

Language profile of five IDP sites in Maiduguri, north-east Nigeria



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This report summarizes key findings from a study of comprehension levels among 951 internally displaced people (IDPs) and host community members at five sites in the Maiduguri area of Borno, north-eastern Nigeria. Individual site reports are available [here](#). The study was designed by Translators without Borders (TWB) and conducted by Girl Effect using Oxfam communication materials, in July 2017. TWB analyzed the data in consultation with Girl Effect and Oxfam, and Oxfam financed the field research. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Première Urgence Internationale (PUI) facilitated the research at Bakasi Camp and in Bolori respectively.

An initial TWB [assessment](#) found that humanitarian organizations working with IDPs and host communities in north-eastern Nigeria lack the information to base their communication strategies on. Detailed data is not routinely collected on the languages people speak and understand. Information for affected groups is provided mostly in Hausa and, to a lesser extent, Kanuri. This research was designed to find out how effective communication in those languages is among residents of five diverse sites. To guide the development of tailored communication strategies, it studied the impact of factors such as format, gender, age, education, and mother tongue on comprehension levels.

Methodology

The survey was in two parts: a structured demographic interview followed by in-person testing to measure actual comprehension of material. TWB first trained Girl Effect's Technology-Enabled Girl Ambassadors (TEGAs) on the methodology. The TEGAs then conducted the survey in person, accompanied by representatives from Oxfam, IOM, and PUI. Surveys were conducted in the following five languages: Gamargu, Hausa, Kanuri, Marghi, and Shuwa Arabic. Sampling used the snowball method and all surveys were conducted in daytime. All respondents were aged 15 or over.

For the comprehension test, each participant viewed or listened to three messages in English. Depending on their stated preference, they then viewed or listened to three more messages in either Hausa or Kanuri. The messaging was brief and used simple vocabulary and syntax; the content covered a range of protection and child welfare issues. The TEGA determined the respondent's answers to be 'correct' or 'incorrect' against a predetermined list of correct responses. A summary of the questionnaire and materials used for comprehension testing is available [here](#). A searchable file containing the full dataset is available [here](#) for organizations wishing to interrogate the data in more detail. The findings for each site are presented in separate reports for ease of reference.

Limitations

It proved difficult to control for certain biases. The snowball sampling method returned higher female response rates than expected. Female respondents represented 80 percent of the total sample. While accurate population data is not available for all the sites surveyed, the available information suggests the female populations in these areas are between 55 and 65 percent.

One of the possible reasons for this disparity was that all the sampling was conducted during the day in order to minimize security concerns for the TEGA enumerators, all of whom are young women. This might have limited the presence of men who were working away from the sites during the day.

It also proved hard to control for prior exposure and difficulty levels in the testing component of the research. Forty-seven percent of the sample claimed to have seen or heard at least some of the material used before. This was the potential downside of testing with materials developed for the population in question. Generally speaking, comprehension rates were higher among respondents who claimed to have seen at least some of the material before. This suggests, but does not demonstrate conclusively, that repeat exposure may favor information retention.

Respondents registered higher than expected rates of comprehension for English text accompanied by a picture. Taking into account the low rates of English text-only comprehension, it is possible that the picture used (showing a farmer and herder working together) was more self-explanatory than the one showed for the Hausa or Kanuri test (of an NGO employee accepting money in exchange for humanitarian assistance). In future, having multiple questions per category would help to control for individual question biases.

The use of two separate questions on the preferred language of communication may have caused confusion, and resulted in inconsistent responses. When asked whether they preferred to receive information in their mother tongue or another language, 79 percent of the sample preferred the former. When asked to specify the language in question, however, a lower proportion of people named their mother tongue. This may suggest that some of those whose absolute preference is for mother tongue communication are also happy to receive information in another language.

Overview of findings

Language and comprehension

Just 23 percent of those tested understood written Hausa or Kanuri. Yet Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) data for August 2017 suggests that over 81 percent of IDP sites are receiving information in Hausa and ten percent in Kanuri. DTM found that residents at 10 percent of sites claimed not to understand the information received.

