How a focus on language can improve responses to internal displacement

A case study from northeast Nigeria

Key points:
- Language is essential to upholding the rights of internally displaced people.
- Many internally displaced people cannot access critical information in a language they understand, so they can't access humanitarian services or accountability mechanisms.
- The UN High-Level Panel (HLP) on Internal Displacement should highlight six language-related actions to improve accountability and operational effectiveness across internal displacement situations.

Internally displaced people face language barriers

In the 22 countries with the largest numbers of protracted or new displacements, people speak over 3,300 languages. These include the mother tongues of minorities and indigenous people, who are often disproportionately impacted by the causes of internal displacement. Indeed, speakers of marginalized languages who are not fluent in the official national language(s) are doubly disadvantaged when a crisis hits. They often belong to less prosperous and powerful geographical regions and they might not be able to access even the most basic information about what humanitarian assistance is available. Host communities might also be marginalized language speakers themselves, compounding communication challenges.

However linguistically diverse the affected population, humanitarian responses are usually coordinated in international lingua francas and delivered in a narrow range of national languages. The role of language in upholding the rights of internally displaced people (IDPs) is too often overlooked. This has been recognized in an increasing number of reports and assessments in various countries, from South Sudan and Iraq to Myanmar and Nigeria.

REALIZING THE RIGHTS OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE IS DEPENDENT ON LANGUAGE

Language is central to upholding the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, in line with international conventions and human rights standards. The Guiding Principles explicitly mention internally displaced people's right to communicate in a language they understand as a component of non-discrimination (Principle 22). They also recognize the right to an education that respects the cultural identity, language, and religion of the people concerned (23). Internally displaced people's right to receive information in a language they understand is implied in several other principles. People should be fully informed on the reasons and procedures for their displacement and give their free and informed consent to displacement not triggered by an emergency (7b and c). The rights to request and receive protection and humanitarian assistance (3), to return or resettle voluntarily and to participate in planning those processes (28) also cannot be met without considering the languages of internally displaced people. Some individuals face particular language challenges. For example, certain groups have fewer opportunities to learn to read, access digital technology, or master another language. For them, the language, format, and channel of communication are critical. Addressing these challenges is essential for the participation of women in planning and managing relocation measures (7d), aid delivery (18), and meeting the special needs of children, certain groups of women, and elderly and disabled people (4). Agenda 2030 also demands that we use language to ensure people have access to information and to protect their fundamental freedoms (Sustainable Development Goal 16.10).
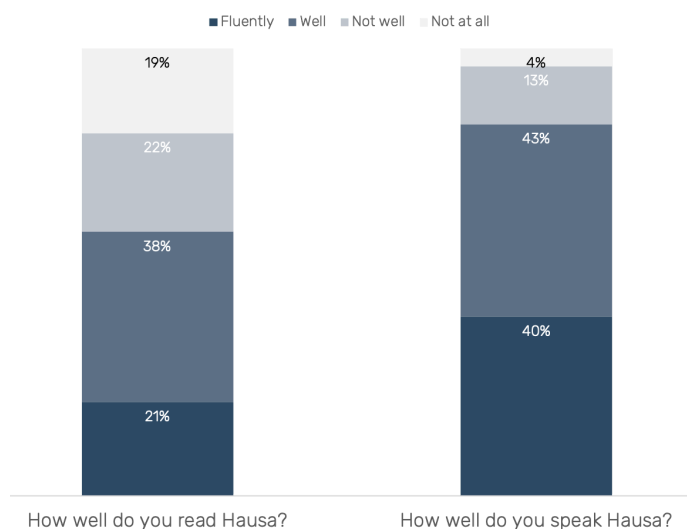

Northeast Nigeria offers key insights

The humanitarian response to internal displacement in northeast Nigeria provides a case-study on how a lack of language support is a barrier to community engagement. It also shows the practical steps the international community can take to overcome that barrier.

Vulnerable people don't receive critical information they can understand

Most humanitarian organizations in northeast Nigeria communicate with affected people mainly in Hausa. Yet the 2019 Multi-Sector Needs Assessment data shows that a minority of people surveyed (31%) speak Hausa as their primary language. A large proportion of the population don't understand it well. Almost half of the households surveyed reported not being able to read Hausa well or at all. This tallies with generally low literacy levels across the region. Beyond Hausa, households surveyed reported speaking more than 30 different primary languages. Among these, Bura, Fulfulde, Kanuri, Marghi, and Shuwa Arabic are the most common.

Self-identified ability to read and speak Hausa

■ Fluently ■ Well ■ Not well ■ Not at all

19%	4%
	13%
22%	43%
38%	
	40%
21%	

How well do you read Hausa?   How well do you speak Hausa?

Translators without Borders' research confirms that the current focus on Hausa, and to a lesser extent Kanuri, excludes large sections of the affected population. Just 23% of people tested at five sites for internally displaced people in Maiduguri understood written Hausa or Kanuri. Less educated female marginalized language speakers had the lowest rate of understanding. Comprehension rates improved when a simple drawing accompanied the text. Audio messaging was the most understood format. Yet substantive multilingual audio communication, such as via radio programming, is rare.

The lack of information in relevant languages has consequences for people's ability to make informed decisions. Some might not know how to prevent the spread of a disease or access the services they need. Others might make high-risk choices. Research by Refugees International highlights that internally displaced Nigerians take risks when they do not receive information they understand. This includes returning to areas that are not yet safe.

