
IN THE LOOP: DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE COMPLAINTS AND FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

Displaced and host communities need and want diverse and responsive complaints and feedback mechanisms in different formats and languages.

Summary: what you absolutely need to know

Complaints and feedback mechanisms are an essential part of the humanitarian community's ability to be held accountable for the assistance and protection we deliver. By setting up open and inclusive two-way communication, the humanitarian system will increase accountability to the affected population.

In order to be accountable, we must first know what languages people affected by the crisis speak, and then develop communications strategies that cater to them. Our complaints and feedback mechanisms are no different. A lack of language support also hinders the engagement of local responders.

In northeast Nigeria, 47% of those surveyed didn't recall receiving any information on how to report complaints or give feedback. Sixty percent of people who speak marginalized languages reported they could not report complaints to aid workers. Displaced people and host communities do not have sufficient access to complaints and feedback mechanisms. Their feedback highlights three critical aspects of ensuring access:

- ensure a wide range of entry points: work with local leaders, and also provide ways for people to express concerns anonymously and confidentially,
- explain mechanisms clearly, in the right languages and formats,

- communicate what actions have been taken as a result of the feedback.

The study examined language and communication challenges in complaints and feedback mechanisms and explored possible solutions for improved humanitarian practice.

This research brief outlines the key findings. Translators without Borders (TWB) and its partners also used these findings to develop **a visual and audio toolkit** [[here](#)] for humanitarian organizations to use when introducing displaced and host communities to complaints and feedback mechanisms.

Solutions involve:

Building trust in complaints and feedback mechanisms by ensuring that:

- they are **confidential** by working with local leaders and making more use of audio recorders and hotlines,
- people can **express themselves comfortably** using their own language,
- humanitarians can understand people, listen to them, and are **perceived as trustworthy** through ensuring that humanitarian staff and community volunteers acting as interpreters receive training and guidance on best practice.

Ensuring that communities can access complaints and feedback mechanisms and know what to expect from them by:

- providing **information** through a wide range of sources (traditional leaders, NGOs), formats (written, audio, text), and languages, explaining how to submit complaints and feedback, referral pathways, and response timelines in all languages in all camps,
- developing **a wide range of complaints and feedback mechanisms**, including hotlines and audio recorders, and ensuring these are coordinated,
- being clear about **how feedback will be incorporated** or responded to by:
 - setting mandatory response times,
 - explaining how language issues will be addressed,
 - proactively communicating about how feedback was incorporated and what changed as a result.

We spoke to displaced and host communities and humanitarian staff

*"Engage us in meetings in the language we prefer to say our opinion, raise awareness on the [complaints and feedback] mechanism, give feedback on time."
- Resident, Sulemanti*

In August 2021, TWB, with the support of Plan International, the Danish Refugee Council, the Norwegian Refugee Council, and the International Rescue Committee conducted interviews and focus group discussions with 350 displaced and host community members aged between 10 and over 60 years. We also interviewed 100 humanitarian staff specialized in protection, camp coordination and camp management, accountability to affected populations, and monitoring and evaluation. The study locations were Teachers' Village Camp, Farm Center, Modu Sulumbri, Sulemanti, Kwanan Yobe, Stadium Camp, Bama, and Pulka, all in Borno State. The interviews explored participants' experiences and perspectives of complaints and feedback mechanisms, their information needs and preferences, terminology, and the availability of visual or pictorial communication.

Communities need to trust complaints and feedback mechanisms in order to use them

Key finding 1: People lack confidence that they are able to accurately relay their concerns

"Hausa language is my problem when it comes to information needs because sometimes the facilitators are not Mandara speaking people and when they [humanitarians] sensitize us on distribution, we have to ask for someone to translate for us because they [humanitarians] cannot give us the complete information we are expecting."

