

# Localized communication

## The successful approach of the 11th Ebola response in Democratic Republic of Congo – and the gaps that remain

The response to the 11th Ebola outbreak in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in Equateur Province, proved the merits of a localized approach to risk communication. This was significant progress on the response to the 10th outbreak, and to the many humanitarian emergencies that have affected DRC to date. The response also highlighted the need for this local, multilingual communication to be better supported by the national and international organizations and authorities involved. Without adequate support, despite the expertise of the local communicators, social exclusion was heightened and both understanding of preventive action and trust in the response were undermined.

The strength of a localized approach to communication lies in community outreach workers and other health communicators playing a central role. With their linguistic and cultural knowledge and their relations of trust within communities, in this response they were able to relay key information in a way that was both understood and accepted. They prioritized verbal information sharing, tailored explanations to local sensibilities, and used different channels to communicate with different audiences. Residents interviewed by Translators without Borders said that it was chiefly because the information was communicated in their local languages, rather than French or Lingala, that they understood and accepted it. They also reported that this understanding left them feeling less confused and afraid of the deadly disease they faced.

*“To communicate right, we need to develop a local language approach. If people hear you speaking their local language, they’ll get involved.”*  
*Health worker, 50 years old, Mapeke*

Yet our research also indicates that the Equateur response highlights the responsibility of national and international organizations and authorities to support this localized approach. In the absence of specific oversight on the matter, the discrimination which exists in all societies risks resulting in the exclusion of marginalized groups. That was particularly the case for “Indigenous” groups (also known as Twa or Batwa), who were excluded from community outreach teams and generally from communication efforts. As a result, that communication didn’t happen in their languages. Without information, research participants from these communities told us they concluded that Ebola didn’t concern them.



Nor does a localized communication approach mean that national and international bodies have no role to play in multilingual communication. The health communicators TWB spoke with said they had not been adequately supported by the response lead agencies. Health workers particularly wanted translation support, in a context where the medical terminology used was largely not understood. Community outreach workers felt they had not received enough information to do their work effectively. The result for much of the population consulted was a lack of detail and adequate explanation on issues like vaccination.

An unintended consequence of local communicators being at the forefront was to obscure the accountability of national and international organizations and authorities. Limited direct contact and communication difficulties left communities lacking confidence in humanitarians and reticent about feedback mechanisms. Over half of research participants were unaware such mechanisms existed.

## What this means for future programming

Responses to humanitarian and public health emergencies can increase the effectiveness of community engagement by routinely placing local people at the center of communication efforts. That will help foster understanding and trust by enabling communication to happen in the languages, formats and channels best suited to communities' needs and preferences.

The role of national and international organizations leading the response is to support and coordinate local communication efforts in order to:

- **avoid excluding marginalized groups**, for instance by ensuring all ethnic and language communities are equitably represented on communication teams.
- **tailoring communication to the needs of affected communities**, firstly by consulting them on their language and communication preferences and then by taking those preferences and local communicators' recommendations on board in planning.
- **promoting a shared understanding and standard translation of information and concepts** by providing health and community outreach workers with training and communication materials in local languages, not just the official and national languages.
- **providing real responses to affected people's questions**, by making feedback mechanisms accessible to local language speakers and providing local communicators with a common set of substantive answers, updated as new questions arise.
- **making it clear that response leads are accountable**, through transparent coordination of communication efforts and regular dialogue in local languages with the different communities affected.

Read a more detailed brief on language dynamics in the affected area of Equateur, and the full research report (in French), on our website:

<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/localized-communication-minimizes-the-impact-of-ebola-in-drc/>.

## Scope of the research

This brief summarizes key findings of a study conducted by TWB for UNICEF on language barriers and communication challenges in the 11th Ebola outbreak in DRC. The study complements the work of the [Social Sciences Analytics Cell](#).

The findings draw on focus group discussions and key informant interviews conducted in December 2020 and February 2021 with 398 participants in Equateur Province. Participants were community members aged between 18 and 80, community outreach workers and members of community outreach committees, health workers and humanitarians. They came from 14 villages, Bikoro town and Mbandaka municipality. Full details available in French [here](#).

### How TWB can help

TWB's mission is to help people get vital information and be heard, whatever language they speak. We help our partner organizations to listen to and communicate effectively with the communities they serve. We translate messages and documents into local languages, support audio translations and pictorial information, and advise on two-way communication. We also work with partners to field test and revise materials to improve comprehension and impact. This work is informed by research, language mapping and assessments of target populations' communication needs. We also develop language technology solutions for community engagement.

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

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



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