

Speaking the language of assistance: Comprehension of language and terms used in Multi-Sector Needs Assessments in DRC

Summary: what you absolutely need to know

To support humanitarian response in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), REACH conducts numerous assessments each year independently and in collaboration with other humanitarian organizations, including the annual Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA), carried out with WFP and in partnership with government bodies. Recognizing that people do not always understand the intended meaning of humanitarian jargon, REACH and CLEAR Global conducted a qualitative comprehension study of five key terms and concepts used in the MSNA. This study was designed by CLEAR Global, and the data was collected by REACH enumerators. Humanitarian organizations can use the findings to take possible gaps in comprehension on board when developing data collection tools, training data collectors, and analyzing the data they collect.

The study focused on five commonly used terms in the humanitarian sector: protection, protection incident, gender-based violence, psychosocial support, and shock.

Key findings

- It is likely that people collecting humanitarian data do not fully understand the terms they are using. Some REACH staff said alternative terms suggested by affected communities were appropriate for data collection even though they were not fully aligned with the intended meaning of the humanitarian terms. Such misunderstandings affect the quality of humanitarian data collected in DRC and may give an inaccurate picture of certain needs.
- The level of understanding of the five selected terms varied across participants. Those with more experience of humanitarian data collection had a better understanding of the meaning of the terms as they are used in humanitarian action.

- The most misunderstood/poorly translated term is 'shock', which most participants associated with emotional shock rather than the humanitarian meaning of a short-term event with negative impacts. REACH enumerators also indicated a misunderstanding of the term, classifying translations of 'shock' that refer to emotional pain or surprise as 'appropriate' translations for use in data collection.
- Participants only partially understood the terms 'protection' and 'protection incident'. Some still misunderstood 'protection incident' even after receiving the REACH definition.
- Participants only properly understood the term 'psychosocial support' after being told the definition. They explained that they provide psychosocial support to each other within their communities, regardless of humanitarian presence.
- Participants best understood the term 'gender-based violence'. However, government enumerators said asking questions about gender-based violence can sometimes put enumerators at risk. In such cases they will either skip the question or rephrase it without using the exact term.
- Both government enumerators and participants highlighted the need for comprehension testing and the translation of data collection tools prior to data collection. Government enumerators said they may rephrase the term 'gender-based violence', and participants suggested 'protection' should be translated into local languages in advance to avoid the risk of enumerators spontaneously translating the term differently from one another.

Recommendations to humanitarians

- **Use plain language in surveys to maximize comprehension.** Maintain an average sentence length of 15-18 words. Choose clear and unambiguous terms, and use them consistently throughout the survey, even if that seems repetitive. Avoid abbreviations, or write the term in full on first mention, followed by the abbreviation in parentheses.
- **Translate data collection tools prior to data collection, including into minority languages.** Do not assume that all enumerators understand the terms as intended. Do not rely on spontaneous translation as some terms will likely be translated differently by different enumerators. If translating surveys is not feasible, provide a glossary of terminology specific to the sector or the organization. These should be used as part of training to prepare enumerators for administering the survey in local languages.
- **Make comprehension testing a standard survey design practice** to ensure that enumerators understand all the terms used in the survey. Adjust the survey based on feedback before data collection begins.
- **Test comprehension with affected communities.** Some people misunderstand terms even after receiving an explanation/definition. Pay special attention to terms that are more abstract (such as 'protection' and 'shock') and do not assume that all terms are straightforward in all languages (such as 'gender-based violence').

- **Provide enumerators with language support to communicate in local languages.** Humanitarian organizations should provide vetted and trained interpreters to ensure the questions and answers are accurately communicated and to preserve confidentiality and safety. Mobile data collection tools facilitate the use of audio recording to improve comprehension of questions and answers. Pre-recorded questions in multiple languages can be played to respondents if there is any confusion about the meaning. They can also speak open-ended answers into a recorder for data collection teams to transcribe.
- **Review data previously collected using survey or interview tools including commonly misunderstood terms for possible sources of confusion.** Where these exist, caveat the data analysis with a note that these terms are commonly misunderstood, and conclusions drawn from this data must be considered in light of these misunderstandings.

