

# Communicating with Communities



Alpha Senkpeni used the Information Ecosystem tool to determine information flows in Liberia during the ebola crisis. Photo: Internews

Information about what is happening around you, what services are available to you and how you can connect with your loved ones is a most basic right and can be lifesaving. Without locally relevant and actionable information, communities are disempowered and left to rely on potentially dangerous misinformation and rumors to decide their next steps.

Internews understands that information is most useful when it is based on the needs and existing structures of the beneficiary community itself. Communicating with Communities (CwC) puts these needs and structures at the center of Internews' work. CwC is a continuous process of listening, responding and adapting programs based on the needs of the community. As simple as it seems, many other factors must be considered when implementing CwC in any program. For example, how do we communicate with the community in a way they can understand, listen and absorb the information? Are all community members participating in the conversation, not just those in authority? Is the information we're providing unbiased, truthful and relevant?

## Internews CwC Principles

### Information is Aid

Information and communication are critical forms of aid and often the main factors that enable people to access lifesaving services.

### Communication is two-way

Ongoing dialogue between the local population, beneficiaries, and humanitarian responders is crucial to a successful program tailored to the needs of the target population. Two-way communication allows communities to give feedback, ask questions and clarify issues; allows beneficiaries to take the lead in determining the information priorities of their community; and encourages responders to adjust to those priorities.



## Understand information ecosystems

What communication channels are used, trusted and available to the people we are trying to reach? In order to decide what method of communication to use, we consider the age, education level, digital access, linguistic and gender divides of the target communities. The goal is not to create new platforms or tools, but rather to tap into existing messaging app groups, community leaders or radio stations that may already be main sources of information for the community.

## Information you can use

Internews focuses on practical information that is most relevant for those consuming it.

- **It must be timely.** Information changes rapidly and providing old news can lead people to make the wrong decisions. The fluid nature of humanitarian crises makes this principle important as well as challenging to implement.
- **It must be actionable.** The people engaging with the information should be able to act upon the information that is provided. The information distributed should remain local, qualitative, and short, rather than being turned into statistics and trends.
- **Mother tongue.** Not only should information be in a language that people understand, but they should also feel comfortable engaging and providing feedback in their own words.

## How do we do it?

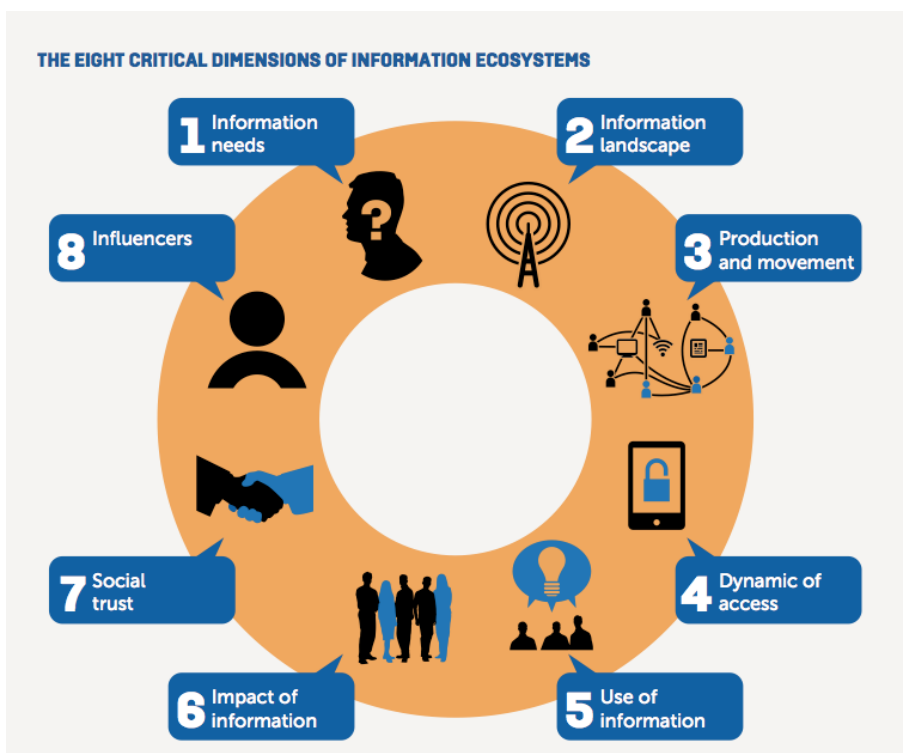
### Research

CwC begins with understanding the full layout of the information ecosystem where the project will be implemented. “Information Ecosystem” refers broadly to a dynamic configuration of different sources, flows, producers, influencers, consumers and sharers of information that interact within a defined community or space. Understanding this context informs the way we design programs.

