

Language use in Somalia: Quantitative research findings

An analysis of language data collected in REACH's Assessment of Hard-to-Reach Areas

Summary: what you absolutely need to know

An estimated 13 million people in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya need humanitarian assistance because of drought triggered by three consecutive failed rainy seasons. Households in the affected areas are experiencing crop failures, lack of water, and significant livestock deaths. Analysis of data collected between October and November 2022 as part of REACH's Assessment of Hard-to-Reach Areas covering the situation in 17 inaccessible districts of Somalia shows some clear trends in relation to language and access to information and services.

- **There is a high degree of language diversity in the hard-to-reach areas assessed**, with 74% of respondents citing more than one language spoken in their settlement of origin. Mahaa (Northern Standard Somali) and Maay Somali are the most widely used languages across most areas assessed, but in many communities the minority languages Benadiri Somali, Mushunguli and Kibajuni are also spoken.
- **Communities which use minority languages experience higher barriers to accessing information, healthcare and services and aid**, although food insecurity and other issues affect nearly all communities across Somalia.
- **Mushunguli-speaking communities in the study are most marginalized due to language and communication issues** - in particular in Bu'aale and Jamaame districts. Benadiri-speaking settlements also frequently face barriers, in particular in Qandala and Caluula districts.

Recommendations to responding organizations

These findings demonstrate that responding organizations should:

- **Focus efforts to address language barriers to:**
 - Mushunguli-speakers in Bu'aale and Jamaame districts.
 - Benadiri speakers in Qandala and Caluula districts.
- **Continue to collect data on language in future data collections** to monitor language-based barriers and needs on an on-going basis and increase response-wide understanding of language-based exclusion.

A note on language dominance in this report

[The 2021 Joint Multi-Cluster Needs Assessment \(JMCNA\)](#) for Somalia records [11 languages in use](#). The JMCNA indicates that Northern Standard Somali (Mahaa) is the most widely spoken as a first language (60% of the population), followed by Maay Somali (20%) and Benadiri Somali (18%). The country's official languages are Northern Standard Somali and Maay. Though both Mahaa and Maay are considered official languages in the constitution, Mahaa is the dominant language in education, government, business and the media throughout Somalia.

In this report, "dominant language" is used to refer to the most widely spoken language for the given district or settlement only. In the wider humanitarian response, Mahaa is the most widely used language and most NGO staff are Mahaa-speaking. Non-Mahaa speakers are more likely to experience language barriers accessing services and communicating with aid workers. For more information, read our report on language challenges for internally displaced speakers of different languages of Somalia.

Language-based marginalization

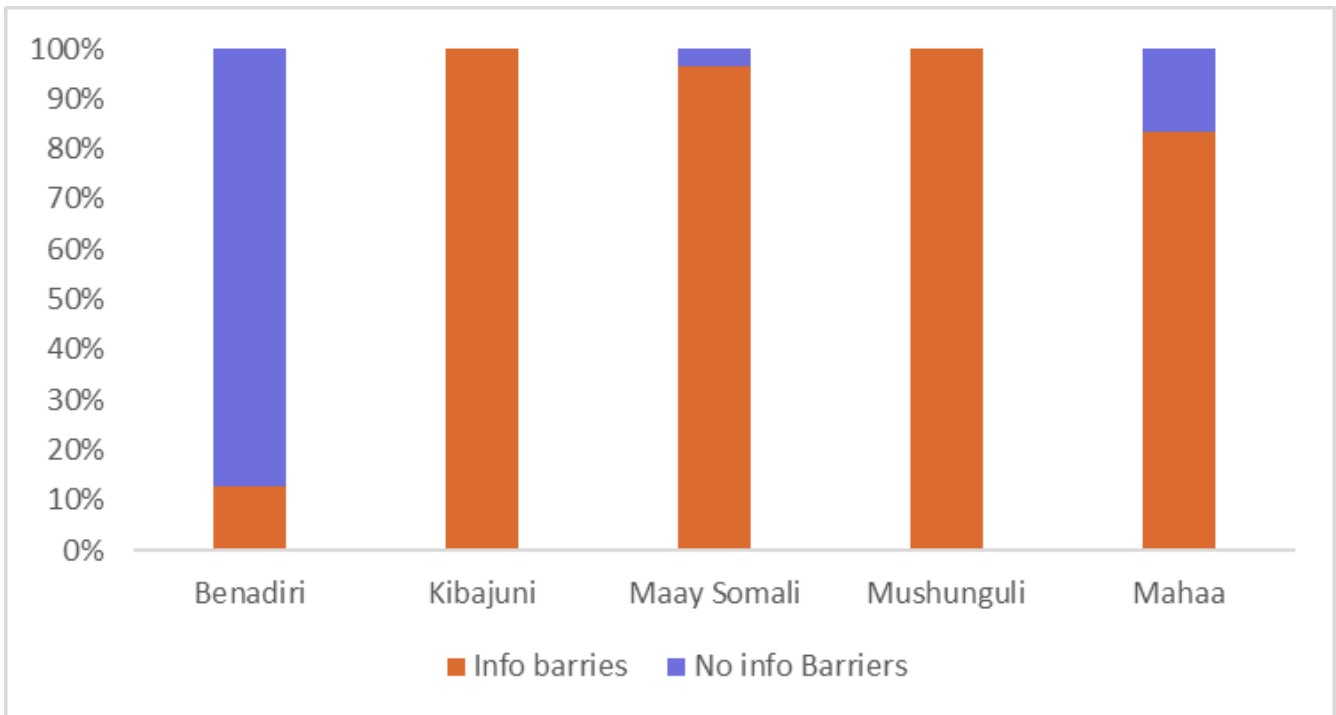
Demonstrated link between language and access to services

Our analysis of language against key questions in the survey relating to access and barriers demonstrates that there is a relationship between language and access to services in a number of different sectors.

