

Communicating During Disasters:

Examining the Relationship between Humanitarian Organizations and Local Media

SEPTEMBER 2013

Capstone Project
commissioned by
Internews

www.internews.org



in collaboration with
Columbia University's
School of International
and Public Affairs
(SIPA)



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHEN DISASTER strikes, humanitarian aid organizations often play a pivotal role in relief efforts. Communicating with affected populations is one of the many challenges these groups face during a response operation.

This survey asked representatives of major humanitarian aid organizations to reflect on how their operations in the field communicate with disaster-affected communities. Interview subjects were specifically asked about “two-way communication,” in which the potential beneficiaries of humanitarian aid are not simply targeted with messaging and information, but are also able to respond and convey their own messages or feedback to organizations providing aid.

In most areas, local media are a logical partner for organizations looking for ways to connect with disaster-affected communities. Yet the relationship between aid organizations and local media is often characterized by mistrust, miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Although many organizations are able to share success stories in which they overcame issues of

distrust or miscommunication to partner effectively with local media, few have institutionalized these efforts to ensure that two-way communication with affected communities is prioritized across all regions or projects.

The two areas in which progress is critical are improving the relationship between humanitarian organizations and local media, and ensuring that humanitarian and donor organizations prioritize two-way communication.

The three sections of this report summarize the results of these interviews regarding:

- Communications with affected communities
- Perceptions of local media
- Engagement with local media

The conclusion highlights key themes that emerged from the survey and presents recommendations from both interviewees and the project team on how to address some of the major issues raised.

INTRODUCTION

INTERNEWS is an international non-profit organization whose mission is to empower local media worldwide to give people the news and information they need, the ability to connect and the means to make their voices heard. Founded in 1982, Internews has worked in over 90 countries providing capacity training for local journalists and fostering independent media outlets.

In October 2012, Internews commissioned a Capstone project¹ with Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) to examine the link between aid organizations and local media during crises. SIPA assembled a team of six graduate students with backgrounds in journalism, logistics and humanitarian affairs

to work with Internews on a global survey examining the relationship between international humanitarian agencies and local media.

Between January and March 2013, the project team interviewed 34 public information and media officers from leading humanitarian organizations and donor officials around the world.

This report examines the relationship between humanitarian aid organizations and local media from the perspective of the aid providers in order to identify ways in which these relationships can be improved to better serve the needs of communities affected by disasters.

1 <http://new.sipa.columbia.edu/academics/workshops>

METHODOLOGY

INTERNEWS provided an initial list of 30 potential interview subjects. The project team contacted each individual to request a formal interview via telephone or video conference. Some interviewees also provided written responses to the survey questions via email. When officials declined to be interviewed or were unreachable, additional subjects were suggested by Internews or by other interviewees.

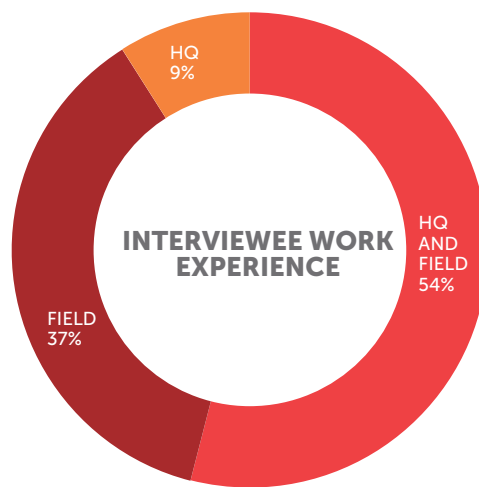
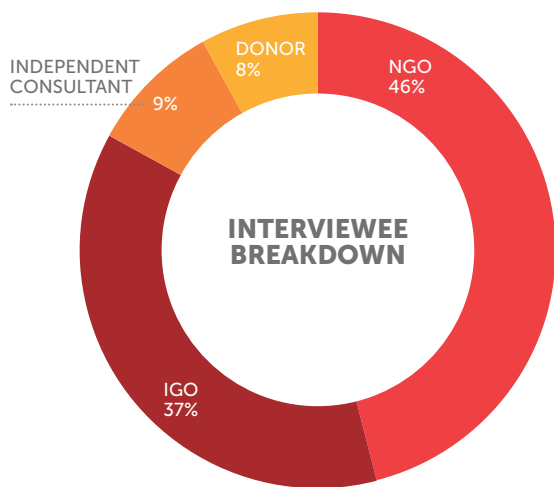
In total, 34 officials were interviewed. These individuals will remain anonymous, but the list of organizations they represent can be found in Appendix A. The interviews followed a 20-question structured survey with multiple choice and open-ended questions drafted by Internews and revised with the input of the project team. The complete list of interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

INTERVIEWEE BREAKDOWN

For reference purposes, we have distinguished four broad categories represented by the interview subjects: inter-governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGO), donor agencies and independent consultants.

