Communications plays a key role during any humanitarian crisis situation. When populations are struggling for basic needs and rights, effective communications can provide relevant and reliable information, with which people have better chances to survive through a crisis situation. This special report is a synthesis of various communications initiatives implemented worldwide in crisis settings.

Crisis Communications

Bringing communities closer through communications at times of crisis

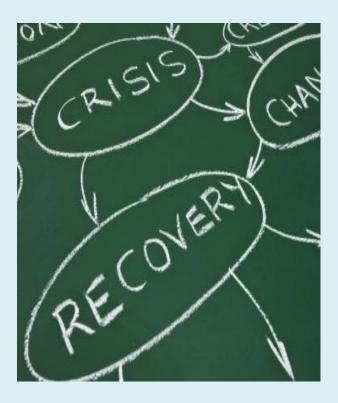## Sudeep Uprety and Bipul Lamichhane

INTRODUCTION

Communication has been identified as one of the most important things a disaster affected population needs. Communication with the population affected by a disaster has increasingly received prominence in the world among the relief workers and organizations. Communicating in a crisis is different than in normal situations. In a serious crisis situation, all affected people may take in information differently, process information differently, and act on information differently. Thus there is a need of direct and accurate communication mechanism to directly reach the crisis affected people.

Communication with communities helps to improve the quality of humanitarian response through accurate and timely information available to humanitarian responders and crisis-affected populations through enhanced communication between them in an emergency. The role and importance of communication with crisis-affected people have grown significantly in recent years, driven by the spread of accountability initiatives within the humanitarian sector, the changing role of media development organizations and the explosion in information and communication technology in crisis-affected countries (Shah, 2013).

The growing recognition of the importance of communication in disaster response has driven an upsurge in discussions, publications and

initiatives aimed at better understanding the potential of broadcast media and new technologies to improve how agencies communicate with their beneficiaries. Current efforts to improve communication between the providers and recipients of humanitarian aid have been fundamentally shaped by three global trends (Communication is Aid, 2013);

1. The proliferation of humanitarian quality and accountability initiatives
2. The increased availability and use of ICTs in developing countries and
3. Changes in the role of media actors in humanitarian response

The infoasaid project

Infoasaid was established in 2010 to improve the quality of humanitarian response by maximizing the amount of accurate and timely information available to humanitarian responders and crisis-affected populations through enhanced communication between them in an emergency. The two main objectives of infoasiad are to strengthen the capacity and preparedness of aid agencies to respond to the information and communication needs of crisis-affected populations and also to partner with a number of aid agencies to help inform and support their communications response in a variety of emergency contexts (Shah, 2013).

The infoasaid project found that the communication projects fulfilled important information needs in the communities on diverse subjects such as health and nutrition, and market practices. The projects also helped improve two-way information flows between humanitarian organizations and the communities they were working to assist. Infoasiad suggests that increased interaction with affected communities, enabled by the community radio show and mobile phones, not only improved each organization's understanding of communities' needs and priorities but also led them to make changes to their assistance. This improved relationship helped the affected population to become active participants in the humanitarian response (Communication is Aid, 2013).

In October 2008, BBC Media Action published a Policy Briefing entitled *Left in the Dark*, highlighting key gaps and challenges in the way humanitarian agencies approached communication with disaster-affected people. Later, a number of media development organizations and humanitarian agencies met to discuss their experiences of communicating with affected communities in emergencies. Three key challenges were identified by them in terms of emergency preparedness (Shah, 2013):

1. Inadequate information provision in emergencies
2. A lack of freely available, up-to-date and comprehensive analyses of the media and telecommunications landscape in crisis-prone countries and
3. A general lack of awareness and capacity amongst humanitarian staff about the key components of effective communication with crisis-affected communities and the basic knowledge and skills required to communicate in practice

To address these shortcomings, three tools were proposed (Shah, 2013):

1. *A message library*, providing quick and easy access to information that could be disseminated to crisis affected populations in an emergency.
2. *A set of media and telecommunication guides* for disaster-prone countries, providing information on which channels could be used to communicate in an emergency and where to find them
3. *An e-learning course* on who should communicate and how in an emergency, with an emphasis on information dissemination, dialogue and program reorientation based on community feedback.