Many communities face barriers to accessing information

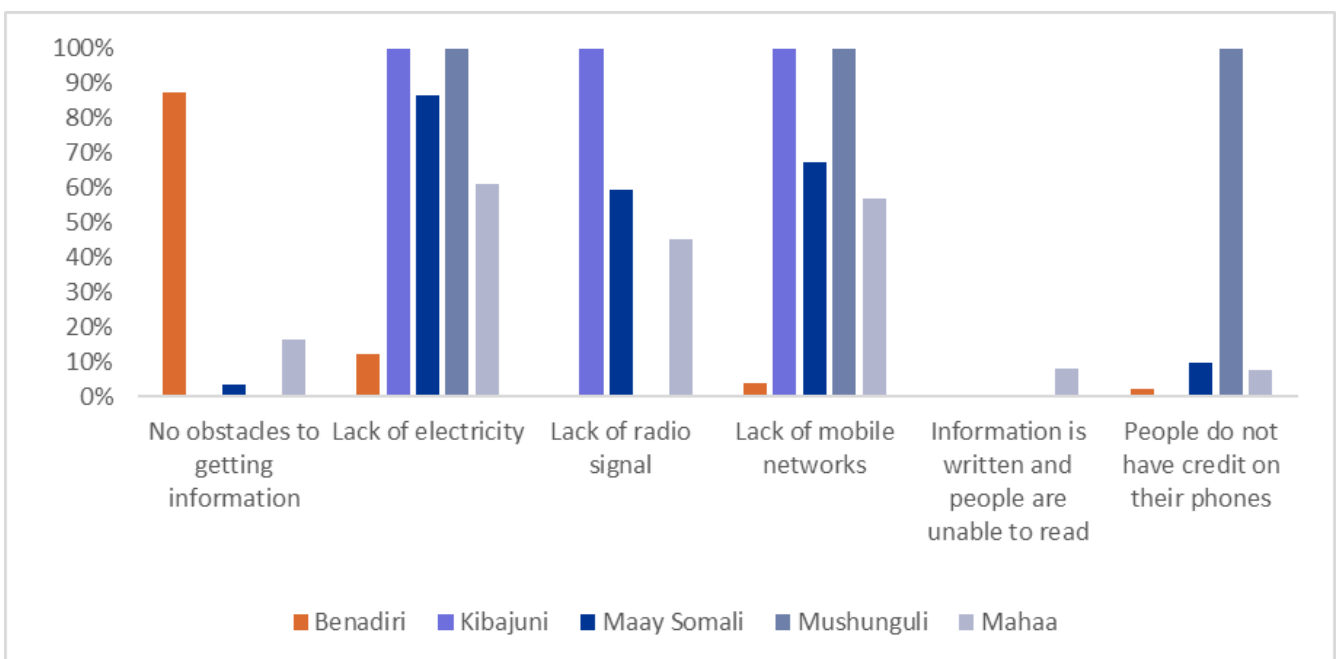
All Kibajuni and Mushunguli-speaking settlements faced barriers to information, along with most Maay and Mahaa-speaking settlements. However, the majority of Benadiri-speaking settlements did not cite barriers to receiving information (fig. 1).

Fig 1. Information Barriers vs Language Group



The most common barriers to receiving information were the lack of electricity, lack of mobile networks and lack of radio signal (fig 2). Mushunguli speakers are more likely to report a lack of phone credits and Kibajuni speakers lack signal for radio and mobile. It also is notable that 8% of respondents who report speaking Mahaa in their settlement cited written information in a context of low or no literacy as a barrier.

Fig 2. Information Barriers vs Language Group

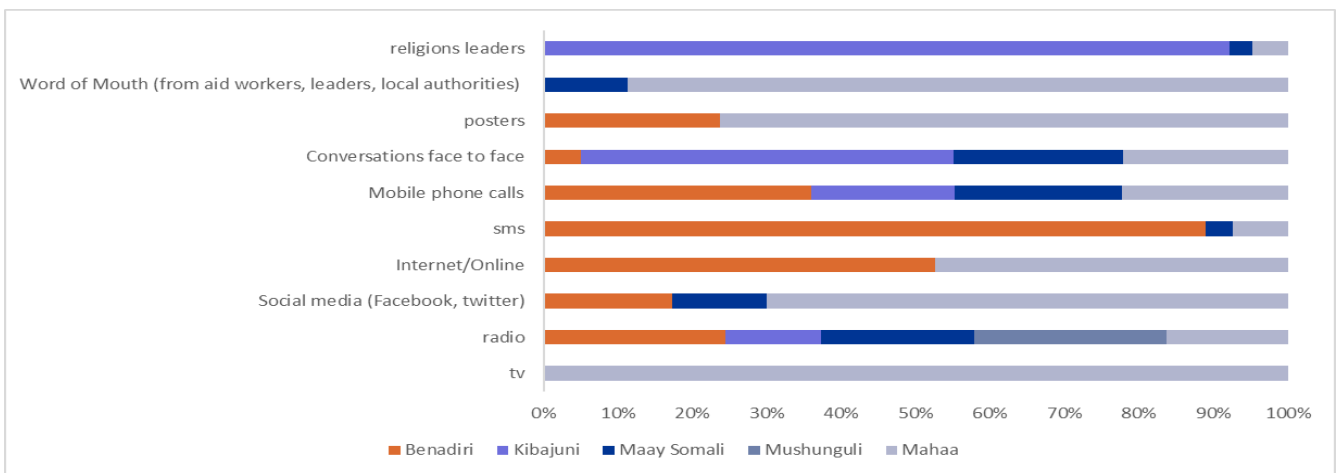


Preferred communication channels vary between language communities

Respondents who used non-dominant languages in their settlement (Benadiri, Kibajuni, Mushunguli) were more likely to use TV (100%), radio (95%), SMS (71%), and phone calls (94%) as their preferred communication channels (fig 3). However, informants from settlements where dominant languages are spoken did not report TV as a preferred channel, but did include having conversations face to face.

