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POLICY BRIEFING # 2

OCTOBER 2008

## Left in the dark

### The unmet need for information in humanitarian responses

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1 IFRC World Disasters Report, 2005.

2 TEC Thematic Evaluation on Links between Relief, Rehabilitation and Development in the Tsunami Response pp73, July 2006.

3 OCHA annual report 2005: part IV Sudden Onset Disaster Coordination Activities: The Pakistan Earthquake

4 *Working with the Media in Conflicts and other Emergencies: DfID policy paper 2000. Produced by DfID's Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs Department and Social Development Department.*

5 Report of the Listening Project, CDA, Collaborative Learning Projects, November 2005.

6 TEC Thematic Evaluation (see footnote 2)

**Front cover image**

Communication breakdown: the aftermath of the devastating cyclone Nargis in Burma.

**Below** Elderly man in Burma listening to his radio.

## Introduction

When crisis or disaster strikes, people need help. They need, shelter, food, water and safety. They need these things rapidly and effectively. Modern humanitarian responses have become more efficient and effective at providing these things.

This policy briefing argues that people need information too. It does so not to create an added burden on humanitarian responses that are always stretched thinly. It does so because such responses are too often undermined, often insufficiently effective – and sometimes outright counter-productive – if people’s information needs are considered a low priority during humanitarian crises.

It is not a new argument, as acknowledged by Markku Niskala, Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) and Red Crescent Societies in the World Disasters Report in 2005:

“People need information as much as water, food, medicine or shelter. Information can save lives, livelihoods and resources. Information bestows power.”<sup>1</sup>

It is however little reflected in the current practice of humanitarian responses. There is increasing evidence that this matters.

Effective information and communication exchange with affected populations are among the least understood and most complex challenges facing the humanitarian sector in the 21st century.

Recent evaluations of disasters – including those of the 2004 Asian tsunami<sup>2</sup> and the 2005 Pakistan earthquake<sup>3</sup> – have identified the failure to consider the value of information and communications with affected populations as a critical and unmet need.

Other rapidly changing factors add to the argument for a reappraisal: the speed with which the communications environment is changing and the increasing ubiquity of mobile telephony; better understanding of the importance of expectation management and accountability to local populations; and an acceptance of the need to make affected populations agents of their own recovery and equal partners in disaster responses. These factors combine to make communications with affected populations an issue that the humanitarian world needs to prioritise.

There is also growing evidence to show that effective communications strategies for beneficiaries – and here a

clear distinction needs to be made with traditional advocacy and public relations activities – hold huge potential for aid organisations themselves. This is not just because they can save lives but because they enable better accountability, more effective management of expectations and ultimately improved humanitarian response.

This paper illustrates the critical need to mainstream information and communication both across the sector as a whole and within projects and agencies. It falls into three parts:

The first part lays out the evidence to date that information is regarded by affected populations as a critical issue, and looks how they identify information needs.

The second part explores how little demands are being met, why this is and what structures, systems and skills are missing.

The third part suggests some clear steps that can be taken to resolve these issues.

## Why information and communication matters in humanitarian responses

### The demand for information

Disaster victims need information about their options in order to take any meaningful choices about their future. Like anyone else, they make decisions based on the best possible information available to them at the time.

Strong evidence suggests that there is not simply a wish for more information, there is a real demand for it and desperate frustration when it is not available.

According to a DFID Policy Paper of 2000: “For people who are caught up in conflict and other emergencies, the need for information is often acute. Frequently, they are separated from their families, lack shelter and adequate food and are scared and confused by the events occurring around them. Programming tailored to the needs of such people can provide an essential information lifeline.”<sup>4</sup>

Following the 2004 tsunami that devastated Aceh in Indonesia, killing over 160,000 and displacing 500,000, a project designed to find out people’s needs discovered that: “A large number of people expressed their dismay that they did not have enough information about aid and aid processes. For some, this meant they felt they did not have, or understand, options.”<sup>5</sup>

Another study on the tsunami response among the recovering population also reported that: “Poor information flow is undoubtedly the biggest source of dissatisfaction, anger and frustration among affected people.”<sup>6</sup>

People affected by disasters and humanitarian crises need information at almost all stages of those crises. The kinds of information they need differs – obviously – at different stages.

