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Still left in the dark?

How people in emergencies use communication to survive – and how humanitarian agencies can help

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LISA ROBINSON/BBC MEDIA ACTION

Front cover image
Six days after the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, a makeshift telephone shop has managed to provide telephone lines charged by solar power. A handful of telephones provide lifeline support for people trying to contact loved ones.

Above Through *Connexion Haiti*, BBC World Service provided daily broadcasts in the aftermath of the earthquake. Produced and edited by a team based in Miami, the programmes shared vital information.

Introduction

In 2008, a BBC World Service Trust policy briefing argued that people affected by earthquakes, floods or other emergencies often lacked the information they needed to survive and that this only added to their stress and anxiety. *Left in the Dark: the unmet need for information in humanitarian emergencies* maintained that humanitarian agencies were increasingly effective and coordinated in getting food, water, shelter and medical help to people affected by disasters, but were neglecting the need to get often life-saving information to them.

Much has changed since 2008. Thanks to the efforts of several humanitarian and media support Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), the report helped to galvanise momentum across the humanitarian sector to prioritise communication with the populations it serves. While many humanitarian agencies continue to see communication as something that is done to raise money or boost the profile of their disaster relief efforts, the sector is, increasingly, seeing the need for a clear strategic focus that responds to the information and communication needs of those affected by disaster. There is also a growing recognition of the benefits of such communication to improve programming and the overall emergency response.

“ In 2012, it may now be the humanitarian agencies themselves – rather than the survivors of a disaster – who risk being left in the dark. ”

On January 12, 2010, a catastrophic earthquake hit Haiti close to the capital, Port au Prince, killing more than 300,000 people and making more than one million homeless. A coordination mechanism designed to ensure the better provision of information to – and communication with – those affected was seen as a real success.¹

The Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network was formed just prior to the earthquake, in response to the *Left in the Dark* briefing, and has been instrumental in convening key discussions around the topic. Other examples of progress include a new project, *infoasaid*, which has received funding from the UK Department for International Development to provide practical assistance on communication to a range of partner humanitarian

agencies. Several agencies, including the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) and the International Organization of Migration (IOM), have secured funding and support for such work during emergencies. There is increasing recognition by the UN's Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) of the importance of this kind of communication: OCHA now includes updates on this area in its situation reports and has funded key initiatives, including the Haiti coordination mechanism. The media assistance organisation Internews, and other specialist communications agencies such as BBC Media Action (formerly the BBC World Service Trust), have also begun to develop specific humanitarian response capacity, including dedicated staff and funding, although resources are still insufficient.

Meanwhile, mobile telephony and other new communication technologies have spread with extraordinary speed. In 2008, the main danger was that people affected by humanitarian emergencies would continue to be left in the dark when disaster struck, deprived of the information that would help them to understand what was happening and what they could do to survive. In 2012, it may now be the humanitarian agencies themselves – rather than the survivors of a disaster – who risk being left in the dark. As growing access to new technologies makes it more likely that those affected by disaster will be better placed to access information and communicate their own needs, a key question arises: are humanitarian agencies prepared to respond to, help and engage with those who are communicating with them and who demand better information?

The response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake saw humanitarian responders begin to recognise the importance and implications of the technological communications capacity of disaster survivors. From trapped people who used mobile phones to call for help from beneath the rubble to locally-run Facebook pages to reunite families, the multiple ways in which technology could create opportunities and new dynamics in an emergency response became clear to all.

Unquestionably, the biggest single change in the communications sector since the 2008 *Left in the Dark* paper has been the explosion in access to communications technology among communities affected by disaster. As a result, this is the focus of this paper.

The changing world of communications technology

The growth in the use of communications technology in the developing world throws up a number of challenges and opportunities for humanitarian agencies. One key challenge for humanitarian agencies – already well behind the curve – will be not just to catch up, but to stay ahead of developments. Back in 2007 (centuries ago in the evolution of new media), researchers at the University of South Colorado analysed the use of social media by populations affected by forest fires in California and concluded that “these emergent uses of social media are pre-cursors of broader future changes to the institutional and organisational arrangements of disaster response”.² This is now becoming a reality.

Mobile phone use tripled in the developing world between 2005 and 2010, with the fastest growth in Africa, according to the International Telecommunications Union. Subscription rates in developing countries grow 20 per cent year on year³ while costs (a key barrier to access) continue to fall (having dropped by over 50 per cent in the past two years alone).⁴

Although access to the internet is still very limited in most countries, it is mushrooming, with mobile broadband access growing by 160 per cent between 2009 and 2010.⁵ Increasingly, internet access is through mobile phones, especially in developing countries. In Kenya, 54 per cent of those who use the web do so through a handset and local telecommunications experts see this as one of the most significant trends for the next five years. In India, the figure is 59 per cent. The increased use of smartphones and the many ways in which handsets are used are strong trends that are expected to continue.⁶ Analysts expect the Indonesian smartphone market, for example, to grow 67 per cent in 2012.⁷

In short, more people in more countries now own and use sophisticated communications technology on a daily basis than ever before, and their numbers will continue to grow – at ever greater speed – over the coming years. As one interviewee in Kenya commented, “We are only a few years away from the first response in which a significant number of survivors have access to smartphones”.

