



Photo : Badal Gyawali

OPEN MIC NEPAL

Tracking Rumors in
Post-Earthquake Nepal

THE CONTEXT

Post-Earthquake Nepal

In May 2015, just weeks after the major earthquake in Nepal, Internews conducted two needs assessment in the affected districts of Sindhupalchowk and Nuwakot. The assessments showed that there was an absence of communication between humanitarian actors working on earthquake response and the local communities. Communities lacked access to information on relief services and how to contact humanitarian organisations. There was also a lack of coverage of the issues faced by affected communities at the local level.

The lack of information on local level created a void, which is filled by rumors. These rumors were not necessarily the result of someone with bad intentions – although that’s possible too – but more often they are the result of sensible people who tie together the bits and pieces of information they have – connecting the wrong dots – mixed with hope and expectations. The result however, fuelled resentment towards aid workers and local media and created tension between communities .

When, for instance people from Dolakha felt aid delivery was taking a long time before it reached their place, a rumor began to spread that aid was delayed because they had white cards instead of a red cards. They also believed that if they had been issued with a red card, they would have been eligible to travel to Canada and Australia for work. In fact the color of the victim ID card had absolutely no bearing on the person’s eligibility for claiming relief or aid. Quite simply, each district chose which color to print the cards on; Dolakha chose white and Gorkha chose red. Obviously people were also keen on finding work, if necessary abroad, to get their life back on track.

Rumors just like this caused uncertainty and anxiety for victims of the earthquake. In the year since the quake, other assessments and evaluations have shown that most people remember rumors from the time right after the earthquake, and in the absence of credible information, most people received information through rumors.

1.. Communicating with Communities: Nepal Earthquake Response Qualitative Assessment, Internews
<http://www.internews.org/research-publications/communicating-communities-nepal-earthquake-response-qualitative-1>

2. Information and Community Needs Assessment, Inter-Agency Common Feedback Project, March 2016
<http://cfp.org.np/uploads/documents/Information%20and%20Communications%20Needs%20Assessment%-28March%202016%29.pdf>

RUMOR TRACKING

Qualitative Feedback on a Regional Scale



Photo : Badal Gyawali

In July 2015, Internews launched Open Mic Nepal, a project designed to track and debunk rumors in the earthquake-affected communities. Based on previous pilots of this approach in Gaza and Liberia, the project set out to assess and address information needs by using minimally structured qualitative data-gathering approaches to surface trends in community conversations, identify key concerns, misunderstandings and toxic/corrupted information, and to redress them with the provision of reliable and verified information as speedily as possible.

The principle of the project design rests in the core proposition of all Internews humanitarian communications work, that “Information is a form of aid in its own right”. The provision of information to people in crisis situations better enables them to make informed decisions about their lives and thus gain agency over their own survival and recovery. It also functions to mitigate stress and reduce inter and intra-communal tensions (as well as tensions between communities, their authorities and humanitarian responders) by promoting dialogue, understanding and shared problem solving. This principle recognized by the Red Cross World Disasters Report in 2005 has since become foundational to the practice of “Communicating with Communities”.

As a sole mandate practitioner of Communicating with Communities, Internews recognizes that some (but not all) information needed by communities in crisis is about humanitarian aid or the agencies that provide it. To the extent that community conversations and concerns can be redressed by the actions of humanitarian responders, Internews CwC programs play an important independent function in

drawing the attention of the humanitarian community (or local/national responders) to issues that affected communities may raise about the effectiveness of response programs. Likewise, Internews CwC programs, with their imperative on “closing the feedback loop” can be a valuable conduit for humanitarians to respond to the concerns of their beneficiaries with information about their activities.

It follows that nimble and effective CwC projects such as Internews rumor tracking can offer humanitarians the opportunity to adjust their activities in response to the information that communities reveal about their circumstances and needs. The methodology has therefore received important recognition for its potential to make positive contributions to current thinking in the humanitarian realm about how to become more accountable to affected populations.

