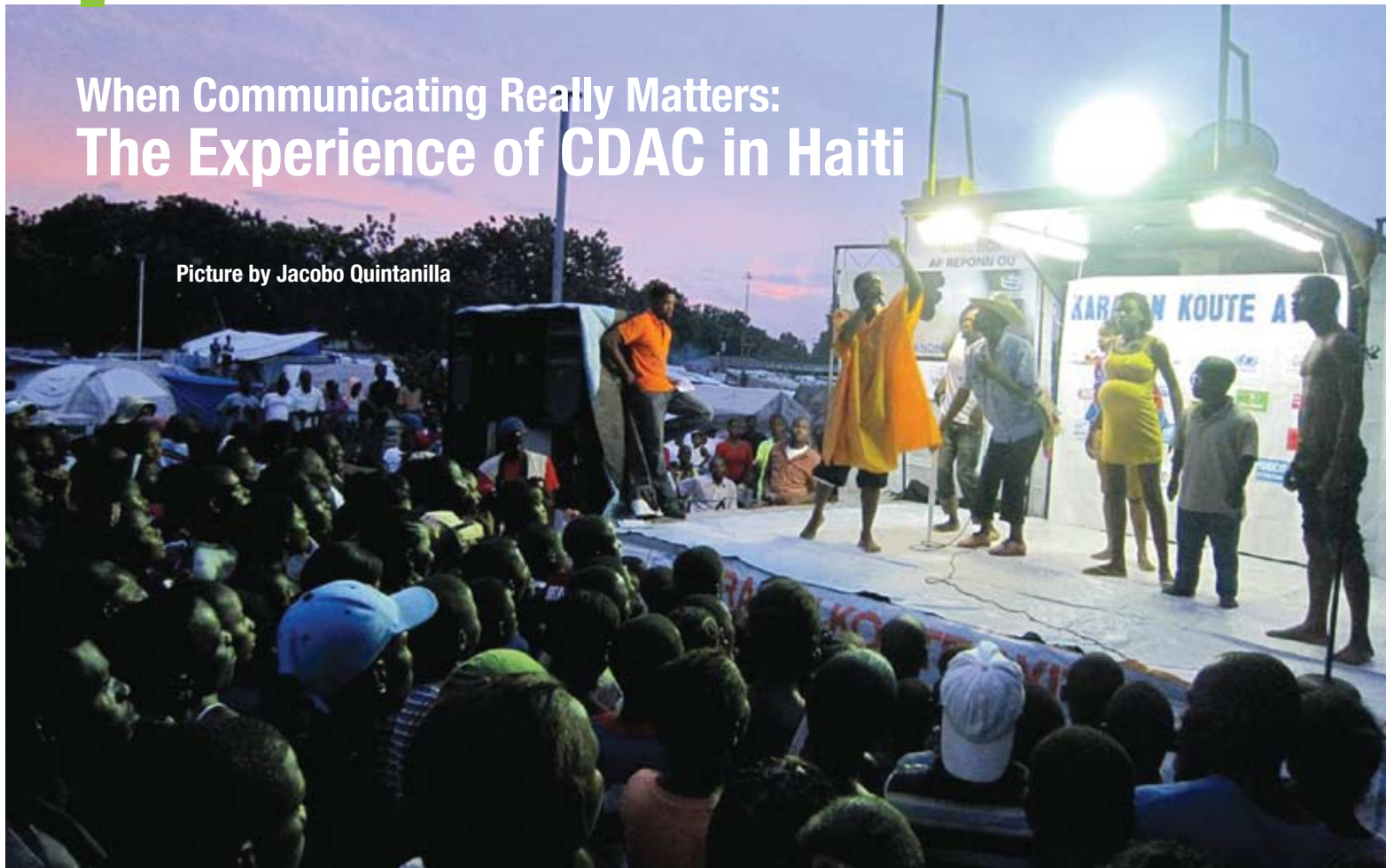


# When Communicating Really Matters: The Experience of CDAC in Haiti

Picture by Jacobo Quintanilla



*Konesans Fanmi se Lepwa Timoun (Family Knowledge is Children's Hope) stages a sketch on community disaster preparedness ahead of the cyclone season in the town of Grand Goave in front of more than 500 people on July 16, 2010.*

In Haiti, as is the case in the aftermath of many natural or man-made disasters, the opportunity for affected communities to have their voices heard is still rare. For some time, many organizations involved in disaster response have, with uneven results, tried to systematically ensure that affected communities have an important say in their own relief and recovery.

The devastating earthquake in Haiti in January, 2010, represented the first-ever humanitarian operation where a collective, multi-agency initiative focused on dialogue with those most affected and elevated how humanitarians talk and listen to populations affected by disasters. The Inter-Agency Working Group on Communicating with Disaster Communities (CDAC) in Haiti ([www.cdac-haiti.org](http://www.cdac-haiti.org)), hosted by the international media development organization Internews and supported by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), is a cross-cluster service that brought together a wide array of actors involved in the disaster response including humanitarian agencies, media development organizations, local media, and local authorities, in a systematic effort to disseminate lifesaving information to disaster-affected populations through a variety of media. Importantly, CDAC also promotes two-way communication between the aid providers and affected communities and while many challenges remain, some notable achievements have been made in the process in Haiti.