Widespread communication gaps affect data collection and access to services

Humanitarian and aid workers widely recognize a lack of attention and resourcing for language support. This has far-reaching implications for informed decision making among both affected people and responders. Field workers have reported particular difficulty communicating with speakers of marginalized languages, and a lack of availability of trained and impartial interpreters. Humanitarian staff have voiced fears that this could impact the accuracy of needs assessments and the effectiveness of program design.

Research suggests inadequate language preparation for enumerators influences the quality of humanitarian data on which key decisions are based. TWB's comprehension testing with enumerators in Maiduguri showed that as few as 35% of words tested were understood. The scores improved slightly with experience, but almost all those interviewed felt that language was a serious problem in their work.

Furthermore, the use of technical terminology that is not readily conveyed in local languages can cause confusion and misunderstanding. Ultimately it can constrain uptake of available services and undermine efforts to protect people and their fundamental rights. TWB's research found that concepts such as "safe space" and "food security" were misinterpreted in the context of conflict. In relation to the COVID-19 outbreak, people reported that the words used to talk about the disease create confusion. They were uncertain about the differences between COVID-19 and other respiratory diseases like flu or asthma and how to distinguish between them. Culture is a related factor. For example, the stigma attached to standard translations of "mental health" may lead to underreporting of cases and underuse of mental health and psychosocial support services.

Accountability mechanisms are not accessible to everyone

Humanitarian workers report difficulties ensuring feedback and accountability mechanisms are accessible to non-Hausa speakers. As a result, many internally displaced people are unable to make their voices heard. In interviews with TWB researchers, many women said they felt more stressed and less confident when speaking with humanitarian field workers who only spoke Hausa. A 35-year old Shuwa Arabic-speaking woman said, "I get so confused when [humanitarians] speak to me. I speak a little bit of Hausa and when they hear me say something in Hausa they start speaking very fast. Sometimes I understand when they are saying, but most of the time I don't."

Anonymous comment boxes are still common in camps for internally displaced Nigerians. They offer a confidential way to provide feedback or complain about the way assistance is provided. However they are only accessible to people who can write. Affected people, camp leaders, and field workers alike voiced concerns about the lack of transparency in feedback mechanisms. Field workers also experience difficulties in closing the feedback loop and responding to complaints in accessible ways, including for those who do not speak Hausa. At the same time, there are information gaps on how people who are housebound due to social or physical constraints can provide feedback.

Data, capacity, and technology are the solution

Data is a key component of overcoming communication challenges. Thanks to the data collection capacity of the humanitarian sector, that problem is relatively easy to solve. The IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix has been collecting site-level language data in northeast Nigeria since mid-2017. In 2019, for the first time, REACH's Multi-Sector Needs Assessment collected household-level information on the languages affected people speak and understand. Together these data sets provide a solid evidence base for informing response-wide funding and programming decisions in northeast Nigeria. Comprehension testing can provide more detail and dig deeper into specific vulnerabilities.

With that information, organizations know which language skills they should recruit for and which languages and formats they should provide information in. Preparedness is a critical component of this, recognizing that translation and other support in hard-to-source languages might not be easily available. Furthermore, community participation and feedback mechanisms can be tailored to the languages and communication preferences of the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach internally displaced people. This includes non-literate women, older people, and people with disabilities. For example, IOM is piloting audio recorders to gather camp-level feedback, with TWB's support for

transcription and translation. The translated audio recordings are then analyzed and used to inform decision making and give responses to community members. Early results suggest this is a promising way for less literate individuals and marginalized language speakers to hold responders to account.

Building translation and interpretation capacity in languages for which there are no professional translators is part of the solution. That applies particularly in contexts with low education levels and high language diversity such as northeast Nigeria. Training can help humanitarian staff work with interpreters and produce clear content for maximum comprehension across languages. Concerted work is also underway to collate resource materials in the relevant languages for all service providers. TWB's Glossary for Northeast Nigeria, funded by ECHO and developed in partnership with IOM, is one example. This free mobile app helps ensure use of accurate and easily understood words in local languages for a wide range of topics, including COVID-19.

Ultimately, multilingual content can be used to develop automated translation technology for marginalized languages. That would allow internally displaced speakers of marginalized languages to access information and communicate directly. Such technology development for Nigerian languages is already in progress, thanks to a partnership between TWB and REACH funded by the Humanitarian Grand Challenge.

Practical language-related actions can improve responses to internal displacement

As the case of northeast Nigeria highlights, language diversity is essential for accountability and operational effectiveness across internal displacement situations. It deserves and requires the HLP's attention and support to strengthen the collective response to internal displacement. Marginalized language speakers who are internally displaced deserve nothing less.

THE HLP SHOULD SECURE COMMITMENT OF GOVERNMENTS, DONORS, AND HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS TO:

1. Improve routine collection and analysis of data on the languages and communication needs and preferences of those at risk of, experiencing, and recovering from internal displacement and of host communities;
2. Develop evidence-based and coordinated communication and community engagement strategies early;
3. Address the specific information and communication needs of more vulnerable individuals, including non-literate women, older people, and people with disabilities;
4. Improve resourcing for translation and interpreting support in relevant languages;
5. Earmark resources to make technological innovation accessible to marginalized language speakers;
6. Ensure language is factored into response plans to internal displacement, enabling internally displaced people to claim their right to communication in a language they actually understand.

ABOUT TRANSLATORS WITHOUT BORDERS

Translators without Borders (TWB) is a non-profit organization offering language and translation support for humanitarian and development agencies, and other non-profit organizations on a global scale.

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