INTERVIEWEE WORK EXPERIENCE

We have also distinguished whether each interview subject had worked exclusively in agency headquarters offices, in the field, or both. The majority of interviewees (54%) have experience working in both headquarters offices and field settings.



SECTION I: COMMUNICATING WITH AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

EVERY RESPONDENT INTERVIEWED recognized the importance of direct two-way communication with local populations in emergency situations. Two-way communication is the exchange of information and opinions between affected communities and humanitarian entities. Such dialogue allows inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations to assess what aid recipients need and inform them about what relief efforts can realistically provide. One NGO official emphasized the importance of two-way communication as “crucial because how you get information across is not the same in every context, and by seeking to understand how a community would prefer to get information, and what their needs are, we can be more effective.”

COMMUNICATION METHODS & MECHANISMS

How organizations actually make contact with local communities depends on available funding and the type of emergency. Mechanisms for communication include radio, flyers, notice boards, focus group discussions, meetings with government or community leaders and increasingly, text (SMS)

messages. Many organizations are now looking at soliciting information and feedback through call centers and suggestion boxes.

How organizations contact local communities “depends on the context and also the stage of the disaster. In the immediate aftermath of a major emergency...the aim is to reach as many people as possible, as fast as possible...However as an operation moves into recovery, the room and need for two-way communication becomes very important.”

To address the problem of access, particularly when it comes to reaching vulnerable groups such as the disabled and women and children, organizations typically seek partners in the field to help them channel key messages and network.

One respondent expressed hesitation about relying on community leaders to convey vital information. Although they see the value in consulting with local authorities for input on community needs and selection criteria for distributing assistance, they believe authority figures should be bypassed because of potential conflicts of interest. Particularly in emergency situations,

FIGURE 1

Understanding that communication is a two-way street, how does your organization directly communicate with local communities in emergency situations about the services you provide?



some authorities may be tempted to withhold information for personal benefit.

CHALLENGES

Many non-governmental organizations find it relatively easy to push their messages out; the bigger challenge is establishing mechanisms to monitor programs and collect and respond to suggestions. Collecting feedback is technically difficult and creates challenges if organizations set unrealistic expectations or respond inappropriately. Although they want feedback, at least eight organizations are wary of setting themselves up for failure if they aren't prepared to act on it. One official at a large donor agency rhetorically asked, "Do you ask for feedback knowing you don't have the capacity to respond?"

When asked to rate their own organization on its ability to establish effective two-way communication with disaster-affected communities, 38% of respondents declined to choose a score, emphasizing the varying degrees of success across different projects in various regions and countries.

SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION IN MYANMAR:

After Cyclone Nargis, a lot of donor money was provided for food distribution. A humanitarian organization working on food distribution conducted village meetings, and found that the local communities wanted livelihood inputs such as generators and equipment rather than food handouts. The project was able to successfully change its strategy to reflect the actual needs on the ground.

On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being "very poor" and 5 "very successful") scores were mainly in the 3 to 4 range.² Every respondent acknowledged room for improvement or specific ways in which their organization is already trying to improve communication with local communities.

Most respondents identified limited time frames and funding as the main challenges to strengthening effective two-way communication during relief operations. Three interviewees specifically mentioned the short "shelf life" of humanitarian projects during crises, which tend to be funded only for the duration of an emergency.

² See Appendix C

FIGURE 2

What, if any, are the main challenges your organization faces in effectively communicating with local communities?



The short-term nature of disaster relief programs means that communication systems and networks do not have sufficient time to become established or fall into disuse between missions.

An international aid agency noted, “Challenges can include inadequate knowledge about the community we are serving. We need to know what the blocks are...if the main target audience...[is] mainly illiterate then we are not using written messages. Resources and short time frames are also a problem, [as is] monitoring how effective campaigns are so we can learn from them.”