The message library is an online searchable database of messages that acts as a reference for those wanting to disseminate critical information to crisis-affected populations in an emergency. It was developed in collaboration with a number of different clusters/sectors in humanitarian response, including Health, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Nutrition, Food Security, Protection, Education and Camp Coordination and Management. The online guides were developed in partnership with MapAction and Internews, using data compiled by field researchers. The e-learning course aims to raise awareness among humanitarian practitioners about the key components of effective communication with crisis-affected communities and to build knowledge and skills on how to communicate in practice (Communication is Aid, 2013).

Lifeline Programming

Lifeline programming, an initiative by BBC is special media programming for communities affected by humanitarian crises. It aims to provide people with timely, relevant and practical information to alleviate their suffering and assist with their recovery. Lifeline programming also aims to give affected people the opportunity to voice their concerns, express their needs, share their stories and hold humanitarian aid providers to account (Lifeline Programming: Communicating with Crisis Affected People, 2013).

News coverage of humanitarian crises tells the world what is happening. Lifeline programming goes further: it aims to help people survive, mitigate the impact of the crisis and recover from setbacks (Lifeline Programming: Communicating with Crisis Affected People,

2013). It is created in collaboration with aid responders and local media to produce the best possible outcome for the affected population.

In the wake of a disaster, people need timely and accurate information to help them decide what to do as much as they need food, water, shelter and medical care. People need answers to vital questions such as: What happened? What should I do now? What help is coming? Where is my family? Which routes are safe to travel on? How can I protect myself? The media can deliver this kind of life-saving information rapidly and on a mass scale. Information shared by radio, television or mobile can empower people to help themselves. Lifeline programming may reach affected communities days or even weeks before aid workers are able to do so. It can provide vital reassurance to people who are confused, traumatized and isolated. It can also help to give these people a voice.

Lifeline programming can communicate key messages to assist relief efforts. It can tell people what services are available, how and where to access them and what to do to stay safe and healthy. It can also help manage the expectations of the affected population. And by providing a platform for people to voice their concerns, it can help aid agencies to detect gaps in the response that need to be addressed (Lifeline Programming: Communicating with Crisis Affected People, 2013).

"Lifeline Programming aims to provide people with timely, relevant and practical information to alleviate their suffering and assist with their recovery."

Communicating with Crisis Affected People

Communicating with crisis affected people is as vital as the aid itself. A crisis communications is a participatory approach that empowers affected populations by providing life-saving information. It is classic community engagement, with its roots in community outreach, local media, public health and emerging technologies. (Beneficiary Communications Guide: Shelter Cluster) Communication in a crisis situation fosters a two-way communication flow that is as much about listening as disseminating. As a result, it can help reduce tension and frustrations, enhances the understanding between program managers and their clients, and facilitates greater quality and accountability of humanitarian assistance.

The method of preparation and dissemination of messaging for beneficiaries will determine the effectiveness and success of the efforts. During the process, it is essential to consider the following; (Beneficiary Communications Guide: Shelter Cluster)

- Address key concerns of beneficiaries and shelter agencies
- Translate the information into relevant local language(s)
- Adapt to the local culture and context
- Test relevance and comprehension with a 'focus group'
- Consider contact numbers or a location where beneficiaries can go for additional information

Methods for dissemination depend on the context and the resources available. While some techniques may succeed in one country or one type of disaster response, it may not be relevant in another. The chosen method should be based upon the most relevant and effective way people communicate in the community where crisis is present.

