



Language challenges in complaints and feedback mechanisms in Borno and Adamawa States

Effective communication is essential for true accountability

Conflict-affected people and humanitarian organizations often struggle to communicate effectively with one another in northeast Nigeria. Language diversity, low literacy levels and structural inequalities combine to place women, older people, and other less educated individuals at a particular disadvantage when receiving and sharing critical information. This disconnect has implications for ensuring humanitarian services achieve their full reach, impact and accountability.

To understand the challenges and potential solutions, Translators without Borders carried out a qualitative study of the situation. This summary outlines key findings and recommends actions to help improve accountability in northeast Nigeria through more effective two-way communication.

We found that humanitarian organizations are largely prioritizing verbal communication in a context of low literacy, particularly among women and older people. But a reliance on spoken Hausa and written English makes it difficult for all but the most educated and native Hausa speakers to engage in real dialogue with humanitarians. The result is less effective and transparent complaints and feedback mechanisms.

Solutions lie in:

- recruiting more humanitarian staff who speak local languages
- training bilingual community members in the basics of interpreting
- and expanding the use of audio, pictorial, and remote communication in local languages.

We drew our findings and recommendations from a series of discussions about language dynamics in accountability in February-March 2020. We spoke directly with 170 conflict-affected people (IDPs and host community members). We also interviewed 13 humanitarian staff specializing in Protection, Child Protection, GBV, ICLA, CCCM, and M&E. We limited our research to people living and working in four LGAs in Borno and Adamawa States: Gwoza, Mubi North, Mubi South, and Michika. However, we think the factors we identified are relevant throughout northeast Nigeria.

Language and literacy barriers undermine trust and limit access to feedback mechanisms for women and older people		
Currently...	Our research suggests that...	So we recommend that responders...
Suggestion boxes remain a standard feedback mechanism, but are inaccessible to less literate individuals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Non-literate individuals - disproportionately women and older people - can't use suggestion boxes to lodge complaints. Indeed, none of the women interviewed had used a suggestion box. ● Humanitarians interviewed recognized that suggestion boxes are not suitable for non-literate individuals. Yet some humanitarian and community respondents indicated that people are nonetheless encouraged to put their 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reconsider the use of suggestion boxes.

	<p>complaints in writing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Some men of different ages said they had asked a friend or relative to write a complaint down for them. ● Those who do provide written feedback in English or Hausa are often not able to communicate clearly in those languages, according to humanitarians. ● Affected people voiced a strong preference for verbal feedback mechanisms. 	
<p>Community members prefer to give feedback verbally. But those who are less comfortable in Hausa - including most women and older men - are not confident that their feedback is received accurately.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Young men register more complaints than women and older men. Women and older men are generally less literate and less comfortable speaking Hausa if it is not their first language. ● Male and female community members of all ages felt feedback systems would be improved if they could communicate in local languages. ● IDPs and host community members reported using assessments, focus group discussions, conversations with humanitarians, and community meetings to provide feedback. These verbal communication channels were the main or only feedback mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Recruit more speakers of local languages for community engagement roles. ● Expand the use of community meetings for listening to affected people's concerns and complaints. ● Maintain and if possible expand in-person collection of feedback from vulnerable groups, taking steps to minimize the health risks to all involved.

	<p>used by women interviewed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People largely provide verbal feedback in Hausa. But women in Michika report Hausa-speaking humanitarians don't understand their accent. Adolescent girls in Gwoza Camp also reported problems making themselves understood in Hausa because of accent differences. ● Residents in Bukaji (Mubi North) noted that humanitarians visit older people and people with disabilities for feedback. Community members say they interpret in such cases, as the individuals concerned often do not speak and understand Hausa. 	
<p>Because of language barriers, many lack confidence that their concerns are accurately relayed and understood.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Women in Gwoza Wakane host community, Mubi North and Michika called for agencies to work with community volunteers to register feedback. This was because the volunteers would speak local languages and the community would trust them to relay the information accurately. ● At the same time, young people in GSS Gwoza camp and women in Gwoza 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure that both humanitarian staff and individuals acting as interpreters receive training and guidance on good practice to provide better assurance that people's concerns are accurately relayed. Training will be more impactful if customized for each audience - humanitarian staff and community volunteers - given their different roles and levels of engagement with communities.

	<p>Wakane host community complained that their feedback is not interpreted accurately.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Some felt that audio recordings would be less open to mistranslation (or what they called “contamination”). ● Only respondents in Gwoza were aware of audio recording as a feedback option, and only women in Michika mentioned the option of hotlines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expand the use of audio recording systems and hotlines in local languages.
<p>People prefer to discuss sensitive issues in person with an appropriate humanitarian staff member. However, respondents are not comfortable discussing misconduct by aid workers and other sensitive issues in person.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Women and adolescent girls prefer to discuss problems and sensitive issues with humanitarians in safe spaces. In Gwoza, in both the camp and the host community surveyed, this happens at the women’s center. In other locations women and girls discuss such issues privately with humanitarian staff. ● Some community members said there were issues they would not feel comfortable discussing with humanitarian staff. These included misconduct by humanitarians, rape, domestic violence or other marital issues, and health issues such as HIV and sexually transmitted diseases. ● Adolescent girls interviewed said they 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explore expanding remote communication tools such as hotlines and chatbots in local languages for reporting misconduct and other confidential issues.

