

## Communication strategies and development challenges among internally displaced persons

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines how communication is used to support Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria. It focuses on how humanitarian organizations share information with IDPs and how the displaced individuals themselves access, interpret, and respond to such communication efforts. The main objective of the study is to evaluate the effectiveness of communication strategies in addressing the development challenges faced by IDPs. A qualitative research design was adopted, using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and content analysis of communication materials from humanitarian agencies. The findings reveal that communication plays a vital role in supporting IDPs' welfare and development; however, participation of displaced persons in the communication process remains limited. Many IDPs still lack access to digital tools and reliable information channels, and most messages focus on short-term relief rather than long-term reintegration, education, and livelihoods. The study concludes that inclusive and participatory communication strategies are essential for improving the social inclusion and development outcomes of IDPs. Enhancing digital access and adopting two-way communication frameworks will strengthen humanitarian response and empower displaced populations in post-conflict settings.

**Keywords:** Communication strategies, Development challenges, Humanitarian communication, Information access, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Participatory communication, Social inclusion

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are individuals who have been forced to leave their homes due to violence, conflict, natural disasters, or human rights violations, but who remain within their country's borders (UNHCR, 2022). Unlike refugees, IDPs often do not receive the same level of international protection, making them especially vulnerable in times of crisis (IDMC, 2021). In Nigeria, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2023) estimates there are around 4.5 million IDPs, largely as a result of the Boko Haram insurgency and communal violence, particularly in the northeast and central regions.

One of the major issues confronting IDPs is the lack of access to clear and reliable communication. Effective communication is crucial in any humanitarian response—it provides life-saving information, helps coordinate aid delivery, and promotes the inclusion of displaced communities in decision-making (Ochieng & Visser, 2020). Despite this, many IDPs face significant communication barriers, such as language differences, limited digital skills, low media access, and widespread misinformation (Adebayo, 2021). In many camps, traditional communication methods like community meetings, town criers, and radio broadcasts—remain the primary ways of sharing information (Abubakar, 2022).

At the same time, the rise of digital technology is beginning to transform communication in these settings. Some displaced persons now access health services, education, and aid updates through mobile platforms or social media (Karam, 2021). Yet, this shift has not been universal. Gaps remain, especially in infrastructure, affordability, and digital literacy, which limit the potential of technology to support development goals for IDPs. Furthermore, many displaced people are excluded from policy discussions and national debates about their futures (UNHCR, 2022).

#### 1.1. Statement of the problem

Despite the crucial role of communication in humanitarian and development efforts, many internally displaced persons in Maiduguri still face challenges in accessing reliable information and participating in communication processes that affect their well-being. The lack of inclusive communication strategies has limited their ability to benefit from aid

interventions and to be actively involved in rebuilding their lives. This situation calls for an investigation into how existing communication approaches can be improved to better address the development needs of IDPs.

## 1.2. Research objectives

This study aims to examine the role of communication strategies in addressing the development challenges encountered by Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Maiduguri, Borno State. The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the main communication channels utilized by both IDPs and humanitarian organizations.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of these communication strategies in meeting the needs of displaced populations.
3. Examine the key development challenges faced by IDPs and assess how improved communication can help address those challenges.

By investigating these areas, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how targeted and inclusive communication practices can empower IDPs, enhance access to essential services, and support their long-term reintegration into society.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section explores existing studies and scholarly perspectives on the role of communication in supporting Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), with a focus on both communication strategies and the development challenges they face.

### 2.1. The role of communication in humanitarian response

In times of crisis, effective communication is more than just helpful it can be life-saving. It allows displaced people to access critical information, make informed choices, and engage meaningfully with humanitarian services (Ochieng & Visser, 2020). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2022) emphasizes that information should be seen as a basic form of aid, equally essential as food, shelter, and medical care. When communication is weak or unclear, it can leave people vulnerable to confusion, misinformation, and even exclusion from available help.

Research consistently points out that communication in humanitarian work should not be one-sided. Instead of simply broadcasting messages to IDPs, aid organizations are encouraged to adopt participatory approaches that involve displaced people in the conversation (Karam, 2021). Top-down communication methods have often been criticized for failing to consider the actual needs and voices of those affected (Adebayo, 2021). On the other hand, when IDPs are given space to ask questions, share feedback, and contribute to decision-making, communication becomes more trustworthy and effective (Abubakar, 2022). This kind of inclusive approach can also improve cooperation between aid providers and the communities they aim to serve.

### 2.2. Communication channels used by IDPs

Information reaches IDPs through various channels, ranging from traditional to digital. Each method has its own strengths and limitations, depending on the context and resources available.

