

Language barriers in the humanitarian response in north-eastern Nigeria

- INITIAL ASSESSMENT -



A man gives consent to comprehension testing at Farm Center IDP camp, Maiduguri. Low literacy levels make format a critical factor in humanitarian communication strategies. Photo: Paul Warambo/TWB.

Introduction

Translators without Borders (TWB) is a US non-profit organization that provides people with access to vital information in a language they understand. TWB's Words of Relief program helps people affected by humanitarian emergencies to access critical knowledge in local languages, and supports aid organizations to communicate effectively with those in need.

Around the world, speakers of minority languages often experience multiple layers of disadvantage, leaving many of them more vulnerable to the consequences of conflict, disaster, and disease. As a result, they can be among the groups most in need of protection and assistance – but also some of the hardest for the predominantly English-speaking aid sector to communicate with. **Nigeria, with its 550 languages, is no different.**

TWB visited Maiduguri in Borno State between 4 and 13 July 2017, to carry out an initial assessment of the language barriers hampering operational agencies' efforts to communicate with affected people in north-east Nigeria. Presentations and discussions with three coordination groups were complemented by individual in-person or skype interviews with staff from eight organizations. In total, 28 people were interviewed directly, from six sectors (Food Security, Health, Nutrition, Protection, Shelter, and WASH). The TWB team also met with language professionals in Maiduguri and Abuja, and with a number of donor representatives. For this brief initial assessment, the team did not interview affected people themselves, although communication with them was a focus of every discussion.

This brief report summarizes key findings and proposes ways forward for operational agencies and their donors to improve communication with communities, and thereby aid effectiveness, through language support to humanitarian action.

Findings

Language barriers in humanitarian action

The population of conflict-affected areas of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States is very linguistically diverse: 28 first languages are spoken in Borno alone. To simplify a complex picture, Kanuri is the dominant language across Borno State and much of Yobe, while Hausa is in widespread use as a regional lingua franca. **Little data exists on how far Hausa and Kanuri are understood by speakers of the minority languages, however. Low literacy levels, particularly among women, compound communication challenges.**

All operational organizations interviewed reported serious **difficulties communicating with target populations as a result of language barriers.** Core staff are predominantly English and Hausa speakers, with some organizations struggling to recruit Kanuri speakers into key positions. As they establish activities in a new operational area, organizations hire local staff and recruit community volunteers who speak the languages of the affected population. Kanuri, Shuwa Arabic, Marghi and Fulfulde/Fulani were among the languages reported to present challenges for communication across the humanitarian response.

The difficulties described affect both operational effectiveness and accountability, from the inclusiveness of needs assessments and feedback mechanisms to the provision of services and the implementation of behavior change campaigns. Confidentiality and conflict-sensitivity are impaired when not everyone can speak for themselves. Organizations were also concerned that the language barriers are impeding their capacity to communicate effectively with conflict-affected groups on the nuances of key concepts (for instance around protection or mental health), and important technical distinctions (e.g. between categories of explosive remnants of war, each requiring specific safe behaviors from civilians).

Written Communication

In most cases, national staff members translate program documentation such as surveys, manuals, guidelines and information, education, and communication (IEC) materials into Hausa and Kanuri. Organizations described the difficulties they face **ascertaining the accuracy of these translations**, most of which are carried out by individuals who are not trained translators and who may not have an ideal command of English. (Indeed some translators may be working between two languages that are not their mother tongue.)



'Our staff generally speak Hausa, not Kanuri or Shuwa. That means we can talk to the host communities, but not the IDPs.' NGO staff member

For other languages, aid agencies call on local staff and community volunteers, but with even less confidence of accuracy, as they are translating from the Hausa or Kanuri version. This multiplies the potential loss in translation, and quality assurance is still more elusive: translation back into English is not usually an option.

In addition to human resources, budgets also hamper efforts to communicate in minority languages. Some humanitarian staff reported inadequate or non-existent budgets for translating IEC materials, manuals and other program tools. Several organizations mentioned that many IEC materials were currently available in only English or Hausa, a situation they were keen to change.

Verbal Communication



'In a focus group discussion, we may hear that somebody only speaks Marghi, but then we have no way to respond to them.' NGO program manager

The challenges of verbal communication are even greater, for both program design and day-to-day operations. Operational organizations reported situations where **interviews with community members pass through four languages** (e.g. English > Hausa > Kanuri > Shuwa and back again); the result is slow planning and implementation, and - above all - **unknown levels of information loss**. Interviewees expressed concern that program planning was not always able to factor in needs and priorities from across the whole target population.

As with written translation, human resources are lacking. Typically local staff or incentivized community volunteers handle interpreting, although at least one NGO provides multilingual enumeration services, including interpreting for focus group discussions. Where interpreters are hired from among the local community, organizations reported **lacking the in-house expertise to test either their language skills or their interpreting ability**. In some teams, one member of staff with the right language pair is called upon to interpret for all project activities, taking them away from their own work.



'In a focus group discussion, we may hear that somebody only speaks Marghi, but then we have no way to respond to them.' NGO program manager

As a result, humanitarians repeatedly described situations where random answers to their question suggested its **meaning had been lost in translation**, where activities took far more than the allotted time without yielding results, and where either **confidentiality or the opportunity to hear from members of minority groups was lost** because a neutral interpreter was unavailable. In an extreme case, soldiers from a local barracks were called upon to interpret when women's and girls' protection concerns were surveyed in [Damasak in March 2017](#): a striking example of the impact a lack of language support can have. The challenges are particularly acute in areas such as Ngala, where the affected population reportedly speaks five main languages, but operations even inside Maiduguri are affected by difficulties communicating with affected people in their own language.