Seventy-nine percent of the sample preferred to receive information in their mother tongue. The preference was especially marked among native speakers of Gamargu (68 percent), Hausa (65 percent), Kanuri (63 percent), and Shuwa Arabic (46 percent).¹

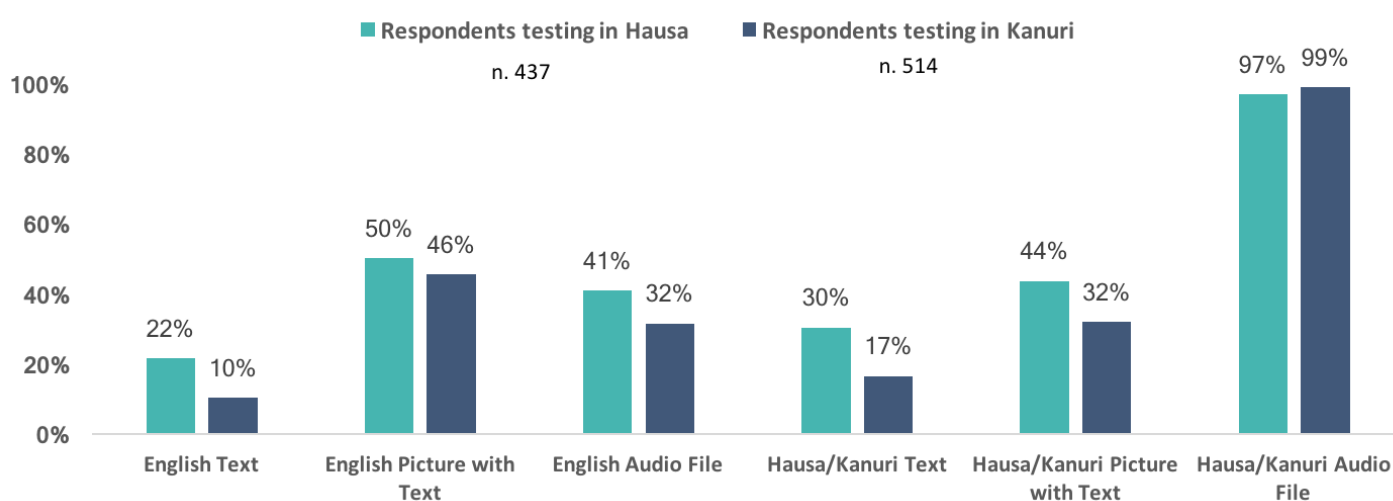
That being the case, **the predominance of Hausa in communication with IDPs should be reviewed, as only 8.4 percent of the sample were mother tongue Hausa speakers.** A further 53.5 percent were native Kanuri speakers.

¹ NB: these figures relate to answers to the question of which specific language respondents preferred to receive information in. When asked to choose between mother tongue and any other language, a higher proportion (e.g. 82 percent of Gamargu speakers) chose the former.

Speakers of certain languages were more likely to prefer Hausa as the language of communication. Fula/Fulani/Fulfulde speakers reported a strong preference for Hausa as the language to receive information in (46 percent). However, a non-negligible 21 percent preferred to receive the information in their own language.

English was found to be largely ineffective for communicating with people at all sites. Comprehension of written text was just 15 percent, broadly confirming the claim by 90 percent of respondents to have no grasp of written English. Eighty-seven percent said they did not understand spoken English either, although in practice 36 percent correctly answered a comprehension question on the simple audio message in that language.

Comprehension rates across five sites in Maiduguri



Format and comprehension

Literacy and education levels are low, even against averages for Borno as a whole, with a clear impact on comprehension. Over 75 percent of the sample had either no schooling at all or no formal schooling. Ninety-four percent of respondents claimed to have no knowledge of written Kanuri and 84 percent no knowledge of written Hausa. While the data is not directly comparable, it is worth comparing this to the 58.6 percent literacy in any language for Borno State overall.² Testing with simple texts confirmed low reading comprehension levels. In addition to selecting the right language and format, humanitarians and others wishing to communicate with IDPs and host communities should use simplified content and plain language.