Settlements where Mahaa is spoken were more likely to use social media (Facebook, Twitter), internet and SMS. However, settlements where dominant languages are spoken have 54% greater access to mobile phone networks than the population from settlements of non-dominant languages.

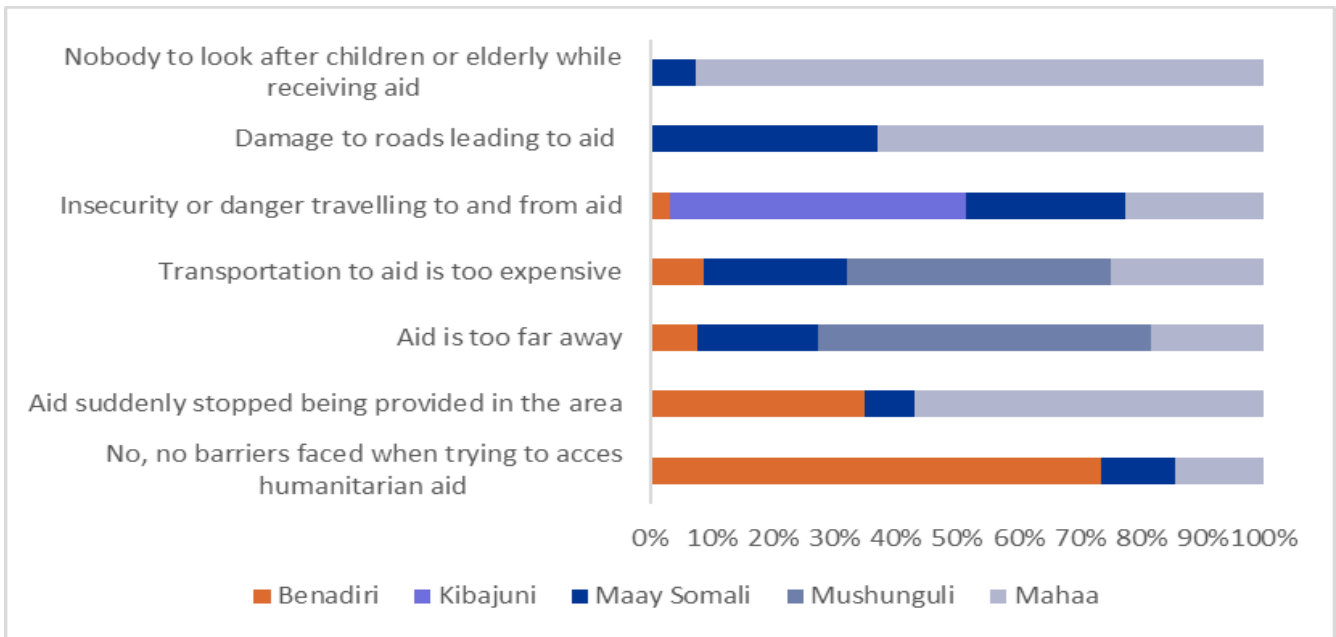
Fig 3. Preferred Communication Channels vs Language



Kibajuni and Mushunguli speaking communities face barriers to receiving aid

For the informants from settlements where dominant languages are spoken, a higher number of barriers to receiving aid were observed; the respondents focused on economic barriers to access and insecurity. In settlements where Benadiri is spoken, people were less likely to face barriers to receiving aid; however, they also noted that aid suddenly stopped being provided in the area. Mushunguli speakers faced barriers relating to physically reaching aid - both distance and cost of transport, and Kibajuni speakers faced insecurity whilst travelling.