In the early weeks of the humanitarian response in Nepal, Internews worked closely with United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and other Communication with Disasters Affected Communities Forum (CDAC) members involved in the design, proposal writing and set up of the Common Feedback Platform (CFP), which aimed to ensure that community voices would be properly included in the response. Internews advocated for the CFP in Nepal to build on existing CwC initiatives from different agencies rather than set up a purpose-built mechanism like the Call-In Centre that was the design choice for the inter-agency platform in Northern Iraq. The Nepal design was envisaged to allow for a wide range of initiatives to complement each other, whilst also ensuring that all humanitarian actors would be responsible for closing the feedback loops with their beneficiaries. The collective exercise aspired to provide shared data analysis in a timely fashion for it to be immediately useful to all agencies in evolving their response programming. However the enormous challenge of timely and continuous collation and analysis of data inevitably constrained the data gathering possibilities to a narrow range of aligned questions, and limited the extent to which qualitative data could be included.

Yet the Internews Open Mic project is recognized as having provided an innovative and effective mechanism for wide-scale real time collection and transparent circulation of qualitative feedback from a crisis affected population. Internews rumor tracking project design provides for multiple avenues by which information can be both gathered and widely shared with the communities from which it comes. Options for both gathering and disseminating feedback are generally both scalable and flexible: any number of humanitarian or civil society partners may contribute towards data gathering (as Accountability Lab and Oxfam did in Nepal) and any number of partners or platforms (media, humanitarian or civil society) may take part in disseminating the information that closes the feedback loop to communities. However the independence of the analytical and “editorial” functions of such a project are vital if they are to serve primarily community interests as “honest broker” in the all-party dialogues that are necessary to oil the wheels of effective response and recovery.

UNWRAPPING THE RUMORS



Photo :Indu Nepal

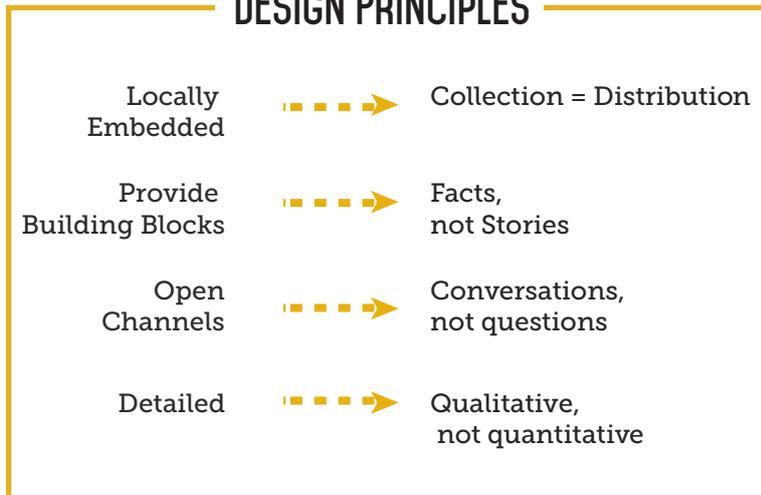
Whilst rumors can be damaging, stressful and misleading for people in crisis, they are in fact a natural part of the “information ecosystem” of any community, as people exchange, check and verify information through the “grapevine” of friends, families, neighbors and others that they trust.

The design of the Internews Open Mic project was predicated partly on Internews direct experience in multiple emergency responses, but also informed by research reviews such as the 2004 study by Prashant Bordia and Nicholas DiFonzo. Problem Solving in Social Interactions on the Internet: Rumor As Social Cognition found that rumor transmission is probably reflective of a “collective explanation process.” The research analysis found that 29.4% (the majority) of statements in the analysis could be coded as “sensemaking” statements, which involved, “[...]attempts at solving a problem.” The researchers also found that each rumor went through a four-stage pattern of development in which a rumor was introduced for discussion, information was volunteered and discussed, and finally a resolution was drawn or interest was lost.

