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Translators without Borders

Improving access and trust in humanitarian complaints and feedback systems in northeast Nigeria

Technology could be part of the solution to current language, trust and confidentiality barriers.

Summary: what you absolutely need to know

We heard from internally displaced people (IDPs) and humanitarians in northeast Nigeria on how complaints and feedback mechanisms currently work. Research participants described an information and communication environment in which access barriers exclude sections of the population, and low feedback response rates and concerns about confidentiality damage trust. More routinely communicating and listening in a wider range of languages and formats can help address access barriers. Complaints and feedback mechanisms that offer better guarantees of confidentiality can help improve trust. Initial findings suggest greater scope for technology-based solutions than humanitarians have so far envisaged.

- Women, marginalized language speakers, and people living with disabilities, face particular difficulties getting the information they need and being heard. People want humanitarians to use information channels that are accessible and reach all population groups, and to make extra effort to support them to get information about issues beyond service provision in the camps.

- Access constraints mean many don't feel their complaints are heard, and poor response rates undermine trust that humanitarians will act on them. People want complaints channels to be made accessible and for humanitarians to act quickly, provide timely feedback and communicate any action taken. This will increase people's trust in the existing system.

- People value confidentiality when making complaints, especially about protection concerns. Trust, privacy and confidentiality were the issues most commonly raised by participants in relation to feedback mechanisms.

- Most people have experience using mobile devices, but not for making complaints and giving feedback. Technology could offer a partial solution to people's concerns around confidentiality, access and responsiveness, building on existing familiarity with mobile internet use.

Humanitarian organizations can take a number of steps to address the issues identified.

Expand information access

- Use multiple channels to share information with the widest possible audience, including multilingual audio messaging, loudspeakers for community leaders to relay information, and print materials with field-tested graphics and limited text
- Expand and strengthen the radio listening program to other locations to support information relay, awareness raising, and complaints and feedback
- Communicate in the languages of camp residents, including relevant sign languages, and provide interpreters with training; use plain language for everyone to understand

Make complaints and feedback mechanisms more accessible

- Expand complaint, feedback and response options for people who can't read or write, including voice recorders and hotlines
- Plan community meetings to discuss complaints and feedback so that women can attend
- Explore options for using other technology solutions to increase access

Improve the confidentiality of complaints and feedback mechanisms

- Provide channels for confidential reporting, including voice recorders, hotlines, suggestion boxes in locations that allow privacy, and other technology where appropriate
- Train community leaders who receive complaints to keep them confidential and anonymous, and to use and advise others on using any technology-enabled reporting systems
- Establish dedicated capacity for handling sensitive complaints, staffed by individuals who speak most of camp residents' languages and trained to provide safe, confidential reporting

Improve the responsiveness of complaints and feedback mechanisms to improve trust

- Agree and work to standard response times for complaints and feedback, and communicate with residents about action taken
- Strengthen referral networks between protection actors and other sectors
- Make sure there are enough electronic devices to support complaints and feedback mechanisms data collection in the camps and train staff on new technological tools that could improve complaints and feedback mechanisms

We heard from over 200 IDPs and humanitarian workers

The research aimed to learn how the humanitarian response in northeast Nigeria can improve complaints and feedback mechanisms and what role technology plays in that. We heard from IDPs and humanitarians about how current complaints and feedback systems work, if and why people are satisfied with them and whether they trust them.

Researchers heard from 206 adults living in camps for internally displaced people, and 13 humanitarian staff, between August and October 2022.

The participants in this qualitative study included:

- humanitarian workers specialized in protection and camp coordination and camp management,
- State Emergency Management Agency staff,
- Civil Society Organization network members,
- community leaders,
- people living with disabilities,
- community members, and
- volunteers of humanitarian organizations.

The research locations were Boarding School IDP camp, Konduga; Vocational Centre camp, Askira-Uba; GSSS camp, Gwoza; GSSS camp, Bama; and Masamari camp, Dikwa. The largest camps per Local Government Area were selected for this research.[1] The study used two qualitative research methods: focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs).

Current systems are not always accessible, responsive and confidential, especially for less powerful community members

Women, marginalized language speakers and people living with disabilities face particular difficulties getting the information they need and being heard

"[We are unable] to reach all population groups equally with information, there are barriers [...] Women complain that most information they receive is through the men, they believe the men don't usually give them the full information that is supposed to be shared with them. [...] Similarly, youth between the ages of 18 and 21 years [...] also feel sidelined, not directly included in getting first-hand information. They say no one is talking about their concerns and most organizations are concerned about women and girls."

– Borno State Network of Civil Society Organizations

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[1] R28 list of site assessed

Humanitarians and IDPs identified serious gaps in people's ability to access information and make themselves heard by service providers in the camps. Some groups face particular challenges. More than half of affected people consulted said they don't have access to the information they need. Some of the important topics they can't get information on are electoral politics, government relocation plans and camp closures, and events taking place outside their local area. Information on humanitarian services, camp activities and health and safety awareness are easier for camp residents to access.

