

# Comprehension Matters

The power of communicating in different languages and formats to reach vulnerable women in northeast Nigeria

September 2018



**TRANSLATORS**  
WITHOUT BORDERS

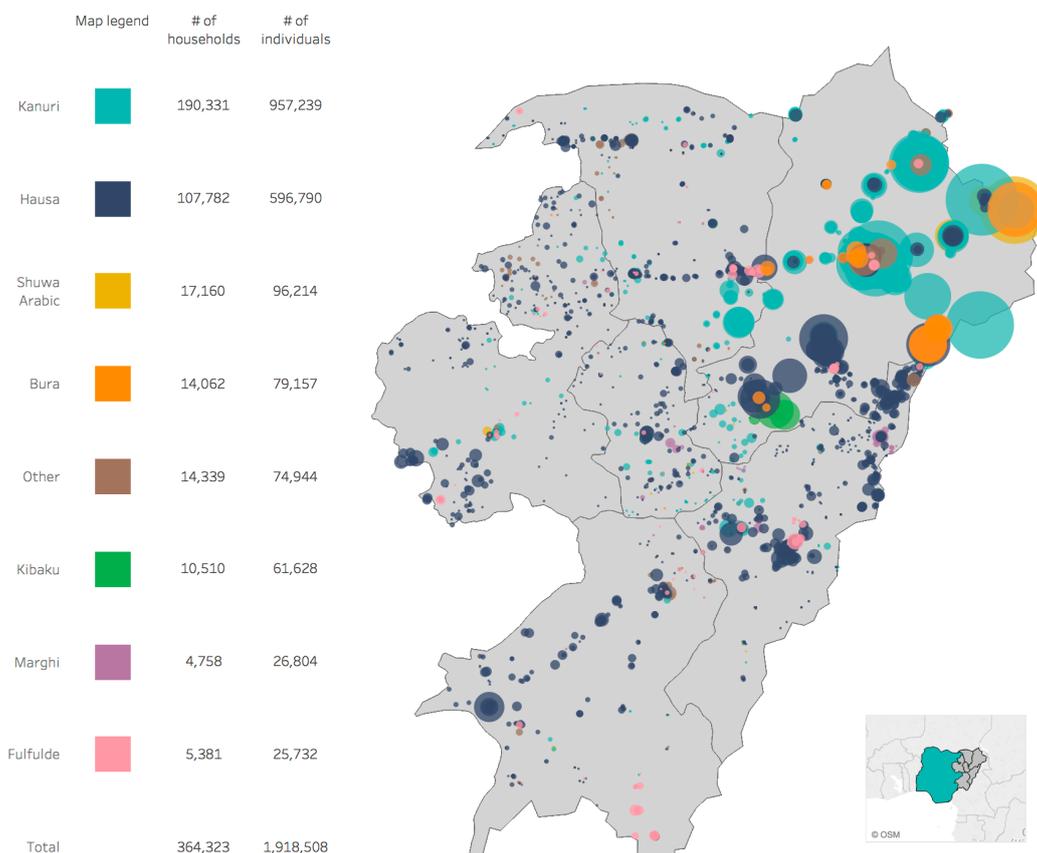
Communication has the power to aid or hinder humanitarian efforts when responding to a crisis. A June 2018 comprehension study by Translators without Borders (TWB) in northeast Nigeria demonstrates the impact of format on the effectiveness of humanitarian communication. **The findings show that, for pregnant and breastfeeding women, humanitarian programs should include verbal and audio communication options.** The use of pictures and plain language can help internally displaced people obtain information that allows them to access services and assert their rights.

Translators without Borders (TWB) conducted this study in partnership with Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and its business group Danish Demining Group (DDG). It builds on previous TWB research that found that uneducated women who speak minority languages encounter critical language barriers.

This new research focused specifically on a representative sample of pregnant and breastfeeding women at Farm Centre Camp in Maiduguri, Nigeria. It examined variables such as mother tongue, level of education, and age to determine the best combination of format and language to communicate with the women.

The findings are relevant to the humanitarian response in northeast Nigeria, where populations living in the area have diverse education levels and speak over 30 languages. Kanuri is the dominant language across Borno State, where we conducted the survey, while Hausa is widely used as a regional lingua franca.