Lack of Data

Organizations reported that they broadly **lacked the information on languages spoken** and understood by their target populations to plan for more effective communication. Until now, no such data has been available across the affected population, although some organizations collect partial data for their own target groups, and TWB and MapAction have [mapped](#) a partial dataset collected by IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM).



'Marghi and Kanuri are the two most used languages in Damboa. This reality must be reflected in activities [and in] IEC materials or radio messages.' Oxfam-commissioned study

In June 2017, the DTM began to collect data on the languages predominantly spoken at IDP sites, which language most people at each site receive and would prefer to receive information in, and how far existing information is understood. This is valuable information not previously available to humanitarians and other service providers. Crucially, the first round of DTM language data suggests that **neither Hausa nor Kanuri is a first language for IDPs at 22 percent of sites, and not a second language for 28 percent – yet only 5 percent of information for IDPs is provided in any other local language.**

These location-level findings are limited to the dominant group in each case; operational planning also requires more detailed information about the communication needs of minority language speakers.

The impact of communicating in the right language

Humanitarians interviewed gave examples of ways in which communicating with affected people in the right language could improve the effectiveness of their work and described the benefits in cases where they had been able to achieve that aim:

- **Increased participation** of minority groups in group activities
- **More effective dialogue** with community members, and between language groups
- **Better understanding of operational needs** across the wider affected population
- **Better identification of minority and marginalized groups** and more effective action to address vulnerability
- **More inclusive communication** in a context where some are excluded
- **More opportunity for behavior** change if local beliefs and concepts are understood
- **Increased accountability** of humanitarian action

Proposed solutions

TWB has extensive experience in facilitating communication in the right language between crisis-affected people and the humanitarian organizations seeking to support them. A series of steps could address the current communication gap and build capacity for the future:

Map languages spoken and understood across all operational areas. This can be done by including a small number of language and communication questions in all household surveys, centralizing the data, for instance through the inter-cluster working group, and disseminating the results widely through humanitarianresponse.info, Reliefweb, and local or response-wide communication mechanisms.

Understand the communication needs of target groups. Education, literacy levels, and proficiency in more dominant languages vary with age, gender, and other factors. Testing comprehension of information by mother tongue, gender, and age can help determine the best combination of format and language to reach a given target for a given message or intervention. TWB has conducted comprehension testing, in collaboration with Oxfam and Girl Effect, at five IDP sites in Maiduguri, and the methodology could readily be applied elsewhere. Findings from the first five sites will be published in August.

Develop multilingual terminology for the humanitarian response. Glossaries are an important resource for translators, interpreters and field staff in crisis situations; TWB has received strong support for its work on glossary apps in the European refugee response. TWB's existing glossary for the protection sector in Nigeria, [available as an app](#) offering voice and text in English, Hausa and Kanuri, was well received and can be expanded to other program sectors and other local languages. If the sectoral working groups each propose a list of terms, TWB can put forward translations to be field-tested and included in the app. This will facilitate translation, interpreting and communication with affected people across the response.

Expand access to professional translation services in the relevant languages. Initial scoping indicates that few qualified translators are currently working in most of the languages of the affected population. Mobilizing that pool, expanding it through training, and using computer-assisted translation tools to enhance speed and consistency, can place multilingual communication within the reach of every humanitarian agency. TWB is highly experienced in professional translation and translation training for crisis response, including rapid translation for urgent communication where needed. The use of a humanitarian translation memory, multilingual glossaries and a two-stage editing process ensure the quality of our remote translations.

Build up a pool of trained translators and interpreters in minority languages. TWB has trained over 200 bilinguals to provide translation services in other countries. The same can be done for speakers of north-eastern Nigeria's minority tongues who have the right language and computer skills. Likewise, TWB provides training and professional resource materials for bilinguals to work as interpreters and cultural mediators. Language testing could also be established to aid recruitment. In addition to improving verbal and written communication with communities, building a pool of language professionals for these languages would provide income opportunities for crisis-affected individuals.

Establish a body of high-quality materials in key languages of the north-east. Translation by professional translators into Hausa, Kanuri and Fulfulde could create an open-source library of IEC materials, surveys and other program documentation in written, graphic, audiovisual and audio file formats, for use across the humanitarian response. This could be expanded to minority languages as capacity increases. Documents can be simplified prior to translation, to ensure more accurate translations into languages with less terminology choice, and improve comprehension among low-literacy audiences.

Raise the profile of language in the humanitarian response. Donors can ask partners how they are managing language, include budget lines for translation and interpreting in partnership agreements, and fund an increase in language support capacity for humanitarian action in Nigeria. Operational organizations can complete TWB's brief [survey](#) of language support needs, collaborate on developing sectoral terminology for translation and field-testing the results, and ensure their teams have access to all the language support available. Sectoral lead agencies and OCHA can lead on language data collection and dissemination, and ensure language as a vital component of communicating with communities and operational effectiveness is factored into the 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan.



IDPs and enumerators during comprehension testing at Farm Center camp, Maiduguri, July 2017 - Photo: Paul Warambo/TWB.

For more information about Translators without Borders, contact:
Ellie Kemp, Head of Crisis Response: ellie@translatorswithoutborders.org

TWB wishes to thank Oxfam for hosting the team's visit to Nigeria and facilitating this assessment.

TWB's Words of Relief program is supported by Elrha's Humanitarian Innovation Fund - a grant making facility supporting organisations and individuals to identify, nurture and share innovative and scalable solutions to the most pressing challenges facing effective humanitarian assistance. The Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) initiative 'Accelerating the Journey to Scale' is funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).

