
 - Training community members in the basics of interpreting.
 - Expanding the use of audio, pictorial, and remote communication in local languages.
 - Using multilingual two-way communication tools like chatbots.
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Key findings and recommended actions

1. Language and literacy gaps limit access to and trust in feedback mechanisms for women, older people, and people living with disabilities



“Because of my mobility issues I have not been able to go out for quite a long time, so I don't know if these [feedback mechanisms] exist” - Stadium Camp, resident

Currently, suggestion boxes remain a standard feedback mechanism but are inaccessible to less literate individuals according to most residents interviewed in Bakassi, Gubio, and Stadium Camps and the Sulumbri host community.

“My children handle my complaints, and I don't know how they do that” - Muna Camp, resident

TWB research suggests that ...

- Less literate individuals - disproportionately women, older people, and people with disabilities - cannot use suggestion boxes to lodge complaints.
- Women have challenges accessing information provided through official channels like noticeboards. This is often due to language barriers, lower levels of literacy, movement restrictions, and limited ability to interact with community leaders and men. This limits their awareness of services. Therefore, this also affects the reach and effectiveness of accountability mechanisms for women.
- Affected people have a strong preference for face-to-face feedback, including talking to humanitarian staff in safe spaces in their local languages rather than Hausa, at protection desks, during focus group discussions, and during community consultations. Most of the respondents stated that engagement with humanitarian workers has to be in Hausa *“because some NGO workers don't understand other local languages”* - Muna Camp and Stadium Camp residents.
- The use of emojis on the complaints and feedback forms has not been successful.

So TWB recommends that responders ...

- Prioritize face-to-face CFMs by establishing structures such as mobile CFM desks to take in, process, and refer complaints and feedback.
- Reconsider the use of suggestion boxes.
- Contextually review feedback forms and ask the questions verbally in local languages.

2. Community members lack confidence in the CFM systems, as they often do not receive a timely response - or worse - no response at all.

"It takes very long before one hears something but mostly we hear nothing at all" - Stadium Camp, resident

TWB research suggests that ...

- Young men (n=25) interviewed in Muna Camp are not aware of a complaints desk. They also stated that they do not complain due to other people's experience of not receiving answers to their complaints. When asked who they complain to, the participants responded usually they *"talk to humanitarians whenever we see them around or during FGDs with different humanitarian agencies"* - Gubio Camp, resident.
- 65% of men in all the camps surveyed often do not complain due to lack of response or long delay before response: *"I cannot write my complaints, I asked someone else to write them for me, but I am not sure if what I tell them is what they write because I never received a response to those complaints"* - Bakassi Camp, resident.
- Male and female community members of all ages felt feedback systems would be improved if they used local languages such as Fulani, Gamargu, Shuwa Arabic, Waha, Higgi, and Mandara.
- Most female community members surveyed in the camps have stated that they usually make good use of the CFM. They *"come forward to complain but [humanitarian workers] record the complaints, talk to us using soft words with assurance that our feedback will be treated appropriately which most times is untrue"* - Bakassi Camp, Gubio Camp, Farm Center, and Stadium Camp.
- All humanitarian staff interviewed understand the process for receiving and responding to a complaint or suggestion, and they recognize that communities demand a timely response. However, due to different organizational structures and referral pathway procedures, many of these responses are not handled appropriately.
- Assessments and focus group discussions remain the major medium where community members are consulted to share their views. But they rarely receive feedback on the outcomes of their complaints and feedback: *"We don't know what they do with the complaints but we don't receive the answers to our complaints"* - Farm Center and Gubio Camps, residents.
- Feedback processes often only focus on project-level information instead of addressing appropriate and effective communication for feedback and complaints mechanisms as well as closing the feedback loop.

So TWB recommends that responders ...

- Understand camp language needs and recruit dedicated CFM and field staff who speak local languages.
- Use community meetings to listen to affected people's concerns and complaints in a format and language that communities speak and understand.
- Provide multilingual feedback on the outcomes of complaints and feedback at camp meetings, through FGDs, regular ad hoc consultations, safe spaces, and house-to-house visits.
- Rotate the locations of the complaints desks where possible and staff them with multilingual females and males.