### Primary languages by internally displaced people (IDP) site in northeast Nigeria



# Highlights

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The study revealed that humanitarians should consider format, in addition to language, when distributing information to communities:

## **Respondents stated a strong preference for verbal and audio communication.**

Seventy-two percent of the women surveyed preferred audio communication in the form of word-of-mouth or radio.

## **Clear, simple pictorial messaging appears to be more effective than text alone.**

Thirty-one percent of the women correctly answered a question about the key message when it was provided in text format. That figure increased to 46 percent when a picture supported the text. It increased further to 53 percent when the key message was represented by a picture alone, without any text.

## **Picture comprehension levels were higher than text-only comprehension levels across all age groups and education levels.**

## **A communication strategy chiefly reliant on written Hausa and Kanuri will be ineffective.**

Two-thirds of women below the age of 45 did not understand simple written text in Hausa or Kanuri.

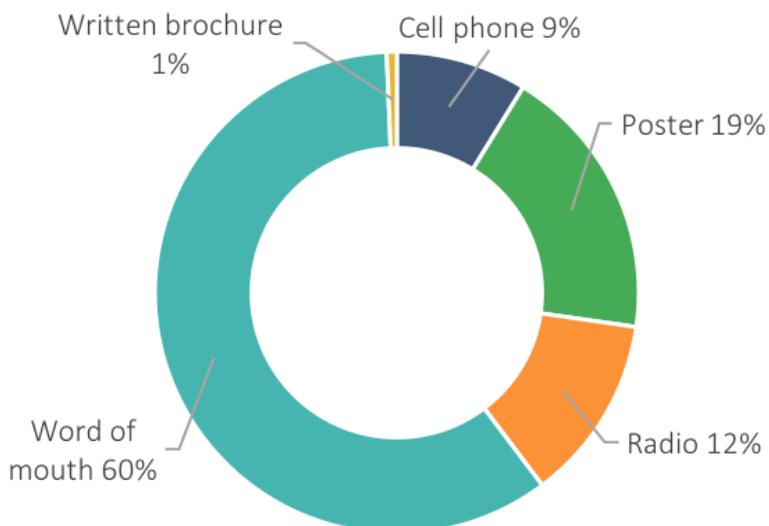


*Enumerators from the Danish Demining Group / Danish Refugee Council work with TWB to conduct research on information comprehension in various languages and formats at Farm Centre IDP Camp in Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria.*

*Photo by Eric DeLuca, Translators without Borders*

# Key findings

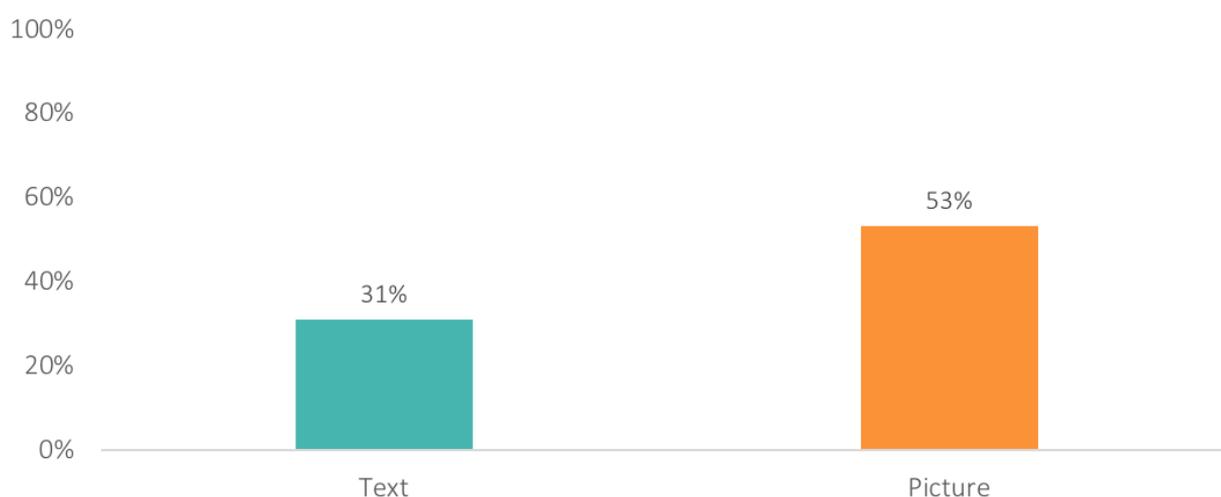
Respondents stated a strong preference for verbal and audio communication.



