

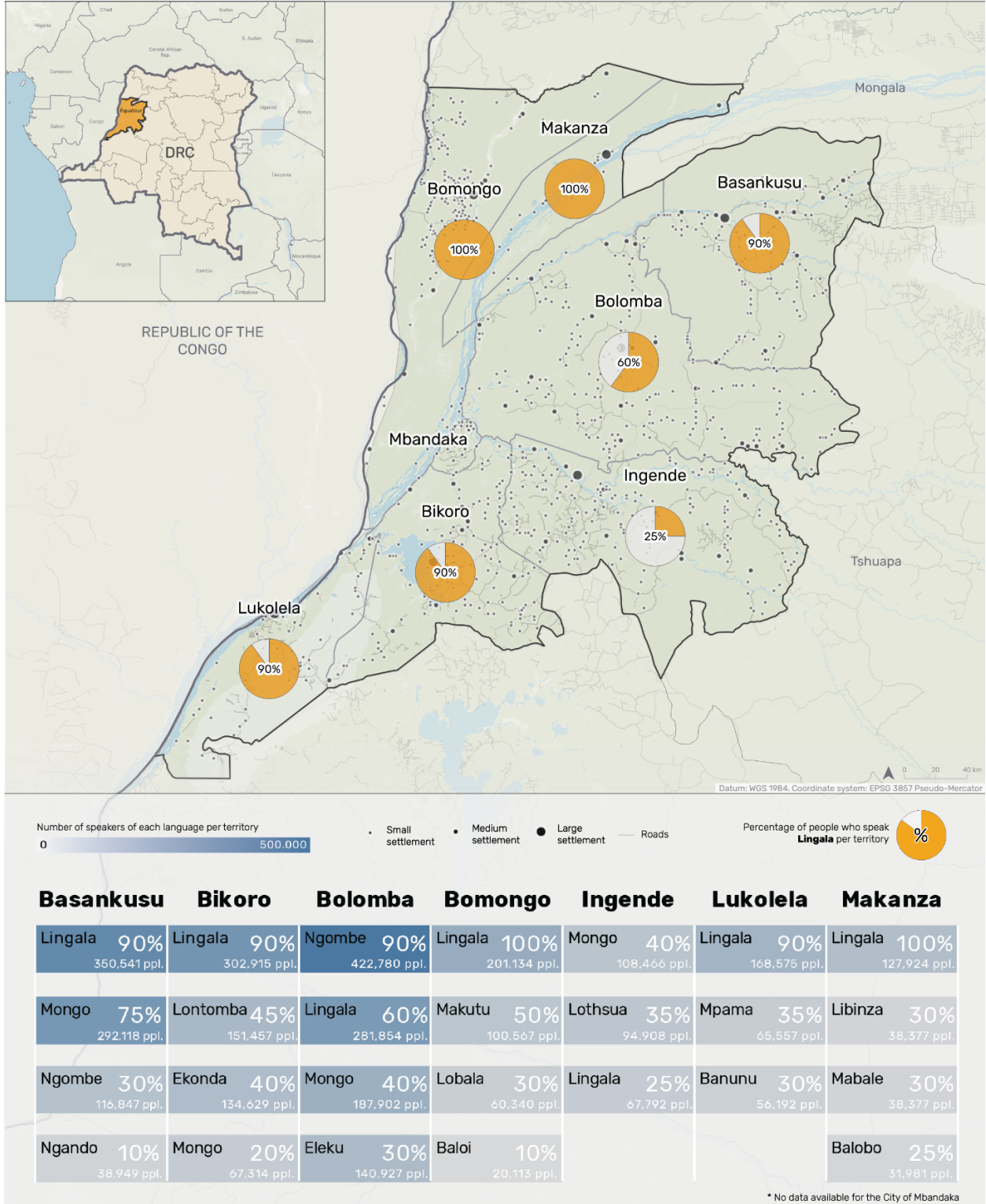


TRANSLATORS
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Use local languages to engage with communities in Equateur, Democratic Republic of Congo

This language brief outlines the language-related research findings of Translators without Borders during the 11th Ebola outbreak in Democratic Republic of Congo. It outlines how language can contribute to the effectiveness of humanitarian action in Equateur Province. People we spoke to during our research, particularly in rural areas, expressed a need for information in local languages. A lack of information in the local language heavily impacts people who aren't confident in French or national languages like Lingala. Because language skills are linked to educational opportunity, the impact is particularly felt by children, women, older people, people with disabilities, and marginalized ethnic groups.

We collected data through interviews and focus group discussions with communities and health communicators in December 2020 and February 2021. This was complemented by field and desk research with local language experts. For further information about wider research findings, [read the report and research brief](#).