- Resident, Pulka

- Sixty percent of speakers of marginalized languages (Fulfulde/Fulani, Marghi, Glavda, Waha, Gamargu) surveyed across all locations said they are sometimes unable to complain directly to humanitarians, who are mostly Hausa and English speakers. In such cases, they rely on friends and neighbors to interpret.
- Communities and humanitarians alike report that communication between them happens in only a few languages compared with the diversity of languages spoken by those communities. This affects communication around accountability, including information on complaints and feedback mechanisms reaching communities, and feedback and complaints reaching humanitarians. All identified some combination of Hausa, Kanuri and English as the main languages of communication, as illustrated by Figure 1.

Languages or dialects commonly used to inform displaced and host communities

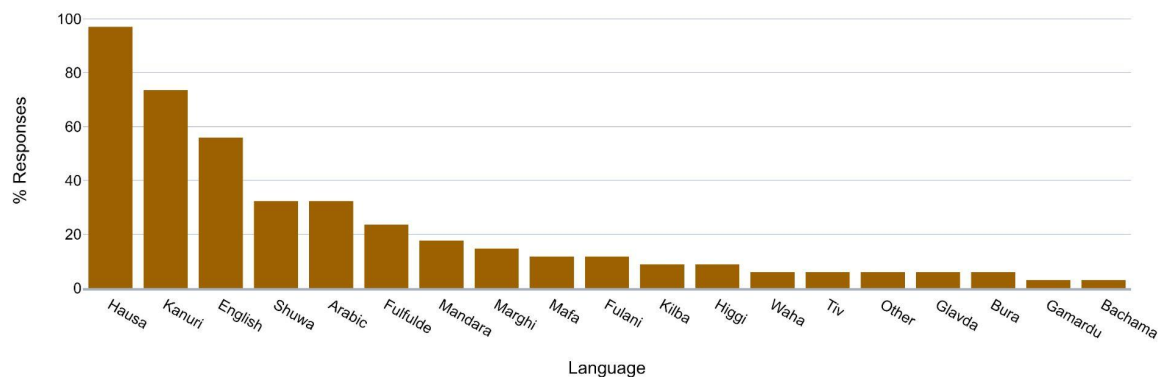


Figure 1: Hausa, Kanuri and English account for the vast majority of humanitarian's communication with displaced and host communities. Source: a survey of 34 Accountability to Affected Populations and Community Engagement Working Group members.

- This is a problem for speakers of other languages across many of the locations surveyed. This is especially pronounced in some locations. For instance, in Pulka, we were told **“most people here do not understand Hausa, Kanuri or English”**. In Jere, Mandara, Fulfulde/Fulani, Gamargu and Shuwa Arabic speakers interviewed complained of the preference given to communication in Hausa and Kanuri over more marginalized languages.
- In 35 of 48 focus group discussions, community members of all ages and genders reported they speak languages other than Hausa or Kanuri at home, including Fulfulde/Fulani, Glavda, Mandara, Mafa, Marghi, Gamargu, Higgi and Shuwa Arabic.

Key finding 2: People lack confidence that humanitarians can understand and act on their concerns

"Field staff do not speak all the local languages. Translation and interpreting is required often when supporting communities"

- Humanitarian worker

"I will keep my problem to myself because even though you bring it they do not even listen."

- Resident, Teacher's Village Camp

- Seventy percent of humanitarians report some degree of mismatch between the languages they speak and those spoken by the communities served, and 27% speak none of the languages of the communities in which they work. Over 52% identify three or more languages spoken by communities which they don't understand.
- Thirty-five out of 100 humanitarians across all locations stated that they often have to find community interpreters to support them in doing needs assessments and raising awareness about protection and health issues.

"Many times when we [humanitarians] are carrying out activities we come across people that [do] not understand [us] and we have to look for interpreters, for example when we [do] assessments or during sensitization [campaigns]."

- While many humanitarians are multilingual, they don't reflect the linguistic diversity of the affected population. Most humanitarians consulted reported speaking Hausa and Kanuri at home; English and Marghi were the next most commonly spoken languages by humanitarian workers.
- Seventy-five percent of humanitarians surveyed felt that displaced and host communities would prefer receiving verbal information on humanitarian services in Hausa, as shown in Figure 2. This is not the view of the community members surveyed at the same locations (see Key finding 5). The languages humanitarians most commonly suggested communities want are Hausa and Kanuri (53%); 22.5% believe communities prefer to communicate only in Haus, and 17.5% in Kanuri alone.