Similar patterns are seen in social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, BlackBerry Messenger (BBM), YouTube and so on. The country with the second highest number of people on Facebook is now India (after the USA) with over 3.5 million new users in the three months (to March 2012), closely followed by Indonesia, Brazil and Mexico. Over the last six months (to March 2012), Facebook sign-ups went up 19 per cent in Libya, 36 per cent in Yemen, 26 per cent in Mongolia and 29 per cent in Azerbaijan.⁸ In Somalia sign-ups over the same timescale increased from around 30,000 to 75,500 – an increase of 138%.⁹ This very steep trajectory was fuelled, according to several Somali journalists interviewed for this paper, by the introduction of the ‘chat’ feature which makes it easy and cheap to chat to friends and relatives overseas – connecting Somalis across the diaspora. Sites like Facebook are also multilingual (Facebook itself now operates in 70 languages), increasing usability in developing countries.¹⁰

In the context of internet access and social media use, it is true, in general, that the dominant user profile at present tends to be: urban, young, male, with some disposable

income. But, as costs fall and coverage increases, all the signs are that usage will increase rapidly in rural areas and among poorer people. The high value placed by even the poorest people on access to communications technology is clear in the way they invest their meagre resources. As one Somali NGO staff member commented on community partners, “they may not have had lunch – but they’ll have a mobile phone.”

What does all this mean for humanitarians? There is, without question, a great deal of hype around technology. Extravagant claims have been made in recent years for its ability to solve everything from election fraud to Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) management. Such claims are often based on little hard evidence, particularly on the practical use of communications technology in emergencies. This has led many aid workers to go to the other extreme and question the relevance of communications technology in emergency responses, particularly when working with affected communities.

Neither position is helpful. In terms of a way forward, it is worth noting that most of the claims come from international technology specialists, while much of the most relevant and valuable work (from an aid perspective) is actually evolving on the ground within local communities and the local private sector. And what is clear is that too many agencies still believe that engaging with beneficiaries via the latest communication technology is something they can do at some vague point in the future, when they are ‘ready’. This is a dangerous and erroneous assumption as the communications revolution is already very much underway.

In terms of communication with affected communities, the most important trends for humanitarian practitioners are shown below.

Growing demand for interaction

The original *Left in the Dark* paper stressed the importance of seeing communication as a two way process, focused on the urgent provision of information and the active enabling of people to communicate. Few within the humanitarian sector disagree with the logic of prioritising such communication and it features increasingly in the rhetoric of the humanitarian system. But, in practice, it is still rarely operationalised in ways that are clear and meaningful. One of the consequences of greater access to, and the spread of, communications technology is that communities now expect – and demand – interaction. As one influential blogger (Kim Stephens, writing on *idisastr 2.0*) puts it, “people who go to an agency’s Facebook page or follow their Twitter feed expect two way communication. Non responsiveness is not something people react well to”.¹¹

In developing as well as developed countries, feedback hotlines, interactive websites and a social media presence are a central part of any business. Local media encourage interaction through phone-ins, Facebook live chats and Twitter/SMS feeds. Governments and other civil actors are, increasingly, online. Such interactivity is now expected of aid organisations. Staff from aid agencies that have made a policy decision not to operate a feedback phonenumber will be asked for a phone number when visiting disaster survivors and will, almost invariably, respond by giving out their own phone number.

“More people in more countries now own and use sophisticated communications technology on a daily basis than ever before.”



Above Haitian radio DJ Carel Pedre used social media to connect people following the 2010 earthquake, reaching thousands.

