



Communicating with Communities

Nepal Earthquake Response

Internews, Qualitative Assessment #2, Chautara, Sindhupalchowk May 15-17, 2015



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Disclaimer:

This is the second report of two field-level qualitative assessments. Please be mindful that these are snapshots of a very complex and chaotic situation on the ground and not necessarily representative on their own. It is important to understand that a camp situation is a different setting than for instance a village as the population is much more heterogeneous and brings a whole different set of challenges. Nevertheless, it also means we get an impression not only about the situation within the camp but also from individuals from various villages.

Summary:

Focus group discussions and community interviews were conducted between May 15 and 17, 2015 in Chautara camp, Sindhupalchowk with both IDP's and affected community members using the camp services. Individuals from the host community and a media key informant were also interviewed. In total four focus groups, five community interviews and one key informant interview were conducted. Additionally, short observations and information from humanitarian partners add to the report. Overall a clear lack of communication and information was visible.

Summary of findings:

- **Information and communication**
 - o Lack of access to communication on relief services
 - o Lack of information on earthquake risks and how to respond to them
 - o Lack of media stories coming from the affected community
 - o Almost no knowledge on how to contact humanitarian organisations
 - o Lack of information also further fuels rumours

- **Access barriers to information and communication:**
 - o Limited or no access to **electricity** reported outside the camp
 - o Lack or limited availability of **radio receivers**
 - o Lack of **batteries** for radio receivers
 - o Limited or no **information materials** available

- **Other barriers to information and communication:**
 - o **Illiteracy** as significant barrier to not only texting but *also* voice calls
 - o Lack of **trust** in local media, due to false rumours and lack of local voices
 - o Broken down or **damaged social structures** cause lack of communication and support
 - o **Lack of local** language information

Methodology

Four focus groups and five interviews were conducted in a tent camp in Chautara, Sindhupalchowk and surrounding areas. Additionally one media key informant was interviewed. Short interactions with other camp inhabitants, and informal discussions with humanitarian partners added to the data. The assessment took place between May 15 and 17, 2015. Participants/key informants were women between 19 and 68 years old and men between 15 and 90 years.

A series of questions was prepared in order to act as a guide for covering communication and information gaps. These included:

- Access to information
- Contact to humanitarian organisations
- Preferred feedback mechanism
- Information needs
- Communication Barriers
- Rumours

As respondents have all gone through significant amounts of stress, the assessment took care to not add an additional burden to them. In order to not add to 'survey fatigue' the assessment was done in a conversational manner inviting participants to share their views rather than intimidating them with long questionnaires. Interviews and focus group discussions were mainly conducted in Nepali. A few respondents translated comments of their family members who only spoke Tamang. Respondents were picked randomly or because they were using the unofficial mobile charging station. The goal was to especially get feedback from women and girls as they have been identified as particularly vulnerable.

Lack of information

None of the respondents had information on relief delivery or any other services provided and at times individuals were very frustrated at this lack of information: **'Sorry, no! It's not possible to get enough information!!'** (focus group 3). This dearth of communication is putting great pressure onto individuals: **'I don't know where to go [for information]. I'm scared about what will happen'** (48 years old, female farmer). Further the lack of communication has a direct impact on humanitarian response. One example for this was when affected communities who had blocked the road to the camp in order to force local officials to talk to them. This meant that no relief could reach the camp and areas beyond for over seven hours. This clearly shows that

continuous information and communication is indeed very relevant to affected communities as part of the relief efforts.

Individuals also mentioned the lack of communication on the upcoming monsoon season: *'we fear that the hills have cracks and the monsoon is coming soon. There is a high risk, but nobody is talking about that'* (group of young men). Affected communities are quite aware of coming risks and a lack of acknowledgement of these risks seems almost suspicious rather than reassuring.

Recommendations:

- Continuous communication with communities through both radio and face to face
- More open approach to information regarding coming risks

Preferred communication channels

There was a strong preference for face-to-face communication, as this would give a chance to discuss and ask questions even for illiterate individuals. Further giving the time for a personal interaction was seen as very positive from all individuals that were interviewed. As a 48 years old female farmer told us: *'I'm uneducated. I can't read and write. I can't dial a phone number. It would be so nice if somebody would talk to me. If people like you would inform us about our options, that would be great.'*

Information through inter-personal networks has become even more relevant, through the lack of other information channels. As a group of young men explained: *'Media is for the city centric. At the moment there's no phone or radio. So your approach of coming and talking to us would be very good. Especially for the more remote areas'* (focus group 1). This points towards stronger trust in inter-personal communication but also acknowledges the lack of technical access to radio, which is still a problem in many remote areas.