Communication can be done with the help of print mediums, radios, engaging volunteers and staffs or shelter agencies. Effective methods of communication with beneficiaries largely depend on the local context where you are working, and the resources at your disposal. It may involve hiring a truck with a loud speaker, using Twitter, or joining resources with other humanitarian organizations to run an SMS campaign. (Beneficiary Communications Guide: Shelter Cluster)

It should always be kept in mind that Low Tech mediums such as FM Radios, Short SMS, Newspapers and other simple sources of information can be more significant rather than complex sources like computers or drones which may not be available to the crisis affected people. During rapid-onset or complex emergencies, some of the infrastructure that is needed to implement 'high-tech' solutions may be non-existent. During emergencies, communicating effectively with communities can often be life-saving. And, 'low-tech' solutions have proven to be effective in improving contact and dialogue with emergency-affected populations. (Rebeca Moreno Jiminez, 2015)

Ethical Approach to Humanitarian Communications

Following are some tips on taking an ethical approach to humanitarian communications (Ghaoui):

- Take informed consent
- Avoid objectifying the person
- Avoid the amplification of feelings
- Use the information for the purpose initially communicated
- Don't push people to talk more
- Show the positive side
- Quote accurately
- Don't leave the facts out
- Protect the information recorded
- Keep their voice the focus for the reader

Communication in Building Resilience

Resilient communities are generally thought to be knowledgeable and connected. The Integrated Community Based Risk Reduction approach (ICBRR) formulated by the Red Cross recognizes and aims to influence and strengthen community knowledge and awareness of disasters, as well as assisting with the formation of effective connections between the community and external agencies that can assist the community in the event of a disaster. (Role of beneficiary communication in Bulding Resilience)

A safe and resilient community is considered knowledgeable:

- If it can assess how prepared it is
- Has a high level of awareness about maintaining good hygiene and sanitation practices and practices these skills
- Does not put itself at greater risk
- Can undertake search and rescue activities
- Has had training on shocks and stresses
- Has a high level of awareness about the shock of stress, stays calm and does not panic
- Can undertake damage assessments

In undertaking the communication with communities, the use of traditional printed media can be crucial. The community receives the information on disaster mitigation through several simple media such as posters, billboards and shop blinds which are diffused throughout the villages. Meanwhile, the community volunteers and other channels such as government departments and schools provide further education through training on many occasions at the household level and during community gatherings. (Role of beneficiary communication in Bulding Resilience) Improved communication networks can be vital in building resilience of the crisis affected communities. The community has to be active and needs some degree of proclamation and needs to be presented attractively to make their information more appealing.

Role of ICT in Humanitarian Communications

Humanitarian communications is technical capacity building; information collection and dissemination; preparedness activities; and/or data analysis for the purposes of saving lives, alleviating suffering, and protecting the dignity of crisis-affected populations when performed in accordance with international standards of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. (Nathaniel A. Raymond, 2015) ICTs are employed in a variety of ways by nongovernmental, governmental, and local communities and actors. This trend is likely to continue with ever more complex implications for organizations and affected communities.

The rapid and increasing exposure of crisis affected populations to communications tools has profound implications for humanitarian contexts. It puts the power of the internet at the fingerprints of people on the move, allowing them to problem solve even in complex emergencies with news, maps, money transfer and other tools. Crisis affected people now have access to networks that were previously unavailable to them. It has brought forth greater analysis to the work of humanitarian actors throughout the world.

A communications revolution is happening all around us. The digital communications revolution that has transformed connectivity and the information flows brought about through mobile phones and the Internet constitutes such a structural change. This shift in communications does not merely alter the dynamics of humanitarian response: it however changes the scope of what can be considered a humanitarian situation. The communications revolution has, in a direct sense for humanitarian agencies, implications for both humanitarian operations and power relations. (Srinivasan, 2015)

Mobile technology is exploding, particularly in the developing world, with costs being pushed down to all-time lows.