Fig 4. Aid barriers vs Primary Languages of settlements

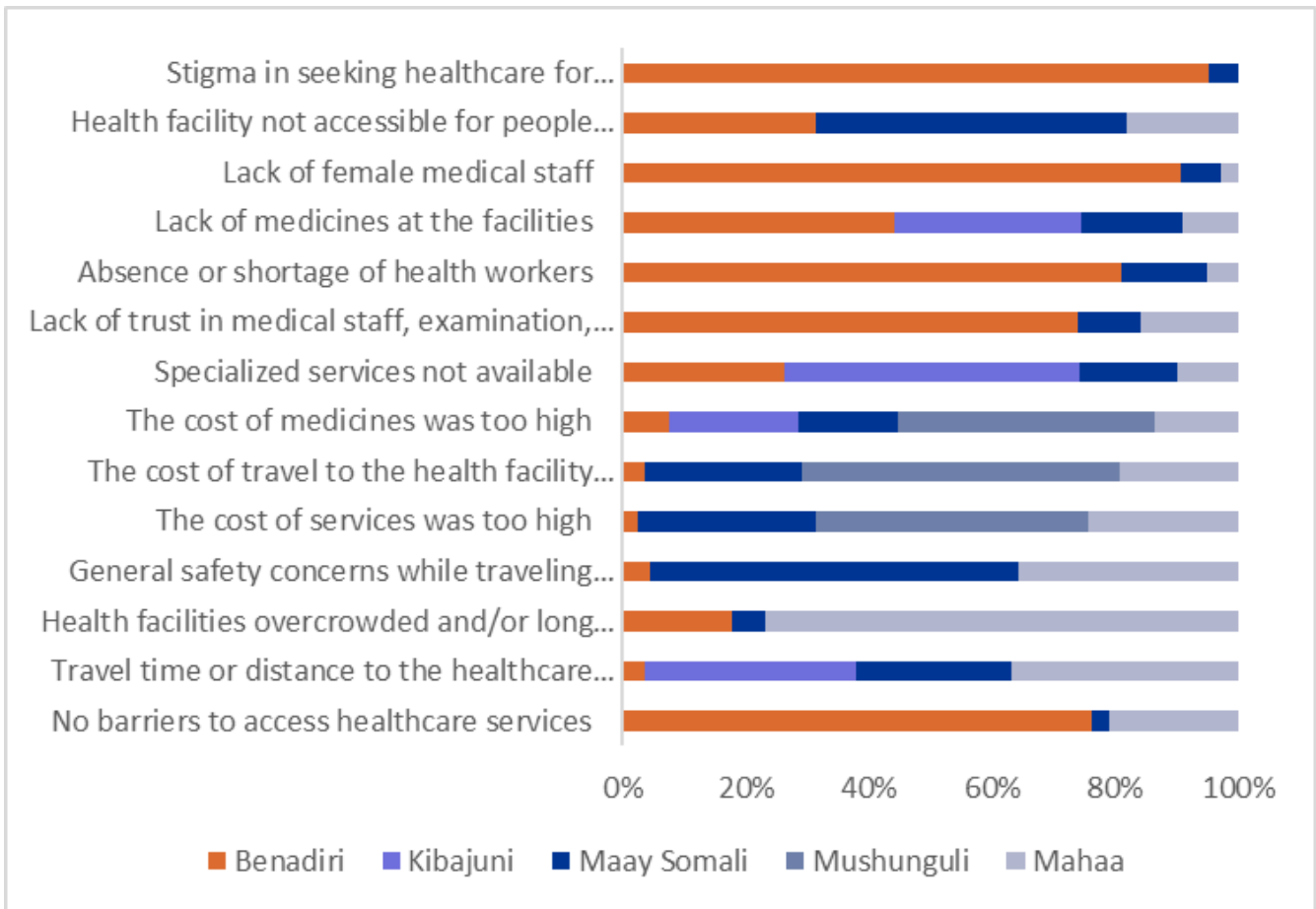


Benadiri speakers lack trust in health service staff

People who speak Maay, Mahaa, Kibajuni and Mushunguli in their settlement report that the main barriers to accessing health care services are associated with costs and distance. Respondents who use Benadiri in their settlement face barriers related to lack of trust towards staff, lack of staff overall and lack of female staff, and barriers to accessing specialised services (fig. 5). These barriers relate more to interactions with staff, so this may reflect Benadiri speakers struggling to reach or communicate with appropriate individuals due to language barriers.

In settlements in Adan Yabaal and Kurtunwaarey districts, a higher incidence of barriers to accessing healthcare were cited, mainly in those settlements where Benadiri (12%, 13% respectively) and Mahaa (5%, 8% respectively) are spoken.

