

LANGUAGE AS ACCESS

Multilingual Humanitarian Communication across Sub-Saharan Africa

Abstract

This report investigates how language practices shape humanitarian communication and inclusion in five diverse and linguistically complex countries: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Uganda. Based on interviews conducted between 2023 and 2024, curated through SIDINL Newsletters from local narrative diaries, it examines the realities of language use, barriers to access, and emerging strategies for multilingual engagement in crisis settings.

The findings reveal that language is not a neutral channel but a lived, political, and cultural reality that influences trust, participation, and the delivery of aid. Drawing on these insights, the report presents a framework of strategies and practical recommendations, ranging from low-tech, community-based solutions to technology-enhanced tools and organizational reforms. It calls for a systemic shift toward language inclusion as a core component of humanitarian planning, protection, and accountability. Ultimately, the report argues that humanitarian communication can only be effective and ethical when all people, regardless of language, can understand, be heard, and participate fully.

Edited by Nikolaos Toumaras.

Local Contributors: Juliet Nabutono, Geoffrey Mugarura, Tresor Phemba, Claudine Furaha, Dieudonne Belinga, Christine Atangana, Majok Duoth, Joseph Gatdet, Serge Namkoisse, Marie Hassana.

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sidinlnewsletters@sidinl.com - <http://sidinl.com/>.

Introduction

Purpose and Scope of the Report

Effective humanitarian response depends not only on what is communicated, but on how, and in which language, it is communicated. In multilingual and crisis-affected settings, the stakes of communication are especially high: misinformation can endanger lives, language gaps can exclude entire groups from aid, and poorly adapted messages can erode trust in humanitarian actors.

This report analyzes the practices, challenges, and strategies of humanitarian communication in five highly multilingual countries, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Uganda. Through a multi-sited, qualitative study anchored in community narratives, the report examines how language mediates access to services, protection, and participation in humanitarian contexts.

The report is intended for humanitarian practitioners, policy-makers, donors, and coordination bodies seeking to improve inclusion, accountability, and communication equity. It offers not only a critique of current practices, but a roadmap of actionable strategies that center language as an essential component of humanitarian effectiveness and ethical practice.

The analysis presented in this report draws on a qualitative, field-informed methodology, carried out between 2023 and 2024. It is based on more than 175 interviews (approximately 35 per country) collected through SIDINL Newsletters, a collaborative platform curating local news and narratives. The data consists of community diaries, first-person interviews,

and oral testimonies recorded in native languages and later translated for analysis.

The narratives include perspectives from:

- Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)
- Local interpreters and community volunteers
- Frontline humanitarian workers
- Teachers, youth leaders, and radio hosts
- Religious and traditional authorities

The five countries were selected for their linguistic diversity, prolonged humanitarian crises, and active international aid presence. Together, they offer a comparative lens into how language practices unfold in different geopolitical, cultural, and institutional environments.

Geographic and Humanitarian Context

Cameroon

Cameroon's Anglophone crisis in the Northwest and Southwest regions has displaced over 700,000 people, intensifying linguistic tensions between French- and English-speaking populations. In the Far North, conflict with Boko Haram has driven displacement and further complicated communication needs among Fulfulde-speaking communities. The country's official bilingualism often fails to reflect the dozens of local languages spoken across humanitarian zones.

Central African Republic (CAR)

CAR continues to experience recurrent violence, political instability, and large-scale

internal displacement. While Sango is a national lingua franca, many rural populations rely on languages like Gbaya, Banda, and Mandjia. Communication in humanitarian response is challenged by low literacy, linguistic fragmentation, and limited media infrastructure, particularly outside Bangui.

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

With one of the highest levels of linguistic diversity in the world, over 200 languages, the DRC faces complex challenges in coordinating humanitarian messages across zones of conflict, displacement, and public health crises. Although French and four national languages (Swahili, Lingala, Kikongo, and Tshiluba) are commonly used, local dialects dominate rural communication and vary drastically even within single provinces.

South Sudan

Since independence in 2011, South Sudan has endured cycles of civil conflict, displacement, and famine. Ethnic and linguistic identity is tightly linked to conflict dynamics, making language choices highly sensitive. While English and Arabic are official languages, Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Bari, and others are spoken regionally, and language access is often critical for protection and peacebuilding efforts.

Uganda

As one of Africa's largest refugee-hosting countries, Uganda has developed relatively inclusive policies. However, the linguistic diversity of its refugee population, from Kinyarwanda to Nuer to Swahili, poses significant challenges for national service providers. While English and Luganda dominate official communication, language

mismatches persist in education, health, and protection programming, especially in rural settlements.

Together, these contexts highlight a regional pattern of linguistic complexity amid humanitarian crisis. This report builds on that foundation to examine how language is experienced and negotiated by those who navigate aid systems every day, and what humanitarian actors can do to meet them in the languages they live by.

Language diversity across sub-Saharan Africa presents both a rich cultural asset and a fundamental challenge to effective humanitarian communication. In the five countries covered in this report, Cameroon, Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, and Uganda, there exists extraordinary linguistic variation, with hundreds of spoken languages and dialects across national and regional boundaries. This diversity affects how humanitarian actors reach communities, understand local dynamics, and ensure inclusive service delivery.

Linguistic Landscapes and Communication Realities

Language Diversity by Country

Language diversity across sub-Saharan Africa presents both a rich cultural asset and a fundamental challenge to effective humanitarian communication. In the five countries covered in this report, Cameroon, Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, and Uganda, there exists extraordinary linguistic variation, with hundreds of spoken languages and dialects across national and regional

boundaries. This diversity affects how humanitarian actors reach communities, understand local dynamics, and ensure inclusive service delivery.

Cameroon

Cameroon is often referred to as “Africa in miniature” due to its ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. It is officially bilingual (French and English), yet over 270 local languages are spoken, including Fulfulde, Ewondo, Duala, and Basaa. The ongoing Anglophone crisis further complicates language politics, as English-speaking populations in the Northwest and Southwest regions face marginalization within a predominantly Francophone administration. This tension affects trust in aid actors and the perceived neutrality of humanitarian messaging.

Communication challenges:

- Need to mediate between colonial and indigenous languages.
- Mistrust in language associated with government authorities.
- Informal translation networks often rely on undertrained local volunteers.

Central African Republic (CAR)

CAR has two official languages: French and Sango. While French dominates formal systems, Sango, a creole derived from Ngbandi, serves as a national lingua franca and is widely spoken across ethnic groups. However, in rural and conflict-affected areas, minority languages like Banda, Gbaya, and Mandjia remain dominant, and Sango proficiency can vary widely.

Communication challenges:

- Overreliance on Sango excludes rural and older populations.
- Humanitarian staff often lack knowledge of community languages.
- Conflict dynamics can influence which language groups feel included or excluded.

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

With over 200 languages, DRC is among the most linguistically complex countries in Africa. While French is the official language, four national languages, Lingala, Swahili, Kikongo, and Tshiluba, serve as regional lingua francas. These languages often form the basis for humanitarian communication, but in crisis settings, further localization is often required.

Communication challenges:

- Geographic fragmentation of language regions.
- Lack of consistent linguistic mapping in emergency zones.
- Inadequate support for low-literacy communication in rural or displaced populations.

South Sudan

South Sudan is home to over 60 indigenous languages, including Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, and Zande. While English is the official language, it is not widely spoken among rural or displaced communities. Local languages are deeply tied to ethnic identity, and in conflict settings, language choice can be politically sensitive or even dangerous.

Communication challenges:

- No single national lingua franca.
- Ethnic tensions may be inflamed by the use of “opposing” languages.
- Inadequate investment in local-language communication tools.

Uganda

Uganda has over 40 languages, with English and Swahili designated as official languages. Luganda is widely spoken in the central region, but humanitarian operations in refugee settlements (particularly in the north and west) often require communication in Acholi, Kinyarwanda, Arabic, Dinka, and Nuer, due to the presence of South Sudanese and Congolese refugees.

Communication challenges:

- High refugee turnover makes language needs unpredictable.
- Interpreter capacity often overstretched in large settlements.
- Disparities in communication channels between host and refugee communities.

Cross-Cutting Challenges Across Countries:

- **Lack of linguistic mapping:** Most humanitarian agencies do not systematically assess language needs in initial rapid assessments.
- **Low literacy rates:** Written messaging in any language may be ineffective without audio or visual alternatives.
- **Gendered access to information:** Women may speak different languages

or have lower literacy rates than men, further complicating outreach.

- **Limited funding for translation:** Most response plans fail to budget for language services, leaving translation to ad hoc arrangements.

Local Language in Humanitarian Settings

In the operational reality of humanitarian response, language is not only a medium of information, but also a key determinant of who is heard, who is understood, and who participates. Across Cameroon, CAR, DRC, South Sudan, and Uganda, language communication in humanitarian settings is shaped by a complex interrelationship of cultural diversity, social hierarchy, displacement, and institutional capacity. Despite the clear centrality of language to effective communication with affected populations, multilingualism is often managed informally, with inconsistent results.