Numerous tech companies are rapidly occupying the space and developing technology for new markets, the previously 'unconnected'– including many people caught in complex emergencies. (Rhoades, 2016)

However the content being shared through these channels is the key. Humanitarian agencies are not actively using these channels. At the end of the day, the technology is available and improving by the minute but it is the content, the speed and efficiency through which lifesaving information is disseminated that is lacking. (Rhoades, 2016) Often overlooked in the humanitarian space is the need for timely, actionable, credible and easily understood content of use to a traumatized population. Moreover there are current systemic inefficiencies and insufficient funding to ensure credible and useful systems that allow the humanitarian community works collaboratively rather than competitively in the interest of the affected populations.

Humanitarian communications should be guiding and indicative for crisis–affected populations to increase resiliency and solutions in the midst of complex emergencies, especially in contexts where current aid is insufficient to meet the vast needs. The more we can enable to self–guide their way out of trouble, the better we can leverage existing resources and bridge the persistent gaps. Humanitarian aid can be made effective through new mobile technology and power of collaboration. They have the potential to empower people to assist themselves. These tool and technologies do just that and we should use them to further that aim. (Rhoades, 2016)

One example of the role of technology in humanitarian communication can be Microsoft. Microsoft is serving The International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) and Red Crescent Societies with their Office 365 cloud, connecting people across many organizations represented in over 180 countries. After decades of fragmentation, Microsoft worked with the IFRC to standardize on a single Communications Cloud. Another example can be IBM who rallied, and combined its network of research labs and years of experience in humanitarian disaster response with data analytics, mobile technologies and cloud to help governments start gathering and analyzing critical information during the Ebola crisis. (Milanian, 2015)

Some of the more prevalent uses of ICTs in humanitarian contexts by humanitarian organizations and affected populations include (Nathaniel A. Raymond, 2015):
1. Remotely collecting and analyzing social media, and other sources of data
2. Communicating information in order to improve situational awareness and clarify rumors and
3. Connecting affected populations to response activities

Media as a Form of Aid in Humanitarian Crises

Humanitarian crises around the world have led to a major change in the priorities and approaches in media development efforts. Traditional efforts aimed at building sustainable media systems and institutions have had to give way to the more pressing needs of the ever–shifting crises. (Ghannam, 2016). Creating humanitarian information systems requires a focus on the interplay of technology, word–of–mouth, and offline information using platforms such as Facebook, the mobile real time message application WhatsApp, or even printed banners.

In Asia, BBC Media Action has worked in Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, and Indonesia to help government and broadcast partners in the development of contingency plans for natural disasters. Lifeline programming also has trained journalists and humanitarian responders in anticipation of natural disasters, such as hurricanes or earthquakes, in environments where they are prone to occur. (Ghannam, 2016)

Humanitarian communications strategies may also serve as a guide for mainstream media outlets during a nation's transition toward stabilization. Reliable information can be a lifeline while misinformation can be an existential threat. Better informed decisions are enabled when the information system and its infrastructure are fully engaged to help affected populations gain greater access and control over information that affects their lives.

Role of Media in Crisis Settings

Media plays a key role during any humanitarian crisis situation. When populations are struggling for basic needs and rights, media reporting can provide relevant and reliable information, with which people have better chances to survive an immediate crisis.

The role of a free media should be embraced and better prioritized in strategies designed to support people in crisis. Efforts to control media and open communication systems are likely to be ineffective and counterproductive in increasingly connected 21st-century communication environments. Support to free and professional media needs is usually poorly integrated and reflected in most development assistance strategies for crisis areas. (Deane)