### **An Unprecedented Collective Effort**

Working from the premises of an emergency media centre created by Reports sans Frontiers (RSF) for journalists in the earliest days after the earthquake, CDAC Haiti provided an important coordination platform for an unprecedented collective communications effort:

daily humanitarian radio shows like Enfo-masyon Nou Dwe Konnen (ENDK – News You Can Use) produced by Internews since January and currently on 41 radio stations, Connexion Haiti produced by the BBC World Service Trust and BBC's Creole Service or Chimen Lakay ("The Way Home"), produced by IOM and Radio Boukman, reached up to 70% of the Haitian population with important messages, news and information on services and programs aimed at them. Technology providers such as Ushahidi and Noulà crowdsourced information and geo-located messages from survivors, the Thomson Reuters Foundation pushed out millions of SMS messages about humanitarian services, the IFRC also deployed mobile messaging, including, more recently, as part of a national cholera prevention strategy, and International Media Support (IMS) mapped the impact of the earthquake on the local media, creating a humanitarian media centre that hosted the country's local media associations.

CDAC also advised on the distribution of some 9,000 donated wind-up radios



through Internews working under the support of USAID/OTI, and coordinated Kouste Ayiti (Listening to Haiti), a travelling caravan with music, drama and public debates that traveled to disaster-affected departments. Through dozens of community mobilizers from agencies like the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), International Organization for Migration (IOM), and Action contra la Faim (ACF), outreach and education on cholera prevention in internally displaced persons' camps was conducted. Working with IMS, CDAC also supported local media with \$90,000 in cash grants and equipment, organized get-togethers of humanitarian actors and local press in an effort to bridge the gap between humanitarians and local media and build further confidence, and also coordinated communication initiatives to tackle a ravaging cholera outbreak, including ongoing audience research on information needs and access to, and use of, the media by communities most exposed to the epidemic for such information

### More Still to Be Done

Much however remains to be done to improve communications with disaster affected communities though much has been learnt in the process. While strong work has been done on delivery of messages to affected populations, establishing systematic ways of listening to survivors -beyond the extensive and rigorous research in the camps undertaken on the information needs of the affected population-, has proven to remain a particular challenge. If this is to change, significantly more resources, training and expertise are needed to move dialogue with affected populations into mainstream humanitarian practice.

Furthermore, the humanitarian community needs to work harder to include those affected by disasters into the design and implementation of programs focused on communications, tap into traditional, indigenous, and often more trusted communication mechanism channels (e.g. religious leaders, farmers groups), and enhance communication with local authorities. And last but not least, we need to collectively be sensitive to the expectations within communities, especially those placed under greatest stress and at their most vulnerable. This is key to the success of all relief operations and community-driven development. Without genuine participation, communities cannot ask questions or make informed decisions, they cannot access information and they cannot inform, guide or direct those services supposedly intended to relieve and support them. Ultimately, they are left further disempowered at a time when it is most critical that they are heard.

CDAC is today in Haiti operating at the heart of the humanitarian system and viewed as a de facto Communications Sub Group (who would have thought this just a year ago!), and is the key strategic forum on issues of communication with affected communities for the humanitarian response community. However, in Haiti and beyond, in other disaster-affected areas, we still face a challenging mindset that suggests providing information to those affected creates an "added burden" on humanitarian responses. Collectively, the humanitarian community fails to realize that humanitarian responses are too often undermined precisely because people's information needs and participation are considered a low priority.

### Room for Optimism

There is a very long way ahead to ensure that communicating with affected communities is a critical and properly supported part of the

**'Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) brings together experts in outreach and communications and humanitarians in a collective effort to improve a two-way communication flow between the humanitarian community and affected populations. CDAC is a source of expertise and advice, a community of practice and an advocacy platform that aims at ensuring that the humanitarian sector mainstreams CDAC and local media play a vital role to maximize aid effectiveness, accountability and transparency to affected communities.'**

standard humanitarian response to any crisis or emergency. The humanitarian community is however slowly but surely realizing the power of and need for effective communication with affected communities, and Haiti, despite the challenges, achievements and shortcomings, has been the first emergency where the broader humanitarian community has tried to apply this systematically.

Let's hope that Haiti, Pakistan, the Tsunami and all the major and minor disasters, past and present, help us to finally learn and realize that there is no need to reinvent the wheel in every single emergency. Let's hope that a consolidated effort in 2011 brings a collective internal and institutional change to make sure that real and genuine communication with disaster affected communities becomes more and more a reality. CDAC, and all initiatives to enhance communications with affected communities need to be predictable, reliable and sustainable to continue to consolidate and mainstream the advances that have been made. In that effort, all of us have an important role and are equally responsible. People out there in the camps, under tents, in the bush, are ready; they are just waiting for all of us to deliver.

*The views expressed in this article are solely representative of the author and are not necessarily those of CDAC Global.*

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