Fig 5. Health Barriers vs Language Group

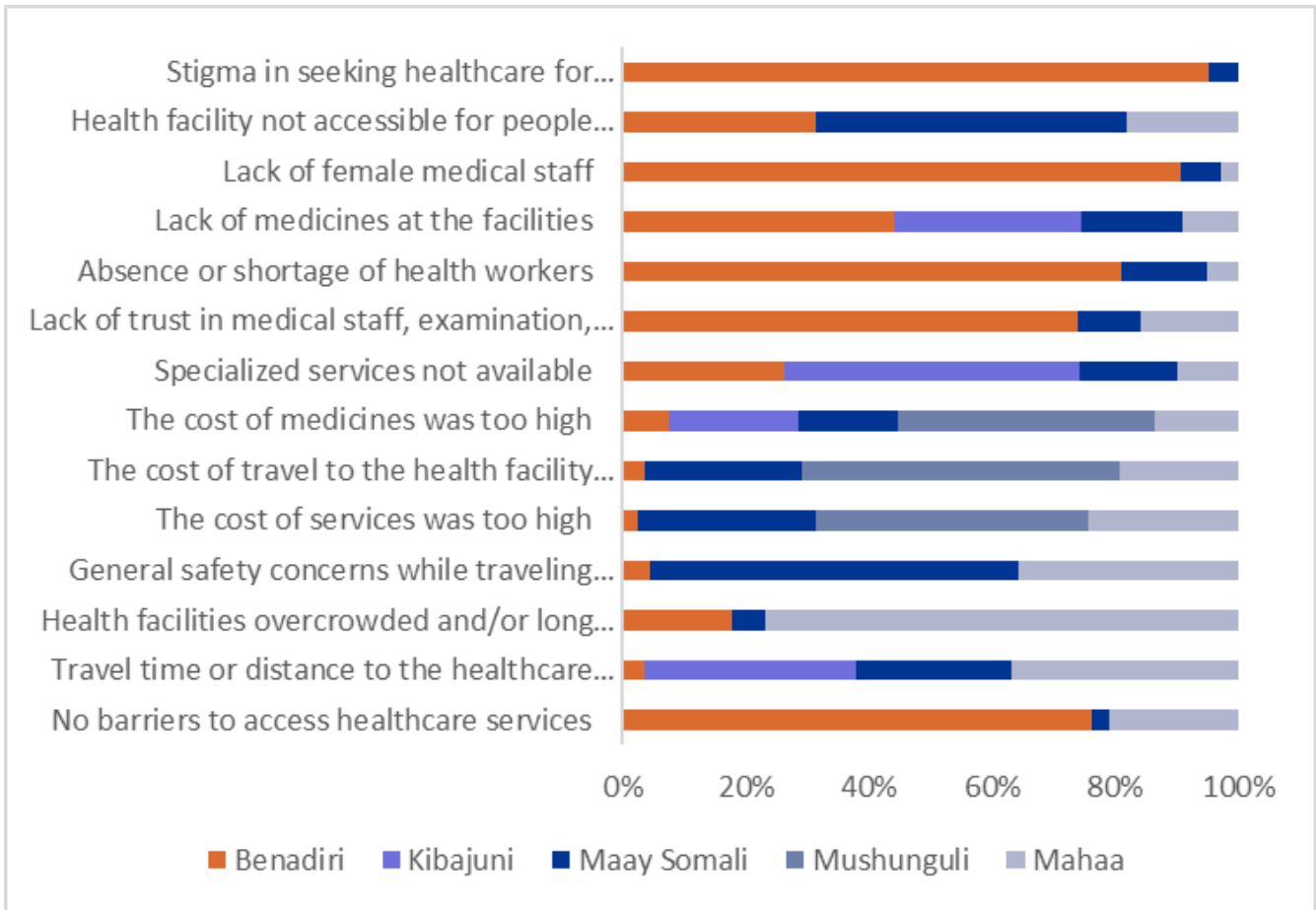


Speakers of less dominant languages have limited options for coping with food shortages

Communities speaking primarily dominant languages also differed from those using less widely spoken languages in their strategies in response to shortages of food or money. The dominant language-speaking settlements tend to use a greater number of strategies, such as selling real estate assets, selling milk, migrating to further rangelands and sending families to IDP camps to receive food aid. These strategies are not observed in the reports of those informants in which non-dominant languages are spoken in the settlements (fig. 6). This may suggest that speakers of the less dominant languages have a more limited set of options due to communication difficulties, which leads to seeking assistance within their communities in times of difficulty.

Communities speaking all languages except for Mushunguli borrowed food or money as their main strategy in their settlement. Mushunguli and Kibajuni speaking settlements also gathered firewood, sent children to eat with neighbours, and begged for food from non-relatives.

Fig 6. Coping strategies (new sources of food) vs Primary Languages of settlements



Mushunguli speaking communities show the highest levels of marginalization

In order to identify which linguistic communities had higher levels of need and are therefore more likely to be experiencing marginalization due to language, we compiled a composite indicator of need. This followed the Multidimensional Poverty Index methodology by Alkire and Foster and utilised key variables around health, security and information.¹

Using this methodology we classified Rab Dhuure, Qansax Dheere, Jamaame, Saakow, Jilib and Badhaadhe districts as high risk. However, all districts are at moderate to high risk - the risk rate per district ranges from 46% to 71%. On average, this population experiences more than three factors of deprivation (fig. 7). Health access was the highest deprivation reported (1,137 informants), followed by food security (1,124 informants).

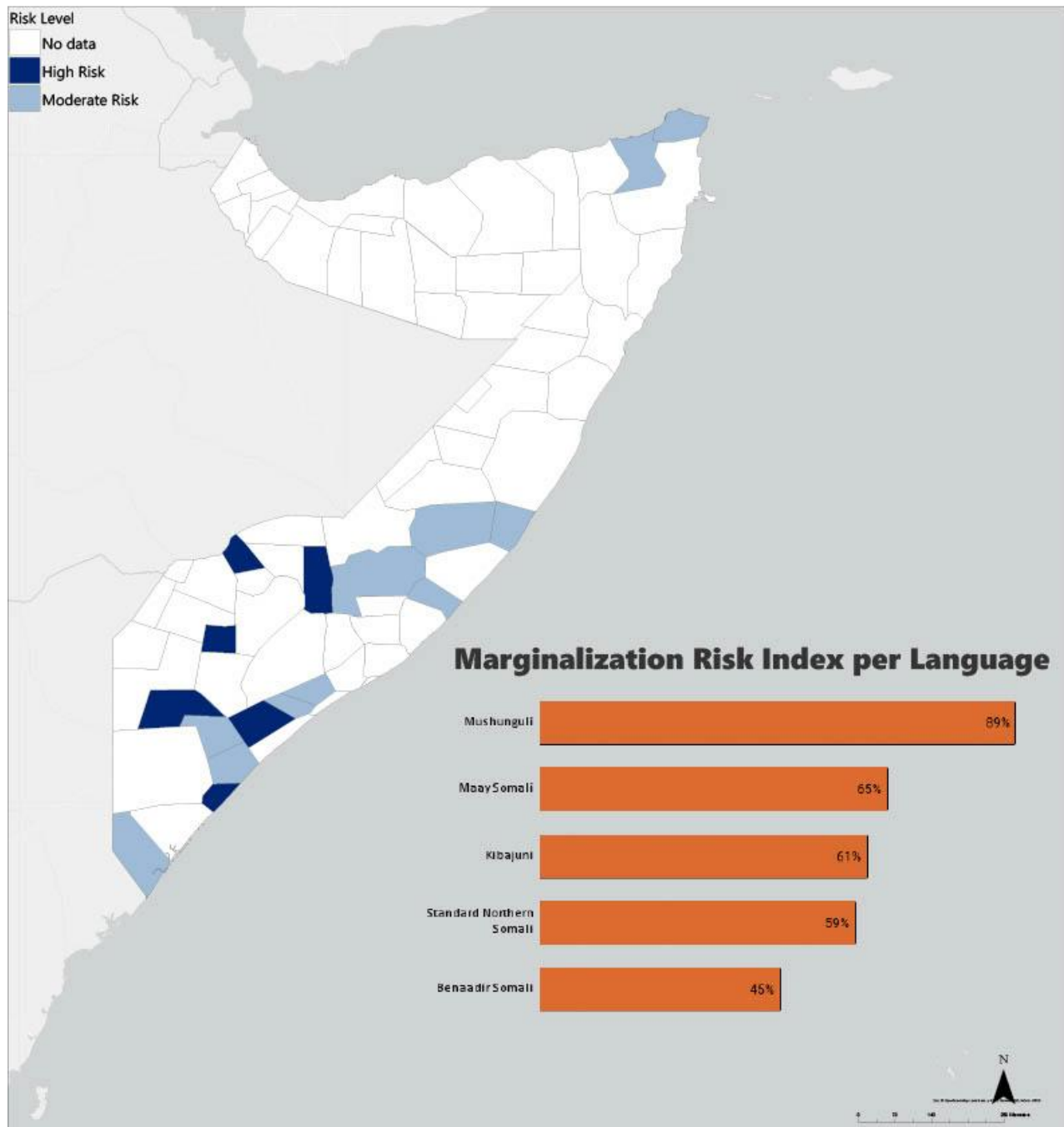
Mushunguli is one of the smallest minority languages of Somalia. This analysis found that Mushunguli speakers faced the highest deprivation among assessed settlements. This may indicate that language

