The language lesson: WHAT WE’VE LEARNED ABOUT COMMUNICATING WITH ROHINGYA REFUGEES 
RESEARCH BRIEF
November 2018
“When I speak my own language, I am free. When I hear someone else speaking Rohingya, I feel like I am home.”

- Rohingya refugee
Who participated?

407 respondents from within the Kutupalong-Balukhali expansion site.

82% are new arrivals. Most of the population reached the camps between August and October 2017.

3 in 4 are 18 to 44 years old.

58% women

42% men

2 in 3 have no formal education.

66% reported that they cannot read or write.
Interview sites:
COX’S BAZAR DISTRICT, BANGLADESH
Key findings

Here is what we found, and what it means for humanitarian communication strategies.

**Rohingya is the only spoken language that all refugees understand and prefer. Thirty-six percent struggled to understand a basic sentence in Chittagonian.** Men and women did not understand a simple sentence in Chittagonian at similar rates (34 percent and 37 percent respectively). After Rohingya and Chittagonian, spoken Bangla is understood at higher rates than spoken Burmese and English. Women are less likely than men to understand spoken Bangla or Burmese.

**Verbal communication is critical.** Sixty-six percent of refugees said that they cannot read or write in any language, and comprehension testing broadly confirmed this. Their stated preference is to receive information face to face, over loudspeaker, and by phone call. This tallies with very strong trust levels in imams, family, aid and medical professionals, and majhees as sources of information.

**Simple visual messaging is effective.** After spoken Rohingya, visual messaging is the most widely understood format. All refugees, irrespective of gender, age, or levels of education understood the illustrations at a similar rate.

**Two-thirds would prefer written communication in Rohingya. However, the language lacks a universally accepted script.** A number of writing systems exist, but more information is needed about how widely understood and accepted they are in the camps.

After Rohingya, Burmese is the preferred language for written communication. Around 32 percent can read simple messages in Burmese, Bangla or English. Reading comprehension in Bangla, Burmese, and English is much better than self-assessments, especially among women. Refugees also express clear preference for brochures (18 percent) over other written formats like posters and banners (2 percent).

**28 percent of refugees do not have enough information.** This suggests that access to information has improved in the past year. However, language barriers and low access to media still leave many refugees without the information they need. This reduces their ability to claim their rights, get the support they need, and make decisions for themselves and their families.
The results of this assessment make it clear that there are varied language needs within the Rohingya community. Different people understand, prefer, and trust different formats of communication and sources of information. Nonetheless, solutions for effective humanitarian communication exist. The importance of understanding the language skills of refugees and their ability to communicate effectively is key.

TWB therefore recommends donor governments, the United Nations, and other humanitarian aid organizations involved in the response take the following practical actions:

1. Use Rohingya as the spoken language of communication with refugees. Since Rohingya is the only language that all refugees understand, it is critical that humanitarian agencies prioritize communication in this language. Agencies should also check communication materials for accuracy.

2. Invest in formal training for field workers and interpreters in the Rohingya language. Agencies frequently hire native Chittagonian speakers as field workers or interpreters for the Rohingya response, but their Rohingya skills may vary. Given the importance of face-to-face communication in Rohingya communities, agencies should assess the importance of face-to-face communication in the response. Training and support programs should build capacity in complex terminology such as health interpreters may require. This can draw on tools such as TWB’s multilingual glossaries of key humanitarian terms.

A Rohingya woman visiting an information hub in the megacamp, Kutapalong. TWB

Recommendations
3. **Use a mix of formats and channels of communication.**

Use multiple formats and channels, and consult with the community on those choices. This ensures that everyone has access to information in a format they can understand, through a channel they trust. Develop a mixed approach appropriate to the information being communicated: loudspeakers and majhees may work well for delivering lifesaving information about basic access to services. More complex issues, such as repatriation, are better addressed through face-to-face discussions, community meetings, or long-form radio programming. Key considerations on format and channel include:

- **Make audio formats central to communication strategies.**
  In addition to face-to-face communication, agencies should use loudspeakers and radio to relay spoken messages.

- **Use visual formats to further aid comprehension.**
  Visual content should be simple and culturally relevant. Develop and pre-test it with Rohingya refugees to confirm that they understand the intended messages. Explore dynamic visual formats such as animation, film, and community theater. Narration or subtitles further expand comprehension.

- **Develop illustrated brochures and leaflets as more permanent records.**
  Provide information in formats that refugees can take home for information retention and later reference. This also allows literate refugees to ask friends or family members to help them understand the information. Given both access and privacy concerns, women in particular may benefit from this approach, which can complement mass communication materials such as posters.

- **Work with others to get the right message out.**
  Build partnerships with trusted community figures such as imams and women leaders to relay and promote key messages. Use the support and resources of the Communicating With Communities (CWC) Working Group to ensure content is coordinated, appropriate, and addresses key community concerns.

4. **Use Burmese script when sharing written information with refugees.**

Respect refugees’ preference to receive written information in Burmese over English or Bangla, and cater to that choice until literacy levels improve. To reach the widest possible literate audience, provide all written materials meant for refugees in Burmese, English, and Bangla. If resources are limited, Burmese should take precedence.

5. **Develop a better understanding of communication issues affecting the Rohingya refugee community.**

Recognize that language and culture are integral to communication, community engagement, and the accountability of humanitarian efforts. Develop a more nuanced understanding of how language and culture can support effective communication. Adapt interventions to the dynamic local context. Areas to consider include: communicating with women; children’s literacy and comprehension; Rohingya script awareness and use; and visual communication.
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