



INFORMATION WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING, RIGHTS WITHOUT MEANING

The Global Compacts aim to save lives, reduce unsafe movement, and combat trafficking and exploitation. They cannot do so without practical action to improve access to information for refugees and migrants.

The New York Declaration of September 2016 sets out priorities for the Global Compacts for Migration and Refugees, due for adoption in 2018. These include saving lives, reducing unsafe movement, and combating trafficking and exploitation of all migrants, regardless of status.

None of these aims is achievable if the people affected lack the information to make decisions in their own best interests. The Global Compacts must address the barriers to information access, which include language, literacy, technology, and social controls.

Refugees and migrants need information to access assistance and protection, and claim their rights.

Information is their right as human beings. (1) Information and dialog were also part of the 'participation revolution' promised to people affected by humanitarian emergencies as part of the Grand Bargain in May 2016. (2) Pragmatically, the mechanisms set up to manage migration also depend on people's capacity to receive information and communicate their needs. For all these reasons, communicating with affected people should be a priority for migration management and refugee response.

Without access to information, migrants may drop out of the formal system, becoming more exposed to smuggling, exploitation and abuse. Vulnerable individuals such as unaccompanied children are particularly at risk. Research by REACH and UNICEF highlights the risks when refugee and migrant children do not receive information in a language they understand. It leads them to make high-risk choices, including dropping out of the formal reception system, out of ignorance of their rights and options. (3)

Leaflets issued to unaccompanied children at the Franco-Italian border were not in a language they could understand. As a result, 'children resorted to taking less safe routes, such as walking through mountains, or paid smugglers in order to minimize the risk of being caught'. (4)

People considering migrating to seek safety or a better life need information they can trust to weigh the risks and benefits. Without it, they will be less able to judge the accuracy of informal reports, making them vulnerable to misinformation and rumor. (5)

Without information, refugees and migrants may be unable to access services, or to lodge complaints when their rights are not upheld. Ground Truth Solutions found that refugees and IDPs in Iraq lack information on how to move within or between countries, access aid, or file a complaint. (6)

Refugees and migrants also need to be able to communicate with service providers and legal advisers about their situation. Where that is not possible, vulnerable individuals can be denied appropriate care, their needs unheard. An interagency team did not speak the right language to ask returned female refugees in Damasak, Nigeria about their protection needs. When a male soldier was asked to relay questions in Kanuri, the women denied facing any exploitation or abuse. (7) With a neutral female interpreter the answer might have been different.

So vital are information and communication that migrants and refugees will devote a large share of limited resources to connectivity. In Tanzania, some refugees sell a third of their monthly food ration to purchase mobile airtime and data. In Jordan, refugee families prioritize spending on connectivity over clothing and health care. (8)

Yet refugees and migrants often do not receive the information they need in a language and format they understand. Many lack the language support to communicate their needs.

To be accessible, information must be in a language and format the intended audience understands. It must also be presented in a way that is relevant to them, and available in a channel to which they have access.

Language: 'International' languages such as English, French, and Arabic are often incorrectly assumed to be an effective means of communicating with refugees and migrants. Ninety percent of refugees and migrants interviewed by TWB in Greece in April 2017 had no knowledge of English. (9) Nor are basic language skills sufficient to navigate a legal or medical consultation. Communicating only in these assumed *linguae francae* can exclude those who have had fewer opportunities to learn them. Women, older and disabled people, non-literate people and marginalized ethnic groups will be among those excluded.

Women often have fewer chances to learn even a national *lingua franca* such as Hausa. In a sample of 437 people tested in Hausa in Maiduguri, Nigeria, men were approximately twice as likely as women to understand written text in English or Hausa. (10)

Format: The format in which information is presented affects how well it is understood. Individuals with no formal schooling can be twice as likely to understand a simple infographic as a written text containing the same information. (11) However, refugees and migrants also value written text: TWB's research in Greece indicates that even less literate people prefer physical documents. The relatively permanent format ensures they can refer back to the content and ask others to read it to them. (12) An effective communication strategy will therefore use a combination of formats.

Appropriate content: To be useful, information must be appropriate to the intended audience. Unaccompanied refugee and migrant children in Greece are receiving complex technical documents on legal procedures. Other children are receiving no direct information at all. (13) Any organization in contact with children is responsible for providing essential information in ways they can understand. Simplified content, particularly on legal or technical issues, can aid understanding. This is also true for less literate adults and second-language speakers.