Respondents who felt that they were relatively successful in effectively communicating with disaster-affected communities were those whose organizations had long-term development projects already established in the area, or were working in countries where the emergency situation lasted for many years. One donor said, “Countries like

Somalia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the ‘emergency’ has lasted several years, have in some ways a much more developed mass communication system because of the need to communicate with people who are not reachable.”

Additional challenges to establishing effective communication include:

- Security.
- Language barriers, including regional differences in dialects or the challenge of attempting written communication in languages that are traditionally only spoken.
- Coordination amongst implementing partners and different agencies with overlapping agendas and specializations. This can hamper overall management and allocation of resources and communication strategies.

“There have to be resources available, specifically dedicated to communications. Donors have to be open to that, and are equally responsible for ensuring that some form of communication is in each proposal.”

NGO OFFICIAL

SOLUTIONS & AREAS FOR SUPPORT

Nearly all respondents agreed that donor support is key to more effectively communicating with local communities. Two-way communication must be prioritized by international humanitarian groups, and donors must recognize communication as a core of service provision. “If donors allocated budgets to accountability and quality in information then two-way communication would slide up the priority list,” asserted an official from a non-governmental organization.

Many groups would also welcome greater donor flexibility within funded projects to allow organizations to make changes based on feedback they may receive from affected communities. Several donors surveyed here confirm that although two-way communication with affected communities is important for emergency response, in practice little funding is allocated specifically for such contact. One official said that “communication is seen as an ‘add on’ to service provision therefore it is hard to direct funding

for communicating activities, [especially] after an emergency is over.”

Over 40% of interviewees also identified local media development organizations as helpful support mechanisms, particularly when they provide tools such as journalist contact lists, local media analysis and information on best practices. One NGO official said that “Infoaid brokered the relationship between [us] and the local radio station. It trained staff...to use frontline SMS, and worked with the local radio station to create a 45-minute interactive program. The feedback we got was tremendous and communities appreciated this airspace and many relied on the program to get relevant information. Although there are some costs associated, it would be good to integrate these projects as standard procedures within [humanitarian] organizations.” Another NGO official cited a media mapping guide by Infoaid³ that provided valuable information on local media communications.

3 <http://infoaid.org/media-and-telecoms-landscape-guides>

Three respondents even suggested “outsourcing” two-way communication to specialist organizations with established networks, resources and know-how. However, most interviewees acknowledged that humanitarian organizations must take responsibility for dialogue with local disaster-affected communities themselves.

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY


Although the survey did not specifically ask about technology, most respondents discussed the evolving role it plays in disaster communication.

Four officials specifically mentioned that social media and text messages can aid all types of communication if utilized appropriately. Three more respondents posited that technology is the way forward for all organizations involved in humanitarian relief. One donor representative said that “sometimes Facebook and Twitter are a more reliable way of communicating with local media. Before you arrive on the scene, you can actually let them know where you are going to be. You can attract them by the use of the mobile network. You have to make it easy for them to interact with you.” Many officials believe that

communications officers should be prepared for an ever-expanding coverage of Internet and cell phone usage in the future.

Yet at least four respondents expressed doubts about whether organizations should rely more heavily on new technologies like social media, text messaging and Twitter. They questioned whether these tools can be harnessed effectively to support interaction between humanitarian organizations and local communities or media, particularly in crisis situations when technology is more likely to fail or experience service interruptions. One NGO official believes that “because of coverage issues, it is best to rely on traditional forms of communication [radio, flyers, community leaders] in disaster-affected communities, to avoid further delays if there are glitches in the system.”

Even organizations that are not interested in using social media have to figure out how to deal with the fact that they will inevitably feature on this public forum and must deal with the massive volume of data and feedback emerging on social media and the Internet. As one official from a large donor agency put it, “Whether you want it or not, the information [feedback] is out there, especially with social media.”



“This paradigm shift - the technological and social media revolution - we need to understand how it changes things for us, how it impacts us, what should we be doing differently, how should we organize to get ahead of this wave, to ride it and not get crushed by it.”

INTERNATIONAL NGO OFFICIAL

SECTION 2: PERCEPTIONS OF LOCAL MEDIA

MOST RESPONDENTS agreed that the role of local media in disasters should be to get information to affected communities and provide accountability and transparency about humanitarian relief efforts. Local media can help save lives by transmitting warnings about dangers or announcements about where to seek assistance.