Prior to the launch of the Internews Open Mic project in Nepal, the Internews Rumor Tracking model had been piloted first in Gaza and then evolved through the “DeySay” project by Internews Liberia during the Ebola-response. As a model, it’s designed primarily to contribute to community “sense-making” processes by short-circuiting the stressful and potential damaging aspects of that process with speedy, verified and actionable information. However all Internews Rumor tracking projects have also played a useful role in some of the recurring debates in the humanitarian field: how to include the affected population in the decision-making, how to build on existing (information) structures and as a result, how to make our interventions more sustainable.

As an organization with deep roots in media development, Internews prioritizes the involvement of local media as a primary conduit for CwC content. Rumor tracking bulletins offer a digest of topical and meaningful stories for journalists to cover,

DESIGN PRINCIPLES



provide a basis for news items, discussions and other program formats, and can be used as training materials for local journalists learning how to cover post disaster stories. The Open Mic project did not aim to produce a stand-alone "final product", but rather to provide a tool or platform for generating local media content, providing a basis for training and coaching of local media and other

communicators, fostering adaptation and localization by local radio stations and generating networks of contacts and discourse around the affected communities.

According to Evaluation of Community Feedback in Shaping Humanitarian Response Report published in May 2016: "The radio informants interviewed stated that Open Mic content was used within planning and programming as the information was current and related to rumors about the disaster and about the assistance that would be available, especially from government."

"The content was adaptable for some media stakeholders who often built on this with more locally relevant examples and contacts for rumors and issues. Agencies such as Internews complemented radio programming with a media mentoring programming to assist with and improve community engagement."

GOALS

- Identify and address information gaps between the media, humanitarian agencies and local people.
- Create a better understanding of the needs of the earthquake-affected communities: put people's concerns and needs at the center of the humanitarian response
- Debunk rumors before they can do harm
- Strengthen the role of local media by facilitating better access to reliable information

