

# Language and the Guiding Principles

Ellie Kemp

**There needs to be more attention paid to the languages and communication needs of those at risk of, experiencing and recovering from internal displacement. A case-study from Nigeria brings the issues to life and challenges the international community to do better.**

The role of language in upholding the rights of internally displaced people (IDPs) is very often overlooked, yet attention to language and communication is central to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.<sup>1</sup> The Guiding Principles explicitly mention IDPs' right to communicate in a language they understand as a component of non-discrimination (Principle 22). They also recognise the right to an education that respects the cultural identity, language and religion of the people concerned (23).

IDPs' 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). And 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 language needs.

Some individuals face particular language challenges. For example, certain

groups may have had fewer opportunities to learn to read, access digital technology or master a second or third language. For them, the language, format (written, graphic or audio) and channel of communication (word of mouth, paper or digital) are critical. Addressing their requirements 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).

The humanitarian response to the needs of IDPs in north-east Nigeria provides a case-study on how great a barrier language can be without proper provision, and what practical steps the humanitarian community can take to overcome that barrier.<sup>2</sup>

## **Language diversity challenges in Nigeria**

Imagine you are managing a programme of support to IDPs in north-east Nigeria. There are more than 500 mother tongues in the country, including 28 in Borno State alone. Most national staff are native Hausa speakers; some speak Kanuri, the dominant language

of Borno and the surrounding area. Senior managers report that interviews with IDPs often entail a four-stage translation between English, Hausa, Kanuri and another local language and that they are not confident of having an accurate analysis of needs and priorities. Focus group discussions are held in Hausa and Kanuri because those are the languages your team members speak. Some IDPs cannot participate because they do not speak those languages, and staff have no way of knowing how many IDPs cannot communicate in those dominant languages.

You worry that potentially life-saving information on issues like disease prevention and eligibility for assistance is not getting through to all those who need it. Even getting information out in Hausa and Kanuri is problematic. You ask Hausa and Kanuri speakers on your team to translate key messages, and others to translate them back into English so you can check for accuracy – but that is slow. Your team trains some IDPs as community mobilisers to facilitate two-way communication in other local languages. But you have no way of checking how good their understanding of the Kanuri translation is, how accurately they

render it in their own language, or whether the community mobilisers are meeting the language needs of all IDPs in each location.

You ask yourself: How easily are displaced people able to claim their right to protection and assistance? Are the most vulnerable individuals able to communicate their needs or report discrimination or abuse? If the host community and the IDPs do not speak the same language, are we unintentionally fuelling tensions between them by communicating in one rather than the other?

It is an aid worker's nightmare. You don't have sufficient information about the languages people speak and understand. And even if you did, you would lack the resources to communicate in those languages. You fear that you might not be fully upholding the rights set out in the Guiding Principles, despite your best intentions.

### From an IDP's perspective

The situation is frustrating for aid workers but it can be humiliating and terrifying for the IDPs themselves. Now imagine you're an internally displaced woman in one of the camps. Like many women in north-eastern Nigeria, you have no formal education and



Translators without Borders/Eric Deluca

Mental health outreach workers from IOM and translators from Translators without Borders conduct research in Maiduguri, Nigeria, on how well words like 'stress' and 'abuse' are understood in Kanuri and Hausa, and whether phrases like 'mental health' carry a stigma.

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you can't read. You are a native speaker of Marghi, one of more than 30 languages and dialects spoken by IDPs across the area hardest hit by the conflict. This language is the mother tongue of 200,000 people but it is not used to communicate with people in the camp where you are living. You never had the chance to learn Hausa and although you understand some spoken Kanuri, you're not confident speaking it.

You haven't seen your husband or teenagers since you fled your village, and you fear for their safety. You don't know how to access information about missing persons. You worry that your house and land will have been taken over by someone else in the years since you left. You know other IDPs have received advice from a non-governmental organisation (NGO) about documenting their property ownership but they had to rely on – and pay – an educated man from the host community to interpret for them with the NGO. Other IDPs from your village are saying they might go home, even if it's not safe. You don't have enough reliable information about the situation back home to decide whether you should join them.

Your youngest child has a bad bout of diarrhoea. The oral rehydration salts you were given to treat him came with instructions in Hausa; you had to ask one of the young men in the camp to tell you what it said. You earn money for food by re-selling cheap goods that you buy at the nearest market, using the few words of Kanuri you know. You are afraid your children still aren't getting enough to eat, and you'd like to ask if more help is available. But the aid workers don't speak Marghi and you can't read the posters they put up.

This is the real nightmare. You're doing what you can but you're unsure what help you're entitled to, and even if you knew, you can't access it directly. You've never heard of the Guiding Principles; in these circumstances, you certainly can't claim the rights they enshrine.

### Language gaps

The Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) of the UN Migration Agency (IOM) indicates that 38% of IDPs in north-east Nigeria

are not receiving information in their mother tongue. Speakers of some minority languages are particularly affected. Just 8.3% of Marghi-speaking IDPs receive information in their own language, and lack of information is reported to be a serious problem for 53% of Marghi speakers.