Background: Language and humanitarian response in DRC

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, with [four national languages](#) (Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili, and Tshiluba) and [more than 200 languages](#) spoken across the country. French is the official language and widely used in humanitarian response, but [less than 2.5% of the population speak French as their main language at home](#). Swahili is also widely used in humanitarian communication, but the dialect used in DRC differs significantly from standard (coastal) Swahili. Humanitarian communication relying on standard Swahili is not effective for most communities.

DRC is experiencing one of the world's largest humanitarian crises, with the [highest projected number of people in need](#) for 2024. Recent violence, the growing presence of armed groups in different regions across the country (especially in the east), and continued outbreaks of disease virtually guarantee the [continuation of a high level of needs in the coming years](#). Given that it is one of the world's longest running and most complex humanitarian crises, DRC has a long history of humanitarian response and humanitarian data collection.

Previous research conducted by CLEAR Global in DRC highlights an ongoing need to understand and address language-related challenges. During the [10th Ebola outbreak in 2018-20](#), communication was mostly conducted in French and standard Swahili, which many in affected communities did not understand. This exacerbated distrust of health workers, impeded vaccination efforts and increased the spread of disinformation about the virus. Language assessments and training for Ebola responses by CLEAR Global/Translators without Borders informed improved risk communication and

community engagement. Evidence of critical gaps in comprehension led to increased emphasis on clear communication in local languages. The [more localized approach to communication during the 11th Ebola outbreak in 2020](#) prioritized verbal information in local languages and used different channels to communicate with different audiences. People reported understanding more of the information shared with them, including how to take preventive action, and felt less confused and afraid of the virus.

Effectively understanding and addressing language issues is especially important in multilingual contexts, where people communicate daily in multiple languages, not all of which they are entirely comfortable using to discuss issues like health, violence, or wellbeing. [Speaking multiple languages is intellectually challenging](#), with multilingual people required to move between languages and grammatical structures when speaking to different groups. This is especially relevant when data collection tools and other humanitarian communication use jargon without testing whether people understand them properly. Humanitarians also need to ensure they base decisions about language use on data rather than assumptions, especially how well people understand a national language.

About this report

Based on nine focus group discussions (FGDs)—four with Lingala-speaking participants, four with Swahili-speaking participants, and one conducted in French with government enumerators—this study tested five terms used in the MSNA with enumerators and members of affected communities to better understand comprehension of these terms. Participants were asked whether they've heard a term before, what it means, the term's history or use in their community, whether it is appropriate for humanitarian data collection, whether it is understood, and what alternatives they would prefer to be used.

Linguistic preferences of participants

- **All participants who spoke Lingala at home preferred to receive information – both written and oral – in Lingala.** Some participants who spoke Lingala at home also spoke Kikongo and Tshiluba (one participant).
- **All participants who spoke Swahili at home preferred to receive information – both written and oral – in French.** Participants who spoke Swahili at home also spoke French and Kihavu, and some spoke Mashi.

- **All participants who spoke Kihavu at home preferred to receive oral information in Kihavu and written information in French.** Participants who spoke Kihavu at home also spoke Swahili, Mashi, Lingala, and Kinyarwanda.
- **The government enumerators spoke Swahili and French at home and preferred to receive information – both written and oral – in French.** The government enumerators also spoke Lingala, Mashi, Kavuu, Kihavu, Kibembe, and Kirenga.

For the purpose of this report, “Lingala-speaking participants” refers to participants who engaged in FGDs facilitated in Lingala, and “Swahili-speaking participants” refers to participants (both Swahili and Kihavu speakers) who participated in the FGDs facilitated in Swahili. Government enumerators are referred to as government enumerators and not by the language of the FGD.

Specific findings by term

Protection

Many participants said they had heard the term ‘protection’, but most Lingala-speaking participants had not heard the term. It is unclear whether Swahili-speaking participants who knew the term were only those who had previously collected humanitarian data, or if others without that experience had heard it too. Regardless, **the explanations provided by participants indicated partial understanding of the term**, with some participants providing accurate definitions and others inaccurate definitions.