One of the most significant patterns across the region is the overreliance on lingua francas, such as French, Swahili, Arabic, or Sango. These regional or national languages are commonly used in humanitarian communication because they offer a broad reach across ethnic and geographic lines. However, this convenience often comes at the cost of exclusion. Many affected populations, especially older adults, rural residents, or recently displaced communities, may not be fluent in these lingua francas.

Moreover, the use of such languages can unintentionally reinforce power imbalances, particularly when these languages are associated with government institutions,

colonial histories, or dominant ethnic groups. When local languages are not formally recognized or integrated into humanitarian policies, the result is a power asymmetry that favors elite staff and expatriates over local personnel and community members. At institutions like the International Committee of the Red Cross, multilingualism is stratified: expatriate workers gain institutional status by speaking "international" languages like English, while local languages are relegated to the margins and framed as markers of authenticity rather than authority (Garrido, 2018). This framing reinforces structural hierarchies and further entrenches inequalities within the aid system. Recognizing the instrumental value of minority languages, as both communicative tools and enablers of agency, offers a pathway toward more just and effective humanitarian engagement (Riera-Gil, 2019).

To bridge linguistic gaps, humanitarian organizations frequently turn to informal interpretation arrangements, often relying on bilingual staff members, volunteers, or community leaders to facilitate communication. While these ad hoc interpreters are essential to field operations, they are rarely professionally trained, which raises concerns about accuracy, neutrality, and confidentiality, especially in sensitive areas such as protection, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), or mental health. These intermediaries also bear a heavy emotional burden, translating traumatic content without support or recognition, a dynamic that can impact their wellbeing and effectiveness.

Community radio is one of the most widely used tools for multilingual outreach, particularly in CAR, DRC, and Uganda. Local

radio stations often broadcast in multiple languages and dialects, providing critical channels for early warning systems, health messaging, and community engagement. These broadcasts can reach populations with low literacy and limited access to digital technologies, making them highly effective. However, radio messaging requires careful planning to ensure that content is culturally resonant, free from bias, and aligned with humanitarian principles. In conflict settings, radio can also be politicized or manipulated, requiring strong safeguards and ethical oversight.

Another emerging trend is the use of mobile technology and messaging platforms to reach diverse linguistic communities. In refugee settlements in Uganda, for instance, humanitarian actors have used WhatsApp voice notes and SMS campaigns in multiple languages to share updates about food distributions, public health campaigns, and protection services. While these tools offer flexibility, they also depend heavily on mobile penetration rates, digital literacy, and network coverage, all of which can vary significantly across and within countries.

Importantly, language dynamics are rarely neutral. In South Sudan, for example, using a particular language in a camp or service point can signal affiliation with one ethnic group over another, potentially increasing tensions or causing fear among minority groups. Similarly, in Cameroon's Anglophone regions, communities may be more receptive to humanitarian actors who use English or local languages, as French may be perceived as the language of oppression. In such environments, language choice is not just a technical decision but a political and ethical

one, requiring local insight and careful risk analysis.

Despite some promising practices, the general trend remains one of reactive, fragmented language strategies. Humanitarian organizations often respond to language needs as they arise rather than integrating language planning into the core of their preparedness, assessment, and coordination efforts.

Language mapping is still uncommon, and the absence of standard tools for identifying communication preferences, such as language surveys or interpreter rosters, limits the ability of actors to respond effectively and equitably.

Ultimately, local language communication in humanitarian settings reflects broader issues of inclusion, trust, and accountability. When communities can express themselves in their own languages, they are more likely to engage meaningfully, provide feedback, and participate in their own recovery. Conversely, when language barriers persist, they create conditions of dependency, misunderstanding, and exclusion. Addressing this phenomenon requires not only translation and interpretation but a deep commitment to linguistic justice, ensuring that language is used as a tool of empowerment, not marginalization.

Communication as a Humanitarian Imperative

Tailored and Relevant Connections

Communication with affected populations (CwAP) is increasingly recognized as a humanitarian imperative, essential for upholding the dignity, autonomy, and resilience of people impacted by crises. Far from being a secondary activity,

communication is a form of aid in itself, empowering individuals to make informed choices, access resources, and voice their concerns (Villa et al., 2017); (CDAC Network, 2014). CwAP refers to the strategic, timely, and inclusive exchange of information between humanitarian actors and affected communities, ensuring that people not only receive critical information but are also able to provide feedback and participate in decision-making.

Recent studies and field initiatives highlight how CwAP fosters inclusion and protection, especially in vulnerable groups. In Ethiopia, a pilot project under the Communicating with Communities Project (CwCP) demonstrated how engaging women and girls in feedback loops not only increased awareness of sexual exploitation risks but also improved the responsiveness of humanitarian actors to local needs (Ethiopia PSEA Network, 2022). Furthermore, by integrating communication into mental health support programs, humanitarian teams in Jordan have shown that consistent, participatory communication strengthens both patient outcomes and staff resilience (Parrish-Sprowl et al., 2020).

CwAP also plays a vital role in democratizing humanitarianism and challenging traditional top-down approaches. By leveraging technologies and participatory media strategies, humanitarian agencies can promote greater accountability and ensure that aid reflects the actual needs of the communities served. However, gaps still exist in the consistent implementation of these approaches, and the success of communication efforts often hinges on existing inequalities and power dynamics (Madianou et al., 2015; Bau', 2019). For

communication to be truly transformative, it must be rooted in a commitment to equity, local ownership, and ethical engagement.

Language Support for Inclusion, Dignity, Protection, and Participation

Language plays a central role in advancing inclusion, dignity, protection, and participation in humanitarian contexts. Clear and culturally sensitive communication ensures that affected populations are not marginalized due to linguistic barriers. In humanitarian operations, where English or other dominant languages often prevail, the failure to recognize linguistic diversity can lead to exclusion of staff, volunteers, and community members with different language backgrounds. This exclusion undermines participation and limits the effectiveness of aid delivery. A study within the international NGO GOAL highlighted how ad hoc translation practices and the undervaluation of multilingual skills often cause systemic inequities within humanitarian teams and the communities they serve (Tesseur et al., 2022).

Language is also vital to preserving dignity and enabling meaningful participation. When affected individuals are addressed in their native or preferred language, it fosters a sense of respect, empowerment, and psychological safety. This is especially important in vulnerable populations, such as refugees or people with disabilities, for whom language barriers can exacerbate trauma and dependency. For instance, inclusive language approaches in healthcare, such as those applied in tuberculosis prevention, help dismantle stigma and encourage open, empathetic communication (Barbosa et al., 2024). Similarly, the use of multilingual

assistants in education for migrants demonstrates how native language support can build confidence and enable deeper engagement with learning and society (St John, 2023).

Furthermore, language access is critical for protection and accountability in humanitarian settings. Without appropriate translation and interpretation mechanisms, affected populations may struggle to understand their rights, report abuses, or engage in feedback processes. The Grand Bargain commitments of the World Humanitarian Summit emphasize language inclusion as a cornerstone for accountability and localization, yet studies reveal a gap between intention and practice in how organizations institutionalize language support (Federici et al., 2019). Bridging this gap requires organizations to formally recognize language services as essential infrastructure in humanitarian aid delivery.

Multilingualism in Humanitarian Policy: Snapshot of International Standards

Multilingualism is a foundational element in key humanitarian policies and standards, notably the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) framework on Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP), and the Sphere Standards. These frameworks emphasize the necessity of accessible and inclusive communication to ensure the rights, participation, and dignity of affected communities. The CHS, for instance, explicitly links multilingual information sharing with community participation and accountability, underscoring that affected people must understand their rights and

services available to them in a language they comprehend (Bolton, 2021; White, 2023).

The IASC AAP framework reinforces multilingual communication as a core responsibility of humanitarian actors. By aligning PSEA (Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse) messaging with community languages, the framework promotes transparency and safety. Effective multilingual feedback mechanisms are critical to building trust and enabling communities to report violations or suggest improvements (Bolton, 2021). Without language access, marginalized populations, especially women, children, and people with disabilities, risk being excluded from life-saving services or protection pathways.

Similarly, the Sphere Standards, while historically critiqued for their technocratic nature, increasingly emphasize the importance of rights-based, participatory humanitarian action that includes linguistic accessibility. The revised Sphere guidelines advocate for contextualization and localization, which includes adapting communication tools and materials into local and minority languages to ensure effective understanding and implementation (Patel and Chadhuri, 2019; (Ouyang et al., 2009). As global humanitarian standards evolve, multilingualism remains central to upholding ethical obligations and ensuring equitable service delivery across linguistic boundaries.

Intersectionality and Communication

Intersectionality is essential in humanitarian communication, as it recognizes that individuals' communication needs and vulnerabilities are shaped by overlapping identities such as gender, disability, age, and

education. A one-size-fits-all communication strategy can unintentionally exclude the very people it aims to support. For example, women and girls with disabilities may face multiple layers of exclusion when accessing health information or reporting abuse, both due to gender norms and lack of accessible formats (Moodley and Graham, 2015). These factors collectively compound communication barriers and reduce their ability to participate in humanitarian decision-making.