Recommendations:

- Use both face-to-face communication and radio
- Include community leaders in your communication, but also go directly to affected communities.

Radio

With the exception of one focus group, none of the respondents had access to radio. Still radio was seen as useful and desirable. As a key informant explained: ***'radio is making an effort, they are the first to reach out.'***

The first barrier to radio was electricity and for camp inhabitants lack of radio receivers. Other barriers included language and trust. Some individuals outside of the camp reported having battery radios, but after the first few days not having batteries. The majority of respondents said they would appreciate having access to a radio: ***'At least if we have a radio, we can get some information'*** (middle aged, woman in Chautara town). Most individuals were happy to listen to radio in a group if that would be the only way to access radio.

Although radio was seen as a valuable source of information it was also criticised. One of the main issues was that individuals felt reporters were not going into rural communities enough but were relying on official sources instead: ***'the radio just gets their information from the government. They don't go out themselves to survey the situation. So I don't believe them.'*** (focus group 3) This sentiment was repeated by another group, who also felt a disconnect between the radio and the audience. ***'Both giving and receiving information is important. If you want to hear local voices, you need to go there and talk to people'*** (focus group 1). Similarly, another individual reported that ***'the radio isn't doing any research, they are just following other [important] people'*** (focus group 3). This distrust in messaging is also important to keep in mind for humanitarian messaging, which once increased might also be perceived as disconnected to realities on the ground. Particularly messages produced outside of the radio stations and without hyper local context may be disregarded and thus lose their usefulness. There was also a feeling that radio is using too complicated language. A young woman explained: ***'we can't even understand the words they use on the news'***. This again suggests that a stronger connection between media and more remote areas is needed in order to understand and serve radio audiences.

Another issue was the perceived unreliability of news that was presented as facts. A young man angrily exclaimed that ***'the 7'o clock news said that there would be another earthquake at 12 noon. Everybody was so afraid and nothing happened! I really want to hit that person'*** (focus group 3). This clearly shows frustration due to false information and points towards the necessity of more careful fact checking.

Another wish that focus groups and individuals expressed was to hear stories on how other affected individuals were doing. *'If I was the boss of the radio station I would broadcast stories on how people are dealing with the earthquake'* (Focus group 3). A local media explained the reason for this concern. According to the key informant, management would question why reporters would take three days to go to a remote area while they are also needed at the office. Additionally, there is a lot of pressure from family members due to safety concerns. For these reasons stories would often not come from the most affected very remote areas. This points towards a lack of resources of local media, who may be overwhelmed by being affected themselves but also by the challenges of trying to serve the more remote and hard to access areas with little or no resources.

The leader of a health related community group reported using the local radio station to inform members of his community group about where to find him and what kind of services he was able to provide. However he also noted that the best way to reach his members was through volunteers on the ground.

Recommendations:

- Consider offering repair services for broken radios
- Include not only local experts but also stories and voices from the community
- Support local media in accessing more remote areas
- Broadcast diverse stories from the affected areas on how people are coping with the earthquake, highlighting the differences but also similarities between different groups

Language:

All participants said that they are most confident in Tamang. Even young men, who were less shy in talking to us, said they would be most comfortable in Tamang. One of the groups expressed their worry at being disadvantaged when it comes to receiving humanitarian support due to their language barrier. Language is also an important barrier to receiving information, as an elderly man explained about his wife: *'She does not understand the language on the radio'* (focus group 2). Language also poses a barrier to mobile phone use as older phones use an English alphabet, which makes it hard to write even simple messages.

