

POLICY PAPER

Communication with Communities: Walking the Talk

Putting people at the centre of humanitarian response

Abstract

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Introduction

The world is facing an increasing number of humanitarian crises, of ever-greater complexity and scale. In 1992, the United Nations appealed for \$2.7 billion to meet the humanitarian needs of people caught up in crisis. In 2017, they appealed for \$22.2 billion¹. The humanitarian system is under great strain to continue to support the growing number of people caught up in crises around the world.

Since the late 1980s there have been a series of initiatives and policies to improve the quality and accountability of humanitarian action. These have included the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), ‘Sphere’, ‘People in Aid’, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) and the CDAC Network². In 2014 the Core Humanitarian Standard³ was launched, which is the most recent in a series of efforts to put people at the centre of humanitarian action, and to build on their capacity to deliver localised and sustainable responses.

Further commitments were made during 2016’s World Humanitarian Summit, which reflected the need to change the way we provide support to communities recovering from crisis. The commitments made, in particular the Grand Bargain’s Participation Revolution⁴, reiterated the need to engage communities and involve them in decision-making.

Put simply, the overarching message from these commitments and initiatives is clear. If we are to meet the growing needs of disaster-affected communities around the world, we must do more to truly listen to them and, crucially, to tailor our responses accordingly. However, the fact is that the implementation of these commitments remains inconsistent and unpredictable during response⁵.

Concerted and coordinated efforts by policy-makers will be the deciding factor if we are able to ‘walk the talk’ and truly put the people we are trying to help at the centre of our humanitarian responses. This policy brief presents the rationale and evidence for increasing investment and uptake in communications with communities, and makes recommendations for policy-makers to maximise its potential.

“The United Nations and its partners should continue promoting approaches on accountability and community engagement in which communities receive timely and coherent information and have access to complaint and feedback mechanisms, and decision makers act on feedback to improve targeting so that needs and rights are upheld. The [Internews] Humanitarian Information Service, launched during the response to Hurricane Matthew in Haiti, is one such tool.”

‘Strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations’, United Nations, 2017

¹ UN OCHA, Global Humanitarian Overview, 2017. Available at: https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/GHO_2017.pdf [Accessed on 10 July, 2017]

² Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network – for more information: cdacnetwork.org

³ The Core Humanitarian Standard. Available at: <https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/the-standard> [Accessed on 10 July, 2017]

⁴ UN OCHA, The Grand Bargain. Available at: <http://www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/3861> [Accessed on 10 July, 2017]

⁵ For example, CDAC, 2017, ‘We hear the participation music, but why is nobody dancing?’. Available at: <http://www.cdacnetwork.org/contentAsset/raw-data/1c576727-2313-4f6d-8c56-27e4889e2503/attachedFile> [Accessed on 1 August, 2017]

Why is communication with communities important?

Including the affected population in the humanitarian decision-making process restores their dignity, their sense of agency and improves their relationship with humanitarian actors. Communications with communities (CwC) delivers more efficient and effective preparedness, response and recovery in several ways.

Information as a right

Communication with communities is a legal and moral obligation. The right to information and expression is well established and enshrined in international human rights law. By upholding the right to information, humanitarian actors ensure that people are treated with dignity and respect, that they know their options, and that they can make informed decisions.

Information can save lives

Immediately following a crisis, understanding what has happened, how to get help and what to do to reduce the risk of harm can save lives. In the immediate aftermath, it is the community who are the first responders. Providing them with information about how best to react can help them take control of their own recovery.



Accurate, available information saves lives in a disaster and allows people to participate in their own recovery.

Participation improves sustainability

Engaging communities and involving them in decision-making builds a sense of community ownership in the response. This participation enables community-led initiatives that build capacity to better prepare for

and respond to crisis. Involving the community in the design, planning and implementation of humanitarian programming improves the sustainability of interventions⁶.

Communications with communities enables transparency and accountability

When individuals and communities are better informed about their rights, the rules and their options, it empowers them to hold humanitarian organisations to account. When they are encouraged to provide feedback, give their input, voice their concerns and questions, and feel they have a safe space to voice any criticism, it also provides an opportunity for humanitarians to adapt their programmes.