In July 2017, Translators without Borders (TWB) partnered with NGOs Oxfam and Girl Effect to survey a sample of camp residents and host communities to better understand their language preferences.<sup>3</sup> We found that IDPs speak many more languages than the primary and secondary languages reported to DTM researchers, with our survey identifying at least 10 and sometimes more than 20 mother tongues at each of the five sites.

Four out of five respondents preferred to receive information in their own language, although many could not read in that language. Since almost all information is currently provided in Hausa or Kanuri, TWB tested understanding of humanitarian messages in those languages. We found that only 23% of residents could answer a simple comprehension question on a short written text in one or other of these languages. That figure increased to 37% when a simple drawing accompanied the text. For Hausa and Kanuri, only audio messaging was effective across all population groups, at least for simple items of information. 91% of uneducated women whose mother tongue was not Hausa or Kanuri were unable to understand the written text. Participation, informed consent and access to services seem a distant prospect in such a context.

The preferred and most effective method – in-person or audio communication – can be provided with support from trained interpreters or field staff recruited and trained from among the displaced population. Because relaying audio information leaves no permanent record for the listener, it is best used in combination with simple text and graphics. For mass communication, radio is the obvious option – but unfortunately DTM data indicates fewer than 40% of households having access to radios.

**Solution: data, capacity and technology**

Data is key to overcoming communication challenges. Organisations supporting IDPs need to know what languages they speak in order to communicate effectively with them. At present that information is largely unavailable at the level of detail needed for planning; it is either not collected at that level or not shared.

Thanks to the data collection capacity of the humanitarian sector, that problem is relatively easy to solve. IOM's DTM has been collecting site-level language data in Nigeria since mid-2017, providing a broad-brush indication for planning purposes.<sup>4</sup> Comprehension testing of the kind carried out by TWB in 2017 can fill in a lot of the detail and dig deeper into specific vulnerabilities. If humanitarian organisations were to add standard questions on language to household needs assessment surveys, this would quickly furnish basic data for communicating with IDPs right across the north-east.

With that information, organisations can work out which language skills they need to recruit for and which languages and formats they need to provide information in. Community feedback mechanisms can be tailored to the languages and communication preferences of the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach IDPs, including non-literate women, older people and people with disabilities.

In a context with low education levels and high language diversity such as north-east Nigeria, support will be needed to build translation and interpreting capacity in languages for which there are no professional translators. Many language professionals in the numerically and commercially stronger languages – Hausa and Kanuri – will need guidance on humanitarian response terminology, and on translating for an audience with low literacy skills and who are often second-language speakers. Humanitarian staff should learn how best to work with interpreters and how to write clear and simple content for the widest possible comprehension.<sup>5</sup> A library of resource materials can be built up in the right languages for the use of all service providers. Ultimately, that library can contribute

to building the automated translation technology that will enable IDPs to have the conversations and access the information that they want directly. In time, they will be able to access instant translations and have their own words automatically translated into a language that a responder understands.

This type of data collection and sharing, capacity building and resource and technology development is already in progress for Nigeria, thanks to a partnership between TWB and IOM funded by the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations.<sup>6</sup>

Nigeria is exceptionally linguistically diverse but in other respects it is no exception. In cases of forced displacement, we know language is going to be an issue and responding organisations have a responsibility to find out what language and other communication barriers IDPs face. Where there are legitimate protection concerns about sharing information on language, such as the risk of some minority language speakers facing discrimination or violence if their mother tongue is made public, we must find ways to counter those risks. As we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Guiding Principles, it is high time the humanitarian sector put the data, capacity, resources and technology in place to ensure that IDPs can claim their right to information they actually understand.

**Ellie Kemp** [ellie@translatorswithoutborders.org](mailto:ellie@translatorswithoutborders.org)

Head of Crisis Response, Translators without Borders <https://translatorswithoutborders.org>

1. The Guiding Principles are currently available in 54 languages: [www.ohchr.org/en/issues/idpersons/pages/standards.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/idpersons/pages/standards.aspx)
2. Translators without Borders (2017) *Language barriers in the humanitarian response in north-eastern Nigeria* [bit.ly/TWB-2017-barriers-NENigeria](http://bit.ly/TWB-2017-barriers-NENigeria)
3. Translators without Borders (2017) *Language profile of five IDP sites in Maiduguri, north-east Nigeria* [bit.ly/TWB-2017-Maiduguri](http://bit.ly/TWB-2017-Maiduguri)
4. [bit.ly/TWB-northeastNigeria](http://bit.ly/TWB-northeastNigeria)
5. See, for example, TWB *Field guide to humanitarian interpreting and cultural mediation* [bit.ly/TWB-field-guide](http://bit.ly/TWB-field-guide)
6. Through this 2018–19 partnership, we hope to expand language support across the humanitarian response in north-east Nigeria in collaboration with interested partners. Please contact the author for more information.