MSNA language data can help humanitarians communicate better with affected people
December 2019

For the first time, household-level information is available on the languages conflict-affected people in northeast Nigeria speak and understand. This is thanks to the 2019 Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA) conducted by REACH.

This new data complements site-level information from IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix as well as focused research by Translators without Borders. Together these data sets provide a solid evidence base for informing response-wide funding and programming decisions in northeast Nigeria. Large-scale surveys of this kind can fill critical information gaps on languages and communication needs in the humanitarian sector.

A note on methodology

The 2019 MSNA figures included in this brief are likely inflated because the assessment involves interviews with heads of household. If that individual speaks or reads Hausa, we can't assume that other household members necessarily will as well. Past TWB research suggests that female and older marginalized language speakers are among those least likely to understand spoken or written Hausa.
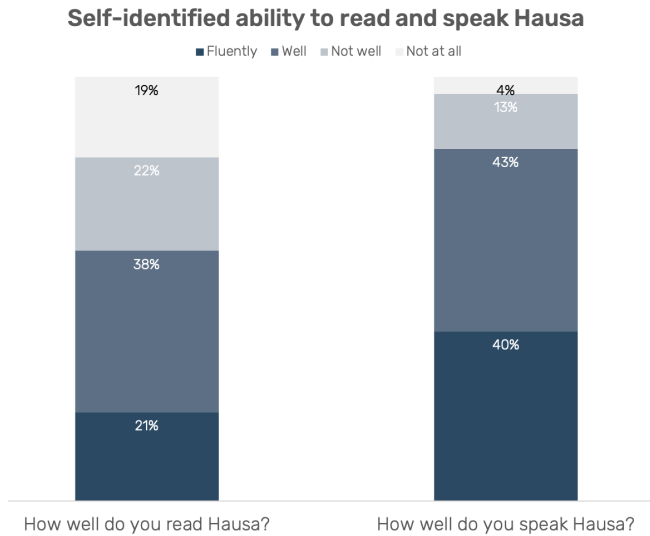
For a detailed explanation of the methodology or to view the raw dataset, visit REACH's website.

Not everyone understands Hausa

Humanitarian organizations in northeast Nigeria communicate with affected people chiefly in Hausa. Yet the 2019 MSNA data shows Hausa is the primary language for a minority of people surveyed, and a large proportion of the population don't understand it well.

Just 31% of households surveyed speak Hausa as their primary language; 28% speak Kanuri and 11% speak Fulfulde. The remaining over 272,000 households (30%) speak more than 30 different primary languages. Among these, Bura, Shuwa Arabic, and Marghi are the most common.

Written information in Hausa will not reliably reach the 41% of households who report reading Hausa "not well" or "not at all." And the over 152,000 households (17%) who say they speak Hausa "not well" or "not at all" will be unable to communicate their needs or report discrimination and abuse in that language. Humanitarian information provision, data collection and feedback mechanisms must cater for a wider range of languages.

Self-identified ability to read and speak Hausa

■Fluently ■Well ■Not well ■Not at all

	How well do you read Hausa?	How well do you speak Hausa?
Not at all	19%	4%
Not well	22%	13%
Well	38%	43%
Fluently	21%	40%

Primary languages vary by area

Speakers of certain languages are clustered in specific areas. Hausa is the main language spoken in northwest Yobe, southeast Borno, and northern Adamawa. In northern Yobe and the rest of Borno, the main language is Kanuri, while in central Yobe and central Adamawa, most people speak Fulfulde.

Within those clusters, the languages spoken vary by Local Government Area (LGA). For example, 68% of households in Gwoza LGA in Borno speak Hausa as their primary language, but only 8% of households in neighboring Bama LGA. To communicate effectively with affected people, humanitarians need to use the languages spoken in the specific area.

Adamawa State

Only 39% of households in Adamawa State report Hausa as their primary language, but 57% prefer to receive spoken information and 52% written information in Hausa. Most households here (92%) claim to speak Hausa "fluently" or "very well." However, only 66% state they can read Hausa "fluently" or "very well." Rates of Hausa speaking and reading ability are especially low in some LGAs, such as Fufore, Jada, Mayo-Belwa, Ganye, and Tounga. These are also among the LGAs where Fulfulde is the most spoken primary language.
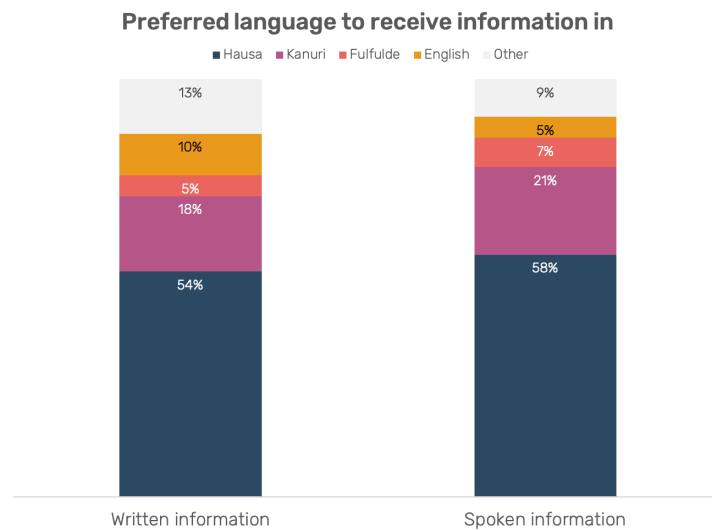
Borno State

