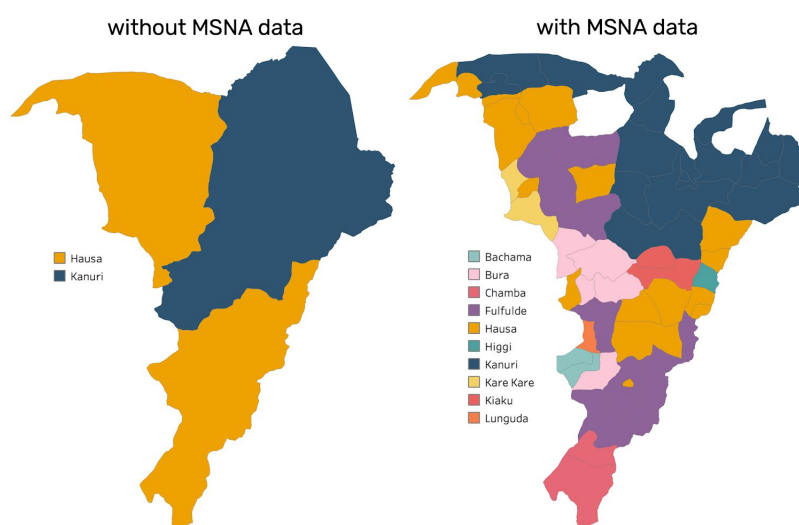# The 2021 multi-sector needs assessments should collect data on the languages of affected people

The 2021 multi-sector needs assessments (MSNAs) are a critical opportunity to strengthen the evidence base for effective and accountable humanitarian response plans. Humanitarian donors and responders need data on the languages and communication preferences of affected people as a basis for funding and programming decisions. At a minimum, asking one simple question on language can make a significant difference in filling this data gap:

What is the main language your household speaks at home?

By collecting this data, MSNAs can help to map the languages of crisis-affected communities, understand the needs of specific language groups through disaggregation, and design programs that they can fully participate in and benefit from. This has already led to more inclusive humanitarian action, notably in northeast Nigeria. Making language data a standard component of response planning everywhere – alongside age, gender, and disability data – is a prerequisite for improving the effectiveness, reach, and accountability of humanitarian action.

Most common main language in northeast Nigeria

without MSNA data

- Hausa
- Kanuri

with MSNA data

- Bachama
- Bura
- Chamba
- Fulfulde
- Hausa
- Higgi
- Kanuri
- Kare Kare
- Kiaku
- Lunguda

MSNA language data supports improved communication in northeast Nigeria

When REACH collected language data in the 2019 MSNA, for the first time responders in northeast Nigeria had an evidence base for their communication and community engagement. They could revise the general assumption that everyone understands Hausa, the main regional lingua franca used in humanitarian communication. The data shows Hausa is the primary language for just 31% of people surveyed, and 41% don't read it well or at all. The data also highlights language differences between areas, enabling communication to be adapted to the needs of different groups. For example, the Mine Action Sub-Sector was able to translate education materials on explosive ordnance into the nine languages spoken by its target audience of over 600,000 people.

Asking the right questions on an ongoing basis is essential

If you can only ask one question, make it the question highlighted above. With just a couple more questions you can capture more detailed information to inform language-aware communication and community engagement strategies. As people's communication needs and preferences might evolve, asking the following questions as part of ongoing assessments can build a stronger evidence base over time.

Recommended language and communication questions to include in MSNAs	
Question	*Key considerations*
What is the main language your household speaks at home? *	• Allow only one language to be selected. • Avoid expressions like "mother tongue", which can be difficult to convey in some languages and might not be relevant where people don't communicate mainly in the language they used growing up. • Provide respondents with a predetermined list of the most common languages spoken to minimize data disparities caused by different spellings of the same language or different dialects that are commonly classified under one language.
What language do you prefer to receive written information in? **	• Allow only one language to be selected. • Use the same list of languages as for the first question. • Ensure "none" is given as an option for those who prefer not to receive information in writing. • When analyzing the results, keep in mind that the preferences of the head of household might not fully represent the preferences of the rest of the household.
What language do you prefer to receive spoken information in? **	• Allow only one language to be selected. • Use the same list of languages as for the first question. • When analyzing the results, keep in mind that the preferences of the head of household might not fully represent the preferences of the rest of the household.
How do you prefer to receive information? **	• Localize the list of possible answers for each context (e.g. in person, radio, TV, poster, leaflet, phone call, SMS, other).

*If space in the questionnaire is limited, only include this question.

**These questions are also included in the Menu of accountability to affected people-related questions for MSNAs, endorsed by the IASC AAP/PSEA Task Team and REACH in 2018.

If you want to know more, or would like support on language data collection and analysis, contact us at info@translatorswithoutborders.org

For more resources on developing language-informed programs and communication strategies, including language maps, datasets, and sample questions, visit our website: translatorswithoutborders.org/language-data/