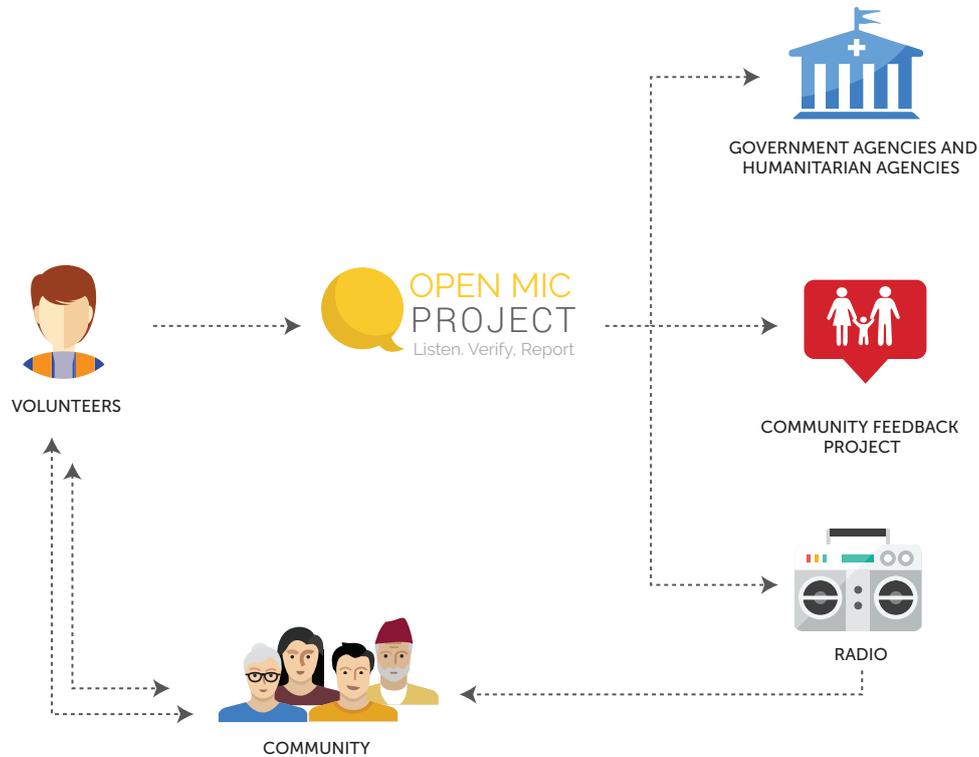
HOW IT WORKED



Image Source : Accountability Lab

Volunteers from partner organizations were briefed by Internews on the approach to rumor collection, that values raw data over processed. Data gathering in the field was “unstructured” rather than based on surveys. Volunteers were asked not to dismiss any issue out of hand, and as far as possible suspend subjective judgement on the concerns expressed by those interviewed.

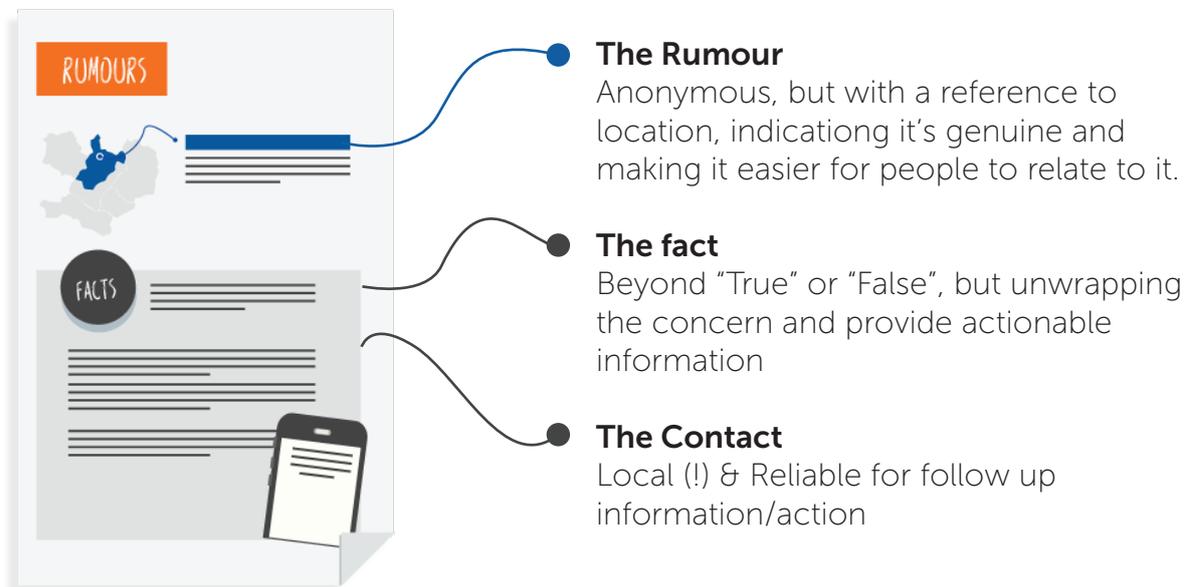
Accountability Lab and Local Interventions Group were the primary data gathering partners, providing “boots on the ground” through their primary project the #quakehelpdesk. The volunteers conducted door-to-door visits in their assigned areas in the 14 most affected districts and sent reports every week detailing their conversations.



The Internews Open Mic team convened weekly to sift through the information gathered, geo-locating and analyzing the content to identify the most pressing information needs for the community. The data came in the form of rumors (They say...), questions (What is the process to apply for a grant?) or concerns (There is a shortage of drinking water in our area). Rumors do not need to be identified on the basis of statistical preponderance, but rather on the basis of their significance and likely impact. Recognizing the virulence of rumor spread, it was vital to identify the potential of any given rumor to spark alarm confusion or harm, and to quash these as soon as possible.

