



COVID-19 OR KORONA BAIROS?

Communicating on the “disease that affects your breathing” in northeast Nigeria

People need detailed information on COVID-19 transmission and prevention in clear, accurate and accessible language.

In crises like the COVID-19 pandemic it is essential to communicate in a language that is clear, accurate, and accessible. Only information in a language that people understand can save lives.

To guide that communication, TWB conducted a rapid focus group discussion with 11 linguists working in eight languages that cover 83% of the crisis affected households in northeast Nigeria. The group discussed popular perceptions related to COVID-19 terminology in northeast Nigerian languages. This brief provides an overview to inform humanitarian communication on COVID-19.

Language use doesn't distinguish between virus and disease

Most Nigerians have a good understanding of the medical concept of a virus and viral infections. This is due to previous disease outbreaks and sensitization campaigns around HIV/AIDS.

When talking about viruses, speakers of most Nigerian languages usually use a generic term that means virus, bacteria, germs, or any disease-causing organism. In Kanuri, the term used is *kuri kwasaye*, literally meaning an insect causing illness. In some Nigerian



languages the term also refers to diseases in general. The Mandara term *kurza* translates as virus, bacteria, germ, and disease.

COVID-19 is not covered by these generic terms. When talking of COVID-19 people refer specifically to the coronavirus.

COVID-19 terminology varies

Speakers of most northeast Nigerian languages commonly refer to COVID-19 as “corona” or “coronavirus”. They understand the term “COVID-19” as well, but as a more intellectual word used mostly in administrative communication. They use “corona” or “coronavirus” to refer to the virus as well as the disease, and rarely use the name SARS-CoV-2. We can prevent confusion by referring to the virus using the terms most people will recognize.

The spelling of “corona” and “coronavirus” varies by language. Most languages in northeast Nigeria use a “K” to produce the sound of a hard “C.” Mandara speakers refer to COVID-19 as *korona*. Kibaku speakers use the term *korona vairus*. Bura speakers say *korona vairus* or *KOVID-19*. In Kanuri, coronavirus translates to *korona bairos* since there is no “v” in the Kanuri alphabet. In Hausa, COVID-19 is translated as *cuta mai sarke numfashi*, literally meaning “disease that affects your breathing”. This localized translation of COVID-19 was coined in the early days of the outbreak, when the virus did not yet have a name.

The table below gives examples of terms from TWB’s COVID-19 glossary. Organizations should use these terms to ensure clear and consistent communication on COVID-19.

The words used cause confusion about COVID-19 and other respiratory diseases

The symptoms of COVID-19 are generally understood, but there is confusion about the differences between it and other respiratory diseases like flu or asthma and how to distinguish between them. Some people consulted were unsure if a person with pneumonia would automatically get sick with COVID-19.

Simple descriptive translations and explanations like “disease that affects your breathing” help people to better understand the impact of a disease and how it will affect them. While useful in clarifying confusing concepts, descriptive translations can make the distinction between one disease and another less clear.

To address this confusion, people need detailed medical information in clear and accessible language to understand COVID-19 specifically. Explanations that lack detail risk downplaying the severity of COVID-19 and can lead to misconceptions.

“Social distancing” is not understood

People don’t clearly understand the concept of “[social distancing](#)”. Many don’t support the idea of keeping a distance, feeling it’s not culturally acceptable. Places of worship are still well attended, large family events like weddings still take place, and people continue to shake hands.

It is important to use contextualized translations of “social distancing” to ensure that the concept is conveyed correctly. Literal translations of “social distancing” create confusion. The more accurate term “physical distancing” can help people better understand how to protect themselves and others from COVID-19.

In Hausa, people use *nesa da juna* for “physical distancing”, which literally translates as keeping away from each other. Another common Hausa translation is *tsayawa ko zama da raata tsakaanin juuna*, which means standing or sitting with some distance between people. Marghi speakers say *Nda pudum ara mji*, which translates as staying away from people. And in Shuwa Arabic “physical distancing” is described as sitting with space between oneself and others.