The REACH definition of ‘protection’ is “generally linked to feelings of security, concerns about human rights abuses and tensions between different communities or population groups.” While many explanations did focus on security and protecting the population from danger, these were either too general (such as “to help protect the population” or “protecting the present before thinking of protecting the future”) or were solely focused on anticipating a danger (such as “foreseeing danger and planning a solution”).

Government enumerators noted, *“When we say ‘protection’ people don’t understand well. When we talk about insecurity, they understand this. It’s better to be more specific: ‘have you experienced insecurity?’ or ‘have you experienced human rights violations?’”*

After providing participants with the REACH definition of the term, participants were asked to reflect on the history of the term's use in their communities. Even though participants had just heard the REACH definition, they continued to misunderstand it. For example, some Lingala-speaking participants said: *"In a school during recess, there is a teacher who ensures [the children's] protection"* [Urban Lingala-speaking men] and *"We often hear pastors recommend that we pray for our own protection"* [Urban Lingala-speaking women].

Swahili-speaking participants, however, clearly associated the history of the term 'protection' with the arrival of humanitarians in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, after repeated pillaging and violence against civilians by armed groups. They also associated the term with an increase in criminality in the region. Understanding the associations people make with a term helps humanitarians identify the risk that people misunderstand it or that it can negatively impact communication. For example, CLEAR Global's [earlier terminology testing in northern Iraq](#) found some protection terms elicited strong negative feelings that people felt made the terms inappropriate to use.

All participants said the term 'protection' is appropriate for humanitarians to use in this context, and the alternative terms provided were all closely linked to safety, security, and human rights. After the REACH definition was shared, participants noted that it is better for the term to be translated in advance and explained in the local language in case the enumerators do not translate the word properly.

The most relevant alternatives provided by participants in their respective languages were:

| Term | Alternative | Language | Meaning |
|-------------------|------------------------------|----------|--------------------------------|
| <i>Protection</i> | Bobatelami | Lingala | Protection |
| | Komibatela | Lingala | To protect yourself |
| | Okucilanga | Kihavu | To protect/guard yourself |
| | Okucilanga n'okulanga owindi | Kihavu | To protect yourself and others |
| | Okulangana | Kihavu | Guarding/protecting each other |
| | Okulanga | Kihavu | To secure/guard |
| | Obulanzi | Kihavu | Guarding/protecting |

| | | | |
|--|--------|---------|------------|
| | Ulinzi | Swahili | Protection |
|--|--------|---------|------------|

Protection incident

Most Lingala-speaking participants had not heard the term ‘protection incident’, except rural men. Most Swahili-speaking participants, however, had. It is unclear whether Swahili-speaking participants who knew the term were only those who had previously collected humanitarian data, or if people who had never collected humanitarian data had also heard it. Regardless, **most explanations provided by participants indicated they partially understood the term.**

The REACH definition of ‘protection incident’ is “theft of foodstuffs (livestock, crops, etc.), theft of non-foodstuffs (materials, appliances, etc.), bodily harm, kidnapping, intercommunity tensions, gender-based violence, threats, psychological violence, territorial conflict, accidents caused by explosive remnants of war or other war equipment, or an incident linked to any of the above.” **While government enumerators said the term should be widely understood, participants’ definitions showed some misunderstanding.** These included:

- *“An unwanted pregnancy or illness resulting from not wearing protection.”* [Rural Swahili-speaking men].
- *“When humanitarians come to do targeting and pretend to write your name on the list; then when the list is displayed, our names are not on it”* [Rural Swahili-speaking women].
- *“An event that occurs due to a lack of adequate protective measures, or damage that occurs due to a lack of safety measures”* [Urban Swahili-speaking men].

Swahili-speaking participants unanimously said that the term ‘protection incident’ could easily be misunderstood. When enumerators incorrectly assume most people can understand this term, they risk collecting incorrect data about protection incidents, or missing when someone is trying to describe an event that would be classified as a protection incident. This can then negatively affect related services such as counselling or legal support.