In 2013, in Darfur, Sudan humanitarian organizations identified serious gaps in basic services. To help address these gaps and increase accountability, organizations agreed to establish a call centre, which enabled people in the community to report issues as and when they happened. In the first months of operation only one third of issues reported were addressed. However, by May 2015, this had risen to 77 per cent. This was due to an elaborate follow-up system to ensure that no reported gap was ignored⁷.

Listening to communities delivers localisation and efficiency

Every crisis and every community is different. The local context dictates the most effective approach and the experts on the context are the people in the affected community. Only by communicating directly with affected people can humanitarian actors improve their situational understanding and tailor response efforts more efficiently to the local context. Sharing information with the community and listening to their feedback can help make response programming more effective by better meeting people's expressed needs.

During the Manila floods in the Philippines in 2012, people trapped by the water took to Twitter to appeal for rescue. Twitter users responding to the floods were already organizing themselves around the hashtag #rescueph. By including that hashtag in tweets people were able to share details of who was stranded and where. Through monitoring Twitter, the local authorities were then able to deploy search and rescue teams more efficiently and effectively⁸.

Managing rumours and misinformation

In times of crisis, when information is scarce, or when information is used as a tool to influence events, misinformation and rumours thrive. In a crisis, this can be a matter of life or death. Effective CwC helps humanitarian actors and communities evaluate and interpret rumours, to ensure people affected by crisis are able to make accurately informed choices about their own recovery.

In Nepal, following the 2015 earthquake, Internews ran a project called 'Open Mic'. Information volunteers from partner organisations gathered on-the-ground raw data on community views and conversations. Internews then analysed the information before publishing both the rumours and the verified information in a weekly bulletin. The newsletter was then shared with communities and used by

⁶ ALNAP, 2014, 'Engagement of crisis-affected people in humanitarian action'. Available at: <http://www.alnap.org/pool/files/background-paper-29th-meeting.pdf> [Accessed on 1 August, 2017]

⁷ UN OCHA, 2015, 'OCHA on Message: Community Engagement'. Available at: https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/OchaOnMessage_CommunityEngagement_Nov2015_0.pdf [Accessed on 1 August, 2017]

⁸ UN OCHA, 2013, 'Humanitarianism in the Network Age'. Available at: <https://www.unocha.org/legacy/hina> [Accessed on 11 July, 2017]

community radio stations, which also created rumour-debunking programmes of their own. The bulletins were sent to 1,000 recipients, including 400 journalists, the Humanitarian Country Team, NGO programme staff and local government agencies across 14 earthquake-affected districts.

In Haiti, Internews used a similar rumour-tracking methodology in response to the 2016 hurricane. Its [Sak Di Sak Vre](#) ('What is Said, What is True') bulletin was disseminated to 34 media outlets shared on social media, reaching policy-makers, journalists, radio stations, civil protection agencies, NGOs and community members. Some 400,000 people have accessed or shared the bulletin on social media.

In 2015 in Greece, Internews launched the '[News that Moves](#)' project, providing migrants and refugees with reliable and verified information about asylum processes, EU regulations and freedom of movement. As part of this project, Internews deployed 'Refugee Liaison Officers' to gather rumours circulating in both the formal camps and informal sites across the country. The project website ([newsthatmoves.org](#)), as well as dedicated Facebook pages in Arabic and Farsi were used to identify and debunk rumours, whilst rumour-tracking bulletins were also distributed to humanitarian organisations to share with their beneficiaries. As of February 2017, more than 300,000 people had accessed the information online and offline.



Internews' News That Moves project provided local, actionable information geared to refugees and migrants, in multiple languages on multiple platforms.

Connected communities are demanding better communication

In an increasingly connected world, crisis-affected communities have the tools to demand information, engagement and action. They are empowered to organise their own information networks, irrespective of the accuracy or value of the information provided. It is no longer left to humanitarian actors to take the lead in deciding to communicate with affected communities; people affected by crisis are reaching out and exercising their right to information and expression. Enabling people to communicate with each other, not only with humanitarian organisations, is increasingly acknowledged as an important contribution to a humanitarian response.⁹

Communicating helps psychological recovery

A crisis, by its nature, is a traumatic event. Communicating with people about the situation, where they can get help and what they can do to help themselves can be critical to their psychological resilience under stress. Communicating with others who are facing the same situation and understanding the process of accessing support helps people better face crisis and actively contribute to recovery efforts.¹⁰

Lessons learned

Diverse communities need dynamic engagement strategies

Men, women, boys and girls access information and communicate in different ways. Within these groups, different demographics will use different ways and means to communicate. If organisations simply rely on community leaders as communication channels, they run the risk of reinforcing existing power structures and inequalities, such as those based on gender, education level or ethnicity. If under-represented groups are to be empowered to help themselves, access services and understand their rights and entitlements, then humanitarian organizations need to develop tailored communication strategies based on a nuanced understanding of community information dynamics.