We start off with an information ecosystem analysis or an information needs analysis, in other words, analyzing eight specific aspects of an environment:

- **Information needs** – are the information needs of all groups being served?

- **Information landscape** – what infrastructures are in place to support information production and flow?
- **Production and movement of information** – who generates information and how does it move?
- **Dynamic of access** – what are the power structures in the environment and how can they affect how the information flows?
- **Use of information** – what do people do with the information they receive?
- **Impact of information** – what impact does this information have on the community?
- **Social trust** – whose information do individuals trust?
- **Influencers in the community** – which voices are loudest or most influential?





Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. Credit Meredith Kohut/Internews

## Using existing information structures

Mapping the information ecosystem allows Internews to identify the most appropriate channels used by the people we're trying to engage.

In many scenarios this means using Internews' classic approaches to working with trusted local media that do more than just disseminate messages, they can also serve as a true facilitator of community conversation.

In some crisis situations local media is not available because it has been damaged or destroyed, or it may lack independence and accuracy. Internews also looks at information flows beyond traditional media: civil society, volunteers, or other trusted organizations who have an ongoing relationship with the community.

## Hiring Staff

To understand the local context and identify local solutions, Internews uses surveys, assessments, and experts as much as possible, but nothing beats having a team of locals as the driver of the project.

Local staff are not only better informed about the target population, they are also more likely to maintain their skills within their community at the completion of the project, allowing the work to continue after external organizations leave.

Internews aims to position itself equally as part of the local and humanitarian communities. We hire a Liaison Officer to communicate with humanitarian organizations, a Journalism Trainer to work with media, and a Data Manager to ensure the feedback data is funneled to the right people through the appropriate channels.

## Partnerships

Before setting up any new structure, group, or introducing a new tool, Internews always explores whether others might already be doing something similar. Local organizations and institutions are usually the first to start working with communities and will continue to do so long after international groups have left, so we seek collaborations with the local community as well as with international humanitarian agencies. By setting up partnerships with other humanitarian actors, Internews projects collate and investigate a broad range of feedback and incorporate the expertise of a variety of organizations. These partnerships increase accountability: feedback from the community is directly passed on to the organizations involved in the response, encouraging them to listen and respond to the needs of their beneficiaries.

## In practice:

**NEPAL:** In April 2015, an earthquake in Nepal left millions displaced from their homes and without access to trustworthy, actionable information. After assessing the communication needs of the affected population, Internews launched Open Mic Nepal in partnership with Accountability Lab and other local organizations. Open Mic provided an information loop that tracked rumors, investigated their content and reported verified information back to local communities through face-to-face communication and local radio stations.



**SOUTH SUDAN:** Displaced people in South Sudan needed a way to talk to humanitarians about what they required, what assistance was available, and where and how to access it. In response, Internews created Boda Boda Talk Talk (BBTT), a low-tech mobile information service that delivers professional recorded news from speakers mounted on a quadbike known locally as a 'boda boda'. As they drive around the Protection of Civilian sites to deliver the day's news, Internews staff invite questions and feedback from the people who come to listen, so that BBTT can continue to meet their daily information needs, and share their concerns with humanitarians.



**GREECE:** When tens of thousands of refugees began landing on the shores of the Greek islands in 2015, Internews created 'News that Moves', a project that debunked rumors and answered important questions through face-to-face conversations, messaging apps, social media and printed communication materials to allow migrants to make vital decisions about their lives.



**BANGLADESH:** In early 2018, Internews conducted an initial information needs assessment for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. We began collecting data from the community through volunteers and field staff from our partners, Translators without Borders and BBC Media Action. The feedback enabled us to share fact-checked information amongst field staff and humanitarian partners, and was turned into audio content by refugee reporters and shared with refugee listening groups.



Internews, an international nonprofit organization, empowers people worldwide with the trustworthy, high-quality news and information they need to make informed decisions, participate in their communities, and hold power to account.