Humanitarian workers in the camps share information mostly through community meetings, and to a lesser extent through the radio. People also get information from friends and neighbors, especially those who travel out of the towns and return. Sometimes people get information from new arrivals coming from hard-to-reach areas.

Despite these multiple information sources, research participants identified several barriers that typically prevent many women and children, speakers of marginalized languages, and people living with disabilities from accessing information:

- **Religious and cultural barriers prevent many women from attending meetings**, and from speaking freely when they do. Most female focus group participants said they depend on their husbands, in-laws, and neighbors for information.
- **People are not able to get the information they need if they cannot read**, or cannot read well: literacy levels are low in northeast Nigeria, particularly among women. Participants expressed a preference for information materials that contain little text. This means any visual content must be field-tested for comprehension and acceptability, as many people will not get information from accompanying text.
- **Speakers of marginalized languages often cannot get information in their language**, as humanitarians typically communicate in the dominant language of the camp, typically Hausa or Kanuri. Fifty-four percent of affected people and humanitarians consulted said that speakers of marginalized languages don't get information directly. They suggested that speakers of Fulfulde/Fulani, Marghi, Glavda, Mandara, Gamargu and Shuwa face particular problems in this regard. This means they have to rely on relatives, friends and neighbours to interpret for them.
- **There is no consistent provision for sign language users.** Humanitarian workers interviewed said they had no sign language capacity or interpreters. Deaf people in the camps rely on family and friends to get information and to help them make complaints or give feedback.

Some humanitarians interviewed saw meetings with community leaders at camp level as the best channel for passing information to the whole community. In-person meetings allow for verbal communication and questions and answers, in contrast to written leaflets and posters. Meetings with camp leaders are also seen by some as offering assurances that other community members will trust and listen to the information provided, because they trust their leaders as members of their own communities.

However, other research participants described problems with this approach. Women often feel that when they get information secondhand from their male relatives, they don't hear everything they want to know. Women in Dikwa and Gwoza felt the same about women leaders being invited to meetings: they wanted all women to be invited. Young men reportedly feel similarly excluded from direct information access, in a context where they feel humanitarian attention is on women and girls and not on them.

Women reported that often only women leaders are invited to the meetings. But they want the meetings to be open to all women.

– Female FGD participants Dikwa and Gwoza

Since inviting all camp residents to all meetings will also present challenges, there is demand for other ways of ensuring that people can access information firsthand. Radio broadcasts can be an effective complement to community meetings, but not everyone owns a radio. In Bama, IOM has found a solution in the form of radio listening groups, where people get together to listen to broadcasts. Community members and humanitarian workers alike praised this approach for ensuring many people can get the same information at the same time from a source they trust. Participants also suggested increasing the use of loudspeakers to relay information as a way of expanding firsthand information access.

Access constraints mean many don't feel their complaints are heard, and poor response rates undermine trust that humanitarians will act on them

Although we found that people do know how to make a complaint, doing so is often difficult for many of the same reasons that make getting information difficult. Humanitarians interviewed said they sometimes have difficulties understanding speakers of languages other than Hausa and Kanuri. They rely on community volunteers to interpret for people making complaints and when giving responses to community feedback. Participants also noted that the widespread use of suggestion boxes is unsuited to the needs of the many who can't read and write. And the same constraints that prevent some women from accessing information at meetings, mean they are often not present when complaints are discussed and humanitarian organizations provide feedback. Some female focus group participants said they feel their complaints are ignored. Poor response rates compound these access issues. Fifty-two percent of IDPs consulted said they either had never received a response to their complaint, or only after a long wait. Response times ranged from one month to a year. Such delays, confirmed by humanitarians interviewed, undermine trust in the system and discourage people from making complaints. When an organization doesn't make a public response, even if they act on the report, people think no action has been taken.

"Some people trust the [complaints and feedback mechanisms] and some don't, because some people when they have been complaining and have no response they would not be eager to complain again."

– Women's leader, Gwoza

Some people prefer to report to their community leaders, saying they trust them more than humanitarian workers. Others complained that this creates further delays while they wait for the leader to relay the complaint.

People value confidentiality when making complaints, especially about protection concerns

Confidentiality is critical in determining whether people make complaints. Forty-four percent of IDPs consulted don't want to share protection-related complaints directly with humanitarian workers. They prefer to make such reports complaints anonymously; participants told us this mainly when they use suggestion boxes. Eighty-one percent of humanitarians identified marital issues, harassment, gender-based violence, and other protection concerns as matters that people don't share with them. Participants said people often don't report directly because they fear reprisals for speaking up.

> *Sometimes when one reports harassment, the perpetrators of the act will follow the person home and beat him. So if such acts are reported secretly, the reporter will be protected from harm (beating)."*
>
> *– Young female FGD participant, Bama*

IDPs' suggestions for ensuring confidentiality include making a private space available for complaints, with trusted dedicated staff to report to. These staff members should preferably be the same gender as the person making the report, and multilingual in order to minimize recourse to interpreters.