Recommendations:

- Add local language information wherever possible
- Use community mobilisers who speak local languages

→ Be aware that even if individuals speak Nepali they might not be able to express themselves in it confidently

Rumours:

All groups and individuals reported numerous rumours. The most common rumour was that **another strong earthquake** would strike very soon. *'The fear of another earthquake is constant'* (young man, focus group 1). This stress was visibly grinding down on the morale of individuals. Often respondents would not be sure where the rumour was coming from exactly, but reported that they had heard it 'from somebody' or that 'everybody is talking about it'. In connection to this rumour we were also frequently asked if we could give information on the likelihood of another big earthquake and to explain what the continuous strong aftershocks meant. These rumours cause continuous stress to the population, who are not sure what information to trust and how to react.

Another rumour was that the USA was spying on Nepal through drones. It seems quite likely that the use of drones for the humanitarian response has been confused with drones used for spying due to lack of information. There was a great worry of **another war coming**, because of the drones and also conflicting interests of China and India. The missing helicopter further fuelled this worry (focus group 1 and 4). Other individuals also mentioned that different political movements in Nepal were arguing amongst each other, who would be getting what kind of compensation or that the army was keeping aid from being distributed.

Additionally, there were rumours about compensation, i.e. being given certain amounts of money for reconstruction. One group for instance said they heard the government would pay 5mio NRP for concrete houses and 2mio NRP for more basic houses. This caused a lot of discussion and confusion as participants were, again, were not sure where to confirm the validity of these rumours.

At times these rumours are coming from questionable sources but also from the local media. As a key informant from the media argued that local media *'needs training on facts vs. rumours!'* A lack of information on what services are provided fosters a breeding ground for the spread of rumours. These rumours put significant stress and uncertainty on affected populations and at times may even hamper recovery efforts.

Recommendations:

→ Explanations on the complexity of earthquake prediction

→ Give information on the current stage of rebuilding efforts, even if the information is that currently organisations and government are planning and discussing a to z.

→ Give room to ask about rumours and explain them

Missing social connections

Especially in the IDP camp the lack of functioning social connections was an issue. Particularly for the elderly this posed a problem as they explained they were used to walk around their village to talk to their friends: *'In your village you can talk to people, but here, although there's many people we don't know them. We are old and people don't want to talk to us.'* (elderly couple, focus group 2).

These missing social links are not only relevant for the elderly however. A 24 years old girl from a Dalith community for instance reported having health issues and not knowing who to talk to. Similarly a woman living outside of the camp who lost not only her home, but one of her close relatives told us: *'You feel like you're going crazy and then somebody comes and talks to you – it feels so good! Thank you'* (48 years old, female farmer).

This issue of lacking social support is of course especially relevant in a camp situation. However, it should be taken into account that there are several unofficial campsites, which may have similar problems. Moreover, other areas may now experience disruptions to their social network due to individuals having moved away or having died. A lack of social connections also means a decrease in social capital and thus can hamper the mental well being of affected communities. Additionally, the disruption of social networks potentially means less support of communities for each other and a more potent ground for jealousy due to a lack of community cohesion.

Recommendations:

→ In camps: organise social gatherings

→ Broadcast stories on other affected communities to support social cohesion

→ Give opportunities for face-to-face interaction in order to give space to air grievances that would otherwise have been discussed in the community

Mobile phones:

A lot of the individuals at the charging station were young men. This is in accordance with the data from the first BBC Media Action online needs

assessment, which reported 91% of their respondents being young men. Individuals at the unofficial charging station were very thankful to be able to charge their phones.

'This is the first time I can charge my phone since the earthquake, it makes me very happy' (teenage boy, focus group 3). Some of the individuals charging their phone had walked two hours and more in order to charge their phone and said they would be coming back again soon. Most of the younger men used their phone to text their girlfriends and get in touch with their family to let them know they were ok: ***'My brother is abroad, he is so worried so we inform him about the situation here'*** (focus group 3). Only one individual was aware of the government hotline, but had not used it as he thought it was only relevant for Kathmandu. This underlines the importance of mobile phones to inform the diaspora of the situation on the ground in addition to informing the affected communities. **Several women said that they could only use their phone with the help of somebody else, as they were not able to text or dial a number on their own.** This is very important to take into account when asking questions on mobile phone usage, as owning a mobile phone does not mean that individuals are actually able to use it.

Recommendations:

- Advertise shared hotline widely, explaining what the hotline can be used for
- Acknowledge that owning a phone does not mean that individuals are able to use it themselves