The survey registered a very strong preference for word-of-mouth as the means of receiving information: 78 percent stated this preference across all five sites. Audio and text with pictures tied for second place (eight percent). This is in line with the in-person mode of communication already adopted by many operational organizations, but which limits the number of people engaged at any one time.

This last finding tallies with findings for comprehension levels by format, which showed close to **100 percent comprehension at all sites for audio messaging in either Hausa or Kanuri.**

² National Bureau of Statistics Nigeria, National Literacy Survey 2010

This is a strong indication that simple audio messaging, including by radio, is likely to be the most effective means of mass communication.

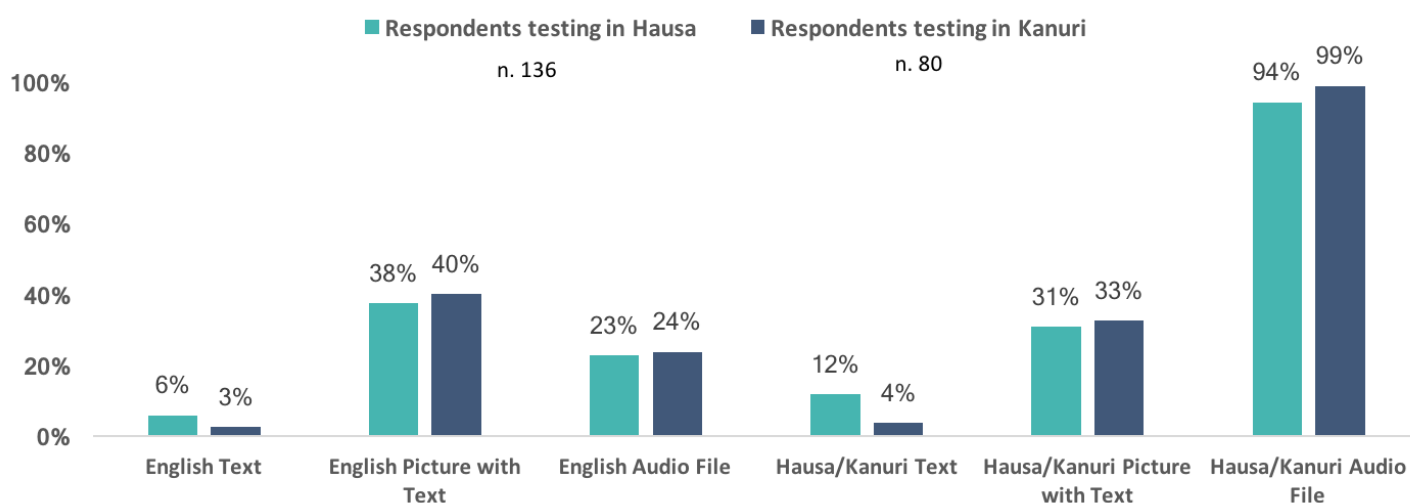
Written comprehension levels were very low, at 30 percent for simple texts in Hausa and just 17 percent for Kanuri. Understanding improved when the text was accompanied by a drawing, to 44 percent for Hausa and 32 percent for Kanuri. This suggests that even graphics with text may reach less than half the sampled population, at least among non-native speakers. Simple text or text and picture content may supplement verbal and audio/video communication and provide a more permanent record that people can refer to; they are insufficient on their own for this population.

Information in Kanuri was only effective in audio format. Less than a third of the sample understood content relayed in written or graphic form. This indicates that it will not be sufficient simply to ‘add Kanuri’: ensuring verbal information relay, through interpreting or the use of audio and video messaging, is essential to improve comprehension.

The effectiveness of visual formats merits further investigation. Despite the low comprehension of English in other formats, 48 percent of respondents understood the English text accompanied by a picture – more than understood content in that format for Hausa. This may indicate that the picture chosen for the text/graphic comprehension test in English was more self-explanatory for participants than the one used for the other languages. However, it may also suggest another potentially effective option for mass communication.