3. Because of language barriers, minority language groups in some of the camps lack confidence and the motivation to come forward and complain for fear of being misunderstood or biased.

Our research suggests that ...

- Organizations are unintentionally listening to and making funding/programming decisions based on input only from the dominant groups. Not only does this mean responders might ignore the groups with less access to power, but they may actually be widening the gap and marginalizing them further.
- Mandara and Shuwa tribes in Gubio Camp complained of the preference given to majority language speakers like Hausa and Kanuri over minority language speakers.
- Women and older men are generally less literate and less comfortable speaking Hausa if it is not their first language.
- The young women surveyed in Gubio Camp reported that they would make more use of complaint and feedback mechanisms if they could communicate in their own language: Kanuri, Shuwa Arab, Fulfulde.
- Speakers of minority languages sometimes seek support from neighbors and friends to interpret their complaint to humanitarians, who are mostly Hausa and English speakers.
- Minority language speakers (Gamargu, Mafa, Mandara, Marghi) in Muna Camp and Farm Center said that humanitarian aid workers do not speak their language.
- Most affected people rely on community leaders, neighbors, and committee members to provide verbal feedback in Hausa. But older people interviewed in all locations don't speak and understand Hausa very fluently, so they require humanitarians to provide information in local languages (as well as Hausa and Kanuri).
- 30 out of 48 research participants interviewed in Gubio Camp reported that the CFM audio recorder didn't work. Interestingly 24 men interviewed in Bakassi Camp assumed the CFM audio recorders are meant for women only, while women groups surveyed in Muna Camp (n=24) did not know the audio recorder existed.

- 21 people with disabilities in all locations (Bakassi Camp, Muna Garage Camp, Farm Centre Camp, Gubio Camp, Sulumbri (Kori Camp), Gwange host community, Stadium Camp, and Bulabulin Ngarnam host community) reported channeling their complaints through a representative but *“having a designated humanitarian whose responsibility is to take complaints”* could help to improve the CFMs at the respective sites.

So TWB recommends that responders ...

- Set up feedback mechanisms to cater for the language needs of marginalized groups.
- Revive the use of audio recording as a CFM, and mandate response times in a language that the person who made the complaint can understand.
- Create awareness – in all languages present in the camp area – among all community groups on how to submit complaints and feedback, referral pathways, timelines in closing the feedback loop, and how to use the recorders and other CFM mechanisms within their camp and living areas.
- Coordinate the use of multilingual audio recorders with all complaints desks to guide community members on how to use the recorders and also how to complain and provide feedback
- Expand the use of audio-recording systems and hotlines in local languages, as voice-based feedback allows people to communicate in a language they are most comfortable in (Figure 3).
- Ensure that humanitarian staff and community volunteers acting as interpreters receive training and guidance on best practice to provide better assurance that people’s concerns are accurately relayed.



Figure 3: IOM is using voice recorders as a community feedback mechanism in camps for internally displaced people. People can record their comments in their own language inside a private booth. TWB then transcribes the feedback and translates it into English for analysis and follow up. This makes the CFM mechanism more accessible to speakers of minority languages – not just English or Hausa.

4. When sensitive issues need to be addressed, people prefer to speak about these face to face and with humanitarians of the same gender in a language they speak and understand

TWB research suggests that ...

- Language issues in discussing sexual abuse and exploitation as they are experienced by men, women, boys, and girls are key dilemmas with unresolved questions on how to best navigate reporting mechanisms.
- Most women respondents believed that reporting sexual exploitation and abuse in their native language makes them feel safe and confident that their report will be taken seriously.
- Respondents also said they wanted more feedback on their reports, in both their own and major languages.

So TWB recommends that responders ...