Disability and education level particularly influence access to information and self-advocacy. People with disabilities may require alternative formats such as sign language, braille, or easy-to-read texts, yet these adaptations are often underprovided in emergency responses (Kafer and Kim, 2017). At the same time, lower levels of education can affect how individuals interpret complex instructions, such as evacuation procedures or public health advice, especially when those messages are not translated into plain language. Gender and education together can shape whether people with disabilities accessed stable employment, showing how educational disadvantage directly impairs access to reliable communication and livelihood support (Ballo, 2020).

Age is another critical factor influencing communication needs. Children and older adults have distinct cognitive and emotional requirements, and often need age-appropriate messaging that takes into account their lived experience and comprehension levels. Refugee adolescents with disabilities in Jordan, particularly girls, faced extreme social isolation and limited access to protective communication mechanisms, underscoring how age, gender, and disability intersect to

amplify marginalization (Pincock et al., 2023). Effective humanitarian communication must, therefore, adopt an intersectional lens to ensure no one is left out due to the unique combination of their identities.

Equity Dimensions of Language Access

Language access is fundamentally a matter of equity in humanitarian contexts, as it determines who can understand, engage with, and benefit from life-saving services. Without intentional policies that prioritize multilingualism, marginalized groups, such as non-dominant language speakers, refugees, and low-literacy populations, are at risk of being excluded from critical information. Language is not merely a technical issue; it is an ethical one, shaping whether people have equitable access to protection, education, healthcare, and participation in decision-making processes (Breugem et al., 2025).

Systemic inequities are embedded in language policy and practice. For example, in higher education and humanitarian aid, a continued preference for dominant languages like English contributes to the marginalization of indigenous and minority language speakers. Policies often promise equal access, but without multilingual implementation, they fail to deliver real equity. In educational contexts, this is described as the gap between “institutional access” and “epistemological access”, the ability to understand and benefit from content that is only possible through meaningful language inclusion (Milligan et al., 2020; Tollefson and Tsui, 2014).

Even programs designed with equity in mind can fall short when language access is not explicitly addressed. In dual-language education programs in the U.S., for instance,

well-intentioned systems intended to support Spanish-speaking learners sometimes paradoxically limit access through complex enrollment processes and unregulated policies (Marcus, 2022). True equity in humanitarian communication demands a structural commitment to language inclusion, treating it not as an optional add-on but as a foundational component of every intervention.

Barriers to Multilingual Humanitarian Communication

Operational and Resource Barriers

Operational and resource-related barriers are among the most persistent challenges to achieving multilingual humanitarian communication. Many humanitarian organizations operate with limited budgets that prioritize direct service delivery over language services, resulting in chronic underinvestment in interpreters, translation technology, and multilingual staff. As a result, translation is often handled informally by bilingual staff or community members, risking inaccuracies and placing an unfair burden on individuals without professional training (Tesseur et al., 2022).

Reliance on ad hoc multilingual skills, while common, reveals the lack of formal institutional capacity for language support. Staff members in NGOs such as GOAL often perform spontaneous interpreting without adequate resources or acknowledgment, creating hidden labor dependencies and uneven service quality (Tesseur et al., 2022). Furthermore, emergency contexts often exacerbate these issues: disaster settings require rapid communication, but the lack of multilingual preparedness, including a

shortage of community-based translators, slows the response and increases risk for linguistically marginalized populations (Uekusa and Matthewman, 2023).

Technology has been proposed as a potential solution, but it is not a silver bullet. While automated translation tools are improving, they cannot yet match the contextual understanding and cultural sensitivity of human interpreters. Their accuracy remains uneven across languages and dialects, especially for under-resourced or indigenous languages, and their utility in high-stakes or nuanced humanitarian situations is still limited (Aiken and Park, 2009). Until structural investments are made in multilingual human resources and institutional translation infrastructure, operational barriers will continue to undermine equitable communication in humanitarian response.

Poor infrastructure for audiovisual communication in remote areas represents a major barrier to effective multilingual humanitarian outreach. Many affected regions lack stable electricity, internet connectivity, or broadcasting equipment, making it difficult to disseminate life-saving information in accessible formats such as audio messages, videos, or translated public service announcements. Even when tools like mobile phones are available, their functionality may be limited by weak signals or lack of locally relevant content (Chiumento et al., 2018).

Despite advances in communication technology, humanitarian actors still struggle to deploy audiovisual solutions where infrastructure is weak. For example, while tools like augmented reality translation helmets or remote video systems have been developed, these technologies are largely

inaccessible in settings without reliable power or internet networks (Simon et al., 2024; Khater et al., 2024). This creates a digital divide that disproportionately affects rural, displaced, and linguistically marginalized populations, who are most in need of accessible information in multiple languages.

In addition, policy and regulatory environments often fail to account for the specific communication needs of remote populations. For instance, deregulated telecommunications markets can reduce accountability, leaving communities without leverage to demand equitable access to communication infrastructure. As a result, technological improvements have not always translated into better communication for those in the most isolated humanitarian settings (Carson and Cleary, 2010). Strengthening audiovisual infrastructure, alongside policy advocacy for equitable tech deployment, is essential for inclusive, multilingual humanitarian communication.

Policy and Coordination Gaps

The absence of formal language guidelines in humanitarian response plans presents a significant barrier to equitable communication and inclusive service delivery. Despite widespread recognition of the importance of multilingual communication, many organizations still lack standardized approaches for integrating language access into planning and implementation. In the humanitarian sector practices, while language access seems to be universally acknowledged as essential, few organizations had established concrete systems or accountability mechanisms to ensure translation and interpretation were systematically provided during crises (Federici et al., 2019).

In many cases, language considerations are treated as operational afterthoughts rather than embedded within preparedness and contingency frameworks. This creates an ad hoc environment in which the quality and availability of multilingual communication depend heavily on individual initiative and resource availability. Humanitarian responders have called for the incorporation of structured language protocols, such as predefined translation workflows, designated language focal points, and needs assessments that include linguistic mapping, to bridge this policy-practice gap (Rossi et al., 2020).

More broadly, failing to formalize language support undermines the goals of the Grand Bargain and other global commitments to localization and accountability. Without clear guidelines, humanitarian organizations risk excluding the most vulnerable populations, especially those who speak minority or indigenous languages, from life-saving information and decision-making processes. Systematic inclusion of language access in humanitarian response plans is not just a technical necessity; it is a moral and legal obligation aligned with the rights-based foundation of humanitarian action (Gunn, 2008).

Disjointed communication strategies across humanitarian organizations hinder the consistency, efficiency, and inclusiveness of aid delivery, especially in multilingual contexts. Despite global commitments to improve coordination, such as through the UN Cluster System, organizations frequently operate in silos, each with its own tools, languages, and priorities. This lack of harmonized communication results in overlapping efforts, duplicated messaging, and conflicting

information reaching affected communities (Halonen-Akatwijuka and Park, 2017).

Systemic factors behind this fragmentation are highlighted. Disparities in organizational goals, policies, work cultures, and timelines make inter-agency collaboration difficult. According to field research among humanitarian practitioners, language and communication mismatches were among the top-tier barriers to coordination, particularly when agencies use incompatible messaging formats or fail to include multilingual components in joint response plans (Sopha, 2023). Additionally, local and national organizations are often marginalized in coordination efforts due to ineffective communication practices dominated by international actors, further fracturing the response (Jack, 2015).

These gaps underscore the need for unified communication frameworks that include language protocols, shared platforms, and inclusive governance. Solutions such as centralized information management systems and language coordination units can serve as mediators, improving both efficiency and equity in multilingual humanitarian communication (Menth, 2016). Without such efforts, disjointed communication strategies will continue to create confusion, exclude vulnerable populations, and compromise the effectiveness of humanitarian response.

Socio-Cultural and Ethical Challenges

Power imbalances in language choice are a profound socio-cultural and ethical challenge in humanitarian communication, as dominant language preferences often marginalize already vulnerable groups. Decisions about which languages to use, and whose voices to

prioritize, are frequently made by external actors without meaningful input from affected communities. This reinforces existing hierarchies and can perpetuate exclusion, particularly for speakers of minority, indigenous, or non-dominant languages (Lenkewich et al., 2017). Such language dynamics reflect deeper structural inequalities, where the choice of language signals not only access to information but also legitimacy and power within humanitarian processes.

Humanitarian agencies often default to globally dominant languages like English or French, even when these are not widely understood in the local context. This practice can make critical information inaccessible and discourage community participation in decision-making. As Ellie Kemp from Translators without Borders notes, failing to use the languages of crisis-affected people "perpetuates communication power imbalances" and undermines both accountability and effectiveness (Kemp, 2021). Additionally, the language used in humanitarian messaging can subtly express dominance, with institutional jargon or emotionally detached tones signaling authority while distancing affected individuals.

To address these ethical concerns, humanitarian actors must critically examine whose language needs are being met and whose are being ignored. Inclusive language strategies require engaging communities in defining preferred languages and modes of communication, as well as investing in local translation infrastructure and training. Empowering affected populations through equitable language practices is not only about comprehension, it is about shifting power so

that communities are active participants in shaping their own recovery.