Hard-to-reach groups

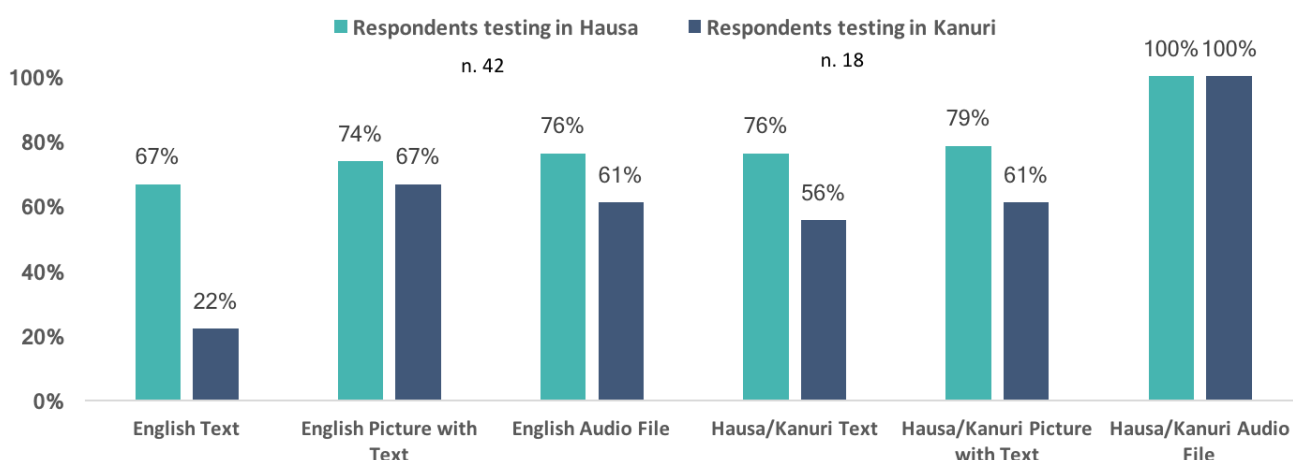
Comprehension rates for ‘hard to reach’ respondents (women and girls with no formal education and whose mother tongue is neither Hausa nor Kanuri)



Gender, education level, and first language had the strongest correlations with comprehension in this sample. The lowest comprehension scores were recorded among women without a formal education and whose first language was neither Hausa nor Kanuri.

Among this group, audio was the most effective format - but even that did not ensure full comprehension. Age did not correlate strongly with comprehension levels across the five sites surveyed.

Comprehension rates for ‘easier to reach’ respondents (men and boys with some formal education)



Conversely, male respondents with at least some formal education found the information easiest to understand in all formats. Those tested in Hausa scored highest.

Conclusions

Comprehension testing shows that the current predominance of Hausa in humanitarian communication efforts in north-east Nigeria unintentionally favors communication with better-educated men and boys. An effective communication strategy for the whole population at these sites will focus on the best means of reaching less-educated female speakers of minority languages. That implies using:

- simplified content;
- audio/video or in-person delivery of messages (ideally complemented by other formats to aid triangulation); and
- translation or interpreting into the mother tongue of the target group wherever possible.

Language support (interpreting and translation) seems most acutely needed among this sample for Gamargu, Kanuri, Marghi, and Shuwa Arabic. As the pool of language professionals will be small, training and support are required to build up the requisite skills and vocabulary.

To our knowledge, this is the first large-scale attempt to measure comprehension levels by language and format among the crisis-affected population of the region. Data on the languages IDPs and host communities speak and understand is not routinely collected, leaving humanitarian organizations ill-prepared to communicate effectively. Systematic collection of data on language and format preferences will provide a better basis for communication. Comprehension testing at other sites can supplement this with a more detailed picture of language support needs and the viability of various formats for specific sections of the affected population.

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