All respondents view local media outlets as important sources of basic information about disaster-affected communities. In the words of one humanitarian official, “(local media) know their countries best, have a wider network of contacts and pick up information ahead of any humanitarian agency.” This makes them instrumental in identifying security hotspots and pockets of need, and they can provide a good barometer of popular sentiment.

TRUST ISSUES

However, respondents were generally pessimistic about the local media’s ability to provide them with consistent, relevant information. The majority of respondents expressed wariness about the trustworthiness of local media reporting. Nearly all respondents mentioned the need to corroborate information from local media with other sources.

REASONS FOR DISTRUST

In South Sudan a local radio station allegedly publicized negative rumors and unfounded claims about a humanitarian organization working on health initiatives in the region. The organization contacted the station and was able to explain itself, but said they felt some damage was already done.

The role of the local media is therefore viewed as a double-edged sword. It has the potential to be an extremely powerful tool for information sharing, but it can also become an obstructive force by spreading rumors or inaccuracies. There is widespread concern that local media do not understand how humanitarian organizations operate and what they can and cannot do.

When asked how much they trust information provided by local media in the countries where they work, on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being “completely trust,” 1 “completely distrust”), 47% of respondents found it difficult to choose a single score.⁴ This emphasizes that confidence varies greatly from one country to the next, due to the type of disaster and the political situation in a given area.

⁴ See Appendix C

SECTION 3: ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL MEDIA

PASSIVE VERSUS ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

For the purposes of this survey we distinguish between passive and active engagement with local media. Passive engagement refers to the consumption of news through local radio, newspaper, television or online reports. Active engagement implies an exchange with local media, such as providing them with information or seeking answers to specific questions.

Passive engagement with local media is common among the humanitarian organizations surveyed here. Every respondent accesses local media reports at various times, whereas not every respondent has personal experience interacting with local media outlets. Respondents report that they consume local news daily when they are in the field for a disaster response. Officials based in headquarters tend to rely on national or international media sources, and press briefings within their own organizations. Many organizations also rely on field staff or local partners to provide translations and contextualized summaries of local news reports.

Active engagement with local media becomes much more frequent during a crisis, with many organizations saying they interact with local media on a weekly basis. Reasons for engaging with local media typically include:

- Raising an organization's profile.

- Sharing public service announcements.
- Communicating with affected populations.
- Answering community questions.

All survey respondents said that a major purpose for engaging with local media is to share public service announcements and communicate with affected populations. While 65% of respondents said their organization utilizes local media to answer questions from disaster-affected communities, many of them said that this is infrequent, or reactive rather than proactive.

Based on the survey results, inter-governmental and donor organizations tend to prioritize raising their profiles, while non-governmental groups generally place greater emphasis on disseminating public service announcements and building a relationship with local communities. "Operationally, the most important priority is the accuracy of information, and organizationally the most important priority is that the organization's profile is raised," asserted one official with a non-governmental organization. For those whose main priority is to raise their organizations' profile, several respondents said that they tend to focus on international and national (rather than local) media since funding generally comes from international and national sources.

IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

One non-governmental organization worked with a particular radio station in Haiti largely because the broadcaster sought the organization out. But listener figures were not very high in parts of the country that the organization wanted to reach. Had the group known this, they might have partnered with another radio station. Better pre-disaster media landscaping would have helped them target the right media partners earlier on.

SOLUTIONS & AREAS FOR SUPPORT

Respondents outlined the following types of support that could aid more effective cooperation between humanitarian organizations and local media:

- Greater donor support and funding for communications and media-related activities.
- Improved training of local humanitarian staff in media awareness, use of specific communication technology, humanitarian reporting and overcoming language barriers.
- Greater understanding of local media responsibilities and limitations in terms of legislation and regulation.
- More pre-disaster “media landscaping”, which involves providing comprehensive information on media capacity, norms or practices in a given area.
- Sharing best practices for dealing with ever-increasing volumes of information disseminated via social media and the Internet.

Respondents also provided thoughts on the kinds of support local media organizations need to work more effectively with humanitarian organizations:

- More and better journalism training and funding.
- Improved training of local media to understand how humanitarian organizations operate and what they can and cannot do. This includes being able to distinguish non-governmental organizations from UN agencies or individual foreign donors.
- Instruction to help local media understand disaster response and better prepare themselves for crises. This could include planning and practicing how to operate in emergency situations.
- Enhanced entry points for local media to reach humanitarian organizations pre- and post-disaster, including organizational information and contact lists.