Why social media matters in emergencies

Despite their own extensive use of social media (often as a primary source of information on new crises), aid workers often dismiss sites like Twitter and Facebook as either frivolous, irrelevant to the communities in which they work or beyond the reach of the poor. There is growing evidence, however, that this is too crude an analysis, and one that is now being challenged by data from the field – particularly on the increased influence of social media on the more traditional flow of information. In Thailand, for example, the use of social media increased 20 per cent when the 2010 floods began – with fairly equal increases found in metropolitan Bangkok and in rural provinces – rising from 19.5 per cent to 25.1 per cent, and from 18.8 per cent to 24.3 per cent respectively.¹² While television remained by far the most popular medium for flood information, the most viewed public information



video, developed subsequently by Thai PBS television networks, was produced by Kriangkrai Vachiratamorn, a 26 year old film maker who was frustrated by the lack of information provided by the authorities. The video, which features the floods as blue whales, has now had over 2 million hits on YouTube.¹³

The ways in which social media is incorporated into existing communication systems seem particularly important in understanding its value and significance. While the vast majority of Haitians in Port au Prince, for example, are not Twitter users, the city's journalists overwhelmingly are and see it as an essential source of news and updates. Since most Haitians depend on radio for information, they are, in fact, the indirect beneficiaries of Twitter information systems.

One particularly problematic trend that prevents more nuanced understanding of 'social media' is the tendency to regard all forms as essentially synonymous. In fact, they function in very different ways, and are used and accessed in a range of ways by different social groups and communities. In addition to Facebook and Twitter, there are many local social media sites that, once again, function in distinct ways.

Meshing the old and the new

One of the most interesting aspects of technology use in developing countries is the extent to which users integrate it into existing information systems. It is increasingly commonplace, for example, for local radio stations in developing countries to broadcast online. After the Haiti earthquake, one radio DJ developed a spontaneous international family reunification service that meshed Facebook, Twitter and live broadcasting (see case study in box to left). At the same time, confidentiality and protection can become serious issues when family tracing services – and any other model that involves collecting and storing personal information – are operated without adequate knowledge and experience of how to manage such sensitive information.

In Indonesia during the eruption of Mount Merapi in November 2010, a local radio community known as Jalin Merapi began to share information via Twitter and used the network to organise community-based relief to over 700 shelters on the side of the mountain (see case study in box on page 14). Interestingly, two researchers who analysed information systems during the Merapi eruption

Radio I and emergency communications in Haiti

Radio I is one of the biggest radio stations in Haiti – one of only a handful that broadcasts nationwide and to the Haitian diaspora. It was also one of the few left largely unscathed by the 2010 earthquake: its internet connection, remarkably, survived. One of the first staff members to go back to the station hours after the quake was DJ Carel Pedre, a well-known broadcaster and social media enthusiast with a strong Facebook presence and a Twitter feed followed by thousands.

Carel's visibility on social media and radio broadcasts told his listeners that he was alive and the station was functional. As a result, Radio I was besieged by listeners wanting to share their stories, tell people they were alive or appeal for information. Carel also began to receive hundreds of messages from across Haiti and overseas on Facebook and Twitter feed, asking for his help to locate friends and family.

To respond, Carel set up a multi-platform information system that could consolidate all the incoming requests, attempting to respond to them systematically and sharing the information collected with his broadcast and social media audiences. The system involved four friends with laptops all logged into Carel's Facebook (receiving over 100 messages a day) and Twitter feeds, who compiled requests and responded to messages. This was in addition to a team of producers who interviewed all those arriving at the station (an average of 50 people every hour). Each day, the compiled list of people who were being sought was given to the office courier who went out on his motorbike to search for them. Simultaneously, the teams uploaded this information to Facebook, relayed it on Twitter and broadcast it on air. The whole system ran for several weeks without any support from the international aid effort.

found that many people believed traditional channels such as television to be “less satisfying”. In many cases they felt that television did not provide proper information at the time, but created panic instead.¹⁴

Such systems are based on the use of social media to facilitate meaningful, real-time dialogue with communities. At Star FM, one of the biggest radio stations broadcasting into Somalia (from Nairobi), listeners can provide real time feedback to shows via Facebook chat – feedback that is read out by the broadcast team who have the feed on screen in their studio to generate responses. They estimate that the responses are split 50/50 between listeners in Somalia and those in the diaspora.

Technology is also creating profound changes in the ways in which affected communities access and interact with local media. In Kenya, 27% of radio listeners tune in via their mobile phones.¹⁵ Most major local radio stations now broadcast online and consider the diaspora an essential part of their audience. And local journalists increasingly use Twitter, Facebook and social networks as sources of news and ways to share information, a trend that poses a fundamental challenge to the concept of local media. Several Somali journalists interviewed for this paper, for example, commented that they would often hear about events in remote parts of their country via sources in America or Kenya.

The role of diasporas

The rapidly changing role of diasporas in post-disaster communications systems is of critical importance to this issue. In Somalia, for example, over \$100 million is estimated to flow into the country per year from the US diaspora alone.¹⁶ Diasporas also form a key audience for local media.

