
Navigating global guidance

The accessibility and use of child protection and education in emergencies guidance - research brief

Who was involved in the research?

The Global Education Cluster and Child Protection Area of Responsibility, asked Translators without Borders to consult practitioners in Mozambique, DRC, and Bangladesh, on the accessibility and use of their technical guidance. The research team consulted with teachers, volunteers, and managers working with government, local and international NGOs. The research process included electronic surveys, remote interviews, and focus group discussions.

Why look at the accessibility of guidance?

The Global Education Cluster and Child Protection Area of Responsibility were concerned that the guidance they produce might not be getting to the people who need it or may be hard for them to find and use. The research confirmed that staff and volunteers working in emergency settings face significant challenges in accessing materials in Mozambique, DRC, and Bangladesh:

- High numbers of survey respondents found guidance difficult to access (34%, 44% and 12% respectively).
- A significant number of survey respondents said they often needed to read guidance more than once to understand it (30%, 51% and 50% respectively).
- Many practitioners had never seen guidance from the global cluster before (31%, 36% and 5% respectively).

When users face multiple barriers to access, they are even less likely to apply guidance. Through this research, the Global Education Cluster and Child Protection Area of Responsibility hope to inform their own writing and distribution processes and those of other clusters.

What are the main access challenges?

Research participants in Mozambique, DRC, and Bangladesh work in different conditions, but they flagged many similar constraints on their access to and use of child protection and education in emergencies guidance.

We identified two types of barrier to document accessibility: barriers to physical access and barriers to understanding. We found that intended users face both types of barrier with Global Education Cluster and Child Protection Area of Responsibility resources.

Barriers to physical information access

A number of systemic issues can prevent intended users from physically accessing documents. Issues affecting physical access to Global Education Cluster and Child Protection Area of Responsibility information include:

- Limited reading time owing to other work demands
- Poor internet access limiting search time as well as reading or viewing time
- Unreliable electricity supply
- A lack of awareness about what content is available and where to find it.

Barriers to understanding information

Other issues affect whether intended readers can find, understand and use the information in documents once they have physical access to them. Barriers to understanding that we found during the research include:

- A lack of guidance in the languages practitioners prefer (see the text box below)
- Use of unfamiliar sector terms and acronyms
- Ineffective document structures and formats
- A lack of localization, which makes guidance seem irrelevant to practitioners
- A “one-size-fits-all” approach to content development that fails to distinguish between different readers’ needs.

In relation to the last point, participants described using guidance written for education or child protection practitioners to communicate concepts and practices to a wider and often less educated audience. They raised the need for tailored guidance that would make information accessible to a less-informed audience.

Key recommendations from participants and based on their feedback are broadly in line with points made in background interviews with global and national clusters, indicating some shared awareness:

Guidance is still mainly available in a few international languages

Practitioners consulted for this study in all three focus countries frequently complained that guidance shared by the global clusters is not available in the languages most relevant for their contexts. These include Mozambican Portuguese, Congolese Swahili, Bangla, Myanmar (Burmese), and Rohingya. A review of guidance shows that English-language guidance is by far the most common, and recent guidance is typically also available in Arabic, French, Spanish, and sometimes Portuguese. This suggests that language remains a significant barrier to accessing global guidance, particularly for practitioners who don’t speak or aren’t fully comfortable in the official UN languages.

How to overcome these challenges

Overcoming barriers to physical access

Systemic barriers to access are generally difficult for writers and publishers to influence. However, we see several opportunities to vary current dissemination strategies to address these barriers for audiences affected:

- Plan, budget, and agree responsibility for widespread dissemination of durable hard copies, and consider dividing longer documents into separately printed modules to be easier to share and carry.
- Prioritize dissemination of multiple hard copies to national and local practitioners and their institutions.
- Introduce new materials through in-person or online presentations to a wide audience.
- Develop audio or audiovisual versions to expand access to the content.
- Communicate clearly and widely where people can find tools and guidance.
- Help practitioners access the most relevant content and prioritize the use of limited reading time by emailing it directly and signposting topics and categories of content (urgent, practical guidance, background reading, reference, etc.).

