LANGUAGE RESOURCE FOR HUMANITARIAN STAFF WORKING IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA.

Language resource guide

Translators without Borders (TWB) has developed this summary of language problems and potential solutions for humanitarians communicating with crisis-affected people in northeast Nigeria. Based on field research and lessons learned, the following suggestions will improve those interactions, whether done remotely or in-person. Modify them as appropriate depending on the sector or context you operate in.

Around the world, speakers of marginalized languages often experience multiple layers of disadvantage, leaving many of them more vulnerable to the consequences of conflict, disaster, and disease. Members of a certain linguistic group may suffer violence, discrimination and persecution. They may be deliberately denied access to essential services, and the freedom to exercise their rights, such as to use their own language, to educate in their own language and to perform their customs and religious rites. As a result, they are often in need of protection and assistance - but they are also some of the hardest to reach for the predominantly English-speaking aid sector. Not speaking or understanding a specific language can impair the right to receive assistance. Limited communication can also mean overlooking needs and protection risks or failing to provide suitable services. Against this background, key humanitarian commitments recognize the importance of language in communication and community engagement, and indeed there is a growing understanding in the humanitarian sector that "communication is aid". The Core Humanitarian Standard demands that we as a humanitarian sector communicate clearly, especially with vulnerable and marginalized groups (Commitment 4). That includes using languages, formats, and channels that different community members can access and understand. International conventions and human rights standards also highlight language as key to ensure people have access to information and to protect their fundamental

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freedoms. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement explicitly mention internally displaced people's right to communicate in a language they understand as a component of non-discrimination (Principle 22)

Challenges and recommendations

1. Limited access to services

Challenges:

Language can be a potential exclusion factor for program participants.

Marginalized language speakers may be more vulnerable to protection violations, unable to access reporting and feedback mechanisms, or even lack basic information about what humanitarian assistance is available and how it can be accessed.

Recommendation:

Integrate language support capacity where needed. This includes connecting communities to hotlines and other remote services in relevant languages.

Measure program outcomes by language to ensure marginalized language speakers are not left behind.

Include language questions in household surveys to track primary language as a potential exclusion factor for program participants.

key resources 1
- TWB, Northeast Nigeria Language Map, by Local Government Area   - TWB, Northeast Nigeria Language Map, by primary language   - TWB, Communications Dashboard: Internally Displaced People in Northeast Nigeria, by IDP site   - TWB, Four simple language questions for needs assessments and surveys   - TWB, MSNA language data can help humanitarians communicate better with affected people

2. Staff language limitations

Challenges:

Core staff are predominantly English and Hausa speakers.

Kanuri, Shuwa Arabic, Marghi and Fulfulde are among the languages reported to present challenges for communication across the humanitarian response.

This affects both operational effectiveness and accountability, from the inclusiveness of needs assessments and feedback mechanisms to the provision of services and the implementation of behavior change campaigns.

Recommendation:

Use the language data available to identify the language skills needed in community engagement, accountability, data collection, and other program roles.

Make language testing part of recruitment processes.

Provide training and guidance to support bilingual staff in translation and interpreting roles. Options for conducting training remotely include pre-recorded training or live training sessions that can be shared via online or mobile platforms, social media networks, and radio.

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key resources 2

- TWB, [Field Guide to Humanitarian Interpreting and Cultural Mediation](#) (contact us for versions in Bura-Pabir, Fulfulde, Hausa, Kanuri, Kibaku, Mandara, Marghi, Shuwa Arabic, and Waha)
- TWB provides custom online trainings and other remotely accessible content. Email us to learn more (see contact details)

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3. Underprepared data collection

Challenges:

In the absence of language support, data collectors are often forced to rely on neighbors and relatives, particularly children, to interpret.

Some data collectors struggle to understand complex or technical English terminology in surveys, which they are often expected to translate on the spot.

This raises both ethical and data quality concerns throughout the data collection process.

Recommendation:

Develop data collection tools in the languages data collectors and survey respondents speak and understand.

Work with local teams to ensure that all translated survey questions are culturally appropriate while retaining their original meaning.

Explore what language challenges may occur during data collection, and how to mitigate them ahead of time. This includes taking into account the need to have a trained interpreter available or provide interpretation remotely using mobile technology due to safety or public health concerns.

If collecting data in-person or via phone calls, use audio recorders (after seeking consent) as a simple quality control tool in multilingual data collection. Transcribing and translating even a small sample of recorded interviews can be useful for verification and training purposes.

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key resources 3

- TWB and People in Need, [Rapid Guide to Localizing and Translating Survey Tools](#)
- TWB and IDMC, [Case study on audio recording for verification in multilingual surveys](#)

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4. Complex context

Challenges:

TWB's comprehension language assessments found that just 23% of those assessed at 5 IDP sites understood written Hausa or Kanuri. Less educated female speakers of marginalized languages were least likely to understand these two languages.

The use of simplified content and mostly verbal mother tongue communication is critical to reach everyone, including the most vulnerable and less literate groups like children and older people.

Recommendation:

Assess comprehension of information materials and key messages by primary language, gender, and age. The results can help you determine the best language, format, and channel to communicate with a particular target group.

If in-person comprehension testing is not feasible, consider consulting community representatives, networks, and other informal trusted leaders using phone or social networks about the appropriateness and relevance of your information materials.

Apply plain language principles to enable people to better understand and use the information they receive.

key resources 4
• TWB, [Comprehension assessment reports](#) • TWB, [Write Clearly: TWB's guide to writing in plain language](#)

5. Complex terminology

Challenges:

In some languages, words for humanitarian or technical issues might not exist. If they do, they might carry stigma or not be commonly known by community members.

Terms like "mental health," "food security," and "social distancing" can be hard to translate clearly into other languages.

When talking about sensitive topics, communities might prefer to use indirect language or euphemisms. Yet humanitarians aren't always familiar with them.

This can lead to misunderstandings or misreporting of affected people's experiences and concerns.

Recommendation:

Identify suitable translations of key words in local languages before any kind of interaction with community members. These can help build multilingual glossaries to ensure consistent and accurate communication.

Avoid using jargon, abbreviations, and acronyms that assume a level of knowledge around a specific topic, except where relevant and appropriate.

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key resources 5
- TWB [Glossary for Northeast Nigeria](#)   - TWB [COVID-19 Glossary](#)   - TWB, [COVID-19 or Korona Bairos? Communicating on the "disease that affects your breathing" in northeast Nigeria](#)

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: multisectoral 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