The media and communications sector plays a complex role in crisis situations. In societies experiencing conflicts, violent political upheaval or complete collapse, the media can provide important, reliable, and timely humanitarian and political information in the midst of chaos, helping people to navigate their wild and chaotic

surroundings. (Kalathil) Moving toward the longer term, media and communication processes can enable citizens to engage in dialogue, serve as platforms for debate and oversight, anchor governance reforms, and facilitate peace building and poverty reduction. However, reporting during crisis is not easy: the situation is urgent and often chaotic; time is short. Local media organizations and journalists themselves may well be affected by the crisis or could be in life-threatening situations while reporting. (Role of Media During Crisis)

The way in which local and international media respond to emergency situations are quite radically different. Local media need to provide immediate, detailed information to cater to the needs of local audiences – information about immediate casualties and survivors, share sources of nearby aid, and alert any potential threat. International media, in contrast, serve international awareness, informing global audiences about the current situation and its impact on the local population and on the outside world. (Role of Media During Crisis). Both of them have their own features and significance in a crisis situation.

Connecting Nepal's Disaster Affected Communities with Radio

After the devastating earthquakes in Nepal, many families had lost access to information; their radios and TVs had been destroyed or buried in the earthquake, and gaining access to much needed information was impossible. This information gap resulted in rumors and questions about everything from selection criteria for reconstruction grants, to myths regarding the next earthquake. (Carter, 2016)

Oxfam had partnered with a local community radio station 'Radio Sindhu' to produce a community radio program, including a section on myth de-bunking, called Jeevanshaili. Internews provided capacity building to help the station produce the show with Oxfam, and their community mobilisers worked with communities to gather the content. (Carter, 2016)

Working through local radio Oxfam have been able to provide communities with the information they want and need, in a way that they find accessible, and which is part of their daily life (topics included health, gender, humanitarian assistance and government programming).

Their teams went into communities and listen to their issues, questions, concerns and interests. Oxfam distributed over 1000 radios to women's groups and youth groups to encourage members to listen. Their show was replayed at four different times and on two different stations, allowing these groups different opportunities to sit together and listen.

Public Communication by Organizations

It is ironic that humanitarian organizations should still need to communicate more transparently about their own public communication strategies and outcomes. Care should therefore be taken in drawing conclusions about humanitarian public communication policies and their effectiveness, for many organizations provide only limited information about their communication activities and impact. (Moke, 2005) It is nevertheless useful to distinguish between field level, federation and central communication policies. Humanitarian organizations and their staff members must understand the meaning of the basic principles of humanitarian action, be able to articulate which of these principles govern their activities, and act accordingly. Public communication strategies can play an important part in this respect.

It is essential for humanitarian organizations to perceive communication as a strategic management function. Adopting a clear approach in public communication is the best way to put over the complexity of emergencies and conflicts, gain support for the victims of conflict, address insecurity and protect organizational independence.

This is particularly important against a backdrop of growing inspection by media and other players, and of the misinformation and rumors that are common in crisis situations. (Moke, 2005) Much will depend on the scenarios chosen by donor governments, for they steer humanitarian action with their cooperation and funding requirements, and their policies towards multilateral institutions.

Conclusion

The importance of advance planning, the need for communication for development experts within humanitarian organizations, and the need to motivate for greater prioritization of communication is a vital part of humanitarian responses. Wherever possible, all communication interventions should begin with a needs and communication habits assessment, followed by a strategy that comprises multiple communication channels to facilitate community engagement and to amplify and reinforce messages. However, engaging the community requires efforts to not only collect information, but also to monitor and report back on the information gathered. The importance of monitoring and evaluation to create an evidence base about what works and what doesn't work needs to be identified.

Communication with affected populations requires experts in communication for development within an agency at Headquarter and field levels, who can draw on technical ICT expertise, program specialists and monitoring, evaluation and accountability specialists to ensure that communication serves program delivery and promotes accountability. At the same time, awareness needs to be increased among program staff about how communication can serve as a support service to their programs. Strong partnerships with equipment manufacturers need to be developed and their capacity and willingness to respond to technical problems in the field should be tested prior to an emergency. In an emergency response the first step should be an information needs and access assessment.

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