A review of CwC efforts as part of the Typhoon Haiyan response in the Philippines¹¹ found that people preferred organizations to use a range of communication channels, which were both trusted and well-understood by people in the community. The community criticized what they saw as an over-reliance on the use of elected community officials as a communication channel.

There is a collective responsibility to better communicate with communities

During any response or conflict, the affected population is generally not immediately familiar with the missions and mandates of different organisations, nor does it understand the relationship between

⁹ Emergency Telecommunications Cluster, 2015, 'ETC2020 - A New Strategy for Humanitarian Connections'. Available at:

<https://www.etcluster.org/document/etc2020-new-strategy-humanitarian-connections> [Accessed on 1 August, 2017] and ICRC, 2017, 'Humanitarian Futures for Messaging Apps'. Available at: <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/humanitarian-futures-messaging-apps> [Accessed on 1 August, 2017]

¹⁰ BBC Media Action, 2015, 'Humanitarian broadcasting in emergencies: a synthesis of evaluation findings'. Available at:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/reports/Humanitarian-broadcasting-in-emergencies-synthesis-report-2015> [Accessed on 1 August, 2017]

¹¹ CDAC Network, 2014, 'A Review of Communicating with Communities: Initiatives and Coordination in Response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines'. Available at <http://www.cdacnetwork.org/contentAsset/raw-data/7825ae17-8f9b-4a05-bfbd-7eb9da6ea8c1/attachedFile2> [Accessed on 1 August, 2017]

Government and humanitarians or other actors. There is a collective responsibility for organisations to share information about response activities and to *coordinate* communication with communities. There have been some innovative efforts to collaborate in engaging crisis-affected communities in recent responses¹². However, such efforts remain relatively rare. Many humanitarian responders are still reluctant to participate in coordination mechanisms and share information, even where awareness exists of the benefits of doing so, including cost efficiency and economies of scale¹³.

Accountability is more than just a suggestion box

A mechanism to collect feedback is only one component of accountability. Unless organisations act upon the feedback – and are *seen* to be acting upon it – the collection of feedback is meaningless. Collection of feedback without action can lead to the perception that organisations are actively ignoring the community. Programmes that are accountable to beneficiaries must therefore be flexible in design and capable of adaptation based on the feedback from the community. Feedback responses, including any changes in programming, should be communicated to the community to ensure they value and trust the feedback mechanism¹⁴.

Speed is of the essence

Humanitarian crises are dynamic: the situation changes constantly, as do the information needs of the affected population. Successful two-way communication depends on the design of fast and locally relevant feedback loops that minimise the time lag between community input and the provision of information responses. Streamlined design that includes approval processes, the choice of channels, format and means of distribution can be challenging, and can benefit from specialised technical support to agencies as they design their CwC strategies.

Language matters

The use of appropriate language to communicate is key to encouraging participation and ensuring impact, especially if the information is culturally or politically sensitive. The ‘right’ language is the language or dialect most familiar to, and trusted by the community. This may vary between groups within the community depending on factors such as place of origin, ethnicity or education level. For example, using language that people may have learned at school but do not use at home, or language spoken by the Government and those in power may reinforce power dynamics and further marginalise vulnerable groups – hampering communication efforts from the start¹⁵.

Face-to-face dialogue is often preferred by the community

Face-to-face dialogue remains one of the most powerful engagement tools. Face-to-face interaction strategies require commitment of time and resources for effective preparation and follow-up – at a time when resources are often stretched by the pressures of emergency response. However, evidence indicates that communities themselves prioritise this form of engagement¹⁶ and are more likely to respond positively, which makes it a cost-effective investment. Online information exchange and social media represent a

¹² CDAC Network, 2017, ‘The Role of Collective Platforms, Services and Tools to support Communication and Community Engagement in Humanitarian Action’. Available at: <http://www.cdacnetwork.org/tools-and-resources/i/20170531072915-3fs0r> [Accessed on 1 August, 2017]

¹³ CDAC Network, 2014.