Channel: Other barriers to communication are financial, technological, and social. Worldwide, one in five rural refugees has no mobile coverage. (14) As in any population, those with power and resources can access information and make their voices heard. Female, older, and less educated refugees and migrants are less likely to have access to mobile phones and the internet. In refugee populations from Jordan to Rwanda, social controls limit access to information technology for women and other less powerful family members. (15) Reaching these groups entails identifying channels where they can have some autonomy. (16)

Practical solutions exist

Overcoming these obstacles means addressing a collective blind spot on language and communication. It also entails collecting the data needed to plan for language support, and resourcing that support appropriately. Above all, it requires governments and humanitarian organizations to make communicating with affected people the default position of migration management and refugee response.

1. Pay more attention to language in humanitarian action

From the 2010 Haiti earthquake (17) to the West African Ebola crisis, (18) experience shows that humanitarian impact can hinge on communicating in the right language. Still the humanitarian sector consistently underestimates the language factor. A July 2017 assessment in north-eastern Nigeria found language barriers to communicating with affected people to be widespread. Yet operational organizations are ill-equipped to address them. (19)

Language barriers are a common challenge in situations of migration and displacement, compounded by low literacy and education levels. If the humanitarian sector recognizes that, it will be better placed to design and resource interventions accordingly.

2. Improve data on the languages of refugees and migrants

Information on the languages new arrivals speak and understand is as important for meeting their needs as age and gender. Yet it is rarely collected or discussed. Without that data, service providers default to potentially unsafe assumptions. The data gap can be filled through existing processes such as needs assessments and registration. Adding a few questions on language and education would yield the basis for effective communication strategies. Comprehension testing can then be used to measure outcomes.

Humanitarian organizations in Turkey provide language support almost exclusively in Arabic, because 91 percent of refugees and migrants are from Syria. This neglects Syria's Kurdish speakers. It also disregards the other 9 percent of Turkey's refugees and migrants, a linguistically diverse group of around 315,000 people. (20)

3. Give communicating with communities higher priority

Effective communication with communities (CwC) is still not standard humanitarian practice. The 'participation revolution' is not yet a reality on the ground across the humanitarian sector. (21) CwC expertise is too often lacking at field level, leaving efforts uncoordinated and fragmented. Patchy, inconsistent information leaves refugees and migrants more vulnerable and formal reception systems less effective. (22) Collective approaches such as the Communication and Community Engagement Initiative may offer a way forward. (23) Appropriate technology geared to the specific challenges of affected people in a given situation can be part of the solution.

The appropriate technology may be free WiFi hotspots at key locations to facilitate information access where connectivity is poor or costly. (24) It may be information dissemination on micro-SD cards for offline viewing on mobile phones, (25) or apps such as [refugee.info](#) (26) and [virtualvolunteer.org](#). (27) Or it may be radio as a channel to reach those without access to the internet.

4. Earmark resources for trained language support

Language remains below the humanitarian radar and often absent from humanitarian budgets. Grassroots organizations and local government services struggle to pay for interpreting and translation even in wealthier countries. Across the European refugee and migration response, a shortage of interpreting services is reported at medical facilities, schools and legal centers. The small pool of trained language professionals in many minority languages is also a limiting factor. Family members, often children, and untrained and under-supported volunteers often fill the gap.

Bridging that gap means budgeting for and mobilizing professional language services wherever possible. Specialist non-profit language providers can contribute where commercial services are unavailable or unaffordable. Training and support programs can build capacity in languages where the pool of professionals is insufficient.

5. Overcome reluctance to share information

Concerns about how information might be used can further restrict access to it. Governments anxious to limit inward migration may have little incentive to inform people of their rights. (28) Anti-immigration sentiment can pervade policy debate such that 'the very idea that asylum seekers should be able to exert any choice is considered an anathema.' (29) A fear of inadvertently assisting people smugglers or encouraging irregular migration is an additional deterrent. (30) Not only is this a denial of basic rights, but people's choices are only influenced if information relayed is seen as balanced and credible. (31)

One humanitarian organization in Chios, Greece chose not to share information with refugees and migrants in writing. Its justification was that smugglers would use written legal advice to 'beat the system'. (32)

Regional and global policy flux on migration creates its own challenges. Humanitarian organizations in Italy, Greece, and Turkey are concerned that information they share may soon be outdated and create confusion. (33) A clear global position on the right to information, backed up by practical provision for regular updates, could remove that barrier.