Kanuri is the most spoken primary language (48%) in Borno State, where most internally displaced people live. Respondents in Borno also have the lowest average rates of Hausa speaking and reading ability across the three states: only 51% say they read Hausa "fluently" or "very well." Dikwa, Ngala, and Magumeri are among the LGAs with lower rates of Hausa speaking and reading ability.
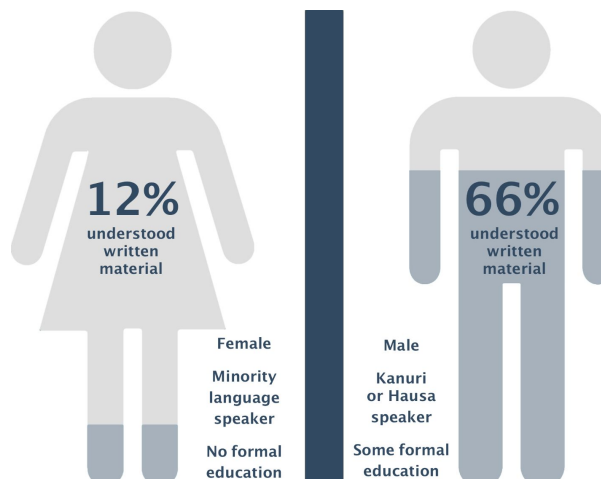
Both language and format matter

Across the three states, over 50% of respondents said they prefer to receive spoken and written information in Hausa. That leaves close to 400,000 households (40%) preferring other languages, chiefly Kanuri, followed by Fulfulde or (for written communication) English. Language preferences matter to build trust and ensure impact, especially if the information is culturally or politically sensitive.

Preferred language to receive information in

■ Hausa ■ Kanuri ■ Fulfulde ■ English ◻ Other

	Written information	Spoken information
Other	13%	9%
English	10%	5%
Fulfulde	5%	7%
Kanuri	18%	21%
Hausa	54%	58%

Low literacy levels across northeast Nigeria mean that some people will not understand any written information. Qualitative evidence from REACH suggests that many MSNA respondents need to have a friend or family member read information for them.

Simplified content and mostly verbal mother tongue communication are critical to reach everyone, including the most vulnerable and less literate groups.

TWB's earlier comprehension assessments found just 23% of those tested at 5 sites for internally displaced people understood written Hausa or Kanuri; less educated female minority language speakers had the lowest scores.

12%
understood
written
material

Female

**Minority
language
speaker**

**No formal
education**

66%
understood
written
material

Male

**Kanuri
or Hausa
speaker**

**Some formal
education**

Five ways to take language into account in humanitarian funding and programming in northeast Nigeria

1. **Base community engagement and accountability on area-specific language data.** Operational agencies should know and cater for the languages and communication needs of affected people in each LGA where they are working. TWB has produced an underlined interactive map where you can explore the 2019 MSNA data by LGA in more detail. Site-level language data collected for IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix is also available on TWB's communications dashboard.

2. **Use this data to identify the language skills needed in community engagement, accountability, data collection, and other program roles.** Make language testing part of recruitment processes. Provide training and guidance to support bilingual staff in translation and interpreting roles.

3. **Test comprehension of information materials and key messages by primary language, gender, and age.** The results will determine the best language, format, and channel to communicate with particular target groups in.

4. **Promote a common approach to multilingual communication and community engagement.** Addressing language barriers one agency at a time is slow and resource-intensive. Response-wide resourcing and collaboration can put two-way multilingual communication within reach of every program. Pool translations of information and training materials, surveys, and other documentation in key languages and formats to build an open-source library that everyone can use. Budget for increased language support capacity across the response.

5. **Measure program outcomes by language to ensure marginalized language speakers are not left behind.** Include language and communication questions in household surveys to track primary language as a potential exclusion factor for program participants. Use indicators and targets that show how people's language and communication needs are being met. Donors can support this by asking funding applicants about their language planning, and using a standard set of questions across donors.

For more information about TWB's research and language support for the response in northeast Nigeria, contact nigeria@translatorswithoutborders.org or visit our website: translatorswithoutborders.org/twb-response-nigeria.

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