Tackling language-based exclusion in the Horn of Africa hunger crisis: Lessons from the 2021 JMCNA data for Somalia

Humanitarian organizations must communicate in the languages of affected communities to offer an effective response to the hunger crisis in Somalia and the wider Horn of Africa. Data from the 2021 Joint Multi-Cluster Needs Assessment (JMCNA) for Somalia highlighted the marginalization of minority groups from humanitarian assistance, and the role of language as a compounding factor of exclusion. The findings challenge a widely held assumption that Northern Standard Somali is sufficient to communicate with crisis-affected people in Somalia. Responders in Somalia and across the region should learn from those findings:

Act on the 2021 data. Don't wait to have more data in order to act: assume language-based exclusion is happening, and take steps to address it proactively. At a minimum, organizations should:

○ Hire staff at all levels with diverse language skills matching those of the communities served: ensure teams include (or can at least call upon) speakers of all languages and dialects spoken in their operational areas.

○ Incorporate interpreting and translation into budgets and work plans.

○ Ensure feedback mechanisms are accessible and widely advertised in a range of languages.

○ Review procurement and hiring practices for language and other identity bias.

Collect language and communication data from now on, both in needs assessments and as standard information to request of program participants.
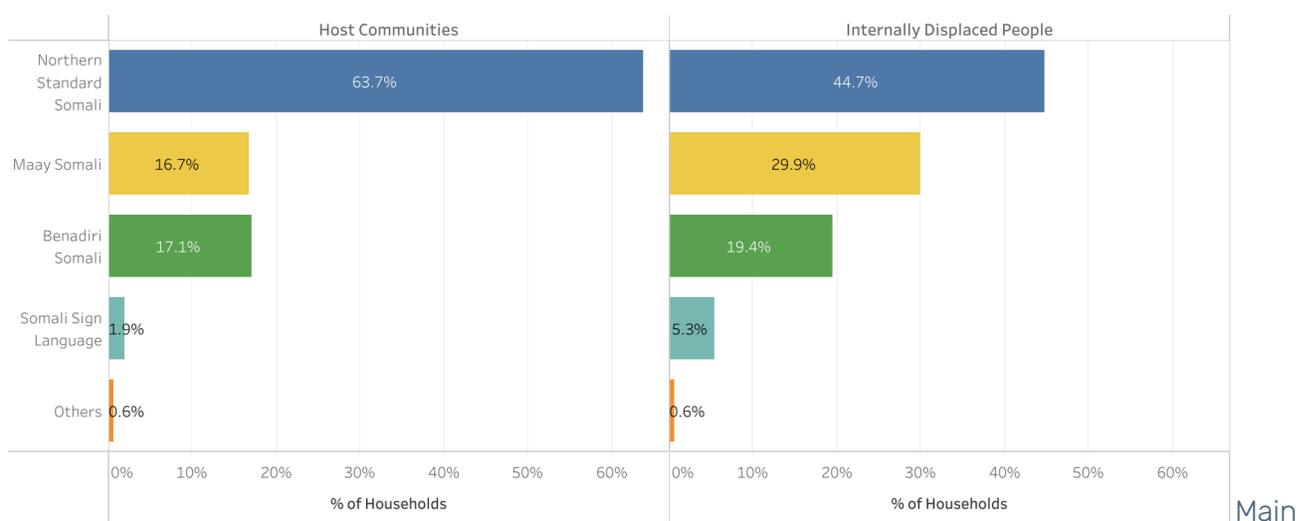
○ Include at least "What is the main language you use at home?" as a standard demographic indicator in all data collection among affected people. Ideally, also include "Which other language or languages do members of your household use?" to give a more complete picture.

○ Disaggregate program indicators by main language to track access, participation, outcomes and accountability across language groups and correct imbalances.

○ Use additional standard questions on communication preferences to gather baseline data,[1] and update regularly to capture change, especially where displacement is ongoing.

○ Treat language data as sensitive data, and consult local experts on managing sensitivities around language data collection and sharing as part of data collection risk assessments.

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[1] CLEAR Global, Language Questions in Humanitarian Data Collection, downloadable question bank: https://translatorswithoutborders.org/language-questions

Progressively build understanding within teams about how best to manage language diversity:

○ Explore how far related languages like Northern Standard Somali, Maay and Benadiri Somali are mutually understood, where points of confusion lie, and what communication strategies can reach all groups.

○ Build glossaries of terms with widely understood and accepted translations in all relevant languages, through discussion with affected communities, teams and linguists. CLEAR Global's existing glossaries offer a starting point.[2]

○ Consult local experts on communication issues for different language communities and incorporate their insights into plans and practices.

2021 findings have lessons for the response to the current emergency

Main language used at home, by population group (2021 JCMNA)

Because REACH included a question on the main language respondents speak at home in the 2021 JMCNA survey, the data can be disaggregated by language. Unfortunately, although [at least 11 languages are used in Somalia](#), few speakers of languages other than Northern Standard, Maay and Benadiri Somali were included in the survey and the results are not representative of the population as a whole. As a result, only limited insights can be drawn. Yet disaggregation still allows us to see some important links between language and a number of key indicators:

● **Northern Standard Somali is the main language for less than 50% of internally displaced respondents**. Northern Standard Somali speakers accounted for 58.7% of the total JMCNA sample, and 44.7% of internally displaced respondents. In contrast, Maay and Benadiri Somali speakers combined represented 37.8% of the total, but 49.3% of those who were internally displaced. Communicating primarily in Northern Standard Somali may therefore be less effective with internally displaced peoples than with non-displaced communities.

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[2] CLEAR Global, glossary web apps: https://glossaries.translatorswb.org/

- **Maay speakers were more likely to feel they had been denied humanitarian assistance**. Maay speakers were overrepresented among both internally displaced and non-displaced households who reported being denied assistance. Within this group, Maay speakers were much more likely to cite minority clan membership as a reason.