¹ More detail on the calculation of the index can be found here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-mXitca0psdov3jy21wf-wGyvOtvIDzD>

marginalization could be contributing to some of the reported deprivations, such as lack of information, or limited access to health services.

We also found that in Bu'aale and Jamaame districts, Mushunguli was the language of the communities with the highest risk rate. In Qandala and Caluula districts, Benadiri-speaking communities have the highest risk rate (fig. 8). These languages are non-dominant both overall and within those districts, so speakers of those languages are likely to face higher barriers to accessing services and information.

Fig 7: Marginalization Risk by District and Language²



The Marginalization Risk Index for the 17 hard-to-reach districts aim to identify the districts with recurrent needs in health, food security, information, and others that are summarized in a indicator, showing the level of needs according to specific limits. The index is proposed using a composite average, which is generated through the dichotomous variables, which represent whether a person is deprived in any of the selected categories.

March 2023.

Source:
REACH

Hard Areas to Reach

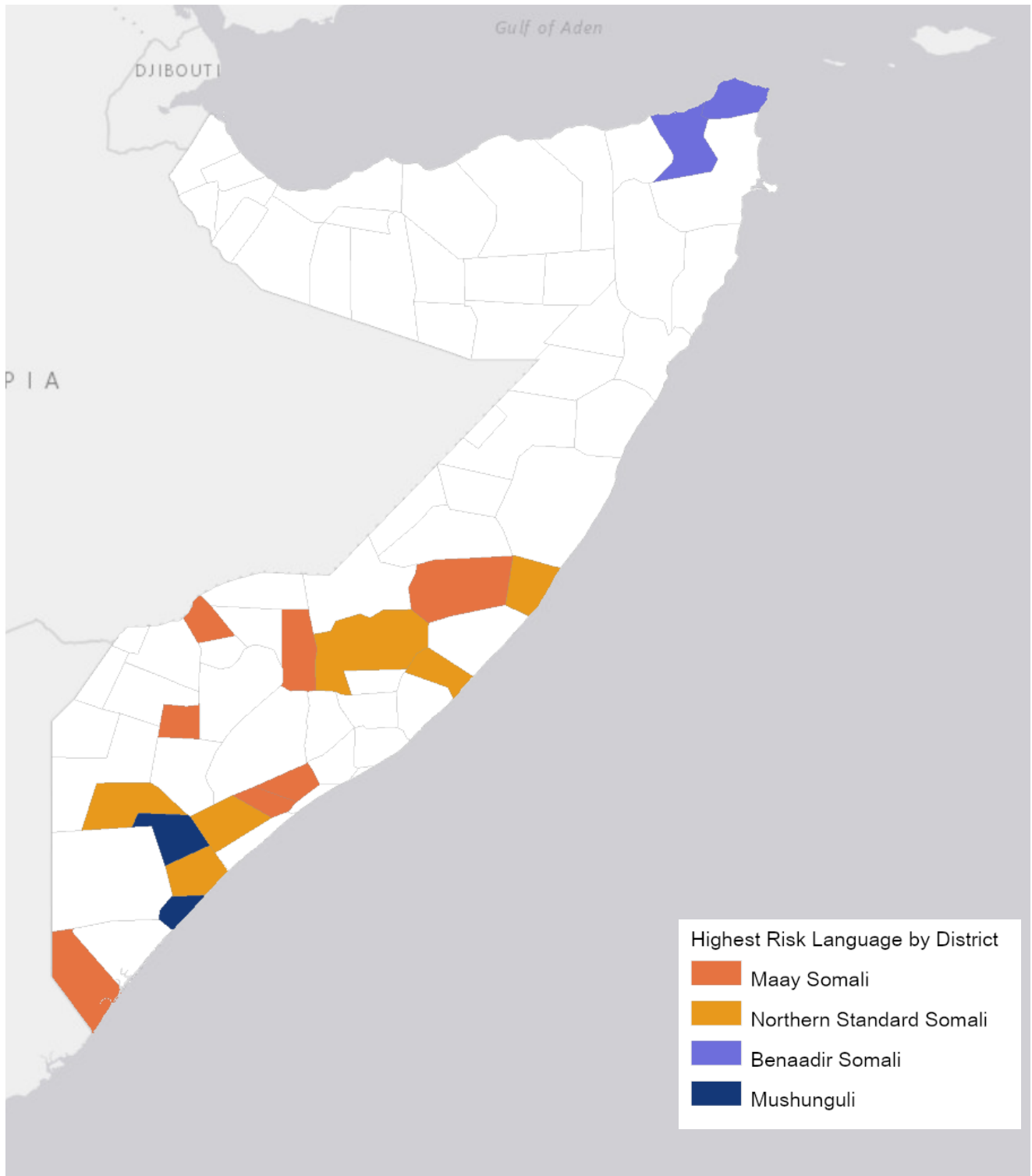
October - November 2022



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² The maps used in this report refer to Benadiri as Benaadir Somalia, and Mahaa as Northern Standard Somali.