¹⁴ Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE), 2016, ‘Listening to Communities in Insecure Environments: Lessons from Community Feedback Mechanisms in Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria’. Available at http://www.gppi.net/fileadmin/user_upload/media/pub/2016/SAVE_2016_Listening_to_communities_in_insecure_environments_Briefing_Note.pdf [Accessed on 1 August, 2017]

¹⁵ Translators without Borders, 2015, ‘Words of Relief: Translators without Borders’ local language translation for emergencies’. Available at: <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/alnap-innovation-words-of-relief-case-study.pdf> [Accessed on: 1 August, 2017]

¹⁶ SAVE, 2016

technology-driven extension of face-to-face and peer-to-peer communication. Messaging ‘apps’ are an increasingly prevalent mode of preferred communication between people affected by crisis¹⁷.

Findings from [the review of Communicating with Communities in Response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines by the CDAC network](#) suggest that communities affected by Typhoon Haiyan needed information to be provided via multiple channels with face-to-face communication the strongest preference. The report highlighted the importance of communicating via locally preferred and trusted channels. Communication solely via elected community officials was not acceptable to many community members. The opportunity to remain anonymous was valued by community members when giving feedback, as communities expressed concerns around losing support or assistance if they complained to humanitarian or government agencies. Being able to express concerns or ask for information or support that was outside the boundaries of agencies established programming was highlighted as very important. The UK’s Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) referred to such work as “thoughtful and cost-effective niche programmes [that] led to disproportionately positive impact (for example Internews and MapAction)”¹⁸



Radio Bakdaw held events in the community and encouraged two-way information sharing with its audience after Typhoon Haiyan.

Communication preferences should be assessed, not assumed

Communication tools used by organisations are not necessarily those preferred and used by communities¹⁹. Assessment of the information “ecosystem” can be seen by humanitarian agencies as a time-consuming luxury during a response. However, an investment in researching access, sourcing, flow and trust around

¹⁷ ICRC, 2017

¹⁸ Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), 2014, ‘Rapid Review of DFID’s Humanitarian Response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines’. Available at: <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/ICAI-Philippines-report-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁹ CDAC, 2014, and Forcier Consulting, 2015, ‘South Sudan Communication with Communities Gaps and Needs Analysis: Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Program (DEPP) Baseline Study’. Available at: https://www.internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/SouthSudan_Gaps_Needs_DEPP_Baseline_2016-07.pdf [Accessed on 1 August, 2017]

information movement in any given community is vital to the design of truly effective communications strategies, ensuring that people will believe, trust and act upon the information they receive, and thus ultimately saves time and money²⁰.

The role of local media is vital

Local media play a key role in communications with communities and generally have well-established positive trust relationships with their communities. The community sees local media as being independent from the humanitarian response and therefore a channel through which people can talk freely about sensitive issues, such as corruption.

Local media can also act as a counterbalance to information channels that the community may perceive as reflecting social hierarchies and associated power imbalances²¹. Despite these positive factors, however, humanitarian agencies can tend to view local media with suspicion and mistrust, due in part to a lack of professional capacity amongst some local media. Building capacity of local media is just as valuable as building capacity in any other part of the community during crisis (e.g. health workers, local government or civil society organizations), and arguably more so owing to the cross-cutting nature and wide societal reach of the information that media can provide. Such investment enhances the ability of local journalists and media outlets to play a crucial role in CwC, and is vital to the sustainability of the response and the transition to recovery.

In Haiti, Internews worked with AyiboPost, a trusted network of bloggers online, to publish the story of a baker that sparked a wave of solidarity from other Haitians who then donated money to him to re-build his oven and provide food for hungry people. This story is a reminder that local people are always the first responders in a crisis and an example of the power of local media to tap into community resilience and galvanize community relief efforts.



Local coverage of a baker making do with homemade materials generated community support; with donations the baker was able to invest in his business, purchasing a proper oven.

²⁰ See for example, Internews, Mapping Information Ecosystems Tool, 2015, Available at: https://internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/Internews_Mapping_Information_Ecosystems_2015.pdf [Accessed on 1 August, 2017]

²¹ SAVE, 2016.