People need information, not just instructions

People understand basic information on the symptoms of COVID-19, handwashing, and keeping a physical distance. But they often lack the detail and practical guidance to understand for example why handwashing is important or how they can practice physical distancing in their daily lives.

People need to know why and how they are supposed to follow protection measures. Clear, accurate, and accessible information is critical for effective health messaging. Detailed information in plain language will be essential to control the transmission of COVID-19.

What this means for your program

Organizations involved in the COVID-19 response can increase their impact with three practical actions:

Base risk communication on language data. TWB has produced a [language map](#) for

northeast Nigeria including nineteen languages. To identify the most effective languages, formats, and channels for communicating on COVID-19, organizations should include [four simple language questions](#) in needs assessments and surveys.

Use glossaries to ensure consistent and accurate communication. TWB has developed a [COVID-19 glossary](#). It includes more than 150 terms related to COVID-19 in Mandara, Bura, Kibaku, Waha, and English. We are regularly updating the glossary and adding further languages.

Apply plain language principles. Plain language will enable people to better use the information they receive. Information in plain and accessible language reduces confusion and has the potential to prevent rumors. TWB has produced [plain language guidance](#) for humanitarian organizations working in the COVID-19 response.

Do you speak COVID-19?

For further information on the importance of language in the response to the pandemic see our [policy brief](#) and visit TWB’s [COVID-19 webpage](#).

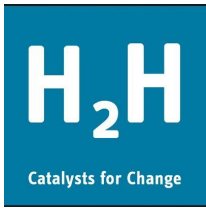
TWB is developing a chatbot in local languages to disseminate information on COVID-19 from partners, answer frequently asked questions, and gather data to tailor future communication.

For more information on TWB’s language support to the COVID-19 response, contact corona@translatorswithoutborders.org

COVID-19 related terminology

Language	COVID-19 / coronavirus	virus	handwashing	physical distancing	Severe acute respiratory infection
<i>Hausa</i>	cuta mai sarke numfashi	ƙwayar cuta	wanke hannu	nesa da juna	tsananin cutar numfashi
<i>Kanuri</i>	korona bairos	kuli kwasaye	musko tulta	wande batau kamman namnami	kam zauro raksa yinjin bama
<i>Shuwa Arabic</i>	coronavirus كُرُونَه فَيْرُس	wajah وَجْه	assalanal eyd عَسَلَانَل عِيد	taba'aidu minal naas walla tagodu baynatku wasi تَبَعِيدُ مِنَ الْبِنَاسِ وَلَا تَعُودُ بَيْنَاتِكُ وَبِيي	wajah albilhayn maknus almulamma bey shu'ulal nifas وَجْهَ الْبِلْهَيْنِ مَكْنُوسِ الْمَلْمِ بِي شُعُولِ الْبِنَاسِ
<i>Marghi</i>	koronavairus	vairus	cinna tsiagu	nda puɗum ara mji	shilgu ga tsukwa lagur mpi
<i>Mandara</i>	korona	kurza	bàrà erva	a nja ɗa ɗe gyékwé a mazla	maɗala guza puwa shifa
<i>Bura</i>	korona vairus, KOVID-19	su rakka nata nca aɗa tsokta wuta wa na ana saɗta shilku	kaci tsi	cangtang ka nwwadzi	shilku na mwavɛr na tsukwa lakur mpika
<i>Kibaku</i>	korona vairus	vairus	katsa tsai	njai ntalang ntalang	kasuwar ɓuthla nam kulda aka duna
<i>Waha</i>	kuza coronavirus	inat sangat kuza	mboz jivo	labta njaɗa	kuza pagh sunfi kusa tund sosaiya

Source: TWB global COVID-19 glossary, except the translation for COVID-19, supplied by focus group participants



This publication is based on work funded by EU humanitarian aid (ECHO) through IOM, the UN migration agency, and by the UK Department for International Development. The COVID-19 glossary is part of a project funded by the H2H Fund, a funding mechanism for H2H Network members, which is supported by UK aid from the UK government. The views expressed in this publication should not be taken, in any way, to reflect the official opinion of the European Union, nor do the views expressed necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies. The European Commission and the UK government are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.