Fig 8: Highest Marginalization Risk Languages by District

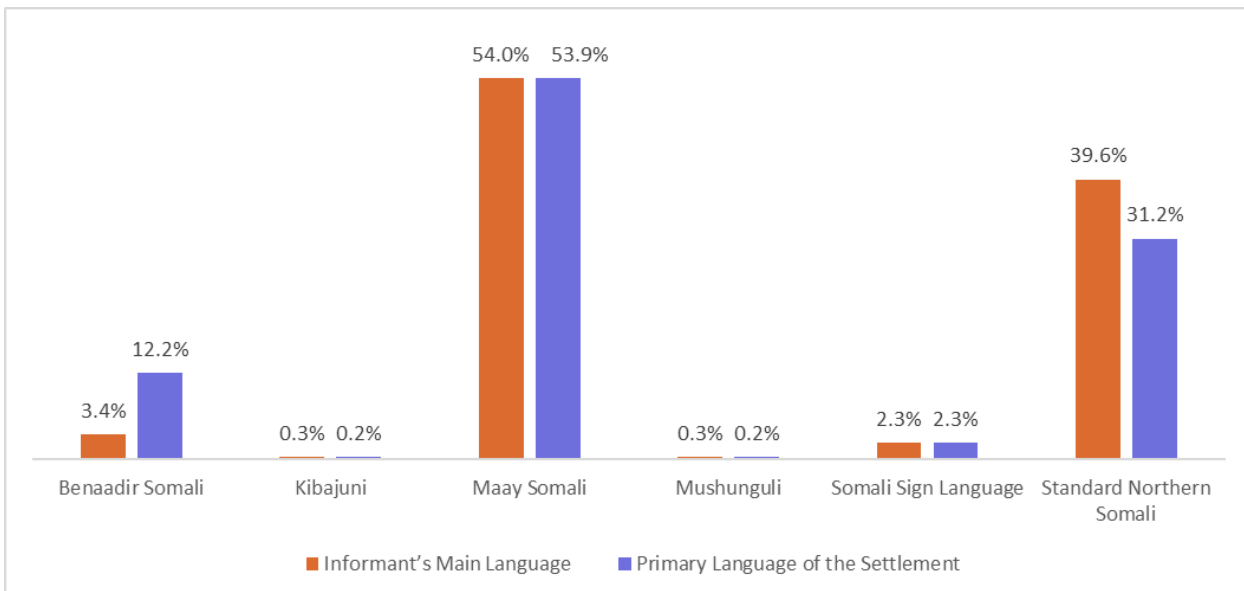


Language Use Overview: Hard-to-Reach areas

The questionnaire for REACH’s Assessment of Hard-to-Reach Areas contained several distinct questions on language: the language that the key informant used as their main language at home (referred to in this report as ‘Informant’s Main Language’), the most common language used in the informant’s settlement of origin (‘Primary Language of the Settlement’), the second most common language used in the informant’s settlement of origin (‘Secondary Language of the Settlement’) and other languages used in the informant’s settlement of origin (‘Other Languages of the Settlement’).

Maay Somali and Mahaa were the most commonly reported languages for both the informants’ main language and the primary language of the settlement, with Benadiri, Kibajuni and Mushunguli in the minority (fig. 9). The proportions of respondents’ language was similar overall to the languages of the settlements. However, a larger proportion of settlements were identified as primarily Benadiri-speaking, compared to the informants. More informants indicated Mahaa as their main language compared to the proportion of settlements where Mahaa is the primary language. This may indicate a risk that marginalized language speakers are underrepresented in data collection due to language barriers in the assessment process.

Fig 9: Informant’s Main Language and Primary Language of the Settlement³



For most districts the most common informants’ main language corresponded with the most common primary languages of the settlements. However, as shown in Maps 1 and 2, there were some notable

³ Somali Sign Language was cited by a relatively high number of individuals. However this does not correspond with other data, in particular data on disability and is likely a reporting error. Therefore, we have excluded these records from the dataset for the remainder of the analysis.