**Figure 1: Respondents' preferred format for receiving information.**

Seventy-two percent preferred audio communication (predominantly word-of-mouth, although radio, the primary mass communication medium in audio format, was the preference for 12 percent of the sample).

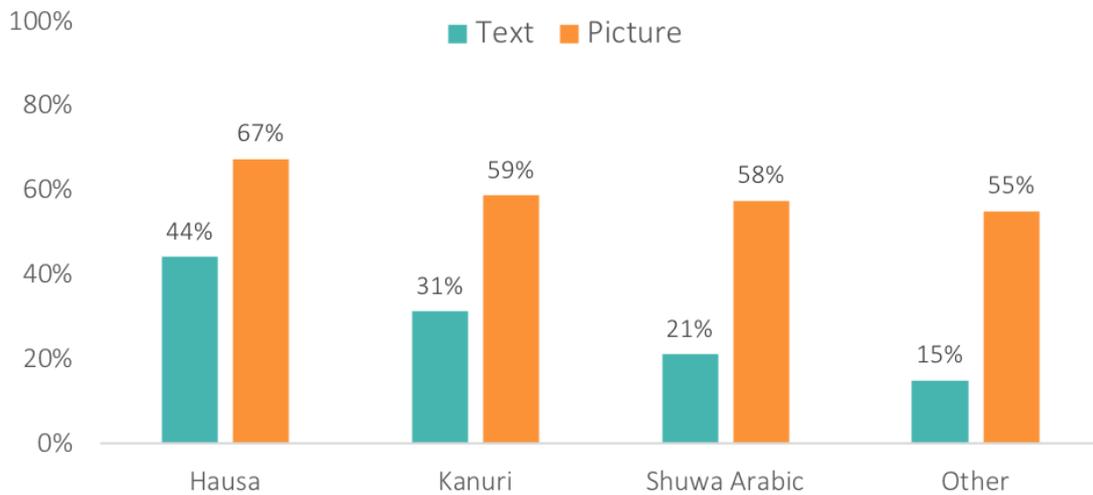
Clear, simple pictorial messaging is more effective than text alone.



**Figure 2: Comprehension rates by format.**

Thirty-one percent of respondents correctly answered a question about the key message when it was provided in text format. When a picture conveying a simple message was provided on its own, over half (53 percent) of the women understood the key message.

The preference for picture messages was clear, regardless of the respondent's mother tongue. This suggests that using a picture markedly increases comprehension.