Technology can also offer guarantees of confidentiality. Participants in Konduga and Bama, women especially, told us they had appreciated IOM's earlier provision of voice recorders for feedback for that reason. This initiative, since discontinued, enabled people to record their comments in their own language inside a private booth. Translators without Borders then transcribed and translated the recordings into English for analysis and follow-up, expanding confidential feedback opportunities for minority language speakers.

> *"When we have highly sensitive and secret issues we don't want anyone to know about [them]. Before we had a place in the camp, you would just go there and say what you want using a device without anyone knowing who made such complaints."*
>
> *– Young female FGD participant, Konduga*

Most people have experience using mobile devices, but not for making complaints and giving feedback

Ninety percent of research participants have cell phones or have access to phones through their family or friends. Most female focus group participants do not have their own phones, but told us they can easily use their husbands' phones. Mobile phones are a means of communication and access to information, particularly for those with smartphones. Both men and women report they use phones to watch movies and listen to music. Only a few people can write text messages and read messages received. However, they are familiar with online applications and using the internet to get information.

Community members are comfortable when they use public phones or call toll free numbers for complaints and feedback. However, 65% of the community members reported that there were no hotlines in the camps. Where hotlines do exist, participants' experiences of using them varied from extremely satisfied to dissatisfied. Dissatisfaction was linked in particular to being unable to call the hotlines in languages they understand.

> *"I called the hotline and they spoke in English so I dropped the call."*
> *- Young female FGD participant, Gwoza*

Currently no complaints and feedback system in the camps studied uses technology to increase access and improve confidentiality. However, community members and leaders expressed willingness to use technology-based feedback mechanisms if introduced.

> *"I think providing these types of electronic devices can help to improve the system because it is not necessary for someone to be literate before he can understand the information from these devices. Some information can be viewed on the screens and people can be trained on how to use these devices"*
> *- Women leader, Dikwa*

Humanitarians voiced their own support needs related to complaints and feedback mechanisms in the field

Most humanitarians interviewed said mobile devices could be helpful especially for documenting complaints in order to close the feedback loop. Several suggested that devices like mobile phones would provide anonymity for sensitive complaints, which they felt would make people more likely to report.

Humanitarians also said they are not equipped to provide information and support on protection-related issues. This points to a need for more information sharing between the protection sector and other organizations and sectors working in the camp.

Figure 1: Excerpt of responses from humanitarian workers

We asked humanitarians…
Question 1: What kind of tool would help you and your colleagues providing information and managing and responding to complaints and feedback? Any ideas? • "Electronic devices with applications, like phones containing ODK (Open Data Kit) where you can easily take complaints. These applications are designed with questions, this makes it easier to complete tasks." • "The complaint kobo tool should be made in a way that the complaint will pop up, when the response will not be on time so that the complainer should be aware, instead of waiting, I think the kobo is very important if they can change the settings so that the complaint should be popping up." • "It will be easier for us, if we can get a computer, that's a laptop to help us better preserve information and respond to the complaints better."

Question 2: What kind of information are you lacking to provide better support for complaints and feedback mechanisms?

- "Security cases and marital cases."
- "The most information is sexual exploitation: so many women are being exploited very badly in this camp. This is something very common in the camp."
- "Honestly, I don't think we have something that we are lacking on the information sharing, maybe that of GBV due to the culture of silence as I told you earlier, some don't open up. That is the essence of having the community volunteer, if they have information sensitization will follow in that area."

Question 3: What kind of support could you need for information relay and complaints and feedback mechanisms?

- "Maybe support with translation of languages and recorded jingles, because some languages are lacking."
- "We need NGOs to increase their interventions in this camp, [...] like to have enough food for new arrivals, shelter kits, latrine and shower, and first aid."
- "Support for employing volunteers who will understand the marginalized languages in the camp. Additionally, we will appreciate to have additional mobile speakers to aid in information dissemination within the camp community."
- "We need support of a public address system to ease information dissemination especially to a larger population."

Question 4: Are there specific complaints you would like to receive through a mobile device? Which complaints?

- "Yap, there are cases where you might want to report a sensitive case or talk about a confidential case. You might need a confidential channel like the mobile devices."
- "Yes, there are some people that don't want to appear physically, because of the kind of complaint, they will prefer calling on phone and lay their complaint without exposing themselves."
- "Yes, maybe some protection cases that they don't want anyone to hear or listen to, this one I prefer to use a mobile phone."
- "Yes like sexual exploitation complaints and harassment."

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, [Developing effective complaints and feedback mechanisms](#)
- TWB, [Complaints and feedback mechanisms](#)
- TWB, [Comprehension assessment reports](#)
- TWB, [Write Clearly: TWB's guide to writing in plain language](#)
- 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.

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 advise on two-way communication. We also work with partners to field test and revise materials to improve comprehension and impact. This work is informed by research, language mapping and assessments of target populations' communication needs. We also develop language technology solutions for community engagement.

For more information visit our website or contact us at info@translatorswithoutborders.org.

TWB is a cornerstone of CLEAR Global, an initiative launched in 2021 to expand our ambition to help people get vital information, and be heard, whatever language they speak.