



Nigeria. Camp management team member interviews an internally displaced woman at Bakasi Camp in Maiduguri, to develop a multilingual glossary of key terms.
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Mia Marzotto | 2018

Nigeria

Protecting IDPs and Displacement-Affected Communities by Speaking Their Languages

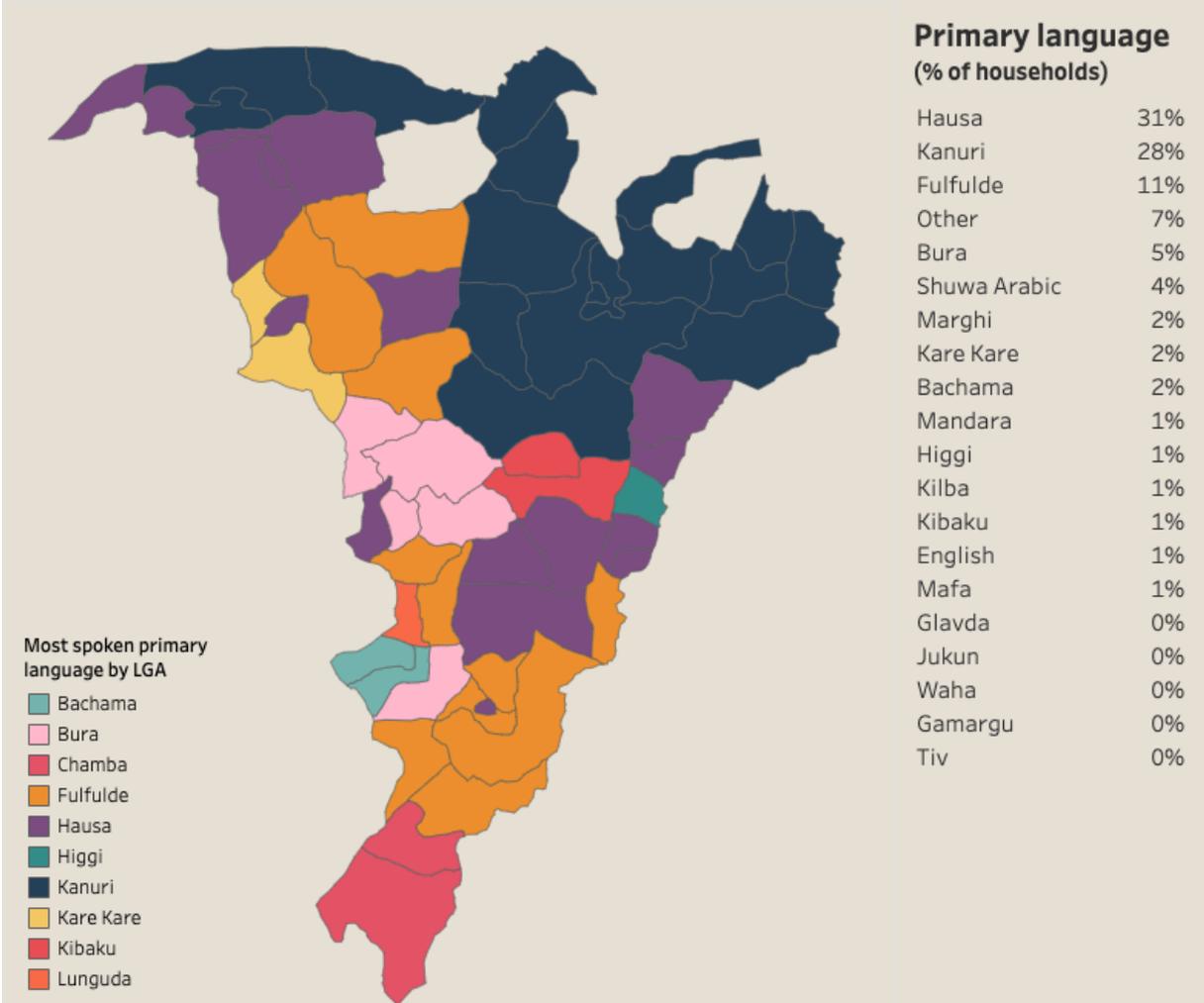
1. Context

There are over 2 million internally displaced people (IDPs) in northeast Nigeria, 80 per cent of whom are women and children. They were largely forced to flee from conflict and violence perpetrated by Boko Haram

and other non-State armed groups over the past ten years.¹ Humanitarian agencies communicate with IDPs and host communities primarily using Hausa as a regional *lingua franca*². IDPs speak over 30 different languages, however, and many do not speak Hausa well. Only a minority use it as their mother tongue.³

In a highly challenging operating environment, low education and literacy levels among IDPs and language-related barriers to communication between IDPs and humanitarian agencies have obstructed IDPs' access to information and participation in processes and decisions affecting their protection and prospects.⁴ Lack of attention to linguistic diversity has undermined operational effectiveness and accountability by limiting IDPs' ability to use feedback mechanisms, give informed consent, be included in needs assessments, and access services.⁵

Speaking IDPs' language and using the right words became especially pertinent in Nigeria as the need for specialized mental health and psychological support grew in a context with mass abduction of girls and high rates of gender-based violence. IDPs and others affected by these violations required specific treatment, which entailed more precise language than normally used in humanitarian work. This was a particular challenge in Nigeria where people struggling with mental health issues are often stigmatized and labelled as "crazy people." At the same time, there was limited awareness that using certain language could be damaging.⁶



Northeast Nigeria Language Map, Translators Without Borders, 2019.