Map 1: Language map of Equateur Province

Lingala is not a local language

While French is the official language and widely used in education and government, there are four national languages: Kituba (Kikongo), Lingala, Swahili, and Tshiluba. Not everyone speaks national languages like Lingala, and even fewer speak French. Most of the people we spoke to preferred their local language to Lingala. Those who preferred Lingala wanted to communicate in a localized version of Lingala.

Many research participants said they were comfortable receiving information in Lingala. However, not all variants of Lingala are understood across the province. In Equateur and beyond, the population speaks a variant of Lingala known as Lingala Facile, which borrows words from local languages and from French. This adaptation of local terms means that the Kinshasa localized version of Lingala Facile is not understood by all speakers of Lingala Facile.

"There are difficulties, especially in cases where the communicator uses French, English words and even with Kinshasa Lingala Facile and Mekanja Lingala, which are harder to understand."

50-year-old health worker in Mapeke

People speak shared languages in public but prefer their local languages for receiving information

Language use is highly localized. People stressed the importance of using localized versions of languages to communicate with communities. Even when languages are mutually intelligible to a certain degree, people understand better and trust communication more when it is in the local version of their language.

"The message is not in the right language because we adapt the communication only in Lingala, but not everyone understands Lingala. You have to communicate in their local language."

39-year-old health worker in Bikoro

In Bikoro Territory where we conducted our research, most participants spoke variants of two related languages: Ekonda and Mongo. Participants stressed the importance of using these local languages to communicate with communities, especially in critical areas such as health, where technical concepts or terminology can be confusing.

"We avoid speaking other languages or [variants], like Ntomba, Kwala and

Ekonda, because when we are in public other people will be uncomfortable and will think we are talking about them."

56-year-old man in Bobanda

In public spaces people may speak a lingua franca such as Lingala Facile, but most said that they understood information and could communicate better in local languages.

Communication in a local language fosters trust and avoids misunderstanding. In some villages, people said there were notable differences in variants of languages from village to village. Although there was some understanding, it is important to communicate critical information in versions localized to the specific area or even to a specific village.

Discrimination reduces access to information for Indigenous communities

Discrimination against certain groups such as "Indigenous" communities (also known as Twa or Batwa) can be reinforced by lack of two-way communication in their preferred languages. Engagement with these communities to understand communication preferences is important if they are to access information and

services and make their own questions, concerns and priorities heard.

Participants from Twa-speaking communities expressed a preference for the designation "Indigenous people" rather than "Twa" or "Batwa". On the other hand, most refer to their language as Twa (also written "Tswa"). While the concept of "Indigenous" remains contested and complex, in our reports we respect this preference.

Indigenous communities in Equateur largely speak Twa. Profoundly discriminatory attitudes and practices towards these communities have influenced the use of the Twa language and responders' understanding of how it relates to other local languages.

Speakers of Twa often describe this language as a variant of one of the dominant languages. In fact, while Twa speakers often incorporate the vocabulary of other local languages, Twa is for the most part not understood by others outside the community (whom Twa speakers refer to as "Bantu").

"We speak Mongo but our Mongo has a small difference with the Bantu Mongo. Our Mongo is called Twa, which is still Mongo but with small differences in tonality and certain terms. The Bantu

minimize us a lot because of our way of pronouncing words and our tone; that's why, when there are Bantu present, Indigenous people only speak Bantu Mongo, whereas among us Indigenous people we speak our own Mongo, which is well understood only in our communities."

39-year-old man from Bamanya

Successful risk communication and community engagement happens in local languages

People prefer to communicate with health communicators from their communities who speak localized versions of local languages and who understand their context and concerns. In the case of the 11th Ebola epidemic in Equateur, this was achieved by communicating with the population mainly through community outreach workers and community health workers.

"As the community health workers explain these terms to us in detail in Lingala and sometimes in Ntomba, there is no confusion."

22-year-old man in Mpango

Communication and engagement strategies should reflect the needs of the community. To ensure this, organizations must consult different groups when asking how they want to receive information and ask questions of responders. We found that on some topics, women and men may prefer to have separate sessions, and Indigenous communities told us they preferred to receive information without the presence of other ethnic groups, since they would feel freer to comment and ask questions.

How TWB can help

TWB's mission is to help people get vital information and be heard, whatever language they speak. We help our partner organizations to listen to and communicate effectively with the communities they serve. We translate messages and documents into local languages, support audio translations and pictorial information, and provide plain language advice. We also work with partners to field test and revise materials to improve comprehension and impact.

For more information visit our [website](#) or contact us at drc@translatorswithoutborders.org.



This publication is based on work funded by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), with support from UK Aid funded by the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. The views expressed in this document should in no way be taken to reflect the official position of UNICEF. Nor do they necessarily reflect official UK Government policies. UNICEF and the UK Government cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained in this publication.