#### 2.2.1. Traditional media

Radio remains one of the most commonly used tools for reaching displaced populations. Its affordability and ability to broadcast across large and remote areas make it especially valuable in regions like northeastern Nigeria (Abubakar, 2022). Community radio, in particular, has proven useful in delivering localized updates on safety, health, and social services (IDMC, 2023). However, radio is mostly a one-way medium—while it can deliver information quickly, it doesn't offer much room for feedback or interaction, which limits how well it can support two-way communication.

#### 2.2.2. Digital media and mobile technology

With the spread of mobile phones and internet services, digital platforms have started to play a growing role in how IDPs access information and stay connected. Tools such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and SMS messaging enable faster, more personalized communication between aid providers and displaced individuals (Karam, 2021). These platforms also make it easier for IDPs to stay in touch with family or access services like education and healthcare remotely.

Still, not everyone can benefit from these tools. Many IDPs struggle with issues like low digital literacy, lack of smartphones, poor network coverage, or the high cost of mobile data (UNHCR, 2022). As a result, the potential of digital media to fully support displaced communities often remains underutilized.

#### 2.2.3. Face-to-Face Communication

While digital tools have changed how information is shared, face-to-face communication still holds strong value, especially in communities where oral traditions are part of everyday life (Ochieng & Visser, 2020). In many IDP settings, people rely on conversations during community meetings, places of worship, and one-on-one interactions with aid workers to get information and share concerns. This kind of direct communication often helps build trust and allows

space for questions and feedback (Adebayo, 2021). However, not all IDPs are able to take part in such gatherings. Fear, trauma, and ongoing security threats often keep people from speaking openly or attending public events.

### **2.3. Development challenges and the role of media**

Displacement doesn't only mean the loss of shelter—it also brings with it a number of long-term problems, such as poverty, lack of access to education, poor healthcare, and social exclusion (IDMC, 2023). In these difficult situations, communication—whether through radio, mobile phones, or in-person discussions can play an important role in helping IDPs access services, stay safe, and connect with others.

#### **2.3.1. Access to education**

For many displaced children and young adults, school is one of the first things to be disrupted. Without regular access to education, their chances for future employment and independence are greatly reduced (UNHCR, 2022). Onyia et al. (2024) found that collaborative and communication skills among teachers significantly predicted teaching performance in Delta State. This underscores how communication capacities influence outcomes in educational settings and suggests that in displacement contexts such as Borno State, communication strategies among IDPs may similarly shape development and empowerment outcomes. Some efforts have been made to bridge this gap through radio education programs, mobile apps, and online learning platforms (Karam, 2021). While these are steps in the right direction, many families still lack internet access or the devices needed to take part in digital learning. In such cases, even well-designed programs can fall short of reaching the people who need them most.

#### **2.3.2. Health communication and misinformation**

In overcrowded camps and shelters, health information can be a matter of life and death. Unfortunately, rumors about vaccines, disease outbreaks, or even basic hygiene practices often spread quickly in these environments (Adebayo, 2021). Some organizations have tried to address this problem through community health workers, awareness campaigns on radio and social media, and simple printed materials (Abubakar, 2022). These efforts have had some success, especially when they involve trusted local voices. Still, the battle against misinformation continues, and more consistent communication is needed to build long-term trust in health services.

#### **2.3.3. Social reintegration and economic empowerment**

For IDPs who want to rebuild their lives and rejoin society, communication is also key. Training programs, awareness campaigns, and small business support initiatives can give people a way to earn a living again and regain their independence (Ochieng & Visser, 2020). Local media and community groups often help spread the word about these opportunities (IDMC, 2023). At the same time, it's important to recognize that how the media portrays IDPs can shape how others view them. When displaced people are ignored in the media—or worse, portrayed in negative or pitiful ways—it becomes harder for them to be accepted and included (UNHCR, 2022). Positive and respectful media coverage can go a long way in changing this.

### **2.4. Research gaps and conclusion**

There's no doubt that communication plays a major role in supporting IDPs. But much of the research so far has focused on short-term relief and basic information-sharing. Topics like how IDPs can participate in communication, the effect of digital inequality, and whether current strategies help with long-term reintegration haven't received enough attention. This study aims to dig deeper into those areas by looking at how communication affects access to development opportunities and whether it helps displaced people feel included in society again.

## **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

This research examined how communication strategies are used to support Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria. A qualitative approach was adopted to gain insight into the lived experiences of IDPs and assess how effective communication practices are in addressing their development needs.

