TRANSLATORS WITHOUT BORDERS

TWB language services in the Democratic Republic of Congo

We build humanitarian capacity to communicate in the right language

Translators without Borders Translators without Borders (TWB) aims to close the language barriers that hinder humanitarian and international development efforts worldwide. Since 2013, TWB has expanded language support for crisis response globally, building communities of translators in marginalized languages. TWB has partnered with over 100 humanitarian and development organizations supporting meaningful two-way communication.

Communication barriers make it harder for people to protect themselves

TWB has been researching language barriers in health responses in DRC since early 2019. We supported the response to the 10th Ebola outbreak in eastern DRC, and are currently supporting the response 11th Ebola outbreak in Equateur province, and the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe similar communication challenges affect the reach, impact and accountability of humanitarian action in DRC beyond public health emergencies.

People need information in their own language

The Democratic Republic of Congo is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, with over 200 languages spoken. Risk communication is often delivered in French, and to some extent in Swahili or Lingala, and often using a variation of these languages that is not locally appropriate. This excludes sizable and often vulnerable sections of the affected population, particularly women, who prefer to receive information in their own languages. It limits their ability to make decisions, and their uptake of services.
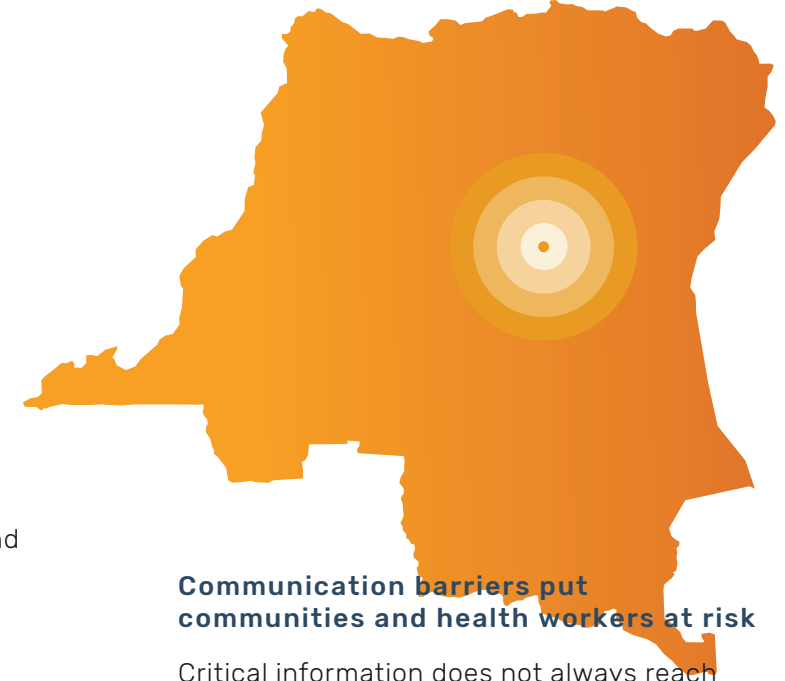
Communication barriers put communities and health workers at risk

Critical information does not always reach people, which can lead to tension and misunderstandings between the community and responders. This affects humanitarian capacity to understand and respond to the changing needs of communities. The use of technical terminology compounds the situation, when not consistently translated and explained in local languages.

The lack of language data is itself a barrier for responders

To communicate effectively, responding organizations must understand what languages people speak, what channels they prefer, and what terms they understand and find appropriate. We need data on language, channels, and terminology to understand how to ensure effective and relevant two-way communication with people.

TWB supports responders in six ways:

1. We collect, analyze, and map language data as a basis for effective risk communication

- We support organizations to find the most effective languages, formats, and channels to communicate on health. This starts with using our four language questions in needs assessments and surveys.
- We have produced language maps for DRC, North Kivu, Ituri, and Equateur covering more than 30 languages. We work with partners to improve and expand on existing data, and to produce analytic maps that support better responses.

2. We provide translation, transcription, and plain language content development to improve comprehension

- TWB provides written and audio translations. Our focus is on translating and editing community-facing materials, ensuring equal and meaningful access to information without language barriers.
- We currently offer translations into three Congolese languages: Lingala, Congolese Swahili, and Nande, as well as French. We will add two local languages (Mongo, Ngombe) and a variant of Lingala spoken in Equateur (Lingala Makanja).
- TWB also works with a growing volunteer network of linguists. Our aim is to support our partners in meeting community needs in the short term, and to build a strong national and international community of language experts in local languages.
- We offer plain language training and assessment of source materials. Applying these principles makes content more accessible. To address unequal access to written information, we offer graphic design support for information design and pictorial messaging.

3. We develop and use glossaries for consistent and accurate communication

- We have developed a specialized DRC health glossary with more than 400 key health terms in Lingala, Congolese Swahili, Nande, French, and English. The glossary suggests culturally adapted alternatives for communicating concepts that may not exist in all languages.
- It is regularly updated and expanded to other languages. It provides clear and accurate translations of humanitarian and health terms in an easily accessible offline format. With the built-in audio feature, you can also hear the words spoken aloud.
- We are developing visual and audiovisual products to accompany our glossary. These illustrate key medical concepts or messages.

4. We conduct research to expand the evidence base for effective communication strategies

- We work with humanitarian and development organizations to research language and communication barriers. In 2019, our research included comprehension surveys with the International Rescue Committee in Goma and Beni.

- We have carried out research on grief and bereavement, and developed a glossary of terms used by Congolese language communities in relation to illness and death. This work supports partners to engage in epidemic prevention and response programs related to COVID-19 and Ebola.

- We have launched a multi-country qualitative research project on the effectiveness of risk communication and community engagement on COVID-19. In DRC, we have partnered with Mercy Corps for data collection, combining remote methodologies with face-to-face interviews. We will share that analysis regularly with community engagement partners to allow responsive programming.

5. We develop language technology solutions for community engagement

- Using artificial intelligence and natural language programming, we have developed innovative solutions to community engagement. Our contactless chatbot Uji was developed in DRC, with partners such as IFRC, the Congolese Red Cross Society, and Kinshasa Digital. This chatbot allows two-way conversations and helps us share up-to-date information with health responders and communities in local languages.

- Uji can interact with people in Lingala, Congolese Swahili and French. Content is updated weekly and includes approved messaging on both COVID-19 and Ebola. It is available on WhatsApp and will include SMS integration. Thanks to the Viamo 321 hotline, we are expanding our reach: users can ask questions about COVID-19 through a standard telephone connection. We will analyze these questions to identify information gaps. We will then work with partners to develop responses to these information needs.

6. We promote accountability through two-way communication in local languages

- We localize and translate training materials on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), under our global partnerships with InterAction, CHS Alliance , World Food Program, and the PSEA Network.

- TWB is developing this work in the DRC so responders can strengthen and expand their complaints and feedback mechanisms with adapted language and technology components.

- We are passionate about improving accountability to affected populations and helping partners to meet the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability. We actively seek to develop partnerships with organizations that have a demonstrated commitment to improving the transparency and effectiveness of their programs by listening to communities and responding to their concerns.

To learn more about TWB's support to the response in DRC, contact drc@translatorswithoutborders.org. For more on TWB's humanitarian and development work globally, contact info@translatorswithoutborders.org or visit our website: translatorswithoutborders.org

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