### From “what’s happened?” to “who’s responsible?”: stages of information needs

Immediately after a disaster, information needs are often simple. People typically want to know what just happened, where they can get food, and where their family members and friends are. They may wish to ask questions, such as which hospitals are open in their area or how to access services. Providing means to begin to address these and similar needs can help prevent panic and increase survivors’ capacity to take action.



IMOGENWALL/BBC WST

During the initial stage of most emergencies, information is scarce and often unreliable. Normal information channels – such as radio stations, mobile phone networks – become suddenly unavailable, often meaning information becomes least accessible to those most affected.

People staffing media outlets and other information centres can be among those affected, and they can also be especially vulnerable. In conflicts, media outlets may be among important targets for political control or destruction. Non-media channels of information may also be affected: community leaders may be dead or missing, and phone lines and internet connections down.

Over time other equally critical information needs emerge. People want to know the availability of medical assistance, sources of food or fresh water supplies, how to prevent disease and sometimes advice on building basic shelters.

An important component in this is expectation management – desperate populations are very prone to hearing what they want to hear. Ineffective communication at this stage can create false expectations and misunderstandings about what assistance is forthcoming, and about the role of the agency in question.

Later still – but also sometimes quite quickly – people begin to want to know what they are entitled to and how they can start understanding what relief and services are available to them. As policies by local authorities are implemented they create the need to share and explain these policies with survivors so they know how to access and demand what they are entitled to. For example, government guidelines on housing construction after the tsunami or the provision of compensation for victims.

Issues of accountability now become important – to report cases of suspected misuse or diversion of aid, to highlight ongoing needs and where they haven't been met.

In the longer term, information and communication needs become more complex and shift from simply wanting to know to needing to communicate. Once people's most basic needs are met, questions about who is responsible for aid delivery and how they can ask questions come to the forefront.

Effective communication can also be extremely useful to agencies seeking to provide help – asking people not to travel, for example, can keep roads clear for efficient delivery of aid.

As technology develops, recent disaster responses have also seen affected populations becoming more proactive in collecting data regarding impact and needs. After the Yogyakarta earthquake, Java, in 2006, for example, some survivors set up websites detailing who in their communities had been affected in what ways and what different groups needed within a week of the disaster.

**How ignoring information needs can increase suffering**  
Increasing evidence suggests that one reason information and communication are vital commodities and tools in humanitarian response is that their absence intensifies suffering.

In particular, psychosocial studies increasingly note that information deprivation actually causes stress and exacerbates trauma. Leaving a community of internally displaced persons to wait in tents or transitional shelter with no explanation of if or when they will get houses, how to apply or where to complain, inflicts additional suffering, rather than relieves it.

As Markku Niskala, Secretary General of the IFRC, has said: "As well as saving lives, information reduces suffering in the wake of disaster. Tracing lost family and friends, knowing how much compensation you are entitled to, or where you're going to live – such information means an enormous amount to survivors left homeless and traumatised."<sup>7</sup>

This has also been recognised elsewhere. The InterAgency Standing Committee – a key coordination mechanism for international humanitarian assistance – argues that "A helpful step in coping is having access to appropriate information related to the emergency, relief efforts and legal rights and about positive coping methods."<sup>9</sup>

In recent years, recognition that the provision of information to affected populations comprises an important form of aid has become widespread. From the Red Cross World Disasters Report 2005 to work by humanitarian learning networks such as ALNAP (Active Learning Network on Accountability and Performance), the benefits to all concerned of effective and properly resourced communications strategies as a key part of humanitarian work have become evident through field research.

#### Radio lifeline: recipient requests

In Burma, where Internews has distributed radios to facilitate the provision of humanitarian information, recipients asked for weather reports, news on general aid provision, information about health and sanitation issues and how they could avoid and treat diseases, as well as discussion and debate around aid delivery.<sup>10</sup>

Sometimes information is the only help that can be made available, especially when isolated populations are cut off and beyond the reach of aid. The use of radio networks and mobile phones, for example, can play a critical role here. In Darfur, the BBC World Service Trust uses local shortwave radio to deliver lifesaving information on issues such as malaria prevention to displaced populations who are not in camps.