- Explore expanding communication tools such as hotlines and chatbots in local languages for reporting misconduct and other confidential issues.
 - Promote multilingual quality assurance: recording, transcribing, and translating some of the incoming calls for quality assurance purposes. Local languages increase people's confidence. Recruit and train more female staff/volunteers with diverse language capabilities.
 - Strengthen referral pathways and empower communities with information, in a language they understand, on where to access services made available for them.
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5. Using only Hausa and Kanuri limits the reach, impact, and transparency of communication efforts

“They call us whenever they want to pass information to us, but they don't speak our language. They only speak Hausa and Kanuri which we don't understand. They only waste our time, and we end up asking few of our people for the summary” - Older Gamargu women in Muna Garage

Currently, community members at all locations surveyed receive responses to their feedback in Hausa and some in Kanuri. [2019 MSNA data](#) shows that Hausa is the primary language for a minority of people surveyed (31%), and a large proportion of the population don't understand it well. As a result, minority language speakers, many women, and older people have less opportunity to understand and discuss the responses they receive.

TWB research suggests that ...

- Respondents across all locations and demographics indicated that humanitarians respond to feedback mainly in Hausa and sometimes Kanuri.
- Most people interviewed understand responses they receive if they are given verbally in Hausa, Kanuri, and other languages like Waha, Maafa, Marghi, Fulani, and Bura-Pabir by community volunteers or representatives. Older speakers of languages other than Hausa prefer to receive information in their own languages.
- A majority of community members in all age groups and at all locations prefer to receive verbal responses to their complaints.
- Community members surveyed in Bakassi Camp were generally satisfied that they understood humanitarians' responses to complaints. This may be because 68% of households displaced from Gwoza local government area to Maiduguri camps speak Hausa as a primary language (according to MSNA data) – more than double the average of 31% for northeast Nigeria.
- 30 community members from Sulumbri host community mentioned that audio information is available, but respondents expressed an interest in receiving information in local languages, for instance through loudspeakers in public places. They suggested this would be appropriate to provide responses to feedback that affected residents generally.
- 24 men in Stadium Camp requested a full-time WFP complaints desk or hotlines, so that they can address most complaints directly without having to wait until the subsequent rounds of distribution to report a complaint.

So TWB recommends that responders ...

- Refer to existing data on the languages people speak and understand locally and use those languages to communicate about program plans and respond to community feedback.
- Promote trust by providing interpreting support in local languages where possible, and Hausa at a minimum, to communicate directly, rather than through a community leader.
- Develop communication resources in local languages for the hardest-to-reach audiences.

- Use TWB Glossaries (Figure 4). These are a tool to assist humanitarian field workers and interpreters working on responses across the globe. They improve communication between humanitarian workers and communities by providing clear and accurate translations of humanitarian terms in an easily accessible offline format. With the built-in audio feature, you can also hear the words spoken aloud.
- Identify suitable translations of key words in local languages before any kind of interaction with community members. These can help build multilingual glossaries to ensure consistent and accurate communication.
- Avoid using jargon, abbreviations, and acronyms that assume a level of knowledge around a specific topic, except where relevant and appropriate.

Sectors	English	Hausa	Kanuri	Fulfulde	Shuwa Arab (Arabic)	Shuwa Arab (Latin)	Bura Pabir	Marghi	Waha	Kibaku	Mandara
Protection	access		hanya	zawal	laawol kebol kuuje	درب	darb	laku	lagur thlia	gimata	bui lukwa
Protection	access to justice		hanyoyin samun adalci	lai hakku fandoye	kebol laawol aadilaaku	درب ليل عدل	darb layl adil	lakur wuta jirkur	thlia lagur jirkur	gima gonga	bui jirkur akwa kotu
Protection	accessibility		samun shiga	Duluwu	kebugo laawol	دزبه	darbah	laku ta mda a wuta lukwa wala mzhita vi laga	thlia lagur gwa	gimata	whalir bui lukwa su
Protection	acquired		samu	Gantana	marugo	اللغة	allagah	wuta	akuya thlia	javata	bui su
Protection	acquisition		mallaka	fando	kebol kunde	ليجان	ligiyan	wuta su ar kar	thlia su	javat javi	whalir bui su
Protection	acre		eka	eka	mobgal babal	بكان بلجين كير	bikan bilhayn kabyr	ngal al olkur babal	eca	buga uvaha	nkertir su apa fili
Protection	adequate		wadatacce	tiyo	he'ugo	لغ	layig	nata a mzhita	suku munagu	dughwana sosai	nam tara mazi
Protection	affected population		al'umar da abu ya shafa	jami majarawa ye zamzana ma	yimbe ko nasti billa sannadu massiibo feere ko tawi be	جمعه البيئي ليكنهم	jama'a alfitiney ligathum	mji nata su ka wuta da	mjiku bone athlia nda	thlamndo gima tundu	nji namta su tsukwar tedar
								su na adi babal			

Figure 4: TWB [glossary for northeast Nigeria](#)

Scope for continuing improvement ...