There is no consensus among respondents on the single best way to support local media and many respondents are hesitant to speak for local media since it is not their area of expertise.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

THE MAJORITY of officials interviewed for this project acknowledged that two-way communication does not receive the attention it should in humanitarian relief efforts. The majority also recognized that local media outlets have the potential to play a key role in bridging this communication gap.

Although many organizations are able to share success stories in which they overcame issues of distrust or miscommunication to partner effectively with local media, few organizations have been able to institutionalize these efforts to ensure that two-way communication with affected communities is prioritized across all regions or projects.

There are two primary areas in which progress is critical, and the recommendations provided by interviewees and the project team fit into one of these broad categories:

- Improving the relationship between humanitarian organizations and local media.
- Transforming the way in which humanitarian organizations approach two-way communication.

WORKING WITH LOCAL MEDIA

- Local media must understand how humanitarian organizations function, and especially the difference between disaster response versus everyday aid work.
- Humanitarian organizations must understand how local media operate and how norms or constraints may vary across different regions or countries. This type of media landscaping can help aid organizations identify local media partners and how to best work with them to reach disaster-affected communities.
- Greater contact between humanitarian organizations and local media before disasters strike is essential. Regional meetings or workshops could help establish these relationships pre-disaster.
- Humanitarian organizations cannot expect other organizations or local media to handle two-way communication with local populations for them. Intermediary organizations may be a helpful support tool, but aid organizations must be proactive in utilizing all possible resources to get the job done.

PRIORITIZING TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

- Grappling with large volumes of information is an ongoing challenge. With the spread of mobile technology and social media, responders in the field cannot control information coming from disaster areas or claim to have the latest news. Humanitarian organizations must address the challenges and opportunities of new technology.
- Humanitarian organizations must work together during disasters in order to better communicate with disaster-affected communities. Failure to coordinate leads to inefficiency and duplication of efforts.
- Aid organizations must plan in advance how they will get feedback from affected communities and how they will incorporate feedback they do receive. Who takes ownership of suggestions and how they are incorporated into an organization's policies and practices is crucial.
- Donor agencies must focus more attention and resources on two-way communication to enable implementing partners to better accomplish this task. This may include funding specifically for communication initiatives, or greater emphasis on two-way communication as a high-priority deliverable within funded projects.
- How we discuss this problem matters. When we say "communication" many people think of public relations rather than dialogue between a humanitarian organization and a community in crisis. A typical communications or press officer has a different focus and skill set than what would be required of someone working to improve two-way communication with affected communities. Humanitarian organizations and donors should be aware of this difference and allocate staff and resources accordingly.
- Training is essential in order to effect lasting change, whether educating staff on the importance of two-way communication, how to use new technologies and social media, or how to understand and effectively work with local media.

APPENDIX A: ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENTED BY INTERVIEWEES

1. Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS)
2. CARE International
3. Department for International Development (DFID)
4. Doctors without Borders (MSF US)
5. European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO)
6. Emergency Capacities Building (ECB)
7. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
8. Independent consultants
9. Infoasaid project (a joint venture of Internews-BBC Media Action funded by DFID)
10. International Organization for Migration (IOM)
11. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)
12. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)
13. Medecins Sans Frontieres
14. Merlin
15. OXFAM
16. SEEDS
17. United Nations Childrens Fund (UNICEF)
18. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
19. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)
20. United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
21. World Food Program (WFP)
22. World Vision

APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS

CAPSTONE WORKSHOP PROGRAM
JOINT PROJECT BETWEEN:

SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AND
PUBLIC AFFAIRS / COLUMBIA
UNIVERSITY & INTERNEWS

Questionnaire For Humanitarian Responders (November 30, 2012)

SECTION 1: APPROACH TO COMMUNICATIONS WITH AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

1. Understanding that communication is a 2-way street, how does your organization **directly communicate with local communities** in emergency situations about the services you provide? *DONORS: How does DONOR ensure its implementing partners directly communicate with local communities in emergency situations about the services you provide? How does DONOR transmit information from the field to your organization?*
2. What, if any, are the main challenges your organization faces **in effectively communicating with local communities**? *DONORS: What are the main challenges your implementing partners (i.e. agencies you directly fund) face in effectively communicating with local communities, if any?*
3. On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being totally effective, 4 somewhat effective, 3 neither effective nor ineffective, 2 somewhat ineffective, and 1 totally ineffective, **what score would you give to your own organization** in terms of

establishing effective 2-way communication with disaster-affected communities?