Once data had been sifted and analyzed and the most prevalent or virulent rumors identified, the Internews Open Mic team worked to contact sources and verify facts before publishing both rumors and the verified information in the weekly Open Mic newsletter. In addition, the team also tallied the most frequently asked questions or most pressing concerns and provided answers on those issues as well.





Over its 8 months of operation Open Mic bulletins have been based on conversations with on average 376 people during each one-week period. The weekly turn-around allowed for a real-time analysis of the communities' information needs and for relevant and timely information to be relayed back.

To complete the feedback loop with communities, the bulletins were then shared with the on-the-street volunteers themselves, as well as with the wider humanitarian system. Open Mic bulletin went out to more than 1000 individuals every week, including 400 journalists from the 14 most affected districts.

Local radio stations used the information from the rumor tracker to explore the issues that have surfaced with their audiences, and provide accurate and timely information from reliable sources. More than 18 community radio stations used Open Mic content in the program, six radio stations even created programs focusing entirely on debunking rumors.



RESULTS

Open Mic Nepal issues were based on face-to-face conversations with an average of 376 people in a week in the 14 affected districts.

Open Mic Nepal has affected policies at the local level through specific interventions with the District Disaster Relief Committees and clusters at the district level.

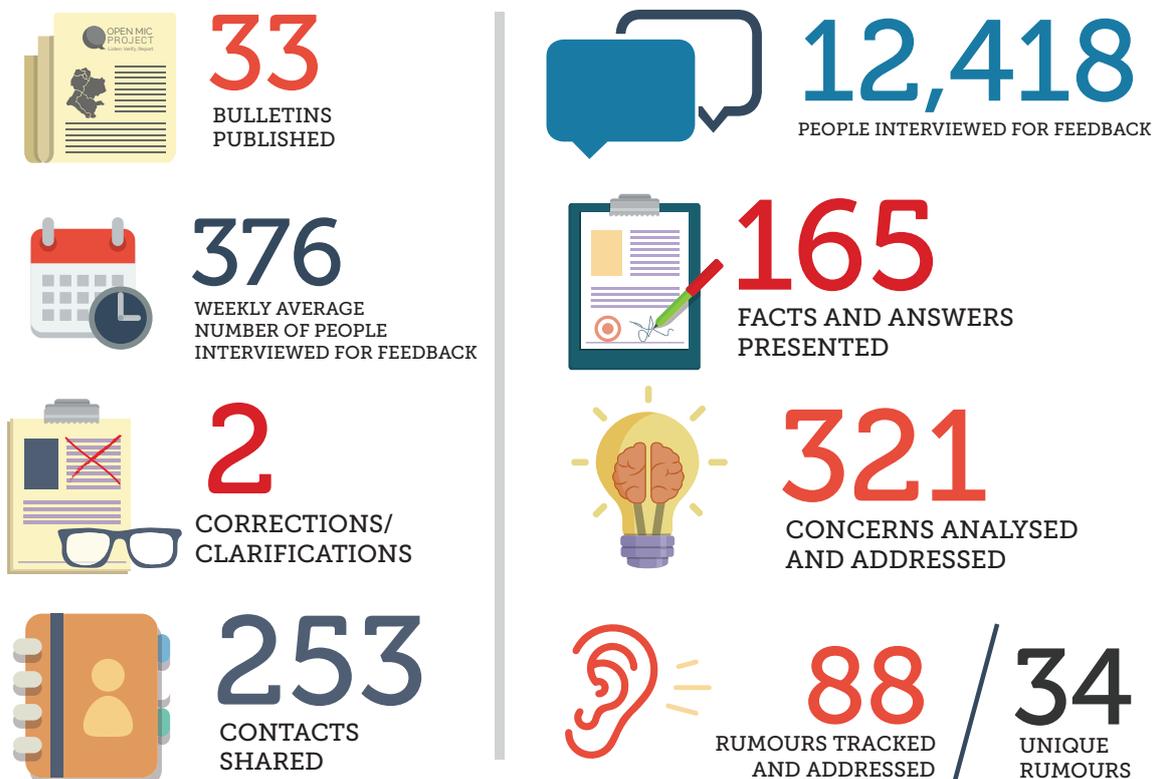
Open Mic reports have been used by at least 18 radio stations to inform their various programs. Six community radios have specific programs to dispel rumors and answers community concerns based on Open Mic Nepal. Ujjalo Radio and Radio Nepal also used Open Mic reports.