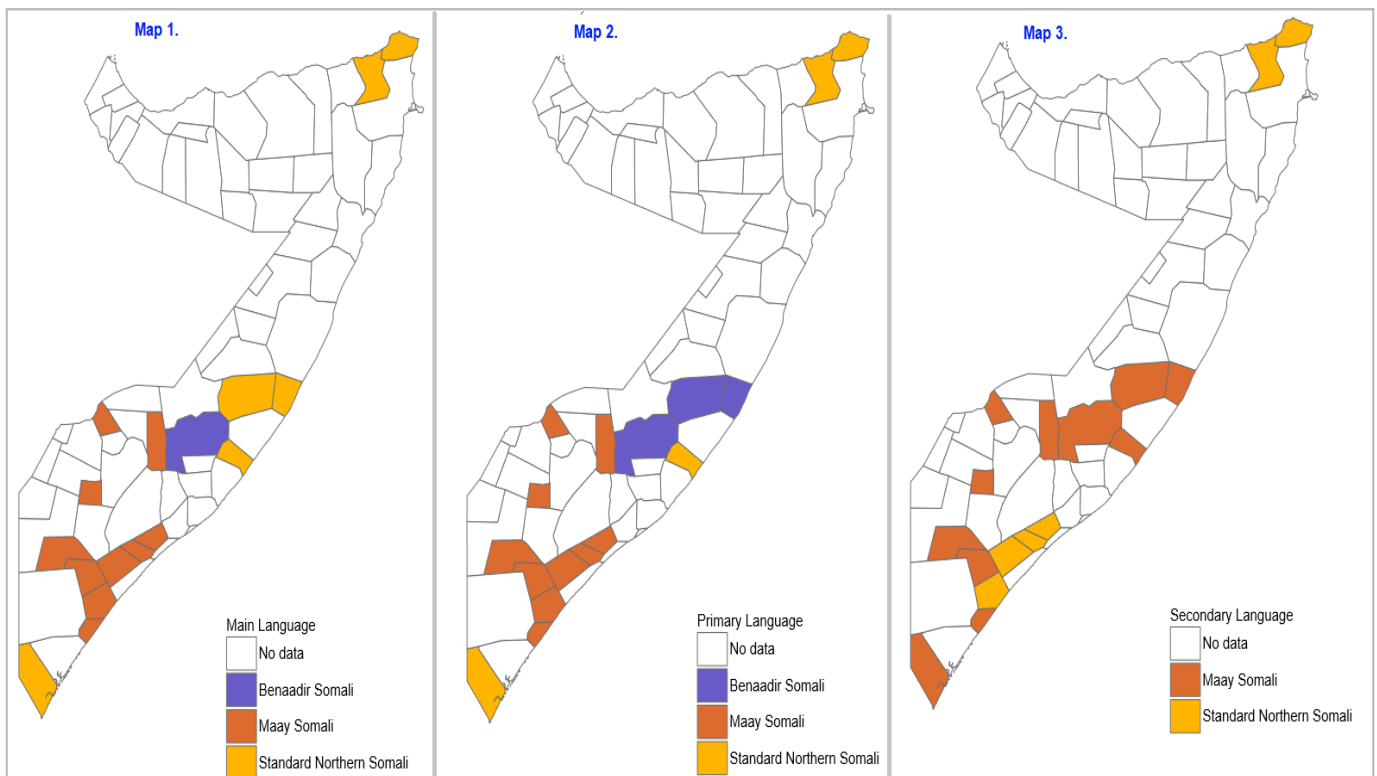
differences: specifically, in Ceel Buur and Xaradheere, the most commonly cited language of settlements was Benadiri, while the most common language of informants was Mahaa.

A chi-square test between the primary language of the settlement and the informant's main language showed that these variables were associated with 95% confidence. However, the same test between main language and second language showed that there is no statistically significant association between the two variables. This suggests that informants tend to have a greater level of awareness about the most common language spoken in their community, which are mostly dominant languages in the settlements, and do not have as much awareness of the secondary languages used in the community. They therefore may be less likely to be aware of the information needs of speakers of non-dominant languages.

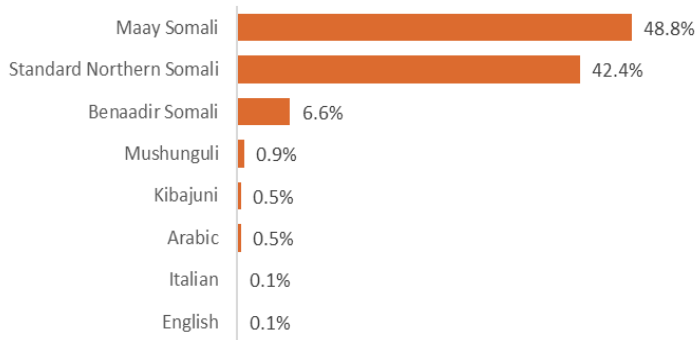
Map 1. Main Language

Map 2. Primary Language

Map 3. Secondary Language



The survey also asked about other languages spoken in their settlements - specifically the 'second most common language spoken by households' (Map 3). In 29% of responses, informants noted that only one language was spoken in their settlement. However in the remaining cases (71%), two or more languages were spoken. This demonstrates that there is in fact a much greater diversity of languages used in the settlements than shown by the primary language of the settlement. In total there are eight languages cited as the "second most spoken language in settlements", including Arabic, English and Italian. The proportion of these languages also varies significantly from one district to another (fig. 10).

Fig 10. Secondary languages of settlements

Data Source

The findings presented here are based on data collected through Key Informant Interviews conducted between October and November 2022 as part of REACH's Hard-to-Reach (H2R) Areas Assessment of Somalia available here: <https://www.reachresourcecentre.info/country/somalia/cycle/704/#cycle-704>.

The H2R assessment used 1,150 key informant interviews and focus groups to gain an indicative understanding of the situation in 17 inaccessible districts of Somalia. Informants were asked a range of questions about the situation in their settlements of origin including questions on the settlement profile, food security, health, protection, water, sanitation and hygiene, other relevant issues and languages used in the settlement.

Records citing Somali Sign Language were excluded from the majority of the analysis. We noted an unexpectedly high number of individuals citing this language. However this did not correspond with other data, in particular data on disability and is likely a reporting error. Therefore, we have excluded these records from the dataset for the remainder of the analysis.

How CLEAR Global can help

CLEAR Global's 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, train staff and volunteers, 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.

Existing resources to support effective two-way communication between people affected by the war in Ukraine and those aiming to support them are available on our website:

- How to work with interpreters and translators
- Practical tips for community interpreters
- Plain language tipsheet
- Interactive language map of Ukraine
- Language data platform
- Training to support effective humanitarian communication (topics include humanitarian interpreting, communication in emergencies, and plain language)

For more information visit our [website](#) or contact us at info@clearglobal.org.

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The H2H Network is driving change across the humanitarian system, getting more to people in need, by coordinating and convening humanitarian-to-humanitarian support and services. The H2H Network and its fund are supported by UK aid - from the British people, and the U.S. Agency for International Development - from the American people, and is hosted by the Danish Refugee Council.

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