	<p>would not want to raise menstrual hygiene with a male humanitarian.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Private family, marital or menstrual issues were named as problems respondents would not ask someone else to write feedback about for them. 	
<p>These communication challenges make it harder to establish a relationship of trust. Community members broadly trust humanitarians, but are not always sure they will act on complaints received.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● As humanitarians and SEMA representatives don't always note verbal feedback in writing, respondents are unsure whether they pay attention to it. ● Young men in Gwoza Camp felt their complaints were not listened to, and that written complaints were destroyed. ● Women in Mubi North complained that, with the exception of NRC, agencies conducted assessments but never reported back to the community or provided assistance on that basis. ● Respondents of all ages said they trust the humanitarians they report complaints to. Several said they do not trust their community leaders or politicians, the other groups they report concerns to. They feel these groups are serving only their own 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Maintain direct communication with community members where possible, with trained interpreting support from within the community as needed. ● Make feedback to communities a routine component of needs assessments. ● Pay attention to matters of dress and punctuality in interactions with community members in order to demonstrate respect.

	<p>interests.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some respondents complained of humanitarians dressing in a way they found disrespectful, or showing a lack of respect by missing or arriving late for meetings. • Asked what humanitarians could do to earn greater trust, community members highlighted taking timely action in response to complaints, acting on commitments made, ensuring confidentiality, and working with trusted community volunteers. One group said: "We do not have a problem getting a response from anyone if the person respects us." 	
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<p>Responding to feedback and providing program information in Hausa and English limits the reach, impact and transparency of communication efforts</p>		
<p>Currently...</p>	<p>Our research suggests that...</p>	<p>So we recommend that responders...</p>
<p>Community members at all locations had received responses to their feedback in</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When information is relayed through community leaders, they summarize it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand the use of posters, audio messaging, and in-person outreach in

<p>Hausa. Hausa is not the primary language for most residents of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe States. As a result, many women and older people in particular have less opportunity to understand and discuss the responses received.</p>	<p>and people feel they are not fully informed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Respondents across all locations and demographics indicated that humanitarians respond to feedback in Hausa.● People aged under 40 understand responses to community feedback if they are given verbally in Hausa. Older speakers of languages other than Hausa prefer to receive information in their own languages. Male respondents at GSS Gwoza camp indicated that residents there speak 22 languages.● A majority of community members in all age groups and at all locations prefer to receive responses to their complaints verbally.● Community members in Gwoza were generally satisfied that they understand the responses to complaints, and that humanitarians take action on that basis. This may be because more of them are native Hausa speakers than respondents in other locations. MSNA data indicates that 68% of households in Gwoza LGA speak Hausa as a primary language, more	<p>local languages to reduce rumor and confusion.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Refer to existing data on the languages people speak and understand locally, and use those languages to communicate about program plans and respond to community feedback.● Promote trust by providing interpreting support in local languages where possible, and Hausa at a minimum, to communicate directly, rather than through a community leader.● Develop communication resources for the hardest-to-reach audiences in order to reach everyone.
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	<p>than double the average of 31% for northeast Nigeria.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● No audio information provision is available, but respondents expressed an interest in receiving information in local languages, for instance through loudspeakers in public places. They suggested this would be appropriate to provide responses to feedback that affected residents generally.● Some community members stressed the importance of not just receiving a response, but being able to question it. Residents of Gwoza camp and host community said they understood the responses received and were able to ask questions about it. Women in Mubi North called for verbal responses “at meetings where everyone can listen and have an equal chance of asking questions.”	
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<p>Information on humanitarian programs and services is not equally accessible to all. This undermines trust in needs assessment and community feedback systems, and generates frustration and probably more complaints.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Respondents across locations, age groups and sexes voiced frustration with a shortage of effective communication around eligibility criteria, program plans, results of assessments, and responses to community feedback. ● Humanitarians interviewed suggested that women miss out on information shared at camp coordination meetings, which women leaders don't generally attend. ● Community members and humanitarians reported that most verbal communication between them happens in Hausa, and that women and older people in communities have difficulty speaking and understanding Hausa. ● Humanitarians reported that they sometimes have difficulty understanding community members. In some cases but not all, they will call on interpreting support. ● Community members and humanitarians alike feel communication could be improved by working with trained interpreters from the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In addition to the measures above, encourage the participation of women leaders in coordination meetings and other important gatherings. ● Develop, field-test and install signage for humanitarian services in camps, combining clear graphics and simple text in relevant languages. ● Develop and field-test low-text, pictorial content for program information and behavior change communication, and place it in locations where it will be seen by as many people as possible.
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	<p>community.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Posters are largely in English and placed chiefly at the center of IDP camps only. ● The team observed a general lack of signposting of basic services, including toilets. 	
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TWB can help

TWB aims to help improve the reach, impact and accountability of humanitarian action in northeast Nigeria by supporting two-way communication with the affected population in their preferred languages and formats.

Our support is designed as a common service across the response. It builds on similar language advisory support and capacity building provided in Bangladesh, DRC and Mozambique.

TWB's current and planned support to the humanitarian response in northeast Nigeria includes:

- Conducting language and communication assessments and formative research
- Developing training, guidance, and tools for the ongoing response as well as customized content and delivery for Covid-19 frontline responders
- Building a community of translators for local languages
- Providing language support for responders on the ground:

multisectorial glossaries, pictorial messaging, audio translations, including a Covid-19 glossary

- Supporting efforts to enable data collection and accountability in local languages
- Offering language technology and communications solutions to improve information access.

For more information about this study or to find out how Translators without Borders is supporting humanitarian action in northeast Nigeria, visit our website or contact: nigeria@translatorswithoutborders.org



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