Radio Langtang produced a program in Tamang language with a focus on reconstruction and community needs following mentorship from Internews.

Humanitarian actors used Open Mic to confirm government policy decisions, and shared it with their staff to be prepared to answer questions while visiting communities.

The Open Mic bulletin was sent to more than 1000 people including 400 local journalists from 14 affected districts that use the bulletin for story ideas and further investigation.

Internews supported 10 radio stations in the affected districts to assist them with humanitarian reporting and provided assistance to cover recovery and reconstruction issues.



EXAMPLE

RUMOURS



NAMDU, DOLAKHA

"They are distributing white earthquake victim ID cards in our village. They say the colour of the card is the reason for the delay in disbursement of Rs 15,000. If we had received red cards instead, we would have been eligible to travel to Canada and Australia for work. I would prefer the red card because my son is unemployed and I am in debt."

FACTS

There are differences in the colour of the earthquake victim ID cards distributed in the affected districts. For instance, in Dolakha, the colour of the cards is white. In Gorkha, it is red.

This difference is because there are no set guidelines on the colour of the cards. A District Disaster Relief Committee (DDRC) can choose to print ID cards of any colour in its district.

The colour of the card has no bearing on the card-bearer's eligibility for claiming relief material and other aid.

The government does not have specific plans to send members of earthquake-affected families abroad for work.

The delay in disbursement of relief amount could be due to a number of factors but the colour of the cards is not one of them.