In Burma, such information was one of the few forms of aid that could be delivered in a country where government permission for international operations was not forthcoming. On occasions when radios or mobile phones remain working through natural disasters, they can also provide crucial links between survivors and rescue teams.

#### Vaccination campaign: radio role

In Afghanistan, following the attacks of 11 September 2001, foreign aid workers were expelled by the Taliban just after all resources had been deployed for a UNICEF national polio immunisation campaign. There were no senior staff left in the country to authorise commencement of the campaign and national staff that remained could not be contacted since all communications were blocked. However, a shortwave BBC radio programme<sup>11</sup> broadcast an interview with a senior UNICEF official who announced the launch of the campaign and delivered some simple and practical messages about polio. The following day the vaccination campaign took place as planned across the country. Those taking part cited the BBC radio announcements.

“I can't see, so when my radio was destroyed in the cyclone, I felt very isolated. Now that I have a radio, I feel like I can see!”

– A blind Monk in Burma who received a radio after cyclone Nargis<sup>8</sup>

7 IFRC World Disasters Report 2005

8 Internews Project Report, 2008.

9 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2007). IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings. Pp. 88. [www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/products/docs/Guidelines%20IASC%20Mental%20Health%20Psychosocial%20\(with%20index\).pdf](http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/products/docs/Guidelines%20IASC%20Mental%20Health%20Psychosocial%20(with%20index).pdf)

10 Internews Project Report, 2008.

11 BBC World Service Trust's Afghan Education Projects.

### An issue of empowerment, a question of accountability

'Empowerment' can be an over used word in the development community, and is most used in the context of long term development aid. But people whose lives have been wrecked need a sense of hope and purpose. Information – and just as important communication – is essential for people to start claiming a sense of power and purpose over their own destiny.

People cannot shape their own future unless they can make sense of what help is available to them, and what it is designed to deliver. It is a common flaw in many aid projects that they stress the importance of accountability and transparency, yet fail to share even the most basic information about finance, the hiring of services under a given project, or management decisions with communities themselves. While it will never be practical to share all information with communities, and the timeframes and demands of the early stages of an emergency response mean that detailed information sharing is neither practical nor desirable, in the later stages of a response this should be common practice.

The provision of information can be simple and cheap – bulletin boards, text messaging, and information feedback boxes are all channels that have been successfully used in recent responses.

#### Notice boards for better transparency

Following the tsunami in Sri Lanka, ActionAid implemented a 'Vigilance Committee' model in all partner communities as a standard element of project design. This model meant explaining that all communities had a right to demand information about project development, including the right to refuse assistance. Committees were set up and each village provided with a 'transparency board' – a bulletin board displaying information including project timeframes, budgets, beneficiary lists and recruitment procedures.

"Lack of knowledge is one of the most important problems in communities," said one local NGO partner. "They need to know who to go to for answers to their questions and problems. If they have information they can solve their own problems."

One community working with ActionAid said this approach had changed their outlook, recalling a previous UN project to rebuild a school under which the community had had no idea of how much the project had cost or who had been hired to build it. "We would not accept that now," said one committee member. "We would ask how much money they were spending and who was getting the contract."<sup>12</sup>

12  
Example taken from Wall, I. (2006). *The Right to know: The Challenge of Public Information and Accountability in Aceh and Sri Lanka*. Office of the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery.

13  
In a keynote speech at the Global Symposium +5 on Information for Humanitarian Action, Geneva, 25 October 2007. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Empowering people through media and communications can educate and lift spirits, both crucial to galvanising people to help themselves. Hearing others share similar experiences of hardships and recovery can play a critical role in improving the psychosocial wellbeing of those affected by disasters. Learning how to trace missing family members, discussing loss, and exploring practical steps to recovery can encourage those affected to move forward after the crisis.