Preferred languages for receiving information according to humanitarians

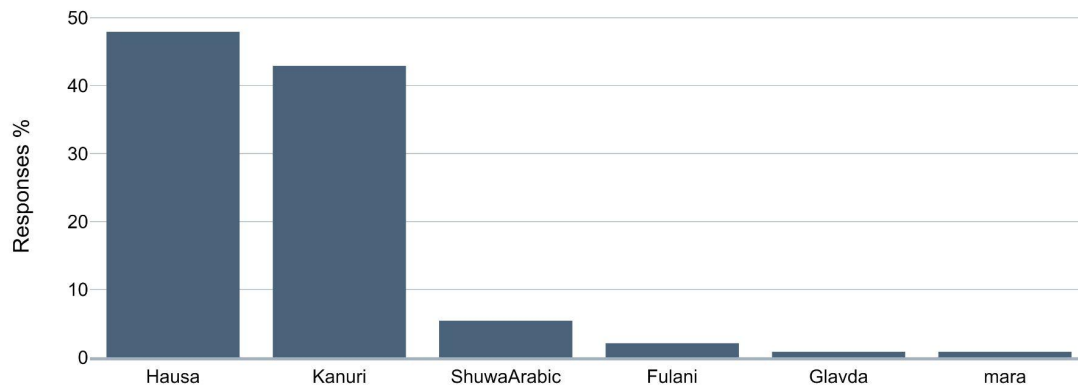


Figure 2: Humanitarians believe that communities prefer to receive information in Hausa and Kanuri.

- Both humanitarian staff and community members recognized that they needed information in more languages, and asked for more translated materials and more staff who can communicate in the languages spoken in each camp.

Key finding 3: People are more willing to report problems if they believe their complaint will remain confidential

"We will go to the bulama "because they are the people of integrity and they know how to keep secrets."

- Resident, Pulka

- Male and female community members of all ages felt that they would not report issues or make a complaint unless they could preserve their dignity through confidentiality.
- Community members in all locations surveyed listed a range of stakeholders as trusted to manage complaints and feedback, including bulamas, religious leaders, camp management, nurses, and NGOs.
- Men and women both generally identified bulamas as the most appropriate people to make complaints to, as bulamas are responsible for resolving issues affecting the community, and because they will keep the complaint confidential.

- Community focus group participants in 25% of locations favored a toll-free hotline to raise especially urgent complaints. When one participant shared this idea, the others often agreed, which wasn't the case with other suggestions.
- Participants in one focus group said they would choose NGOs because they take complaints seriously and have the power to take action. NGOs are sometimes chosen because participants felt that, coming from outside the community, they would handle complaints confidentially.

Communities have difficulties accessing complaints and feedback mechanisms

Key finding 4: Displaced and host communities want more information about complaints and feedback mechanisms

"We need more awareness on complaints and feedback mechanisms and where to go so that our complaints will be taken into account."

- Resident, Sulemanti Camp

- Figure 3 indicates that, with the exception of Teacher's Camp (the camp closest to the humanitarian community), up to 47% of community members surveyed at all locations don't recall receiving any information from humanitarian workers on how they can make a complaint or give feedback since arriving at that location.
- The lack of information was most extreme in the locations furthest from Maiduguri. Here the vast majority of those surveyed could not recall receiving any information.