- **Poor access to information made it harder for some marginalized language speakers to get support**. Households speaking minority languages were slightly more likely to report facing barriers to accessing humanitarian assistance. The most common barrier reported was a lack of access to information, which was reported by Benadiri speakers more than other groups.

- **Sign language users were largely excluded from decision-making and complaint mechanisms**. While they made up only a small proportion of the JCMNA sample, almost all Somali Sign Language users reported feeling unable to influence site-level decisions. This group was also overrepresented within the majority of the sample who didn't know how to make a complaint about humanitarian services.

For further analysis, see here.

Tackling language-based exclusion is key to addressing realities and perceptions of skewed assistance in the food emergency

Acting on this data is essential to ensure the response to Somalia's acute food emergency is governed by humanitarian principles. Greater attention to the language of communication can both help ensure that assistance is actually provided on the basis of need, and tackle counterproductive perceptions that it is available for some groups only. Humanitarian organizations need to know the languages and communication preferences of intended users of their services. And they need to use that information to staff and resource those services to be accessible, relevant and accountable to the people who need them, whatever their language.

While it is not news that humanitarian assistance in Somalia is harder to access for some groups than others, the role of language in that exclusion has not been widely recognized. Patterns of exclusion suggested by the findings above challenge a widely held perception within the response that Northern Standard Somali is used and understood by all. This perception is partly informed by assumptions that Maay and Benadiri Somali, often referred to as "dialects", are close enough to the Northern Standard "dialect" to be mutually understandable. Similar assumptions in other contexts have been found to be inaccurate, with serious implications for some groups' ability to access information and services and make themselves heard. A study of comprehension between speakers of related Somali languages, points of confusion and how they can be overcome is overdue.

Others have described the tendency of the aid system to reproduce processes of exclusion that exist within Somali society, as they do in every society, so that some groups have easier access to

assistance than others.[3] Previous periods of acute food insecurity or famine highlighted the importance of ensuring that the way humanitarian assistance is provided doesn't further marginalize minority groups. To be effective in tackling these structural problems, as they have committed to doing,[4] humanitarians need to understand how language compounds other factors of exclusion, and act accordingly.

Language barriers disproportionately exclude women, older people and people living with disabilities within marginalized communities

What the household-level snapshot provided by the 2021 JMCNA doesn't tell us is how language barriers can increase an individual's exposure to harm, while also diminishing their chances of overcoming it. But we know from research in other contexts that this is the case.

Speakers of marginalized languages typically learn a dominant or official language in school: in Somalia that language is Northern Standard Somali. So those sections of society most routinely excluded from education in any context will be those who most miss out on information, participation and access if humanitarians communicate only or mostly in the dominant language. In most societies, women and girls, older people, people living with disabilities, and highly marginalized communities, castes or clans have disproportionately limited access to education. In Somalia only a tiny proportion of girls get an education: most women from minority clans will not be confident in the national language.

If they have to rely on better educated Northern Standard Somali speakers - who may typically be younger men from more dominant clans - to make themselves heard, then their views can be filtered through the priorities of their intermediary. If their access to aid relies on the same people, then marginalized language speakers can become vulnerable to extortion and abuse.

So the JMCNA finding that Somali Sign Language users feel unable to influence the decisions that affect them is unacceptable but unsurprising. It is likely that less educated members of other language minorities also feel ignored, excluded and denied support - particularly the women, older members, and people living with disabilities.

For now we lack the data to know precisely how language is compounding vulnerability and exclusion among communities affected by hunger in Somalia - and in the other countries at risk of famine in the Horn of Africa. Getting that data, in order to address the issue and to track aid access and outcomes, should be on the to-do list for the humanitarian response.

In the meantime, humanitarians should use the data already available, and work on the assumption that communities need information, assistance and opportunities to participate and report in a more diverse range of languages than has been the case to date.

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[3] Nisar Majid, Mohamed Jelle, Guhad Adan, Aydrus Daar, Khalif Abdirahman, Peter Hailey, Nancy Balfour, Andrew Seal, and Daniel Maxwell. Another Humanitarian (and Political) Crisis in Somalia in 2022. Boston: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2022: https://fic.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/Another-Crisis-in-Somalia_6-9.pdf

[4] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2022 Somalia Humanitarian Needs Overview: https://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/2022-somalia-humanitarian-needs-overview

Resources

Data and analysis

Somalia language maps and datasets, and visualizations of the JCMNA data

Downloadable question bank on language and communication preferences

2021 JCMNA brief for Somalia

REACH brief on drought in Somalia, April 2022

Resources in Northern Standard Somali (currently unavailable in other languages of Somalia)

CLEAR Global's multilingual glossaries on PSEA and COVID-19

Core principles on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, IASC plain language version

No Excuse for Abuse, InterAction video for humanitarian staff and contractors

About CLEAR Global

Our mission is to help people get vital information and be heard, whatever language they speak. We help our partner organizations to listen to and communicate effectively with the communities they serve. We translate messages and documents into local languages, support audio translations and pictorial information, and advise on two-way communication. We also work with partners to field test and revise materials to improve comprehension and impact. This work is informed by research, language mapping and assessments of target populations' communication needs. We also develop language technology solutions for community engagement.

For more information visit our website or contact us at info@clearglobal.org.

About REACH

REACH Initiative facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT). REACH began working in Somalia in 2012 to fill information gaps and to provide timely data on the humanitarian needs of displaced and vulnerable populations. REACH implements or supports several research projects in Somalia, including the annual Joint Multi Cluster Needs Assessment (JMCNA), which informs the Humanitarian Needs Overview and Humanitarian Response Plan.

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