Survivors also regularly cite the need for entertainment and distraction from the long days and boredom inherent to camp situations and displacement. Airing a regular radio programme and holding 'listening groups' around the topics can break monotony, build solidarity, and help people explore answers to common problems.

Attention to this area has grown as humanitarian actors focus on community-driven aid and on the empowerment of local populations, now seen by development agencies more as partners in a response than merely the recipients of assistance. Information is critically important in this context.

People who have knowledge of issues such as when and where food will be distributed, the amount of allocated rations per person, and how to cook the rations to maximise nutritional value, can help manage logistics, reduce corruption, and improve health and mental wellbeing. They are also far better equipped to make crucial decisions about their future, and to participate in the development of aid delivery systems that actually meet their needs.

### Information is still an unmet need – why?

There is widespread evidence that the humanitarian needs outlined in this briefing are still unmet. As John Holmes, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs states:

"Communicating better with those we are trying to help strikes me as a major gap in our armoury."<sup>13</sup>

There are several reasons for this. The good reasons focus on issues of strategy, feasibility and sometimes entirely sensible prioritisation of resources in times of crisis. Communication with affected populations can be a more complex and challenging area than is commonly thought, and the implications for mainstreaming these ideas throughout the humanitarian community represents a real challenge for donors, UN agencies and international and national NGOs alike.

But there are still misplaced assumptions and confusion about how and what to think about information and communication – and where organisationally to locate it. Humanitarian actors systematically fail to see the difference between public relations and communications with affected populations, and thus funds neither the expertise nor infrastructure necessary.

For these and most operational humanitarian agencies, public information still means public relations for their own organisations. Mostly this means dealing with international media, promoting their work and channelling information upwards and outwards. This work is in itself extremely important and valuable, not least in its advocacy work. Without it, external audiences and public support and funding from donor nations would not happen.

Nevertheless, communications to and with affected populations is often an entirely different challenge requiring a different skill set.

Nor is this principally an issue of information sharing within and between those in the humanitarian sector. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs operates a number of excellent web-based initiatives on humanitarian crises, such as ReliefWeb, IRIN News, a gateway for Humanitarian Information Centres, and the OCHA website itself. Each of these resources, however are aimed at humanitarian practitioners and other international audiences. They provide information *about* not *for* those suffering from crises.

The information needs of people affected by disasters remain largely unmet because the people, systems and resources that are required to meet them simply don't exist in a meaningful way. The humanitarian system as it stands is not equipped with either the capacity or the resources to begin tackling the challenge of providing information to those affected by crises. There is very little dedicated public communications capacity within major humanitarian organisations.

## What could usefully be done

### Making someone responsible

Perhaps the single best response that agencies can make to meet information needs is to make someone responsible and accountable for meeting them as part of the overall agency response. Having a clear locus of responsibility for understanding the information needs of beneficiaries in emergencies, devising strategic responses to meeting them, and providing the focal point for implementing them is with very few exceptions simply not happening at present. All the other steps outlined here below are unlikely to happen unless responsibility to and for beneficiaries is clearly integrated into the overall humanitarian response.

### The importance of coordination and strategic links to allied information efforts

Any public information campaign should be aligned and co-ordinated with other agencies to scale up activities to maximise benefits. For example if several medical NGOs are conducting vaccinations – work should reinforce and amplify each other's messages. Again, two-way information flow channels are important, creating systems for questions to be asked and answered to help clear up confusion and misconceptions.

Effective coordination will not happen without commitment from the agencies involved, and without adequate capacity and resourcing – but it can be done, as the example in the following box shows.

#### Leaflets on rights and entitlements

In Galle, Sri Lanka, staff from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) noted that there was much confusion among the local populations about their rights and entitlements concerning housing, and little capacity within the government to provide the information required. The OCHA team worked with several different agencies and local officials to design a campaign including radio spots, posters, a leaflet explaining housing rights and crucially a week long open-house day at the offices of the local government department in charge of housing, during which beneficiaries could ask questions, register for assistance and talk to government officials and aid agencies on how to access assistance. The campaign was a huge success, with both local government officials and populations responding enthusiastically and benefiting from better understanding of each other's roles and needs.