Two-way communication should inform the full programme cycle

Communication with communities starts with listening as the first stage of an on-going dialogue that helps communities and humanitarian organisations alike. The value of CwC is not confined simply to the assessment or evaluation phases of crisis response; it helps improve process and results at the planning, resource mobilisation and implementation stages of the humanitarian programme cycle.

Recommendations

Donors must demand proof that organisations adapt their programming based on community input

A greater emphasis must be placed on organisations engaging affected-communities throughout the programme cycle. If the many commitments made in this area are to move beyond rhetoric, donors must demand that organisations prove how they are delivering better engagement and participation in their programme design, implementation and evaluation. Donors should also ensure that their funding mechanisms include the flexibility for implementers to adapt to the changing needs of communities without onerous modification and approval processes.

The 2016 survey of [the Secure Access in Volatile Environments \(SAVE\)](#) research programme with crisis-affected communities in Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria suggests that communications with communities should ensure meaningful follow-up on feedback from the community. Effective communication is needed at all stages to engage communities both to create the mechanisms, ensure their relevance and to publicise access and use.

Greater support and investment in local media capacity is required

In order to maximise the potential of local media to enhance CwC (and therefore humanitarian action more widely), donors need to recognize the value of investing in local media and communication partnerships. When humanitarian actors involve local media in their response, they build local capacity, strengthen local accountability and reduce misunderstandings and antagonism between humanitarian organisations and the population they are trying to serve.

During the Malakand complex emergency in July 2009, nearly 3 million people were displaced from the northern parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa into its lower districts, including Peshawar, Charsadda and Nowshera, in a space of three weeks. In the government's disbursement of Watan cards (financial benefits) it became obvious that a lack of access to accurate information was one of the major hurdles stopping people from accessing the aid to which they were entitled. Overcrowding, beneficiaries showing up at the wrong site, inadequate documentation, and the influx of ineligible beneficiaries at Watan card centres were just some of the problems that faced government officials and humanitarian workers. Internews' humanitarian communications team employed a two-pronged strategy for beneficiary mobilization, in collaboration with local government officials and the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA). Beneficiaries were directed through radio messages, text messages and newspaper ads to visit these sites and check the beneficiary lists and the dates allotted to their respective areas. This approach proved most successful in areas with high population densities, where such messages

spread through the second-hand medium, word of mouth. As the Humanitarian Communications Unit ran this campaign in each successive district, it was noted that the number of ineligible beneficiaries showing up at Watan card centres dwindled. Over the course of three months the ratio of the number of beneficiaries assisted to the number of beneficiaries turned away at Watan card centres in the Charsadda, Mardan and Nowshera districts rose from 3:1 to 7:1.

Collective action and collaboration should be prioritised by donors

In increasingly complex operating environments, it is only through solid partnerships and collaboration that the diverse and dynamic needs of communities can be met. No single organisation can be solely responsible for their own accountability and engagement: humanitarians have a *collective* responsibility to better engage and communicate with crisis-affected communities. Donors should support collective approaches that more efficiently use resources, build local capacity and improve coordination. Such approaches enable humanitarian actors to speak with one voice, ensuring consistency in community engagement efforts and reducing ‘engagement-fatigue’.

Donors must support communication with communities preparedness planning

Donors should fund the secondment of CwC experts to Governments during preparedness planning to ensure that community engagement is central to planning efforts. The inclusion of CwC in preparedness planning and simulations can engage a diverse range of stakeholders in advance of crisis and increase the likelihood of coordinated CwC efforts during a response. Donors should seek to support CwC working groups and other coordination forums in order to achieve this.

AUTHORS & CONTRIBUTORS

Stijn Aelbers
Anahi Ayala
Jon Barnes
Daniel Bruce
Jon Bugge
Alison Campbell

CONTACT INFORMATION

43-51 New North Road
London, N1 6LU, United Kingdom
+44 (0)207 566 3321

876 Seventh Street
Arcata, CA 95518, USA
+1 707 826 2030

1133 Fifteenth Street
Suite 350
Washington, DC 20005, USA
+202 833 5740

E-mail: info@internews.org
www.internews.org
www.facebook.com/internews
Twitter: @internews

Press Enquiries
press@internews.org



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