**Figure 3: Comprehension rates by language and format.**

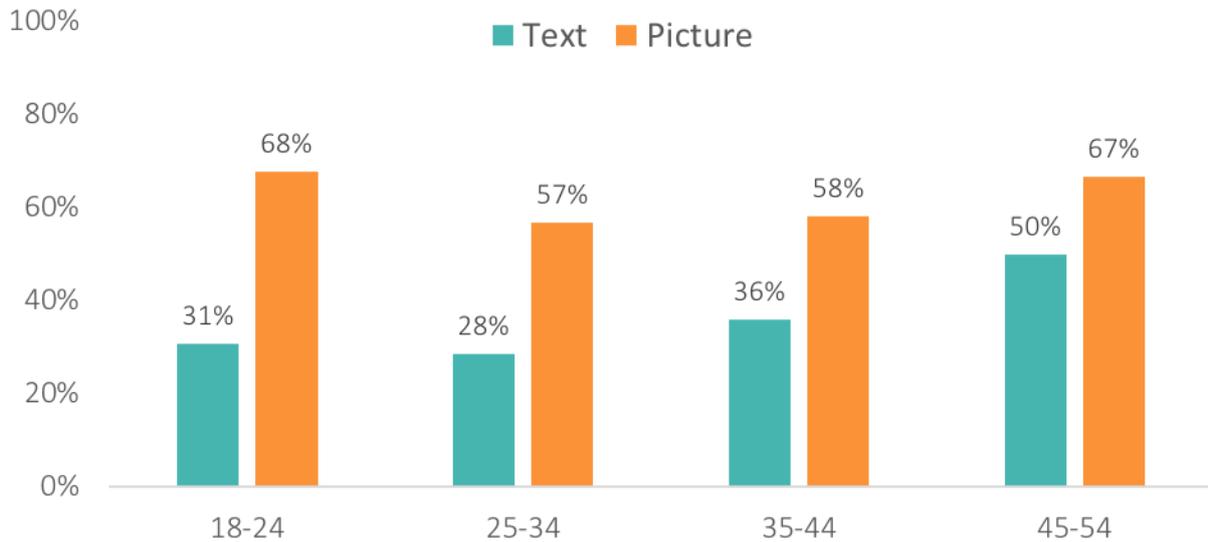
Rates of comprehension were lower for non-Hausa speakers. Only 31 percent of Kanuri, 21 percent of Shuwa Arabic, and 15 percent of other language speakers understood the information in written format. Comprehension of picture messages followed a similar pattern, suggesting reading skills were not the only factor influencing understanding. Note: all testing was conducted using Hausa or Kanuri text.



Farm Centre IDP Camp in Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria.

Photo by Eric DeLuca, Translators without Borders.

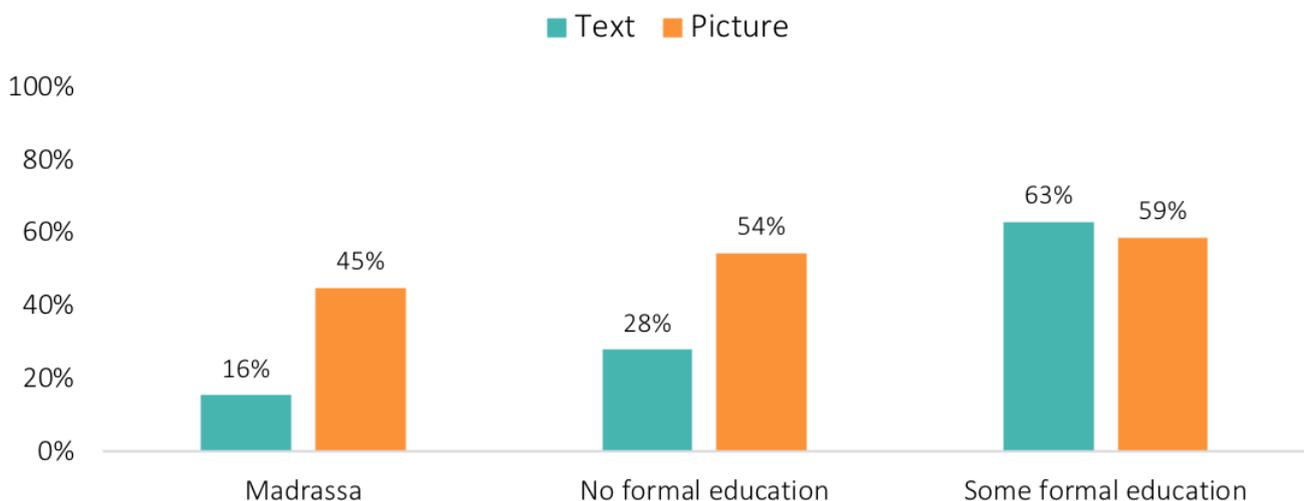
Picture comprehension levels were higher than text-only comprehension levels across all age and education levels. A communication strategy chiefly reliant on written Hausa and Kanuri will be ineffective.



**Figure 4: Comprehension rates by age and format.**

Rates of comprehension, especially for written information, were lowest among women in the 25-34 age bracket. Women aged 45-54 were the most likely to understand written information. Information in picture format was approximately twice as effective as text for women under 35.

Text comprehension rates were low for those with lower education levels.



**Figure 5: Reading comprehension by education level.**

Comprehension rates were low (28 percent on average) for the 65 percent of the sample who had no formal education. Rates more than doubled (63 percent) for those with some formal education. Only 16 percent of those whose highest level of education was a madrassa understood written text.