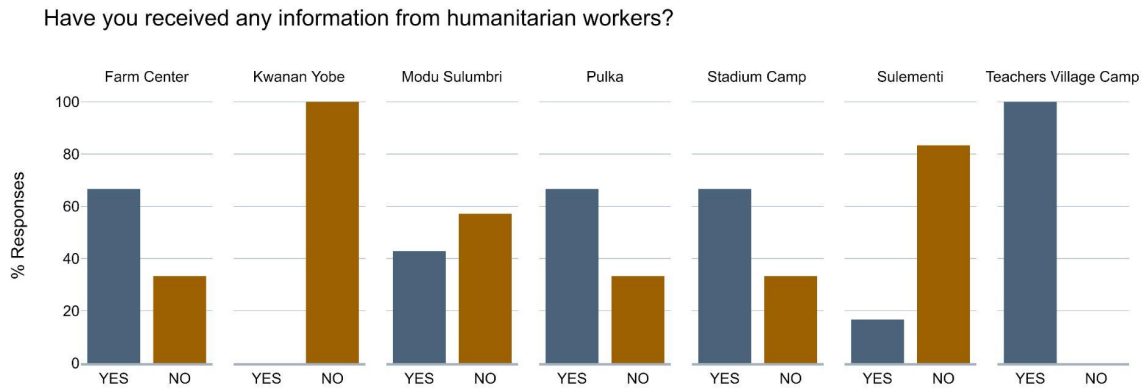


Figure 3: People living in camps close to Maiduguri are much more likely to know how to report complaints.

- Over 80% of community members felt that they needed more information delivered through face-to-face communication and help centers or provided by staff.
- Participants in over 25% of focus group discussions also said they would like to have more suggestion boxes for those who know how to write (together with the paper to write on),
- Thirty-eight percent wanted more help desks and staff, especially those with local language skills.
- Community members across all locations think more awareness-raising is needed on complaints and feedback mechanisms. They would like humanitarian NGOs to provide this and other information through local leaders, like the *bulamas*, to ensure the widest possible dissemination in the right language.
- Participants also suggested door-to-door information relay, radio advertisements, large signposts or banners, and community meetings to enable everyone in the camp to access information, including how to raise complaints and give feedback.

Key finding 5: People want information in pictorial and audio formats on how to make complaints and give feedback

"Since we can't read, [information] should be in a format that we can understand by simply looking at the pictures."

- Child, Teacher's Village Camp

- Information, education, and communication materials are present in most camps, often focusing on gender-based violence, human rights, and improvised explosive devices (see Figure 4). However, no pictorial or audio information was available on complaints and feedback mechanisms in any camp we visited.
- Humanitarians can learn from the accessibility of the information materials that are available, for instance on preventing sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment, when developing accessible information on complaints and feedback mechanisms. In at least two camps, residents found signs to be poorly contextualized (using English, no graphics or graphics with non-African faces and landscapes), and physically hard to access (handwritten, and displayed in places that are closed during the evening and not near shelters or widely around the camps).
- Both humanitarians and community members in all locations want to see more versions of multilingual low-text pictorial materials presenting humanitarian services and complaints and feedback mechanisms

"They [humanitarians] should print more in the local languages so that we understand better."

- Resident, Farm Center Camp

- Participants in 36% of focus groups said spoken information was in Hausa and Kanuri, leaving the others to rely on word-of-mouth and/or pictorial information.
- A majority of community members in all age groups and at all locations prefer to continue receiving information in audio format. People in four community focus group discussions stated that *"it will be helpful to have audio information on different topics, not only on COVID-19."*