It is also important to note that much of the information needed and requested by affected populations is not within the remit of humanitarians to supply. This includes details of compensation packages, requirements to register with local officials to access assistance, policy decisions such as no-build zones or new housing policies, any government run efforts such as construction of temporary housing or relocation of Internally Displaced Peoples (IDP).

In these situations, although international agencies cannot be the channels through which this information flows, they can play a critical role in advocating strongly for government resources to be dedicated to effective communication, providing and funding technical assistance for governments who may simply lack the capacity to implement a public information campaign or monitoring body on the scale necessary.

As the example involving OCHA in Galle, Sri Lanka above illustrates, effective partnerships between aid agencies and government officials can provide excellent and comprehensive opportunities for affected populations not just to access the information they need, but to ask questions of governments and hold those charged with running government assistance to account.

### Where beneficiary communication is already a priority: disaster risk reduction

Disaster risk reduction is one obvious area in which communications plays a key role, and one area in which serious efforts have already been made. Public education concerning preparation for, and advised responses to a crisis, has communications at its core, as do early warning systems.

There is plenty of scope in applying the methods and lessons learned in developed countries to developing ones, and in learning the lessons of previous disasters.

Coordination of information and communication efforts is critical to all disaster relief and is dealt with in more detail below, but it is also critical in disaster risk reduction, as the experience of Aceh in 2004 demonstrated (see box).

#### Mixed messages cause confusion

In Aceh, several different organisations disseminated materials explaining what to do in an earthquake. One set told people to run out of the house, another to hide under furniture, and a third to stand in a doorway. Each was produced independently of the other, unaware that other organisations were even working in this area. Some of the materials were good, but these organisations missed an opportunity to reinforce each other's work and ensure against overlap. Moreover, they confused traumatised populations even further.<sup>14</sup>

Regional disaster risk reduction plans should include media landscape studies which map out a population's regular media access and usage under normal circumstances. If organisations know how individuals typically seek trustworthy information – be it through radio, bulletin boards, or word of mouth – rapid response mechanisms can be much more appropriate, targeted and effective. Local media can enable populations to participate in discussions about methods to reduce risk at the community level. Such

14  
Wall, I. (2006). *The Right to know: The Challenge of Public Information and Accountability in Aceh and Sri Lanka*. Office of the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery.

**Below** Radio in a box: the equipment and space needed to run an emergency station can all fit into just one shipping container. This one houses an entire radio station with the power to transmit for many miles. This station was provided by the Dutch in Banda Aceh, Indonesia after the tsunami.



IMOGEN WALL/BBC WST

15

BBC World Service Trust (29 May 2008). *Media environment and audience consumption in Burma: A short briefing.*

studies can also be useful in the longer term and established development responses.

### Treat communication equipment as a lifesaver

There is great potential for humanitarian actors to invest in preparing for information needs in a humanitarian response – stockpiling equipment, preparing emergency lifesaving information packages in appropriate forms (announcements on radio etc) so they are ready to go in a disaster.

If information for affected populations is a vital element of the aid process then equipment to produce, disseminate and receive information needs to be readily available in emergencies. Radio receivers can be distributed to affected populations along with other basic provisions.

Studies have shown that affected populations go to great lengths to reinstate their media infrastructure and access to information at the earliest opportunity following a disaster.<sup>15</sup> Relief efforts should recognise these community-driven priorities and respond accordingly.

### Radio relaunch provides information fast

Following the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999, a DFID-funded project worked to get an independent Albanian broadcaster back on air as soon as possible after control of Kosovo was passed to the UN. The influx of refugees, as well as the aid community, were desperate for some sort of information system to be set up, and fast. Despite a collapsed mobile phone network, mountainous terrain complicating FM radio reception, and a lack of stockpiled equipment, the team managed to get “Radio 21” on air within 12 days with a mixer borrowed from BBC news and rehabilitated computers.