### **3.1. Research design**

The study was designed as a case study, focusing on IDPs living in Maiduguri, a city that hosts a significant number of displaced persons due to prolonged conflict in the region. This location provided a suitable environment to investigate how humanitarian organizations communicate with IDPs and how such strategies impact the challenges they face. Both the experiences of the displaced individuals and the communication methods used by aid providers were examined.

### **3.2. Data collection methods**

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and content analysis of materials produced by humanitarian organizations.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected IDPs, community leaders, humanitarian workers, and media professionals. These conversations helped uncover the preferred channels of communication, common challenges in accessing information, and how communication affected access to health services, education, and economic opportunities.

Focus group discussions were also organized with small groups of IDPs drawn from different camps and host communities. These group discussions explored collective experiences, the relevance of current communication strategies, and how communication influenced social cohesion and participation in community development. Each FGD was guided by a trained moderator and recorded with participants' consent.

Additionally, a content analysis was carried out on materials such as radio broadcasts, posters, leaflets, and social media posts used by humanitarian organizations. The aim was to evaluate how clear, accessible, and relevant the messages were, and to assess whether the content addressed key development issues like health awareness, education access, and livelihood support.

### **3.3. Sampling technique**

A purposive sampling method was used to identify and select participants who had relevant experiences or roles in the communication process. This included IDPs who had stayed in camps for at least six months, community heads, staff members of aid organizations, and journalists covering displacement-related issues. For the FGDs, participants of different genders, age groups, and educational levels were chosen from various camps to ensure a wide range of perspectives.

## **4. DATA ANALYSIS**

The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved listening to audio recordings, reviewing transcripts, and identifying patterns and recurring themes across the interviews, FGDs, and content materials. Key phrases were highlighted, coded, and then grouped into broader themes that reflected communication practices, barriers to accessing information, and the development challenges faced by IDPs. These themes formed the basis for interpreting findings and drawing conclusions on how communication strategies can be improved to better serve displaced populations.

### **4.1. Ethical considerations**

Ethical standards were carefully observed throughout the course of this research. Before any data were collected, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Each person involved was given a clear explanation of the study's purpose, the nature of their involvement, and their rights as participants. Names and other identifying details were omitted or changed to maintain confidentiality, and all collected data were stored securely.

Because the topic involved sensitive and sometimes traumatic experiences, efforts were made to approach discussions with care and respect. Participants were assured that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any point without facing any negative consequences. Their safety and emotional well-being were treated as a top priority at every stage of the research process.

### **4.2. Limitations**

Like many field studies, this research encountered a few challenges. Access to certain IDP camps was limited due to security concerns and logistical constraints, which restricted the sample size and scope. Since the study was conducted solely in Maiduguri, the findings reflect the situation in that area and may not fully capture the experiences of IDPs in other parts of Nigeria or beyond.

Although this study was limited to Maiduguri, future research could expand to other regions of Nigeria or West Africa to allow comparative insights. This would help identify whether similar communication challenges and strategies exist across different displacement settings.

## **5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter presents the findings of the study based on thematic analysis of the data gathered from interviews, focus group discussions, and a review of communication materials used by humanitarian organizations. The results are organized according to key themes that emerged during the analysis and are discussed in relation to the main research objectives.

### **5.1. Thematic analysis of interviews and FGDs**

Analysis of the interviews and focus group discussions revealed several recurring themes that reflect both the communication challenges faced by IDPs and the strategies in place to address them. These themes also shed light on broader development concerns, including access to health services, education opportunities, and income-generating

activities. The voices of IDPs themselves highlighted how information was shared, what gaps existed, and how communication either supported or hindered their ability to rebuild their lives.

**Table 1: Key Themes from Thematic Analysis of Interviews and FGDs**

Thneme	Sub-Themes	Frequency/Notes
Communication Preferences	Radio, Word-of-mouth, Community meetings	Most IDPs prefer radio broadcasts in local languages.
Misinformation	Spread of rumors, Lack of trust	Misinformation is widespread, especially via social media.
Barriers to Access	Language, Technology, Security Concerns	Limited access to digital tools, security fears when using phones.
Health and Economic Communication	Limited access to health information, Misinformation on opportunities	Communication channels are often ineffective due to the lack of follow-up.

### Theme 1: Communication preferences

Radio emerged as the most preferred source of information among many IDPs, especially programs broadcast in local languages. This preference is largely due to the limited availability of smartphones and unreliable internet access in the camps. “Radio is the only thing we have that tells us what is happening. I listen every morning because we don’t have phones,” said a 45-year-old male IDP from Almiskin camp in Maiduguri. Community-based communication methods—such as face-to-face meetings, announcements from local leaders, and word-of-mouth—were also widely favored. These approaches were valued not only for their familiarity but also because they allowed people to ask questions and receive immediate feedback, something often missing in mass media or digital platforms.