When asked about the history of the term ‘protection incident’ in their communities, participants in all FGDs provided examples in line with the REACH definition of the term. This suggests participants understood the term well after they heard the explanation.

All participants said the term ‘protection incident’ is appropriate for humanitarians to use, and the alternative terms provided included: “disadvantages due to lack of protection”, “problem”, “unfortunate event”, and “accident”.

The most relevant alternatives provided by participants in their respective languages were:

| Term | Alternative | Language | Meaning |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Protection incident</i> | Likama ya bobatelami | Lingala | Protection incident; protection risk |
| | Cinjirwa | Kihavu | Unfortunate event |
| | Obuhanya | Kihavu | Misfortune, unfortunate event |
| | Matokeo za ulinzi | Swahili | Consequence of insecurity |
| | Matokeo yaku kosa usalama | Swahili | Consequence of lack of security |
| | Ecinjira ch'obubulirwa b'omurhula | Swahili | Something that disturbs the peace |

Gender-based violence

Most participants had heard the term 'gender-based violence', but some urban Lingala-speaking participants had not. Most explanations indicated participants understood the term, and participants from rural areas who spoke Kihavu at home emphasized customary norms. Government data collectors, however, noted that many people cannot discuss gender-based violence aloud due to sensitivities and social norms. Enumerators need to clearly explain the term during data collection.

The REACH definition of 'gender-based violence is "violence against a person because of their gender." When asked about the history of the term in their communities, **participants provided examples that showed they correctly understood the term**, especially regarding sexual violence.

Kihavu-speaking men and women, especially from rural areas, focused on sociocultural norms as driving gender inequality and gender-based violence: *"Since the time of our ancestors, women have always been downplayed, pushed aside, and discriminated against in favor of men. But then NGOs came and made people realize that everyone is equal, and that no one should be discriminated against because of their sex"* [Rural Swahili-speaking women].

“The term gender-based violence is well known, but the population doesn't understand what it really is. The local authorities, who take part in many workshops and training courses, are aware of this but don't want to inform the population as they see it as going against customs, so they prefer to keep this information secret” [Rural Swahili-speaking women].

All participants said the term ‘gender-based violence’ is appropriate for humanitarians to use as it is. Participants emphasized that awareness of the term does not translate into action. They said that gender-based violence persists because some people think perpetuating patriarchal norms is the same as maintaining customary norms.

It is important to note that government enumerators said **sometimes asking questions about gender-based violence can put data collectors at risk**, especially in areas where customary authorities want to maintain customary norms (the example they provided was in the Haut Plateaux of South Kivu). In such cases, they will either skip the question, or they will rephrase it without using the exact term. Comprehension testing helps avoid loss of data due to enumerators feeling unable to ask certain questions. This is especially critical in languages where words for sexual and non-sexual violence overlap, or in contexts where people are likely to use euphemistic or veiled terms like ‘dishonour’ to describe overt violent acts like rape. Comprehension testing to find the most appropriate and widely understood terms also helps identify and mitigate terms that could re-traumatize people.

The most relevant alternatives provided by participants in their respective languages were:

| Term | Alternative | Language | Meaning |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----------|------------------------------------|
| <i>Gender-based violence</i> | Akalondola | Kihavu | Discrimination, dismissing someone |
| | Akabonerero | Kihavu | Contempt/neglect or sabotage |
| | Akakenerezo | Kihavu | Contempt or neglect |
| | Kubonerera | Kihavu | Neglect, distrust, sabotage |
| | Ujeuri wa ki jinsia | Swahili | Gender-based violence |
| | Ku gadamizwa | Swahili | Belittle, denigrate |

Psychosocial support

None of the Lingala-speaking participants had heard the term ‘psychosocial support’, except urban women. Most Swahili-speaking participants had heard the term, except rural women. It is unclear whether Swahili-speaking participants who knew the term were only those who had previously collected humanitarian data, or if people who had never collected data had also heard it. Regardless, **most explanations indicated participants understood the term**, with explanations focused on compassion and social and moral support.