2. Description of the practice

The first step to addressing the problem was to determine which languages IDPs spoke. Key sources included IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix that has provided IDP site-level information since mid-2017, including on language use. Research by Translators without Borders and partners also provided a more in-depth understanding of potential comprehension barriers, particularly for women.⁷

The next step was pilot testing ten terms in two languages to see how IDPs and communities responded. The test revealed that the term “safe space” for Kanuri speakers (the dominant language in Borno and the surrounding area) meant a place with armed guards, which was not what humanitarian workers wished to convey. Similarly, “mental health” in Hausa was found to mean “services for mad people,” while the phrase for “psychosocial support” did not carry the same stigma. Focus group discussions with IDPs and host communities further revealed that the Hausa word for “stress” (“gajiya”) was understood as physical stress after a day of hard labour. By pairing the word with a descriptor such as “physical” or “emotional,” actors could more effectively communicate about mental health.⁸

From here, the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Sub-Working Group, co-chaired by the Ministry of Health and IOM, developed an online glossary in collaboration with Translators without Borders to support effective and appropriate communication with IDPs and host communities.⁹ Available in nine local languages online or offline on a computer, tablet, Android or iOS device, it includes respectful, consistent, accurate and easily understood translations of key terms and concepts on mental health issues.¹⁰

3. Results for internally displaced persons and others

Government and humanitarian agency staff now have an increased awareness of the importance of the words they use and how accurate translation can help them reach some of the most vulnerable IDPs. Staff of the local government hospital have also expressed appreciation for this work. All stakeholders can access an open source resource to inform strategies for communicating with IDPs and others as well as strategies to address language barriers and facilitate the participation of marginalised speakers of minority languages. Notably, the glossary is being used to train interpreters working throughout the region.¹¹

While the impacts on IDP and host community participation have yet to be evaluated, the glossary and steps taken have helped humanitarian actors with planning and implementing a more inclusive response¹². This requires building in time for training new staff, maintaining the glossary, promoting it in coordination meetings, and expanding it to cover more languages and sectors, such as protection, housing, land and property and camp coordination and camp management.¹³

4. Why this is a good example to share

Meaningful participation of IDPs and host communities requires meaningful conversations. Understanding IDPs' language profiles is the first step towards ensuring that the language used contributes to building a protective rather than destructive environment in which IDPs and host communities feel understood and supported.

Endnotes

- 1 IOM, 'Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) Report Round 30' (IOM 2019) <<https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/DTM%20Nigeria%20Round%2030%20Report%20December%202019.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=7880>> accessed 24 June 2020; OCHA, 'Humanitarian Response Plan- Nigeria' (OCHA 2020) <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ocha_nga_humanitarian_response_plan_march2020_1.pdf> accessed 24 June 2020.
- 2 Data shows that Hausa is the primary language of affected populations in 47 per cent of IDP sites in north-east Nigeria, but humanitarian organizations are using it as the primary language of communication at 81 per cent of sites. Translators without Borders and MapAction, 'The Power of Speech: A Translators without Borders Project Highlighting Language Barriers for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in North-East Nigeria' (ArcGIS) <<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=4d2cd9e3500949e78aa788ae4ae0ab4f>> accessed 4 November 2020.
- 3 REACH, '2019 Nigeria Multi-Sector Needs Assessment' (2019) <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/REACH_NGA_Multi-Sector-Needs-Assessment_Executive-Summary-Report_November-2019.pdf> accessed 4 November 2020.
- 4 Translators without Borders, 'Language Barriers in the Humanitarian Response in North-Eastern Nigeria – Initial Assessment' (Translators without Borders 2017) <<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Language-barriers-in-the-humanitarian-response-in-north-eastern-nigeria.pdf>>.
- 5 Translators Without Borders, 'Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Sub Working Group Round-Table Discussion' (Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Sub Working Group Round-Table Discussion, September 2018) <On file>.
- 6 Interview with MHPSS Sub-working Group Co-coordinator/IOM Nigeria.
- 7 Translators without Borders, 'Comprehension Matters: The Power of Communicating in Different Languages and Formats to Reach Vulnerable Women in Northeast Nigeria' (Translators without Borders 2018) <<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Comprehension-Matters-in-NE-Nigeria.pdf>> accessed 24 June 2020.
- 8 TWB Communications, 'Translators Without Borders Expands Glossary to Include Mental Health Language for Nigeria Humanitarian Response' (Translators without Borders, 28 August 2018) <<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/translators-without-borders-expands-glossary-to-include-mental-health-language-guidance-for-nigeria-humanitarian-response/>> accessed 4 November 2020.
- 9 Interview with MHPSS Sub-working Group Co-coordinator/IOM Nigeria.
- 10 TWB Communications, 'TWB Glossary for Northeast Nigeria' (Translators without Borders, 28 March 2018) <<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/twb-glossary-north-east-nigeria/>> accessed 2 October 2020.
- 11 vTWB Communications (n 8).
- 12 Interviews with Translation Without Borders and MHPSS Sub-Working Group Coordinator/IOM Nigeria
- 13 Ibid.