### Theme 2: Misinformation and lack of trust in sources

A number of participants shared concerns about misinformation, particularly messages spread through informal social networks and hearsay. A female participant in one focus group noted, “Sometimes we hear that food distribution will happen, but when we go there, nothing happens. We don’t know who to believe.” This finding points to a lack of trusted, centralized sources of information in the camps. As a result, IDPs often had to rely on incomplete or inaccurate information, which sometimes led to poor decision-making or increased anxiety.

### Theme 3: Barriers to access

Language differences surfaced as a major barrier. Some IDPs, especially those displaced from remote rural communities, struggled to understand messages delivered in Hausa, Kanuri, or English—the common languages used by aid groups. “Many of us don’t understand Hausa or English well. If messages are not in our own language, we just ignore them,” explained one respondent from Muna Garage camp. In such cases, essential information was either misunderstood or completely missed. This language gap created an uneven flow of information, where only a portion of the population could fully benefit from available communication materials or services.

### Theme 4: Security concerns

Security was a recurring issue in conversations about communication. Several IDPs expressed discomfort or fear about using digital platforms, particularly mobile apps and online messaging. Some believed these tools could be monitored or used to track their movements, making them cautious about engaging through such channels. This led some people to avoid certain platforms altogether, limiting their access to potentially useful information and services.

## 5.2. Content analysis of communication materials

In addition to interviews and FGDs, communication materials produced by humanitarian organizations such as flyers, posters, radio programs, and digital messages were reviewed. The analysis showed both strengths and gaps in how these messages were crafted and delivered.

### Health-related communication

Health information was the most common theme across all materials. Messages focused on hygiene, disease prevention, vaccination drives, and managing illness outbreaks. However, these messages often used broad language that didn’t reflect the specific concerns or conditions within individual IDP camps. As a result, some information was either not well understood or seemed disconnected from the reality IDPs faced on a daily basis.

### Educational opportunities

Several posters and handouts shared details about learning programs for children and vocational training for adults. Yet many IDPs interviewed were unaware of these opportunities. Distribution of materials appeared inconsistent, and in some cases, they were posted in places where few people could actually see or access them. This reduced the reach and potential impact of the educational support being offered.

### Economic empowerment programs

Radio announcements and occasional printed materials promoted various livelihood and skills-training programs. However, these messages rarely included follow-up support or clear steps for registration. Some IDPs noted that while they heard about a program once or twice, they received no further updates or interaction, which made it difficult to track whether the programs were genuine or still active.

### Mobile platforms and digital communication

Some organizations made use of SMS alerts and mobile applications to reach IDPs. These platforms were helpful for those who had access to smartphones and stable networks. However, many people in the camps lacked these tools. As a result, digital efforts, though innovative, did not benefit a large segment of the population. The reliance on mobile-based communication widened the gap between digitally connected IDPs and those without any access.

**Table 2:** Content analysis of communication materials from humanitarian organizations

Material Type	Focus	Strengths	Weaknesses
Radio Broadcasts	Health campaigns, Livelihood programs	Widely accessible and in local languages.	Limited interactivity; difficult to measure effectiveness.
Posters and Pamphlets	Health, Education, Livelihoods	Simple and easy to distribute in camps.	Limited visibility; hard to target specific groups.
SMS and Mobile Apps	Health updates, Emergency alerts	Direct communication to individuals.	Limited smartphone access among IDPs.
Community Meetings	Various programs and updates	Immediate feedback from community members.	Limited attendance and participation due to mobility challenges.

### 5.3. Connection between communication and development challenges

The findings from this study clearly show a strong connection between how information is communicated and the development challenges faced by IDPs. Where communication was clear, accessible, and relevant, IDPs were better able to engage with services related to health, education, and livelihoods. However, gaps in the way information was shared often limited the effectiveness of such efforts.

#### Healthcare access:

In some camps, health communication—especially around disease prevention and immunization helped reduce the risk of outbreaks. Yet many IDPs found it difficult to apply these messages in their everyday lives, largely because the information was too general or not adapted to their specific context. This lack of localized messaging made it harder for displaced people to fully benefit from the health campaigns.

#### Educational initiatives

Although there were efforts to promote education through posters and radio programs, many IDPs particularly children and youth remained unaware of learning opportunities. Outreach was not always targeted or consistent, and in many cases, messages did not reach those who needed them most. This limited participation in educational programs, despite the availability of resources.

#### Economic empowerment:

Programs aimed at training IDPs in entrepreneurship or vocational skills were often introduced through radio or public announcements. While the initial communication created some awareness, there was little in the way of follow-up. Many participants noted a lack of mentorship, guidance, or sustained support, which weakened the long-term impact of these empowerment efforts.