The exclusion of minority language speakers in humanitarian communication is a persistent and critical barrier to equitable aid delivery. Humanitarian operations often default to dominant global languages, such as English, French, or Spanish, despite the linguistic diversity of crisis-affected regions. This results in vital information being inaccessible to speakers of indigenous or minority languages, particularly in remote or marginalized areas. For example, in Latin America alone, there are over 100 indigenous languages spoken by populations often left out of health, education, and protection services due to a lack of communication in their native tongues (Carbonell et al., 2006).

This systemic exclusion is compounded by the lack of formal language policies and data collection. A survey among staff at the NGO GOAL revealed that while many staff work multilingually and communities speak a wide range of languages, the humanitarian sector largely operates in English and other colonial languages. This creates informal and unequal translation practices that rely on staff without formal interpretation roles, leaving linguistic minorities underserved and potentially at risk (Tesseur et al., 2022).

Furthermore, language-based exclusion is not limited to field operations but extends into policy and research. In the U.S., federally funded pediatric clinical trials have systematically excluded individuals who speak languages other than English or Spanish, violating inclusion policies and marginalizing Latino and other minority language communities from important health research and services (Anwar et al., 2023). These

examples underscore the need for robust, systematic language inclusion strategies that go beyond token translation efforts and actively center the linguistic rights of minority communities in all phases of humanitarian work.

Mistrust stemming from misunderstood messaging is a critical socio-cultural barrier in humanitarian communication, often arising from poor translation, cultural disconnects, or lack of clarity. When communities do not understand or misinterpret messages from aid providers, especially in high-stakes situations like health campaigns or evacuations, this can lead to suspicion, fear, or rejection of services. Misunderstood messaging has been identified as a key factor in undermining trust in both healthcare and humanitarian responses, particularly in linguistically diverse or marginalized communities (Forte et al., 2023).

Language-related misunderstanding can result in unintentional errors in message reception, especially when the language form used is unfamiliar or too technical for the audience. These breakdowns in comprehension can occur even when translation is provided, due to cultural mismatches, low literacy, or lack of contextual adaptation. Studies highlight that such misunderstandings are not just a linguistic issue but a shared organizational responsibility, requiring consistent, redundant, and culturally tuned communication practices to mitigate mistrust (Fiset, 2023).

The stakes of mistrust are especially high in emergency or disaster contexts, where misinformation or unclear instructions can result in life-threatening decisions. Tools like multilingual warning systems, culturally-aware phrasing, and proactive engagement can play a vital role in rebuilding trust and ensuring that

aid messages are received as intended. As Ellie Kemp notes, language gaps and technology misuse in crises have long undermined accountability and effectiveness, reminding the sector that communication must be people-centered, not institution-centered (Kemp, 2021).

Methodology and Data Collection

This report draws on extensive field-informed data curated through a participatory, narrative-based methodology conducted throughout 2023 and 2024. The research was facilitated by SIDINL Newsletters, in partnership with local news curators and multilingual community liaisons embedded in humanitarian contexts. Rather than imposing top-down questionnaires, this approach centered around the collection of lived narratives, focusing on how people themselves perceive, use, and experience language in humanitarian communication.

A total of approximately 35 individual interviews per country were conducted in Cameroon, Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, and Uganda, resulting in over 175 firsthand accounts. These interviews were not limited to aid recipients, but included local interpreters, community volunteers, women's group leaders, teachers, radio hosts, displaced persons, and frontline health workers, representing a diverse cross-section of language users and mediators. This method aligns with evidence showing that informal interpreters and multilingual community members are essential conduits of communication in humanitarian operations, even though their roles often go unrecognized and unsupported (Moser-Mercer et al., 2021).

The interviews were collected and curated through online diaries and voice-based narratives, allowing participants to share experiences in their preferred or native languages, including Fulfulde, Lingala, Swahili, Dinka, Nuer, Luganda, Sango, and others. This multilingual narrative method served a dual purpose: it preserved the authenticity of linguistic experience and highlighted the often invisible labor of interpretation and translation in humanitarian contexts. Where feasible, narratives were recorded using mobile devices, while others were submitted via written formats through local journalist networks.

To preserve participant anonymity and safety, names and specific locations have been omitted or anonymized where appropriate. Translations into English were conducted with the assistance of regional language consultants and cross-checked for cultural nuance and contextual clarity. In cases where language loss, fragmentation, or mixing was observed, this was also noted as an analytical insight, reflecting the fluid and politically charged nature of language use in crisis zones (Riera-Gil, 2019).

This methodology allows the report to center community voices as a primary source of data, rather than treating them as background context. It reveals patterns that are often missed in formal assessments: such as how people adapt to multilingual environments, feel excluded by official language choices, or mistrust humanitarian messages when they are not linguistically or culturally aligned (Garrido, 2018). These insights form the foundation of the following country-specific analysis.

Language as a Lived Experience in Humanitarian Contexts

Humanitarian communication is often approached as a technical task, crafting clear messages, translating key information, and deploying materials in multiple languages. However, the narratives gathered across five countries reveal that language is far more than a functional tool. It is a living social practice, shaped by history, identity, trust, and power. This report synthesizes and analyzes the main key themes drawn from the online narratives of SIDINL Newsletters, offering a cross-country lens into how multilingual communication is experienced by those directly involved in or affected by humanitarian response.

Each theme below explores recurring patterns across country contexts and interprets how specific communication dynamics affect inclusion, access, and participation.

Marker of Trust and Power

Across all five countries, interviewees consistently described language not just as a medium of information, but as a symbol of trust, allegiance, and legitimacy. The choice of language in humanitarian communication often carried political, ethnic, or cultural weight, influencing whether messages were trusted, ignored, or even rejected outright.

In Cameroon, for example, the use of French in aid communication was perceived by many Anglophone respondents in the Northwest and Southwest regions as a symbol of state dominance and repression. A 23-year-old youth leader from Bamenda remarked, “Even if it's aid, when it comes in French, people think it's the government's hand.” In contrast, Pidgin-English, despite not being an official

language, was widely seen as the “language of the people”, used in churches, markets, and by trusted local figures. As one local translator put it: “When it’s in Pidgin, people listen. When it’s in French, they tune out.”

A similar pattern emerged in South Sudan, where language was tightly linked to ethnic identity and post-conflict tension. In camps hosting both Dinka and Nuer communities, language use could escalate fear and division. One midwife in a UN-operated clinic explained: “If you speak Nuer too loud, Dinka women get nervous. If you speak Dinka, Nuer women avoid coming.” While English and Arabic were sometimes used as compromise languages, they were not always effective for older adults or recent arrivals. A young interpreter from Bentiu camp recounted being threatened for “translating in the wrong direction,” highlighting the risks faced by language workers in polarized environments.

In CAR, the picture was more subtle but equally charged. While Sango is widely spoken and often used in humanitarian messaging, it is still considered a *lingua franca* of urban elites in some rural areas. A teacher in the Ouaka prefecture noted that his community “listens to Sango, but we believe Gbaya.” In these areas, cultural affiliation outweighed functional comprehension, and messaging perceived as ‘from outside’ often lacked emotional resonance. Even if people understood the language, they did not always accept the message if it felt disconnected from their cultural worldview.

These insights reveal that comprehension alone is not sufficient to ensure communication effectiveness. In multilingual humanitarian contexts, the language used becomes a proxy for trust, and by extension,

for inclusion or exclusion. When the language of aid aligns with that of political or economic power, it can be interpreted as partisan, unapproachable, or irrelevant. Conversely, when communication is delivered in languages perceived as local, accessible, and socially neutral, it tends to be more credible and culturally congruent.

However, humanitarian operations often default to the most administratively efficient or internationally recognized languages, such as French, English, or Arabic. These decisions are made without consulting communities and without assessing the symbolic weight language carries in a given context. The consequences can range from low uptake of services to deepening social divides, even when the technical content of the message is accurate.

The interviews also showed that trust in the speaker mattered as much as trust in the language. In many cases, the messenger’s identity (local vs. international, male vs. female, elder vs. youth) influenced the reception of the message. But when language and identity aligned, such as a respected elder speaking in a local dialect, the message had greater reach, legitimacy, and emotional impact.

Ultimately, these examples underscore the need for humanitarian actors to treat language as a socially situated practice, not a neutral translation task. Communication strategies must begin with language mapping that includes not only who speaks what, but what each language represents to whom. Only then can humanitarian messaging build trust, rather than inadvertently undermine it.

Informal Interpretation: Essential but Unrecognized

While humanitarian agencies often highlight the importance of language access, the operational reality is that most multilingual communication in crisis contexts is carried out not by professional interpreters or institutional language teams, but by informal, unpaid community members. These individuals, ranging from bilingual youth to local health workers, teachers, and refugee leaders, play an essential yet systematically underrecognized role in enabling humanitarian communication.