The station was a great success in the immediate post-conflict situation. Amid the chaos of the first two months, there was a huge need for information, including news, public service announcements, and debate. NATO had used depleted uranium shells causing public health problems and many buildings had been booby-trapped by the Serb army who had used landmines. Information about these things needed to get out quickly and the radio station was an obvious outlet.

### Understanding channels of information flow

The initial days following a disaster are the most crucial for saving lives. During this period, the sharing of useful information with affected populations in languages they understand, through media they trust, can – as in Burma – provide a life saving resource. Understanding of available channels can also help facilitate the flow of vital information about needs back up to those implementing the aid effort: what is going on in inaccessible areas or what additional distress is being caused by unfounded rumours.

A prior understanding of how populations in disaster prone areas source information is vital in determining the best channels for information flow: for example, local media, local religious networks and local civil society groups.

One key channel is usually local media – who are often best placed to provide immediate information to audiences, in the languages they understand. Disaster risk reduction programmes should ensure that local media professionals in disaster-prone areas have continuity plans to mobilise or resume their work quickly, equipment to get back on air, and skills to deliver humanitarian or educational material under crisis conditions.

When local capacity is insufficient to respond to immediate information needs, a number of quickfix solutions can be applied, such as the ‘radio station in a suitcase’ model, which consists of a single piece of luggage containing all the equipment necessary for short-range broadcasting.

Rebuilding the local media infrastructure for sustained operations must be prioritised as aid efforts continue. This may be as simple as providing a generator to a radio station that has lost its electricity supply, using UN communications structures such as World Food Programme towers to relay local radio stations (though in politically complex environments this needs careful thought), and distributing wind-up radios. It is also important to note that the local communications sector is not only restricted to journalists. In many countries, including those most disaster prone, have indigenous PR agencies, marketing companies etc, who are all experts in delivering messages to audiences and who can provide a professional service which is culturally sensitive, effectively targeted and implemented with a detailed understanding of local risks and sensitivities.

### Basra-based broadcasts

In Iraq, the BBC World Service Trust assisted with the importation and construction of a studio and transmission equipment to establish a Basra-based broadcast station from scratch. The vast majority of work on-site was conducted by Iraqi companies, supervised by the station’s new Basra-based Iraqi management team. Al Mirbad now broadcasts live and pre-recorded output every day. Research has shown it is one of the most widely recognised and listened-to radio stations in the South.

### Getting information from people, not just to them

The traditional conceptualisation of public information as a one-way distribution of information is inadequate from the perspective of those on the receiving end. Many communication efforts tend to be modelled on outdated theories that assume ‘effects’ if the right messages are sent often enough to target audiences.

Participatory communication, which recognises varied responses from audiences and allows people to ask questions and to express their viewpoint, has the added

**Below** Woman reading newspaper in Calang, Aceh, Indonesia. Women frequently have less access to information disseminated through media than men – particular care needs to be given in any communication strategy to ensure that women are equal participants and have equal access.



benefit of providing a vital source of data concerning needs, fears, rumours and perceptions.

As previous studies have noted, there is often a reluctance among aid agencies to open up channels through which affected populations can communicate publicly, asking questions, seeking clarification or commenting on the response, sometimes based on the fear that this would open the gates to either a flood of unanswerable questions or damaging criticism of the response.<sup>16</sup>

As one NGO coordinator in Sri Lanka told researchers in 2006: "The problem is fear. We never make promises because we are afraid we will not be able to keep them and that is wrong. We need to clarify, to assuage, to walk people through their fears."<sup>17</sup> In fact, some evidence shows that the opposite is true: that often questions, especially in the early days, are basic and easily answered, and that communities provided with channels for communication do not just provide constructive and nuanced feedback but are very appreciative of such efforts and have a high regard for the organisations providing them.

### Tsunami call centre

In Sri Lanka, the government body Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation (TAFREN) created to coordinate tsunami response established a call centre in the weeks after the disaster. This operation was outsourced to Bates, a local advertising company with experience in call centres. Over a week, Bates trained a five person team to answer the most common questions put forward by survivors and advertised through local papers and radio stations. The centre received hundreds of calls, an analysis of which showed that most were related to housing and livelihoods and concerned basic requests for assistance. Although no independent evaluation was carried out, Bates reported they were able to provide satisfactory answers to over three quarters of callers without the need for further referral. The project was funded by the World Bank.