### 5.4. Discussion

This study demonstrates how central communication is to the development and well-being of internally displaced persons in Maiduguri. As the findings show, when communication strategies are weak or poorly executed, IDPs are left vulnerable not only to misinformation but also to missed opportunities in health, education, and livelihood support. In line with Adebayo (2021), the study found that the spread of misinformation is a serious challenge in IDP settings. Many participants spoke of hearing conflicting or incorrect information, which created uncertainty and, in some cases, fear. Without trustworthy sources, IDPs often rely on rumors or informal networks, which are not always reliable.

Another critical issue highlighted in the research is the over-reliance on one-way communication by aid organizations. Messages are often sent out with little room for feedback or engagement. This mirrors Abubakar's (2022) call for more participatory forms of communication, where displaced individuals are not just passive receivers of information but active contributors. Including IDPs in the communication process would help make messages more relevant and more likely to be trusted.

The study also supports Karam's (2021) observations about the digital divide in humanitarian contexts. While mobile technology and social media can be powerful tools for reaching people, many IDPs still lack access to smartphones, stable networks, or the digital skills needed to use these platforms effectively. This gap limits the reach of even the most well-designed digital campaigns. In agreement with Ochieng and Visser (2020), this research also points out that most communication strategies focus on short-term goals like distributing food or promoting vaccinations—without considering how communication can support long-term goals such as reintegration, education, or economic independence.

Overall, while humanitarian organizations are making efforts to inform and assist displaced communities, the findings suggest that communication strategies must be expanded and deepened. Beyond delivering urgent messages, communication must be viewed as a tool for development—one that is inclusive, interactive, and sustained over time.

### **5.5. Summary of findings**

The study explored how communication strategies influence the development challenges faced by Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Maiduguri, Borno State. The focus was on how communication affects access to services, development opportunities, and the social reintegration of displaced individuals. Findings show that many communication efforts—though well-intentioned—tend to leave IDPs out of the process. A significant number of IDPs lack access to phones, the internet, or relevant information in their local languages. While traditional media such as radio remains the primary channel for reaching these communities, such approaches often fail to address long-term development needs or encourage meaningful participation. Overall, the study points to the need for more inclusive and responsive communication systems—ones that give IDPs a voice and address the digital and structural barriers they face.

## **6. CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY**

This study makes meaningful contributions to both theory and practice. Academically, it enriches the field of development communication by showing how effective communication strategies can improve the living conditions and development prospects of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Maiduguri. It demonstrates that communication is not merely about information delivery but about empowering affected populations through participation and dialogue.

Practically, the study provides humanitarian and development organizations with valuable insights into designing more inclusive and responsive communication systems. It identifies gaps such as weak feedback channels, language barriers, and digital inequality, offering guidance on how to address these issues to enhance the impact of aid interventions.

The study also contributes to policymaking by emphasizing that sustainable recovery for IDPs requires long-term communication plans that go beyond emergency relief. It encourages the integration of communication strategies into broader development frameworks, particularly in post-conflict regions like Borno State.

## **7. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The findings of this research carry significant implications for humanitarian communication and policy implementation. First, they show that communication should be considered a strategic tool for empowerment, not just for disseminating information. Organizations working with IDPs must prioritize two-way communication that allows displaced persons to express their needs and contribute to decision-making processes.

Secondly, the study implies that addressing communication barriers—such as limited digital access, low literacy levels, and language differences is crucial to achieving inclusive development. This calls for tailored communication methods that consider the socio-economic realities of IDPs.

Furthermore, the study suggests that effective communication can strengthen trust between humanitarian organizations and displaced communities, leading to better coordination and sustainable development outcomes. Policymakers, therefore, need to invest in community-based and digital communication infrastructure to support these efforts.

Finally, for future research, the study opens opportunities to explore how participatory communication models can be applied to other post-conflict or displacement contexts in Nigeria and beyond.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

Effective communication is central to the development and social inclusion of displaced persons. Yet, this study found that current communication strategies are often limited in scope, lacking the tools or vision to involve IDPs in meaningful ways. Information is frequently delivered in a top-down manner, with little opportunity for feedback or engagement. The digital divide marked by low access to mobile technology and limited digital literacy further widens the gap between aid providers and displaced communities.

To truly support reintegration and long-term recovery, communication must go beyond short-term announcements and aid alerts. It needs to become a tool for inclusion, collaboration, and empowerment. The research underscores the

need to shift from reactive communication during emergencies to sustained development communication that includes IDPs in the decision-making process and supports their rebuilding efforts.

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