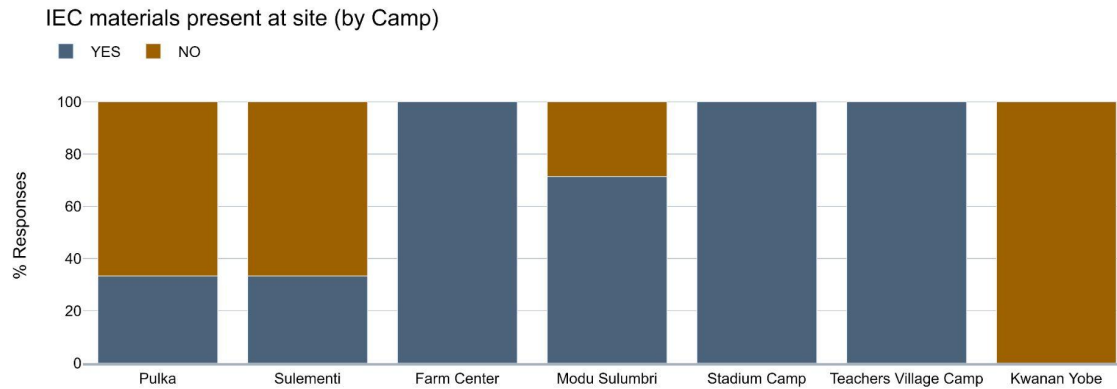


Figure 4: No respondents had seen any IEC materials on any subject at one camp, and less than 40% had seen them at two other sites of the seven surveyed.

Key finding 6: Displaced and host communities want to know how the feedback loop will be closed and if their feedback will have any impact

“Response in time is the best thing to do differently. If they can improve that we will be grateful.”

- Male resident, Stadium Camp

- Timely response was the main concern for participants in 30% of the focus group discussions. The shared experience was of never receiving a response or receiving one too slowly. In one focus group discussion, participants said they would like to receive a reply in two or three days to feel their concerns are being addressed.
- Community members across all locations, age groups, and sexes voiced frustration at the lack of responses to community feedback.
- Twenty-four percent felt that urgent responses required hotlines. Participants expressed frustration that it often was not easy to contact the right person to fix the problem. Participants in one focus group said they knew both the phone number and the name of the staff person to whom they could speak about problems in one sector. This was highly praised.

Key resources

- TWB, [Glossary for Northeast Nigeria](#)
- TWB, [COVID-19 Glossary](#)
- TWB, [COVID-19 or Korona Bairos? Communicating on the “disease that affects your breathing” in northeast Nigeria](#)
- TWB, [Comprehension assessment reports](#)
- TWB, [Write Clearly: TWB’s guide to writing in plain language](#)
- TWB, [Field Guide to Humanitarian Interpreting and Cultural Mediation](#) (contact us for versions in Bura-Pabir, Fulfulde, Hausa, Kanuri, Kibaku, Mandara, Marghi, Shuwa Arabic, and Waha)
- TWB, [Northeast Nigeria Language Map, by Local Government Area](#)
- TWB, [Northeast Nigeria Language Map, by primary language](#)
- TWB, [Communications Dashboard: Internally Displaced People in northeast Nigeria, by site](#)
- TWB, [Four simple language questions](#) for needs assessments and surveys
- TWB, [MSNA language data can help humanitarians communicate better with affected people](#)
- TWB and Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, [Case study on audio recording for verification in multilingual surveys](#)
- TWB and People in Need, [Rapid Guide to Localizing and Translating Survey Tool](#)
- TWB, [The link between language and accountability for the future of Grand Bargain](#)
- TWB, [The challenges and opportunities of multilingual audio communication in Borno State](#)
- TWB, [Accountability tools in Monguno unintentionally exclude women](#)
- TWB, [TWB develops language technology to improve humanitarian communication in northeast Nigeria](#)
- TWB, Library <https://library.translatorswb.org/>. This library collates all of the language resources designed to help humanitarian staff, interpreters, and translators working with crisis-affected people in northeast Nigeria.



This publication is based on work funded by the UK government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) under the Promoting Rights and Supporting Protection Needs in North East Nigeria (ProSPINE+) Consortium program.

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Translators without Borders would like to sincerely thank all the communities and organizations who supported and contributed to this research. In particular we are extremely grateful to partners from Accountability to Affected People and Community Engagement working group, Protection and WASH sectors, staff from organisations: Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, Norwegian Refugee Council, Plan International and their colleagues in Bama and Pulka, for their ongoing support in overcoming the challenges of conducting research during a pandemic.

Translators without Borders believes that everyone has the right to give and receive information in a language and format they understand. We work with nonprofit partners and a global community of language professionals to build local language translation capacity and raise awareness of language barriers.

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