Understanding not only what populations need, but also what they need and want to *know* is crucial for a successful response, from both the survivor and aid agency point of view. Humanitarian agencies can benefit from strategies that allow affected populations to communicate directly with them, passing on information about needs, concerns and feeding back on aid including reporting cases of suspected misuse of aid.

Initial information assessments can easily be combined with other surveys by simply asking questions such as if they have access to equipment such as working radios or phones or checking whether the local station is broadcasting.

### Information responses in Pakistan

In the areas most severely affected by the October 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, the main sources of mass information were devastated, creating an information vacuum and active rumour mill. Broadcasting equipment had been ruined and scores of local journalists were killed, went missing, or were dealing with lost relatives. In response, the Pakistan Emergency Information Project, secured emergency licences to broadcast and immediately set about rebuilding radio production facilities, providing small equipment grants, training journalists in humanitarian reporting, and producing a daily one-hour humanitarian programme.<sup>18</sup>

### Understanding and exploiting the impact of new technologies

One of the most profound shifts in this sector is coming not from aid agencies or the development world but from the rapid commercial development of communications on a global level. The speed with which populations in the developing world are adopting mobile phone and internet technology and finding innovative uses for new communications is far outstripping the levels of understanding of these new trends in the aid world – and the sector is still growing fast.

“The ability of local populations to source, share and transmit information is being transformed”

The ability of local populations to source, share and transmit information is being completely transformed. In some cases, those affected by disaster have called decision-makers directly, expressing their requests about what kind of aid and how much they think should be provided.<sup>19</sup>

### Text messages post-earthquake

Local journalists in Jakarta and Yogyakarta used mobile phones to receive emergency text messages distributed by Internews with post-earthquake information which they could immediately relay to audiences. Journalists participating in the information service also sent back SMS updates on reconstruction in their areas, effectively creating an information hub.<sup>20</sup>

### Not just restoring but sometimes building communication infrastructures

It is often not enough simply to restore existing communications infrastructure. In many developing countries, or disaster areas, access to information may have been inadequate prior to the disaster or may consist of channels inappropriate for the targeting of the disaster victims. In Sri Lanka, for example, most media outlets had a national reach which meant that channeling information just to the specific areas affected by the disaster was not viable. In these cases, humanitarian agencies may need to look at creating dedicated information projects to plug these gaps.

### Newsletter reaches remote communities

In Aceh after the tsunami, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) identified the devastated area of Calang as an area in need of communications assistance. With no local radio station and cut off by road damage from newspaper distributions, the people of Calang had little information on the ongoing aid effort. UNDP partnered with the local government to prepare a newsletter detailing information about the relief effort, including explanations of initiatives, details of available assistance and how to access it and contact details for agencies. The concept was to produce something low tech so the entire production process could be done in one room with standard office equipment such as printers and photocopiers. An independent evaluation a year after establishment found that the newsletter was highly valued across Calang, and was even being read by people outside the district.

### The importance of donor commitment

Donors tend to be reluctant to dedicate funds exclusively for information and communications, giving priority to more traditional humanitarian items and activities.

16 and 17 Wall, I. (2006). *The Right to know: The Challenge of Public Information and Accountability in Aceh and Sri Lanka*. Office of the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery.

18 Humanitarian Practice Network (June 2006). Humanitarian Exchange. [www.odihpn.org/documents/](http://www.odihpn.org/documents/)

19 Flood, famine and mobile phones. (July 26th, 2007). The Economist. From: [www.economist.com/world/international/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story\\_id=9546242](http://www.economist.com/world/international/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=9546242)

20 Internews website: [www.internews.org/prs/2006/20061019\\_indo.shtm](http://www.internews.org/prs/2006/20061019_indo.shtm)

There is a little evidence that this is changing. In Burma, the BBC World Service Trust and the BBC Burmese Service received funding from IrishAid and the Vodafone Foundation to produce daily five minute humanitarian broadcasts to the areas hit by Cyclone Nargis. The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) similarly provided funding to Internews to carry out humanitarian information work during the same crisis. During a period in which little

international aid could reach the delta, the information contained was designed to help victims make the best of the resources they had to ensure their survival. More donor attention to the role of communications strategies within projects that they are funding – i.e. asking what they are, if they are properly planned for and resourced – would also greatly help in ensuring that communications becomes a key requirement of project design.