Across all five countries, respondents described a heavy dependence on volunteer interpreters who operate without formal training, support, or compensation. In DRC, one community health worker in North Kivu recounted translating information from Swahili into Nande and Hunde on a daily basis. “They [the NGO] say it's helpful, but they don't pay us for it. If I don't do it, people won't understand the medicine instructions.” This institutional reliance on unpaid linguistic labor was echoed in multiple settings, particularly in regions where professional interpretation services are unavailable or prohibitively expensive.

In Uganda, refugee girls in Bidi Bidi and Kiryandongo settlements often act as informal interpreters for their parents or community members. “I explain to my mother what the clinic lady said, but sometimes I don't understand all the words,” said a 16-year-old South Sudanese refugee. This unrecognized responsibility carries hidden emotional and ethical burdens, especially when the content involves sexual and reproductive health,

trauma counselling, or protection issues. Several youth described feeling uncomfortable or overwhelmed but felt obligated to help their families navigate aid systems.

Similarly, in CAR, local religious leaders were frequently called upon to “translate the message” during distribution campaigns or safety alerts. “They come with the message in Sango or French, and I explain it again in our dialect during prayers,” noted an imam in the Ouham region. While this strategy often improved reach and understanding, it placed additional pressure on community leaders who were already stretched in their pastoral roles, and introduced risks of message distortion or selective interpretation, depending on local power dynamics.

The burden placed on informal interpreters is compounded by a lack of training in core principles of humanitarian communication: neutrality, accuracy, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity. As one Ugandan aid worker explained, “We rely on whoever is around. Sometimes they get the tone wrong. A message meant to reassure becomes frightening, or they use words that trigger conflict.” These limitations are not the fault of interpreters, but rather a failure of system-level planning, which assumes language can be handled ad hoc.

Furthermore, many of these interpreters operate without safeguards or support mechanisms, despite working in emotionally taxing and politically sensitive environments. Several youth and female interpreters described experiencing verbal abuse or threats when translating between groups with historical tensions, as in parts of South Sudan. Yet they had no access to complaint channels, debriefing sessions, or psychosocial support,

even when handling traumatic subject matter like GBV reporting or child separation cases.

Importantly, community members expressed a desire for formal recognition and capacity-building, rather than rejecting their informal roles. In DRC and Uganda, respondents suggested creating local interpreter rosters, offering basic interpretation and ethics training, and introducing small stipends or incentives for those regularly called upon to facilitate communication. A refugee teacher in Uganda proposed a youth-led language team: “We are already doing this. Why not make it official? Then we can do it better.”

A fundamental gap is highlighted between the rhetoric of inclusion and the practice of language delivery in humanitarian settings. Informal interpreters are not peripheral, they are the frontline of multilingual engagement. Without recognizing and investing in this reality, humanitarian communication risks becoming both inequitable and unsustainable.

To move forward, organizations must shift from viewing language access as an “add-on” to seeing interpreters as vital actors in the protection and participation ecosystem. This requires resourcing, training, and protecting those who already serve in these roles every day, often invisibly, and without thanks.

Multilingual Overload and Humanitarian Strain

One of the most consistent patterns across the five country contexts is the linguistic overload experienced by humanitarian workers, who are tasked with delivering services in settings marked by extreme language diversity, often with no formal tools, training, or protocols to manage this

complexity. The result is a humanitarian environment where language decisions are improvised, service delivery becomes inconsistent, and vulnerable groups are systematically excluded.

In Uganda, particularly in refugee settlements such as Bidi Bidi, Kyangwali, and Nakivale, interviewees described an overwhelming diversity of languages, with South Sudanese, Congolese, Burundian, and Rwandan refugees speaking upwards of 15 different languages. Humanitarian actors reported that even when services were delivered in Swahili or English, many newcomers did not understand. A camp-based protection officer said: “We switch to Kinyarwanda, but then someone else needs Kirundi. Then someone else speaks Nuer. There’s no end to it.” This constant linguistic pivoting created confusion, delays, and emotional fatigue for both aid workers and recipients.

This multilingual pressure was also strong in Central African Republic, where French and Sango are used as “standard” communication languages yet remain unintelligible to large segments of rural populations. In the Ouham and Bamingui-Bangoran regions, humanitarian staff shared that even after translating messages into Sango, local populations speaking Banda, Mandjia, or Gbaya still required additional, hyper-local interpretation. “We don’t just translate once, we translate two or three times before someone understands,” one health promoter explained. These extended translation chains created risks of message dilution, while also increasing dependency on informal interpreters.

In DRC, interviewees highlighted not only the breadth of languages, French, Swahili, Lingala,

Kikongo, Tshiluba, and dozens of local languages, but also the geographic fragmentation of language zones, which makes it difficult to generalize communication materials even within the same province. One field logistician stated: “You can go 30 kilometers and have to change your whole language plan.” In high-mobility areas, such as around Goma or Bukavu, displaced populations often shift linguistic profiles rapidly, outpacing the capacity of humanitarian actors to adapt messaging formats.

Humanitarian staff themselves are often multilingual, but their language skills are treated as incidental, rather than integral to their role. In all five countries, staff reported that their ability to speak multiple local languages was uncompensated, unsupported, and informally utilized. A national staff member in Cameroon said, “I speak five languages, so they ask me to do things that are outside my job, just to help explain. But it’s never in my contract. There’s no training. No backup.” This leads to burnout and resentment, while also placing the burden of communication on a few individuals.

The lack of planning tools compounds the problem. None of the respondents reported access to language mapping databases, interpreter rosters, or real-time translation technology. Materials were often distributed in a few dominant languages (e.g., French, English, Swahili), with little regard for contextual language needs. One respondent in South Sudan described being given health flyers in English: “They give us the paper, but our people can’t read it, and even I don’t know how to explain what is written.”

In some contexts, aid workers resorted to guesswork or default choices when unsure of language needs, risking confusion or exclusion. In Uganda, several NGOs admitted to defaulting to Luganda or English in mixed refugee-host interactions, even when those languages were poorly understood by refugee populations. In DRC, staff described choosing Swahili as a “safe” option, even when local dialects would have been more appropriate, largely because of a lack of accessible translation infrastructure.

The cumulative effect of this multilingual strain is twofold:

1. Service quality becomes uneven, with people in dominant-language groups receiving more accurate, timely, and complete information.
2. Field staff operate under constant linguistic pressure, which erodes morale, increases risk of error, and leads to inconsistent community engagement.

The situation is particularly challenging in emergency contexts, such as mass displacement or epidemic outbreaks, where speed and clarity are critical, but language needs shift daily. Without advance investment in language planning, humanitarian agencies enter each new crisis with no scalable system for multilingual response, relying instead on staff improvisation and community resilience.

This reality underscores a need for institutional preparedness. Multilingual complexity is not an exception, it is the rule in sub-Saharan humanitarian settings. Agencies must develop and maintain:

- Context-specific language maps and preference databases
- Local interpreter networks with basic training
- Flexible, modular communication materials ready for rapid translation and deployment

Until such systems are in place, frontline workers and affected populations will continue to bear the burden of linguistic improvisation, and the cost will be measured in both missed information and missed opportunities for meaningful participation.

Cultural Communication Practices

A recurring and deeply instructive theme was the observation that formal humanitarian messages often fail to resonate, not because of poor translation alone, but because they disregard local communication norms. In contrast, community members consistently expressed higher trust, clarity, and engagement when messages were shared through culturally grounded, oral, and participatory formats, such as storytelling, song, proverbs, group discussion, and dramatization.

In South Sudan, this dynamic was especially visible in women’s protection programming. In informal “women’s circles” held in displacement camps in Upper Nile and Unity states, facilitators explained that messages on topics like sexual and reproductive health or gender-based violence were often misunderstood or rejected when delivered in direct, clinical language, even when translated into a local tongue. Instead, they used analogies from agricultural life, traditional stories, or shared metaphors to explain

sensitive topics. One facilitator described using the imagery of a “withered tree” to speak about trauma and recovery, saying, “The women understand immediately. They’ve lived that story.”

This preference for culturally anchored modes of expression was echoed in DRC, where respondents in low-literacy communities described learning health practices visually and collectively. Community health volunteers frequently demonstrated handwashing, mosquito net use, or water treatment in front of groups, using a mix of speech, gestures, and humor. “If I show them with my hands and feet, they remember,” one volunteer in Ituri said. “But if I read from a paper, they look away.” The effectiveness of demonstration-based communication was particularly strong among elderly women and men, many of whom had never attended formal schooling.

In CAR, storytelling and communal prayer emerged as trusted channels for spreading humanitarian information. In several regions, religious leaders played a dual role: offering spiritual guidance while translating aid information into culturally resonant moral narratives. For example, hygiene and public health advice during cholera outbreaks was framed through biblical parables about cleanliness and collective responsibility. One Catholic priest described his approach: “We don’t just tell them what to do, we give them a reason to care, based on our shared values.”

In Uganda, youth engagement workers found that refugee adolescents responded better to rap, theater, and spoken word poetry than to printed IEC (information, education, and communication) materials. In one settlement, a group of Congolese teenagers created short

drama skits to explain reporting mechanisms for abuse and complaints. The plays were performed in Swahili, Kinyarwanda, and Luganda, with call-and-response interactions that invited audience participation. An NGO staff member observed: “It’s the same message we print on leaflets, but when they perform it, people actually understand.”