Overcoming barriers to understanding

Writers and publishers have a direct influence over barriers to understanding. Consultations on specific guidance materials found that readers had problems understanding and navigating even those materials designed to be more user-friendly. Recommendations for improving this revolve around the general principles for plain-language communication. They include:

- Communicate in the languages of your audience: this includes using the variant of the language used locally, for instance Congolese not Kenyan or Tanzanian Swahili for DRC, and Mozambican not Brazilian Portuguese for Mozambique.
- Use familiar terms and sentence structures: avoid or explain technical terms, use simple sentence structures and words and concepts familiar to your intended audience, and don't distract from key messages with unnecessary detail.
- Provide simple illustrations and summaries to aid understanding and recall.
- Adapt content to be relevant for your audience's work: participants warmly welcome resources that reference relevant content like national legislation, and generally lack time to adapt global resources to their own needs

Some of these recommendations require investment in new skills and resources. The research provides useful input from users to support decision making on the potential value of that investment.

Checklist for commissioning and adapting content

This plain-language checklist will support organizations commissioning new content, or adapting existing content, to ensure it is as accessible and useful as possible to practitioners in emergency contexts. When clusters are requested to disseminate resources, they can also use this checklist to verify that the resources are more likely to overcome the functional accessibility issues we identified.

While the checklist doesn't directly address the operational accessibility challenges we identified, it does reflect research participants' insights into the conditions in which they use the content. These include restricted reading time owing to other work demands, limited electricity, and poor internet access.

The expectation is not that every new resource developed will meet every recommendation below. Each recommendation is intended to help better tailor education and child protection content to the needs of its intended audiences, and inevitably those needs vary. Use them as a reference to guide authors, editors, and designers. For more on applying plain-language principles, see:

https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Plain-Language_Write-Clearly.pdf

Make the content relevant

- Understand your audience's information needs, and prioritize addressing them. Then test your content with that audience, and adjust accordingly.
- State the purpose of the document and its peak message, and include those in the first or second paragraph.
- Write for a non-specialist audience, recognizing that practitioners may use materials to communicate with parents and others with a role in children's protection and education.
- Translate key content into local languages, and seek input from local sector practitioners to ensure translations are accurate, comprehensible and appropriate to the context.
- When including hyperlinks to other resources, ensure those resources are in a language your audience understands. Where your audience is likely to read hard copies, provide hard copies of essential supporting material too.
- Test draft material with representative readers for comprehension and appropriateness.
- Consider developing shorter modular materials to enable users to focus on the content that is most relevant to them.

Make the content findable

- Order the content to present the most important points early.
- Include design features that help readers to navigate the content and find the information they want. Consider typical reading patterns, including scanning.
- Provide an index to aid navigation within a printed or electronic document.

Make the content easy to understand

- Maximize reader comprehension by using words that are familiar to most readers in your intended audience. This will make your content accessible to a wider range of readers. It will also make it quicker to read, even for people who could potentially understand less common words.
- Aim for an average sentence length of 15–18 words, with a maximum of 25 words. Remove redundant words, split long sentences into shorter ones, use vertical lists, or use a combination of these features.
- Write predominantly in the active not the passive voice.
- Use simple sentence structures to minimize effort for the reader.
- Avoid the use of abbreviations where possible: spell them out in full, with a plain-language explanation where appropriate.
- Avoid technical terminology where possible, and explain in plain language where not.
- Consider including a short and well signposted glossary for key terms and essential abbreviations, with plain-language explanations.

Make the content legible

- Avoid dark backgrounds in text boxes and text over pictures, which can make the text harder to read. Maximize contrast, ideally black text on a white or yellow background, as recommended by organizations of people with visual impairments.
- Use a limited range of colors.
- Present text in a single column. Research participants found it harder to keep their place when reading text presented in multiple columns.
- Use bullet points and lists for ready reference.
- Consider including simple diagrams and other graphics to break up the text and aid rapid comprehension and recall of key concepts.
- Use a font size of 14 point or larger.



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