Improving access to information for refugees and migrants in the Global Compacts

Including specific provisions on access to information can help ensure the Global Compact for Migration and the Plan of Action for Refugees achieve their goals. This will require:

- Explicitly acknowledging the right to information in the right language and format as a means of ensuring effective protection of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of migrants, regardless of their migratory status.
- Recognizing the specific information needs of potentially vulnerable individuals, including children, women, older and disabled people, and ethnically marginalized groups.
- Recognizing access to information is a necessary component of planned and well managed migration policies.
- Promoting shared information and communication standards (language, format, channel, simplification, and gender- and age-appropriate interpreting support).
- Planning for coordinated, balanced information provision in the right language and format to combat people smuggling and enable people to make informed decisions about migration and to claim protection.
- Including transparent information provision in the right language and format, and appropriate interpreting support for legal consultation, in return and readmission procedures.
- Including routine data collection on language as a basis for planning effective communication strategies as part of disaggregated data on international migration.
- Earmarking resources for CwC in the languages of affected people, including training and recruitment of female interpreters.
- Increasing the availability and affordability of information and communication services for refugees and migrants.

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- (1) [Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19](#)
- (2) IASC (2017) [Agreed, practical definition of the meaning of "participation" within the context of this workstream](#)
- (3) REACH (2017) [Children on the Move in Italy and Greece](#)
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) Internews (2017) [Lost in Translation: The misinformed journey of migrants across Italy](#)
- (6) Ground Truth Solutions (2017) [Summary of focus group discussions in northern Iraq](#)
- (7) UNHCR (2017) [Interagency Initial Rapid Needs Assessment: Damasak LGA, Borno State, Nigeria](#)
- (8) UNHCR (2016) [Connecting Refugees: How Internet and Mobile Connectivity Can Improve Refugee Well-being and Transform Humanitarian Action](#)
- (9) Translators without Borders (TWB)/Save the Children (2017) [Language & Comprehension Barriers in Greece's Migration Crisis](#)
- (10) TWB/Oxfam/Girl Effect (2017), forthcoming
- (11) TWB (2017) Lost for words: improving information access for refugees and migrants in Greece, forthcoming
- (12) TWB/Save the Children (2017), op.cit.
- (13) TWB/Save the Children (2017) [Bridging the Gap: A Study on the Impact of Language Barriers on Refugee and Migrant Children in Greece](#)
- (14) UNHCR (2016) op.cit.
- (15) Ibid.
- (16) See for example Carter Center (2015) [Women and the right of access to information – Guatemala](#)
- (17) John Patrick (2011) [Haiti earthquake response: emerging evaluation lessons](#)
- (18) TWB (2015) [Words of Relief: Ebola Crisis Learning Review](#)
- (19) TWB (2017) [Language barriers in the humanitarian response in north-eastern Nigeria](#)
- (20) TWB (2017) Putting Language on the Map in the European Refugee Response, forthcoming
- (21) Gppi (2017) [Independent Grand Bargain Report](#)
- (22) Internews (2017) op.cit.
- (23) CDAC (2017) [The Communication & Community Engagement Initiative](#)
- (24) Internews (2017) op.cit.
- (25) Refucomm and TWB trialed this approach with new arrivals in Chios, Greece. Preliminary evidence suggests it is cost-effective and well received where internet connectivity is limited or expensive.
- (26) <https://www.refugee.info/about/>
- (27) <http://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/what-we-do/community-engagement/virtual-volunteer/>
- (28) Charlotte Karagueuzian, Audrey Verdier-Chouchane (2014) [Taking Africa's Irregular Migrants into Account: Trends, Challenges and Policy Options](#)
- (29) Refugee Council (2010) [Chance or choice? Understanding why asylum seekers come to the UK](#)
- (30) TWB (2017) Putting Language on the Map in the European Refugee Response, forthcoming
- (31) Jill Alpes (2015) [Migration risk campaigns are based on wrong assumptions](#)
- (32) TWB (2017) Putting Language on the Map in the European Refugee Response, forthcoming
- (33) Ibid.