Even in Cameroon, where literacy rates are higher in urban areas, respondents in rural Anglophone zones stressed that communication is as much about tone and delivery as it is about content. “If you speak like a government man, we switch off,” said one market vendor in the Southwest region. Instead, she explained, people trust messages delivered in familiar accents and everyday language, preferably through trusted community figures, not institutional voices.

These patterns reveal that effective humanitarian communication is not merely about linguistic translation, but it is about cultural translation. Messages must speak to local epistemologies and emotional registers, using formats and metaphors that communities already know and value. This is especially critical when addressing taboo, complex, or technical topics, such as GBV prevention, disease transmission, or legal rights.

However, despite evidence of their effectiveness, these culturally rooted practices are rarely supported or scaled by formal humanitarian strategies. Most communication campaigns remain highly textual, top-down, and anchored in Western information delivery models. Radio programs, posters, and leaflets dominate, even in communities where oral traditions are central and literacy is low. Few programs budget for the time and expertise

required to co-design messages with community storytellers, religious leaders, performers, or traditional educators.

This oversight is more than a missed opportunity, it risks alienating the very populations aid efforts aim to serve. When communities are passive recipients of alien communication models, the result is disengagement, mistrust, or misinterpretation. When they are active co-creators of message content and form, the result is deeper understanding, ownership, and change.

To address this gap, humanitarian organizations must:

- Invest in cultural mediators, not just linguistic translators.
- Integrate oral and visual literacy tools into all communication campaigns.
- Prioritize participatory message design, especially for marginalized or low-literacy groups.
- Expand partnerships with local storytellers, artists, and performers as core communication partners, not as decoration or afterthought.

In crisis contexts, where clarity and connection are essential, the medium is part of the message. And in the communities interviewed, that medium is most powerful when it is rooted in culture, relationship, and narrative tradition.

Linguistic Inequity as Structural Exclusion

Throughout these narratives, one of the most pressing and sobering findings was the persistence of linguistic inequity as a structural

feature of humanitarian response. Across all five countries, language inclusion was not systematically planned, budgeted, or governed. Instead, language access was treated as a logistical afterthought, if addressed at all. As a result, entire populations speaking minority or non-dominant languages were either poorly informed or excluded altogether from critical services, information, and decision-making spaces.

In Cameroon, the marginalization of Anglophone communities was exacerbated by the absence of multilingual strategies that account for both language and political identity. Several respondents from the Northwest and Southwest regions explained that aid announcements were often only available in French, even when directed at internally displaced people in Anglophone zones. Others highlighted that Fulfulde, widely spoken in northern Cameroon, was “rarely used in written materials, even though many can’t read French or English.” This creates a de facto language hierarchy where only those proficient in elite or official languages gain full access to humanitarian aid.

In CAR, interviewees described a landscape where formal messages, often printed in French or delivered in Sango, missed their intended audiences in rural and linguistically diverse areas. A community leader from Nana-Grébizi stated, “The health posters are in French. But most here can’t read French or read at all.” While agencies attempted to simplify messages or use images, respondents said that visuals were often too abstract or lacked cultural relevance. In such cases, linguistic inequity overlaps with educational and geographic exclusion, reinforcing disparities along multiple axes.

In DRC, where more than 200 languages are spoken, humanitarian staff acknowledged that services are often geared toward speakers of French or one of the four national languages, Swahili, Lingala, Kikongo, or Tshiluba. This means that smaller language groups, such as Shi, Lendu, or Nande, must adapt to dominant tongues to receive aid. A health worker in Bukavu explained: “If you speak French, it’s easy to get service. If you speak Nande only, you wait longer or ask someone to help.” This echoes the structural dynamic where language becomes a gatekeeping mechanism, not by design, but by omission.

In South Sudan, the exclusion was more dangerous. Ethnic and linguistic affiliation were tightly intertwined with histories of conflict and marginalization. One elder in Jonglei noted that aid communications in Dinka were understood but not trusted by Nuer recipients, and vice versa. When English was used as a supposed neutral option, it was often not understood by older adults, women, or people in rural areas. A local staff member described a situation in which a GBV reporting line received no calls, not because of stigma alone, but because the recorded message was only in English. “People didn’t know what it was or how to use it,” he said. “It was invisible to them.”

Even in Uganda, which has comparatively high language integration in refugee settlements, respondents described structural gaps. Government-run schools and health clinics used English or Luganda as default mediums of communication, which often excluded refugee populations from South Sudan or DRC. One Congolese mother noted: “When the nurse speaks, I just nod. Then I ask someone later what she meant.” Several

young refugees reported that they only began understanding services once they found a peer or teacher who could translate. Yet no formal structures exist to provide such support, and interpretation roles are rarely paid or institutionalized.

These patterns illustrate that linguistic exclusion is not the result of individual oversight or temporary miscommunication. It reflects systemic underinvestment and planning failure at all levels of the humanitarian architecture:

- Needs assessments often omit language mapping.
- Response plans rarely include budget lines for interpretation or translation.
- Coordination mechanisms lack shared language protocols or standards.
- Monitoring frameworks do not track who was reached linguistically, or who was left out.

In the absence of clear mandates, language remains tied to institutional convenience, not community reality. Programs default to dominant languages because they are easier to implement or report in, not because they are best suited to the audience. Donor templates, reporting guidelines, and staffing models further reinforce these patterns by rewarding administrative efficiency over inclusive design.

Yet linguistic equity is not merely a technical fix, it is a matter of justice. When people cannot understand their rights, health instructions, or the conditions of receiving aid, they are denied meaningful participation. This undermines the core humanitarian

principles of dignity, accountability, and inclusion.

To address this, language must be recognized as critical infrastructure, with:

- Dedicated funding in all program budgets.
- Standardized language assessments at the start of every response.
- Inclusion of minority language speakers in feedback mechanisms and leadership roles.
- Institutional incentives for language equity in monitoring and evaluation tools.

Without these shifts, humanitarian communication will continue to reinforce the very inequalities it aims to address, perpetuating a silent exclusion that affects the most vulnerable first, and most deeply.

Community Radio and Mobile Tools: Underutilized Potential

While language diversity poses challenges, many communities across the five countries studied have longstanding local communication infrastructures, especially community radio stations and mobile-based tools, that are linguistically adaptable, widely trusted, and locally rooted. These platforms offer significant potential to bridge humanitarian communication gaps, yet they remain underutilized, underfunded, or inconsistently integrated into response strategies.

In Central African Republic, community radio emerged as a powerful communication channel, especially in rural and low-literacy

areas. Radio stations such as *Radio Ndeke Luka* and smaller local affiliates broadcast in Sango and several regional languages, including Banda and Gbaya. Interviewees praised these stations for delivering timely updates on vaccination campaigns, movement restrictions during conflict, and hygiene promotion. “We believe the radio more than posters,” said a woman from Bamingui-Bangoran. However, she also noted that airtime for humanitarian messages was irregular and often not in the right language for her village. Many local stations lacked stable funding or direct partnerships with aid organizations, relying on inconsistent project-based support.

In Uganda, mobile tools such as WhatsApp voice notes, SMS campaigns, and community phone trees were used informally by refugee leaders to circulate translated information. Refugee youth groups in Kiryandongo settlement, for instance, coordinated via WhatsApp to record public health messages in Kinyarwanda, Dinka, and Swahili. These recordings were then forwarded within linguistic subgroups. “The aid agencies told us once, but we spread it better,” said one youth leader. Despite this organic innovation, no formal mechanisms existed to support or verify these community-led efforts. This raised concerns about misinformation, especially when voice messages were forwarded without context or verification.

In DRC, humanitarian actors in North and South Kivu used community megaphones and mobile loudspeakers, often mounted on motorcycles, to reach dispersed populations. Messages were delivered in Swahili or local languages, particularly during epidemic alerts or election-related violence. A field staff member noted: “It’s cheap, it’s direct, and it

works. People come out of their homes when they hear it.” Still, these methods were usually seen as stop-gap tools, rather than integrated components of a broader communication strategy. There was little investment in quality assurance, language variation, or content co-creation.

In South Sudan, radio remained a lifeline in areas with no road access or electricity. In refugee camps and rural zones, solar-powered radios tuned into UN and NGO-supported broadcasts, including programs in Dinka, Nuer, Arabic, and Bari. A former teacher now living in a protection camp explained that a weekly radio drama about child marriage had more impact than any poster campaign. “It made people cry, and they talked about it. It changed minds.” Yet staff from local stations reported frequent delays in receiving translated scripts, lack of core funding, and limited access to airtime outside major urban centers.

Across all contexts, mobile phone access, while increasing, remains uneven. Women, elderly people, and persons with disabilities often lack access to handsets or digital literacy skills. Moreover, humanitarian agencies rarely design multilingual, offline-compatible mobile content, limiting the accessibility of health apps or complaint hotlines. Respondents in both Cameroon and Uganda noted that many hotlines or recorded messages were only available in English or French, even when these were not the primary languages of callers. One health volunteer from the Southwest region of Cameroon recounted, “We told women to call the number, but when they did, the voice spoke French. They hung up.”