## Summary: recommendations

- Mainstream communications with affected populations
- Make someone responsible for understanding and responding to the information and communication needs of affected populations

Immediate actions for emergency response	Longer term recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Assess what media platforms could be used to communicate humanitarian messages to/with affected populations (mobile phones, internet, film shows, videos, camp radios etc)</li> <li>● Media in a box ready to deploy within 48 hours of a disaster</li> <li>● Deployment of key broadcasting equipment for damaged stations supplies kept at UN hubs contracts awarded on competitive basis to broadcast supply companies</li> <li>● Consider including wind-up radios as part of an emergency Non Food Items distribution</li> <li>● Carry out a mapping of available communications resources including multinationals, advertising agencies and local PR operations and providers of services such as call centres as well as local media</li> <li>● Source and fund personnel who have expertise in participatory media programming for affected populations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Include information needs of affected populations at the core of both disaster relief and disaster risk reduction and preparedness strategies</li> <li>● Ensure local governments have the funding and expertise to carry out their outreach work</li> <li>● Build budget lines into funding for communications with affected communities</li> <li>● Commission studies on information needs after a disaster to help build and collate resources and evidence for humanitarian information actions</li> <li>● Consider funding newsletters and other channels dedicated to information response to disasters including story sharing and details of opportunities for employment/assistance</li> <li>● Ensure effective coordination of all information campaigns to ensure maximum impact and minimum confusion</li> <li>● Develop local media outlets and information providers in natural disaster prone locations. They can provide immediate and effective information to drive disaster risk reduction strategies and mitigate effects of natural disasters by giving clear humanitarian information</li> <li>● Provide dedicated funding and technical support to bodies that may need to produce citizen focused outreach campaigns but lack the expertise, such as local governments</li> </ul>

### Acknowledgments

Researched and written by Imogen Wall, Lisa Robinson. Commissioning editor James Deane

Policy Briefings offer concise reviews of topical development issues.

The authors are grateful for the help provided in the research and writing of this Policy Briefing.

Thanks to the following colleagues and organisations:

BBC World Service Trust  
 Simon Derry (Regional Director)  
 Abir Awad (Project Director, Al-Mirbad)  
 Shirazudin Siddiqi (Country Director Afghanistan)  
 Lizz Frost Yocum (Research Manager)

Kirsty Cockburn (Director of Communications)  
 Nick Raistrick (Producer, iLearn)  
 Neil McCafferty (Broadcast Systems Manager)

TEC, ALNAP, HPN, DFID Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs Department and Social Development Department, Markku Niskala, Secretary General of the IFRC, Mark Harvey, Internews, IASC, UNICEF, ActionAid, Office of the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, John Holmes, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under-Secretary-General for

Humanitarian Affairs, Christian Clark, OCHA, ReliefWeb, TAFREN, Pakistan

We would like to acknowledge the support of DFID, who provides support to the BBC World Service Trust's *Policy and Research Programme on the Role of Media and Communication in Development*.

This Policy Briefing has been produced for the BBC World Service Trust independently from the BBC and BBC World Service and should not be taken to reflect official BBC policy. Any mistakes are those of the authors.

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The BBC World Service Trust is an independent charity funded by external grants and voluntary contributions, mainly from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the European Union, UN agencies and charitable foundations. Registered charity number: 1076235

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BBC World Service Trust, Bush House, Strand, London WC2B 4PH, UK

**Tel** +44 (0) 20 7557 2462

**Fax** +44 (0) 20 7397 1622

**Email** ws.trust@bbc.co.uk

**Web** bbcworldservicetrust.org