- Communicate about protection against sexual exploitation and abuse using your target group's preferred languages, primarily their mother tongues.
 - Draw on MSNA data or your own data collection, not opinion, for the languages spoken in each area.
 - Use in-person and audio communication in mother tongues as the default.
 - Where interpreting is necessary, train and brief your interpreters adequately for the task.
 - To provide reference materials, develop and test pictorial messaging with simple accompanying text.
 - Engage with traditional mechanisms on establishing safe, confidential reporting, but also consider further investigation into reporting preferences.
 - Communicate on the action taken in response to reports, in people's preferred languages.
 - Pay attention to your own terminology, and test terms with the community.
 - Collaborate between agencies.
 - Resource accountability appropriately.
 - Build data collection and language tracking mechanisms into community engagement and accountability systems and referrals.
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Key Resources

- TWB, [Glossary for Northeast Nigeria](#)
 - TWB, [COVID-19 Glossary](#)
 - TWB, [COVID-19 or Korona Bairos? Communicating on the “disease that affects your breathing” in northeast Nigeria](#)
 - TWB, [Comprehension assessment reports](#)
 - TWB, [Write Clearly: TWB’s guide to writing in plain language](#)
 - TWB, [Field Guide to Humanitarian Interpreting and Cultural Mediation](#) (contact us for versions in Bura-Pabir, Fulfulde, Hausa, Kanuri, Kibaku, Mandara, Marghi, Shuwa Arabic, and Waha)
 - TWB, [Northeast Nigeria Language Map, by Local Government Area](#)
 - TWB, [Northeast Nigeria Language Map, by primary language](#)
 - TWB, [Communications Dashboard: Internally Displaced People in northeast Nigeria, by site](#)
 - TWB, [Four simple language questions](#) for needs assessments and surveys
 - TWB, [MSNA language data can help humanitarians communicate better with affected people](#)
 - TWB and Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, [Case study on audio recording for verification in multilingual surveys](#)
 - TWB and People in Need, [Rapid Guide to Localizing and Translating Survey Tool](#)
 - TWB, [The link between language and accountability for the future of Grand Bargain](#)
 - TWB, [The challenges and opportunities of multilingual audio communication in Borno State](#)
 - TWB, [Accountability tools in Monguno unintentionally exclude women](#)
 - TWB, [TWB develops language technology to improve humanitarian communication in northeast Nigeria](#)
 - TWB, Library <https://library.translatorswb.org/>. This library collates all of the language resources designed to help humanitarian staff, interpreters, and translators working with crisis-affected people in northeast Nigeria.
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TWB can help

TWB improves the reach, impact, and accountability of humanitarian action in northeast Nigeria by supporting two-way communication with people in their preferred languages and formats.

Our support is designed as a common service across the response. It builds on similar language advisory support and capacity building provided in Bangladesh, DRC, and Mozambique.

TWB's current and planned support to the humanitarian response in northeast Nigeria includes:

- conducting language and communication assessments and formative research
 - developing training, guidance, and tools for the ongoing response as well as customized content
 - delivery for COVID-19 frontline responders
 - building a community of translators for local languages
 - providing language support for responders on the ground: multisectoral glossaries, pictorial messaging
 - audio translations, including a COVID-19 glossary
 - supporting efforts to enable data collection and accountability in local languages
 - offering language technology and communications solutions to improve information access
 - providing custom online training and other remotely accessible content. [Email](mailto:info@translatorswithoutborders.org) us at info@translatorswithoutborders.org to learn more.
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