## What does this mean for your program?

**Format matters.** Consider the needs and preferences of less-educated people when designing information, education and communication materials. This will help reach the most vulnerable and less-literate groups.

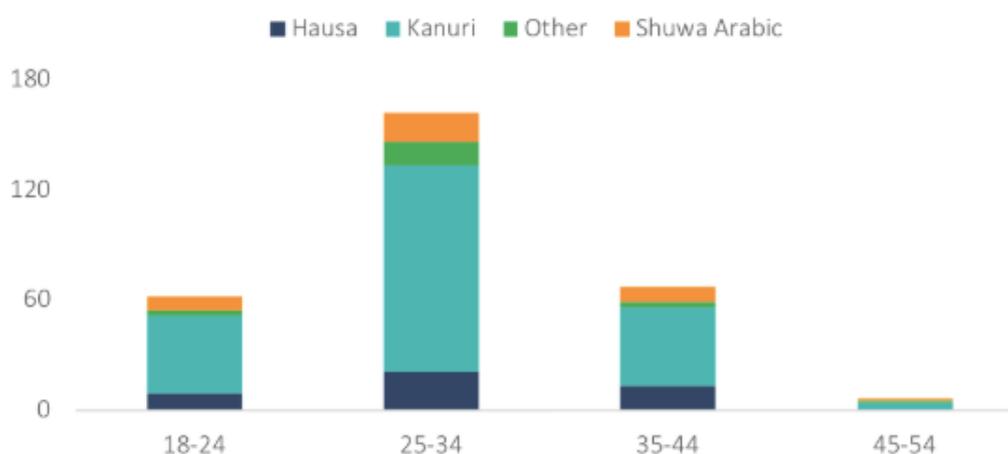
That means:

- Providing a mix of audio and other formats. Audio is best understood by nonnative and nonliterate audiences but simple text or graphics offer the more permanent record needed for information retention and later reference.
- Ensuring written communication uses plain language and is supported by clear pictures.

## Methodology

The June 2018 study was conducted at Farm Centre Camp in Maiduguri, Borno State, northeast Nigeria, and follows comprehension research at five IDP sites in Maiduguri in July 2017, downloadable [here](#). The sample was chosen because pregnant and breastfeeding women represent a key target group for many humanitarian programs and communication activities.

The majority of women (76 percent) surveyed were between the ages of 18 and 34. Sixty-three percent were breastfeeding, 35 percent were pregnant, and two percent were both pregnant and breastfeeding. More than two-thirds of the sample (68 percent) spoke Kanuri as their mother tongue – unsurprising given that Farm Centre Camp is predominantly Kanuri-speaking. Despite its use as one of the primary lingua francas in the region, Hausa was the mother tongue for only 14 percent of the population. Languages classified as “other” include: Bura, Fulfulde, Gwoza, Lele, Mandara, and Marghi.



**Figure 6: Sample population by age and mother tongue.**

*Since the sample only included women who were either pregnant or breastfeeding, this type of demographic profile is to be expected. Kanuri was the most common mother tongue spoken, followed by Hausa, Shuwa Arabic, Fulfulde, and Mandara (in that order).*

The survey had two parts: a structured demographic interview followed by in-person testing. The comprehension test consisted of the enumerators showing the respondents four lines of text and two pictures, one at a time. One of the pictures also included a few words of text. The respondents were asked questions about each piece of content. They could only answer the questions correctly if they understood the content.

This technique helps control for pre-exposure to information, as the questions are specific to the presented content. For example, we asked the question, “According to this picture, what should you do?” instead of the more leading question, “If you see a landmine, what should you do?”

The enumerators rated each answer as either “correct” or “incorrect.” If a respondent answered 50 percent or more questions correctly, we categorized them as having understood the information.

A team of DRC enumerators administered the survey. They provided the questions in either Kanuri or Hausa, depending on the respondent’s stated preference. Seventy-one percent of respondents were tested in their mother tongue. This test included content related to maternal health and mine risk education.



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This research was conducted by Translators without Borders (TWB), the Danish Demining Group (DDG), and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

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