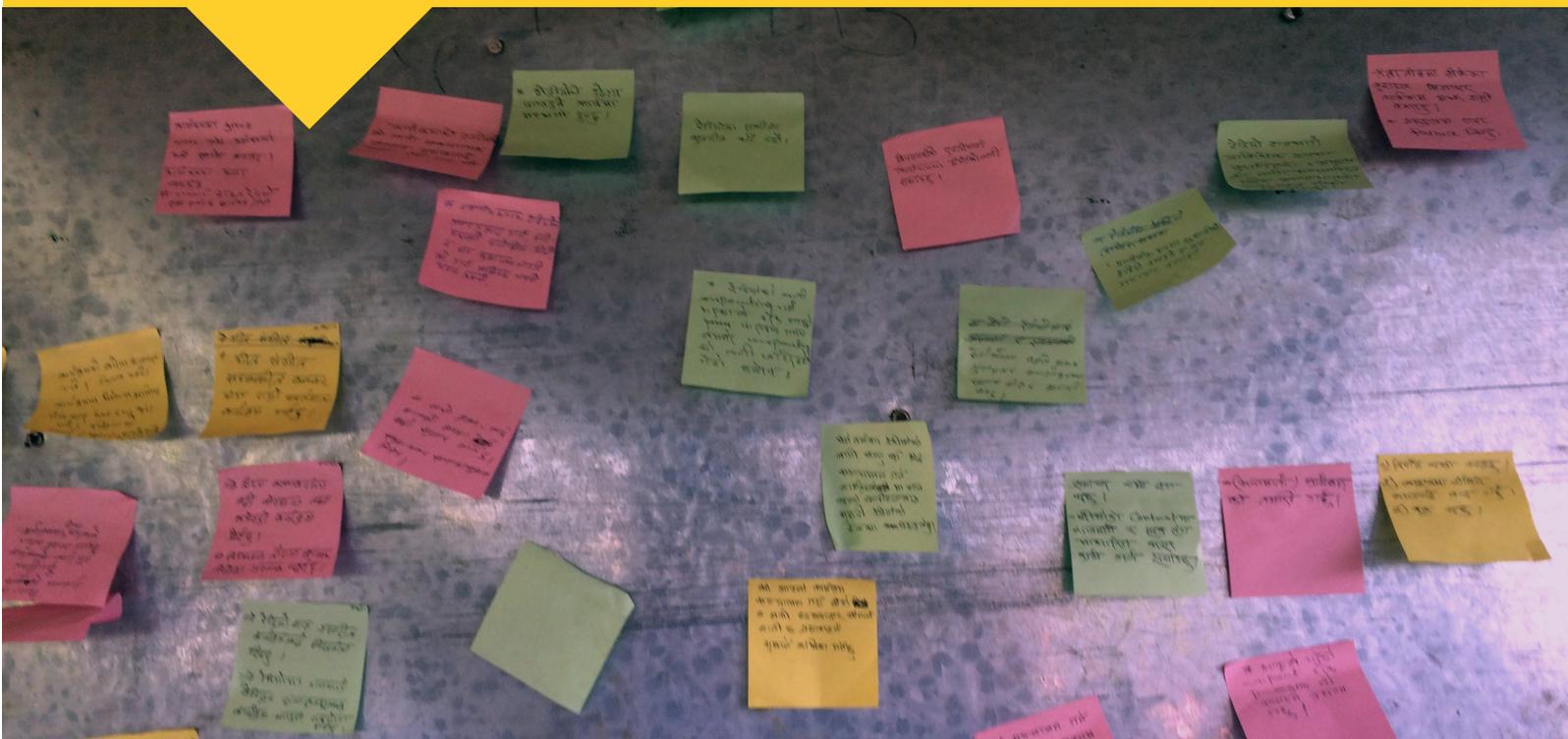


Results:

The Chief District Officer of Dolakha sent a memo to all Village District Committee secretaries clarifying that there is no difference between the red and white ID cards.

Radio Sailung produced a radio report on the topic.

LESSONS EARNED



- The popularity of the Q & A format demonstrated that people were hungry for a venue/opportunity to ask questions.
- The project galvanized contacts between the affected communities, government and humanitarians in ways that can be seen to constitute sustainable outcomes, and should be monitored as such in future iterations of the project. In contrast to projects that create parallel structures in the local information (societal, economic) ecosystems Open Mic nurtured a system of accurate and timely information sharing through active networks of regular contact between the affected people and aid providers and officials – that is still active more than a year after the earthquake.
- The Open Mic was designed to serve first and foremost the information needs of communities. However humanitarian actors/organisations also used the Open Mic bulletins to inform their staff about government policies and other issues – thus acting as a multiplier factor in the dissemination of Open Mic information through their networks in the field. The questions generated from humanitarian staff indicated that they also frequently lacked information and needed a source of consistent and reliable information to refer to.
- The ability of the Open Mic service to build trust with its audience was enhanced by the ethical responsiveness of the model, in which occasionally inaccurate or evolving information was transparently adjusted, retracted or corrected.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Photo : Accountability Lab

- In the Nepal context a lack of comprehensive investment in and support for the country's community radio networks constituted a missed opportunity to harness their full potential in support of CwC. Over time many radio stations came to use and value the Open Mic reports, but much more could have been done from the outset to sustain and enrich the relationship between the Open Mic platform and local media.
- Greater investment in local media support would also have allowed for creative strategies for the inclusion of more women's voices (from the community and as experts to address arising issues).
- Find ways to capture more feedback in different languages, and support local radios to set up informative call-in shows in those languages.
- Scaling up the efforts in more communities across the affected areas would have enhanced inclusivity.

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Oxfam

Common Feedback Project

Accountability Lab