Despite these limitations, community radio and mobile tools offer several key strengths:

- **Flexibility:** Content can be localized quickly and adjusted by language, dialect, or region.
- **Orality:** Ideal for low-literacy settings and verbal cultures.
- **Trust:** Delivered by known voices, often peers, elders, or local journalists.
- **Reach:** Can extend into areas with poor infrastructure or security access.

However, these strengths are not being systematically harnessed. Most humanitarian responses continue to prioritize printed materials and centralized briefings, overlooking platforms that communities themselves rely on every day. Where radio or mobile tools are used, they are often implemented late, inconsistently, or without proper language planning.

To unlock the full potential of these platforms, humanitarian agencies must:

- Form long-term partnerships with local radio stations, offering regular funding, joint content creation, and airtime planning in multiple languages.
- Develop multilingual voice-based mobile systems, including IVR (interactive voice response) tools and translated WhatsApp campaigns.
- Train local communicators, especially youth, women, and people with disabilities, to co-produce and verify content in their languages.

- Recognize community-led communication networks as legitimate infrastructure, not informal add-ons.

These approaches shift the paradigm from delivering messages to communities toward creating shared platforms with communities. In doing so, they enable dialogue, accountability, and trust, the true goals of humanitarian communication.

Strategies and Innovations for Multilingual Communication

While the findings exposed significant structural challenges, they also highlighted promising strategies and innovations already emerging within communities, NGOs, and localized humanitarian operations. These practices, ranging from low-tech, grassroots communication efforts to scalable digital tools, demonstrate that meaningful multilingual engagement is both possible and practical, even in resource-constrained contexts.

Low-Tech and Community-Based Solutions

In many humanitarian settings across sub-Saharan Africa, communities themselves have devised simple, effective, and culturally embedded ways to overcome language barriers in the absence of formal systems. These low-tech and grassroots strategies are not only cost-effective, but often more trusted than official communication methods, especially in rural or low-literacy environments.

Community Radio and Local Broadcasters

As highlighted before, community radio stations are among the most trusted and

adaptable communication platforms. Their use of spoken language, familiar voices, and participatory programming makes them ideal for disseminating information in areas where literacy levels are low and multiple local languages are spoken.

- In CAR, stations broadcast in Sango and regional dialects, using formats like radio dramas, Q&A sessions, and call-ins to engage listeners.
- In South Sudan, serialized broadcasts on GBV prevention and child protection were translated and dramatized in Dinka, Nuer, and Arabic, yielding far greater impact than printed materials.

The effectiveness of radio depends on consistent funding for airtime, training of local radio hosts, and partnerships that ensure timely, multilingual content is co-produced with affected populations.

Visual Aids and Demonstrations

In contexts with low or uneven literacy, especially among women and older adults, visual communication has proven essential. Interviewees described the use of:

- Illustrated posters with minimal text
- Physical demonstrations (e.g., how to mix oral rehydration salts)
- Color-coded instructions (e.g., for food rations or medicine)
- Role-plays or live reenactments of services or rights-based processes

These strategies were particularly effective in DRC and Uganda, where community health volunteers translated medical information into

action by demonstrating behavior rather than describing it.

Megaphones, Town Criers, and Religious Leaders

In rural areas or crowded settlements, megaphones and mobile loudspeakers were often used to deliver emergency alerts or campaign messages. Community leaders, especially imams, pastors, and traditional chiefs, also played crucial roles in spreading messages in their own languages, rephrased in culturally resonant forms.

- In Cameroon, town criers announced vaccination campaigns in Fulfulde and Pidgin-English, often rewording messages to reflect local metaphors.
- In DRC, religious leaders reframed public health messages within moral narratives to drive uptake and understanding.

These strategies highlight the power of local authority figures and oral repetition in reinforcing key messages, particularly in communities where digital or formal channels are weak.

Volunteer-Based Interpretation Networks

Informal interpretation, while often unsupported, remains a critical resource. In several cases, communities had self-organized informal rosters of youth, teachers, or bilingual adults to translate announcements, interpret at health centers, or support community feedback meetings.

- In Uganda, refugee-led youth groups assigned interpreters by language cluster.

- In South Sudan, volunteer interpreters at registration points helped reduce miscommunication between IDPs and aid workers.

Though ad hoc, these networks offer a foundation for more structured and compensated systems if properly resourced and trained.

These low-tech and community-based strategies are not mere stopgaps. They are evidence of localized resilience and communication expertise. However, they often operate without formal recognition, funding, or support. For these approaches to reach their full potential, humanitarian actors must:

- Integrate them into formal communication strategies
- Train and compensate local communicators
- Develop multilingual visual content aligned with cultural norms
- Build long-term partnerships with local media and civil society

By recognizing and scaling what communities are already doing well, humanitarian systems can shift from external information delivery to co-owned communication ecosystems.

Technology-Enhanced Solutions

While low-tech solutions remain the backbone of humanitarian communication in many areas, technology-enhanced tools, when used strategically, can offer scalable, multilingual communication pathways that improve reach, accuracy, and two-way engagement. Across the five countries studied, a number of emerging digital strategies were identified,

particularly in refugee settlements and urban crisis zones. However, the effective use of technology hinges on local adaptation, language inclusion, and digital equity.

Mobile Messaging Platforms (WhatsApp, SMS, IVR)

One of the most common technology-enhanced methods cited by communities and field workers was the use of WhatsApp and SMS campaigns for multilingual communication. These tools were often deployed by:

- Refugee-led youth groups translating key updates into voice notes or texts in local languages
- Community health workers distributing short health tips via SMS
- Protection teams using WhatsApp to send alerts and hotline contacts

In Uganda, a refugee group in Kiryandongo settlement ran a WhatsApp group in Swahili, Dinka, and Kinyarwanda, posting translated COVID-19 and cholera updates. In CAR, some NGOs piloted SMS alerts in Sango and French to reach rural populations with vaccination reminders.

However, these efforts were usually informal and fragmented, with little coordination between agencies. Language customization was often limited by platform constraints or insufficient funding for localization.

Interactive Voice Response (IVR) Systems

In low-literacy or non-literate populations, IVR systems, pre-recorded voice menus in multiple languages, offer a promising solution for providing information and receiving

community feedback. These systems allow callers to:

- Listen to information on topics like food distributions, service changes, or disease prevention
- Record questions, complaints, or feedback in their language
- Get routed to support in real time (where systems are advanced)

While not yet widely adopted across the five countries, IVR pilots have shown success in other humanitarian settings. Field staff in South Sudan expressed interest in developing such systems, especially where literacy and language mismatch prevent uptake of printed information.

Multilingual Mobile Applications

Although mobile apps are still limited by device access and digital literacy, some humanitarian actors have begun deploying multilingual apps with localized content:

- Health apps with audio guidance in Swahili or Luganda
- Digital complaint tools with language selection menus
- Translation apps adapted for common humanitarian terms

In DRC, pilot programs allowed community mobilizers to use tablets pre-loaded with videos and image-based guides in local languages for hygiene promotion and GBV referral pathways. These tools helped standardize messages and reach communities more effectively, but only when supported with training and ongoing language updates.

Crowdsourced Translation and Community Co-Production

One emerging innovation was the community co-creation of digital content, from script writing to voice recording. In Uganda, refugee women were trained to voice-record maternal health messages in Acholi and Kinyarwanda. In Cameroon, young volunteers helped translate digital feedback surveys into Pidgin-English and Fulfulde. These bottom-up contributions enhanced accuracy, trust, and cultural fit.

In the absence of professional translation services, some NGOs relied on crowdsourced language contributions, using messaging groups to test translated terms or phrasing before broadcast. While not always precise, these grassroots efforts often reflected real linguistic usage and local nuance far better than machine-generated translation.

Limitations and Risks

While digital tools offer promise, several cross-cutting concerns must be addressed:

- **Access gaps:** Women, older adults, and persons with disabilities often lack devices, connectivity, or digital literacy.
- **Language exclusions:** Apps or platforms often include only dominant languages; minority language speakers are left out.
- **Data privacy and protection:** Without clear protocols, sensitive communication (e.g., around GBV or health) risks breaches when shared over informal tools.

- **Donor short-termism:** Many pilots are not scaled or sustained beyond the life of a single project.

To fully unlock the potential of technology for multilingual humanitarian communication, agencies should:

- Design all mobile tools with offline functionality, audio options, and language selection
- Support training for community content creators and voice recorders
- Fund multi-platform strategies that combine tech with traditional methods
- Coordinate across actors to avoid duplication and fragmentation

Digital tools will not replace oral, community-driven communication, but when aligned with real needs, local capacities, and linguistic diversity, they can be powerful complements that enhance speed, scale, and two-way dialogue.

Organizational Approaches to Language Inclusion

While community-led and technology-based innovations demonstrate what is possible, sustainable change in multilingual humanitarian communication ultimately requires systemic shifts within organizations themselves. Interviews revealed that language inclusion remains fragmented and underprioritized within most humanitarian agencies, largely due to structural, procedural, and budgetary gaps. To move beyond reactive fixes, organizations must embed language into their core strategies, staffing, partnerships, and accountability mechanisms.