The REACH definition of ‘psychosocial support’ is “to support and prevent mental health problems resulting from the shocks and effects of crises.” While some participants misunderstood (one urban Lingala-speaking participant associated it with support to orphans), most understood the concept well: *“It is any kind of compassion, consolation, and/or moral or social support given to someone after an unfortunate event that has affected them”* [Rural Swahili-speaking men].

When asked about the history of the term ‘psychosocial support’ in their communities, participants noted that the exact term has come with NGOs, but the practice has always existed: *“It is our daily lived reality to experience violence and murder in our communities. Without really knowing what we’ve been doing since [the time of] our ancestors, we encourage and console each other, even before the arrival of NGOs. It was only when the NGOs arrived, with sexual violence against women, murders and floods in the community, that there were listening centers [established] for people who had suffered a particular shock”* [Rural Swahili-speaking women].

All participants said the term ‘psychosocial support’ is appropriate for humanitarians to use, except rural Swahili-speaking women who suggested “consolation” or “crying together” as alternatives. Some participants also noted that people do not always immediately understand the term, but after it is explained, people understand its meaning.

The most relevant alternatives provided by participants in their respective languages were:

| Term | Alternative | Language | Meaning |
|------|--|----------|---------------------------------------|
| | Lisungi ya batu bakweyeli likama | Lingala | Support to those affected by disaster |
| | Lisungi ya bato oyo bakutani na makama | Lingala | Support to those affected by disaster |

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|--|---------|--|
| <i>Psychosocial support</i> | Bosungi ya bato oyo bakutani na makama | Lingala | Support to those affected by disaster |
| | Okuholereza | Kihavu | Console, comfort |
| | Okujira owindi echuka | Kihavu | Console |
| | Ku omboleza | Kihavu | Console |
| | Kulaka haguma | Kihavu | Sympathize with someone, cry together |
| | Kuha wenu omurima | Kihavu | Comfort someone |
| | Kuhanula | Kihavu | Advise/support someone during a difficult time |
| | Ku faridje | Swahili | Console |
| | Faraja | Swahili | Console, be there for someone |

Shock

All participants said they had heard the term ‘shock’. However, **most were unable to provide an explanation that was in line with the humanitarian use of the term.** Swahili-speaking participants were more likely than Lingala-speaking participants to correctly define the term. It is unclear whether Swahili-speaking participants who knew the term were only those who had previously collected humanitarian data, or if people who had never collected data also understood it. This is especially relevant given that government enumerators all noted that people understand the term.

The REACH definition of ‘shock’ is “short-term changes caused by external events that have a negative effect on well-being, assets, livelihoods, security, or ability to withstand future shocks. Examples include weather events leading to low agricultural production, serious illness of one or more household members, rising food prices, livestock disease, armed conflict, forced displacement, etc.” However, **most participants understood shock as a painful event or piece of information,** commonly linking it with “pain”, “suffering”, or “misfortune”. This is unsurprising as it is the more

common use of the term outside humanitarian circles. As one data collector who conducted FGDs in Lingala with men noted, *“One participant stated that he had been robbed and that this had shocked him”* and *“one participant said that he had had an argument with his wife, which had caused him pain.”*

Another data collector who conducted FGDs with Swahili-speaking men noted, *“This term is too generic, understood and abused in the sense of physical or moral pain.”*

When asked about the history of the term ‘shock’ in their communities, participants mostly recounted personal experiences that caused them emotional pain, such as the death of the loved one. Some participants referred to being robbed of their goods.

It is important to note that misunderstanding of the term occurred even after the term had been defined for the participants by the enumerators.

All Lingala-speaking participants said the term ‘shock’ is appropriate for humanitarians to use, while rural Swahili-speaking women and urban Swahili-speaking men said it is not, likely because of misunderstanding around the meaning of the term. Despite participants noting the term is appropriate for use, it is important to consider how widely misunderstood the term was. Suggested alternatives included “disruption”, “turmoil”, and “imbalance”. Participants also suggested the use of “misfortune”, “incident”, and “accident”.