DONORS: What score would you give to the organization you fund in terms of establishing effective two-way communication with disaster-affected communities?

4. What sort of **support**, if any, might you need to do a better job at effectively communicating with local communities? *DONORS: What sort of support, if any, might your implementing partners need to do a better job at effectively communicating with local communities?*

SECTION 2: PERCEPTIONS OF LOCAL MEDIA

5. In your experience, overall, what do you think about the role of **local media** in the contexts where you operate, particularly looking at emergency response?
6. Overall, how much do you trust the information provided by local media in the countries/contexts where you operate/used to be based?
7. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being completely trust, 4 trust somewhat, 3 neither trust

nor distrust, 2 distrust somewhat and 1 completely distrust, how would you rank your trust in the information provided by local media in the countries where you work?

8. Generally speaking, do local media outlets provide useful or relevant information to help you on your day-to-day work/when you were in the field?
9. If yes, how?
10. If not, do you have any suggestions of improvement that could be made?

SECTION 3: ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL MEDIA

11. When you were in/visited, or if you are based in the field, can you tell me approximately how many days a week you:

- Listen(ed) to the local news on the local radio?
- Watch(ed) the local news on TV?
- Read the local news in local newspapers or local news websites?

12. How frequently does your organization interact with local media?

- Daily
- At least once a week
- At least once a month
- Less than once a month
- N/A

Based on answer to question #12, go to #13 or #14.

13. You say your organization has little contact with local media. Why is this contact not

important for your organization?

14. You say your organization has very frequent communication with local media. Why is this important for your organization?
15. If your organization does interact with media, in what capacities does your organization engage with local media as part of your operations?
 - As a way of raising the profile of my organization/donor
 - As a way to share public service announcements
 - To respond to their questions about our operations
 - As key partners in communicating with affected populations
 - Others

16. Looking at your previous answers, in terms of **priorities**, what's more important for your organization in your interaction with local media organizations?

17. What **role** do you think **local media currently play**, if any, in saving-lives and enhancing accountability to and two-way communications with local populations?

18. What kind of **support**, if any, might your organization need to work more effectively with local media?

19. What kind of **support**, if any, do local media organizations need to work more effectively with humanitarian organizations?

This concludes my questions but I'd be really interested to hear of any other issues or insights you would like to add.

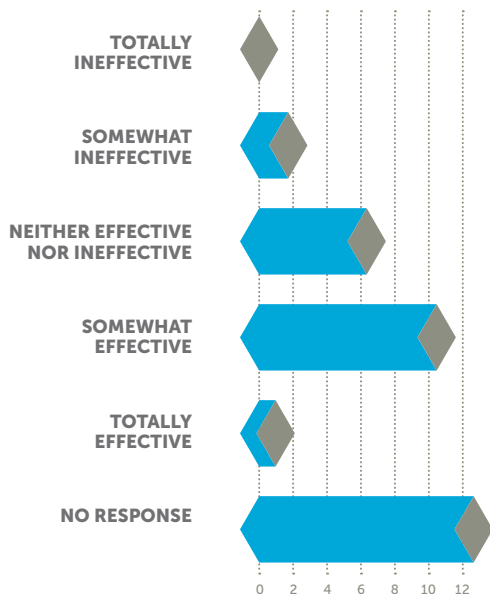
APPENDIX C: QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being totally effective, 4 somewhat effective, 3 neither effective nor ineffective, 2 somewhat ineffective, and 1 totally ineffective, what score would you give to your own organization in terms of establishing effective 2-way communication with disaster-affected communities?

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being completely trust, 4 trust somewhat, 3 neither trust nor distrust, 2 distrust somewhat and 1 completely distrust, how would you rank your trust in the information provided by local media in the countries where you work?

ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE 2-WAY COMMUNICATION WITH DISASTER AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

NUMBER OF ORGANIZATIONS



TRUST IN INFORMATION PROVIDED BY LOCAL MEDIA OUTLETS

NUMBER OF ORGANIZATIONS