Language Planning in Assessments and Preparedness

One of the most critical organizational gaps identified was the lack of structured language mapping and planning at the outset of responses. In nearly all field sites, respondents confirmed that initial assessments focused on shelter, food, or health, but rarely gathered data on:

- What languages people speak and understand
- Literacy levels in different languages
- Preferred communication channels

In DRC and Cameroon, frontline staff described making language decisions “on the fly,” based on assumptions or staff availability. Without reliable data, humanitarian actors risk defaulting to dominant or colonial languages, reinforcing structural exclusion.

Some good practice examples were found in Uganda, where a few NGOs embedded rapid language profiling into their registration process. These snapshots guided the design of health and education materials in relevant refugee languages. However, these examples were the exception, not the rule.

Dedicated Language Focal Points and Staff Roles

Few agencies had designated roles for managing language strategy. Staff with local language skills were often used ad hoc, without recognition, compensation, or training in ethical interpretation. In South Sudan, field staff described situations where bilingual workers were asked to translate GBV disclosures or medical consultations without

support, creating ethical and psychological risks.

Establishing language focal points or communications officers with linguistic expertise can help coordinate multilingual strategies, manage interpreter networks, and ensure community language needs are reflected in every sectoral response. These roles should be resourced and elevated, not treated as optional or extra.

Partnering with Local Interpreters and Translators

The absence of formal interpreter networks was a shared concern across countries. Most organizations relied on volunteers, staff, or community leaders for translation, often without vetting, training, or oversight. This creates:

- Risk of mistranslation
- Breaches of confidentiality
- Over-reliance on a few individuals

Agencies must invest in local interpreter rosters, offering basic humanitarian ethics training, fair compensation, and support for emotional wellbeing. In CAR, radio stations called for standardizing translation quality across NGOs to avoid “message confusion” caused by inconsistent terms for medical or legal concepts.

Where national interpreter associations are weak or absent, organizations can develop partnerships with civil society, educational institutions, or diaspora networks to fill the gap.

Language Budgeting and Procurement

Another recurring barrier was the absence of language as a line item in program budgets. Translating materials, hiring interpreters, or supporting local language media were often treated as one-off activities or absorbed under generic “communication” costs. This led to underfunding, particularly in multilingual or remote areas.

In several settings, field teams described improvising workarounds: using their own devices to translate, borrowing airtime from community radio, or translating only “key” parts of guidance due to lack of resources. These compromises undermine clarity, consistency, and equity.

Including language explicitly in budget proposals, from donor applications to coordination plans, signals that it is a core operational need, not a discretionary add-on.

Monitoring and Accountability

Perhaps most importantly, few humanitarian actors have systems to monitor:

- Whether all linguistic groups are reached
- What languages are used in feedback mechanisms
- If complaints are being processed in languages people understand

Without such tracking, language exclusion remains invisible. Respondents in Cameroon and DRC emphasized that “only those who speak the agency’s language know how to give feedback.” This skews data, masks marginalization, and undermines the principle of accountability to affected populations (AAP).

Organizations can begin addressing this by:

- Disaggregating reach and feedback data by language
- Auditing interpretation practices and materials
- Consulting communities on preferred languages for dialogue and complaints

Effective multilingual communication cannot rely solely on goodwill, improvisation, or community resilience. It requires institutional ownership and investment. Organizations that plan for language, staff for language, and track language use are far better positioned to uphold humanitarian principles and meet people where they are, linguistically, culturally, and ethically.

To embed language inclusion into operational systems, agencies must:

- Institutionalize language planning in assessments and preparedness tools
- Create funded, dedicated language roles
- Develop long-term interpreter partnerships
- Treat translation and interpretation as formal services, not favors
- Build feedback systems that are multilingual by design

This transformation does not require new mandates, it requires making visible what is already vital: that communication is only humanitarian when everyone can understand and be understood.

Recommendations

The findings and strategies outlined in this report underscore that language is not a neutral channel of communication, it is a vector of access, trust, dignity, and power in humanitarian response. To make communication inclusive, ethical, and effective, humanitarian actors must move beyond tokenistic translation and instead adopt systemic, community-informed, and equity-driven approaches to multilingual communication.

Operational Planning and Preparedness

[Embed language into emergency planning and assessments:](#)

- Conduct language mapping and preference surveys at the onset of any response, alongside needs assessments.
- Include literacy levels, dialect variation, and preferred communication formats in baseline data collection.
- Use this data to guide communication strategies for different demographic groups, especially women, youth, and persons with disabilities.

[Standardize language inclusion protocols:](#)

- Integrate multilingual communication guidance into cluster coordination tools, sectoral SOPs, and contingency plans.
- Require partners to include language planning in their project designs and implementation frameworks.

Workforce and Interpretation Systems

Establish and support local interpreter networks:

- Develop vetted community interpreter rosters, providing training on humanitarian principles, confidentiality, and trauma-informed communication.
- Ensure fair compensation, supervision, and psychosocial support for interpreters and translators, especially those handling sensitive topics (e.g., GBV, health).

Formalize language roles within humanitarian teams:

- Create Language Focal Point positions at country or field office level to oversee translation and interpretation planning.
- Include language proficiency requirements in staff recruitment, especially for frontline roles.

Communication Design and Delivery

Prioritize oral and visual communication formats:

- Invest in culturally resonant, low-literacy communication tools, such as posters with contextual visuals, dramatizations, audio messages, and storytelling.
- Co-create content with affected communities to ensure tone, phrasing, and formats are appropriate and accessible.

Diversify and decentralize communication platforms:

- Partner with community radio stations and local media in multiple languages.
- Leverage mobile tools, such as voice notes, WhatsApp groups, SMS alerts, and IVR systems, to deliver and collect information in user-friendly ways.

Pilot and scale participatory translation models:

- Train refugee and host community members to co-produce translations, validate terminology, and adapt materials based on audience testing.

Inclusion, Equity, and Protection

Recognize language access as a protection and equity issue:

- Treat language as a core dimension of protection mainstreaming, intersecting with gender, disability, age, and education.
- Prioritize multilingual access in services targeting marginalized groups, e.g., adolescent girls, older adults, indigenous minorities.

Ensure multilingual access to complaints and feedback mechanisms (CFMs):

- Make hotlines, community meetings, and reporting tools available in multiple languages and adapted to varying literacy levels.
- Monitor CFM data by language to identify patterns of exclusion or miscommunication.

Funding, Monitoring, and Coordination

Include language in all funding proposals and donor reporting:

- Require explicit budget lines for interpretation, translation, and language-sensitive communication in project design.
- Report on language reach and accessibility as part of accountability to affected populations (AAP) metrics.

Coordinate across actors for shared language resources:

- Develop inter-agency language resource banks (e.g., glossaries, recorded messages, translation libraries).
- Coordinate interpreter networks, content production, and training efforts across clusters and implementing partners.

Monitor language inclusion as part of quality and impact assessments:

- Track who receives information in their language, who gives feedback, and whose voices are being missed.
- Use findings to adjust communication practices in real time and hold actors accountable for inclusive outreach.

Language is one of the most powerful tools in humanitarian response, but only when it is used equitably, inclusively, and responsibly. These recommendations are not exhaustive, but they offer a practical roadmap for moving beyond symbolic translation toward a system-wide commitment to linguistic equity. By embedding language at every stage, from

assessment to feedback, humanitarian actors can ensure that communication does not simply inform, but includes, protects, and empowers.

Conclusion

This report has shown that multilingual communication in humanitarian settings is not merely a matter of translation, it is a matter of access, power, and dignity. In the diverse and complex contexts of sub-Saharan Africa, across Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Uganda, language shapes who is heard, who understands, and who participates.

The analysis reveals that language inclusion is foundational to humanitarian effectiveness, yet it remains under-prioritized, fragmented, and frequently improvised. From the structural exclusion of minority language speakers to the unrecognized labor of informal interpreters, communities are left to adapt, mediate, and often struggle with communication systems that are not designed for them.

And yet, this report has also documented resilience, creativity, and innovation. Communities are not passive recipients of aid, they are already communicating through trusted channels, using culturally rooted formats and grassroots language strategies. Whether through women's storytelling circles, youth-led WhatsApp groups, community radio stations, or role-played dramas, people are actively shaping the flow of information in ways that align with their lived realities.

For humanitarian actors, the path forward is clear: language must be treated as core infrastructure, not a peripheral detail. Communication must begin with listening, be

grounded in local realities, and be resourced with the same seriousness as any other aspect of humanitarian response. This means investing in local interpreters, integrating language into planning tools, funding multilingual content, and holding ourselves accountable to the principle that if people cannot understand, they cannot participate.

In a humanitarian system that often struggles to fulfill its promise of inclusion, centering language is one of the most practical and powerful ways to close the gap between intention and impact. Communication that is linguistically inclusive is not just clearer, it is fairer, safer, and more humane.

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