The most relevant alternatives provided by participants in their respective languages were:

| Term | Alternative | Language | Meaning |
|-------|----------------|----------|---------------------------|
| Shock | Pasi | Lingala | Difficulty/suffering |
| | Kokoso | Lingala | Problem/trouble/crisis |
| | Ecinjira | Kihavu | Sudden event |
| | Shida ya rafla | Swahili | A bad or unexpected event |
| | Mushituko | Swahili | Shock |

Participants also suggested other alternatives, but many of these referred to ‘shock’ as an emotional reaction. Despite their training in the terms reviewed during this study, **REACH enumerators incorrectly considered terms in Kihavu and Swahili that referred to surprise or emotional pain as appropriate translations for ‘shock’.**

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How CLEAR Global can help

CLEAR Global'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, train staff and volunteers, 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.

Existing resources to support effective two-way communication are available on our website:

- [Language data for the Democratic Republic of Congo \(DRC\)](#)
- [Language and communication questions for surveys](#)
- [Tipsheet](#) on how to use language data in programs
- Guide to writing in [plain language](#)
- Short [free online training](#) on including humanitarian translation and humanitarian interpreting

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Annex 1: Methodology

This study is based almost entirely on Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with affected communities, complemented by past findings by CLEAR Global in other contexts. A total of nine FGDs were held with 63 people, eight with members of affected communities and one with government data collectors. The FGDs were broken down as follows:

| Community | Language of FGD | Gender | Urban/rural | Number of participants | Number of FGDs |
|--|-----------------|--------|-------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Government enumerators in Bukavu, South Kivu | French | Mixed | Urban | 8 | 1 |
| Women in quartier Monaco, commune de Maluku, Kinshasa | Lingala | Female | Urban | 6 | 1 |
| Men in quartier Monaco, commune de Maluku, Kinshasa | Lingala | Male | Urban | 6 | 1 |
| Women in quartier Maess, commune de Maluku, Kinshasa | Lingala | Female | Rural | 6 | 1 |
| Men in quartier Maess, commune de Maluku, Kinshasa | Lingala | Male | Rural | 6 | 1 |
| Women in Ihusi, health zone of Kalehe, South Kivu | Swahili | Female | Urban | 8 | 1 |
| Men in Luzira, health zone of Kalehe, South Kivu | Swahili | Male | Urban | 8 | 1 |
| Women in Bushushu, health zone of Kalehe, South Kivu | Swahili | Female | Rural | 8 | 1 |
| Men in in Nyamukubi, health zone of Kalehe, South Kivu | Swahili | Male | Rural | 7 | 1 |
| Total: | | | | 63 | 9 |

The data was collected between 8 and 14 December 2023. A consultant with CLEAR Global provided training to REACH enumerators remotely. REACH enumerators then ran FGDs in Kinshasa and South

Kivu, taking notes by hand before writing them up and sharing them with the consultant, who conducted the analysis.

REACH and CLEAR Global used a phased approach to narrow down the selected terms. First, REACH field staff reviewed the questionnaire and identified terms that they thought people might commonly misunderstand. Then the CLEAR Global consultant reviewed the questionnaire and the identified terms, further narrowing them down based on CLEAR Global's experience in other contexts. The long-list of terms was then included in the FGD with government enumerators, and further narrowed down after the session to include only the five most relevant: protection, protection incident, gender-based violence, psychosocial support, and shock.

Limitations

The experience and background of Lingala- and Swahili-speaking participants was different, which may explain differences in comprehension of terms. None of the Lingala-speaking participants had ever participated in humanitarian data collection exercises, while five Swahili-speaking participants had collected data for humanitarians in the past and had been trained in the use of several of the selected terms.

This study is based mostly on the findings of nine FGDs conducted by REACH staff in Kinshasa and South Kivu. FGDs are a complex form of data collection and require significant training, as does comprehension testing. Due to limitations of time, only essential training was provided, potentially impacting the quality of the data collected and the quality of the note-taking. Because this study is qualitative, it cannot be considered representative of entire language communities and the findings cannot be generalized. However, the findings indicate people's comprehension of terms and can be used to adjust terms or enhance training on how to explain terms.