In Haiti the diaspora emerged as an affected community in its own right after the 2010 earthquake, with people desperately searching for news of their loved ones (see case study in box on page 4). They were also an essential source of assistance, including information, for those on the ground – a role facilitated in large part by their use of social media.¹⁷ Through projects such as OpenStreetMap, online Haitians were also able to provide translation and mapping services on a volunteer basis.¹⁸ For survivors, Haitians overseas were also a source of emergency financing, information about what was going on and emotional support, all made possible by communications technology. Yet this crucial function was largely ignored by global responders.

The role of the private sector

One of the most important aspects of the growth of communications technology has been the commensurate growth in power and importance of the private sector. As one senior aid worker in Haiti commented to the authors, “They call Haiti the republic of NGOs, but it isn’t – it’s the republic of Digicel [a local telecoms provider]”.

It is important to note that the local private sector goes beyond mobile phone companies to encompass local technology expertise. At present, the private sector tends to be seen by aid workers as, first and foremost, a donor, providing cash, in-kind goods or expertise. In practice, however, the private sector is becoming increasingly important in meeting the needs of people affected by disasters. One problem is that the humanitarian system does not recognise this, or include the private sector in ‘traditional’ humanitarian response operations.

The private sector can contribute a wide range of expertise, local knowledge and access to consumers, and launch its own initiatives. It is, therefore, moving into the humanitarian system’s notional ‘humanitarian space’ of its own volition.

In Kenya for example, mobile phone company Safaricom is tackling the problem of access to healthcare by establishing Daktari 1525, which provides 24 hour access to qualified medical advice via phone across the country (see case study in box below).¹⁹ A similar system has been established in Bangladesh by Grameenphone.²⁰ In Haiti, phone company Digicel responded to the 2010 cholera outbreak by developing methods that would send an SMS to anyone who travelled through an identified cholera hotspot, alerting them to the dangers and advising on basic precautions. Also in Haiti, local technology company Solutions established a call centre for those affected by the earthquake to report needs and offer assistance, which was up and running – staffed by volunteers – within a few weeks of the catastrophe. The centre received calls from over 25,000 people, including many who had fled Port au Prince but wanted to know how they could access assistance. Staff at Solutions, however, found it difficult to interact with the humanitarian response – aid agencies were skeptical, assumed Solutions were looking for funding and, even when sympathetic, struggled to absorb and respond to the information management models Solutions had developed.²¹ Humanitarian practitioners should note that all of these systems were established with little reference to, or support from, conventional aid providers. Increasingly, real innovation in the provision of information and communication in disasters is coming from the private sector.

“Aid workers often dismiss sites like Twitter and Facebook as either frivolous, irrelevant to the communities in which they work or beyond the reach of the poor.”

Daktari 1525

Lack of access to basic healthcare remains a serious problem in many countries. In Kenya, a new initiative aims to tackle this problem via mobile phones. The Daktari 1525 initiative was launched in November 2011 by Safaricom, in partnership with the local company Call-a-Doc, based on a similar service already established in Bangladesh by Grameenphone. The idea is simple: for 20 shillings (approx. 23 US cents) per minute, any of Safaricom’s 18 million subscribers can call a qualified doctor for advice on any health issue that is troubling them. “In Kenya, there is around one doctor per 10,000 patients – but over 25 million people with cellphones” says Sanda Ojiambo, Head of Corporate Responsibility at Safaricom.

Calls – now running at around 500 per day – are handled by a pool of 50 working doctors, with at least eight available to answer calls at any one time. Doctors provide advice, but do not prescribe. Statistics so far suggest that 60% of the callers are women, and that many callers raise issues they consider embarrassing (discharge, erectile dysfunction, pregnancy issues). The doctors can handle around 50% of cases, referring around 45% of callers to other medical services to confirm a diagnosis and treatment. “There are clients who are trying to find out if they need to put their savings into getting a bus and seeing a doctor,” says Ms Ojiambo. Less than 1% of calls have been emergencies. Dr Polly Okello, co-founder and director of Call-a-Doc says the service is designed not just to provide basic health advice to poor Kenyans, but also to relieve the pressure on Kenyan doctors. “We get so many people with small issues at my hospital, our outpatient load could be much reduced”.

Safaricom and Call-a-Doc aim to bring down the costs of a call by expanding the service, and through partnerships with other organisations including NGOs – some of whom have already expressed interest in supporting services around specific illnesses such as HIV and malaria.

What communication means to survivors

All the evidence suggests that communication matters more than ever to affected communities, especially communications technology, and especially in the hours and days immediately after a disaster. This is shown at its most basic level by the financial investment that even the poorest are willing to make in communications technology. In Haiti, the going rate for phone charging on the streets of Port au Prince immediately after the earthquake was 40 gourdes or one US dollar – the average daily income – for just 15 minutes of charge time.²² In Somalia – one of the most under-developed countries in the world and a failed state for nearly 20 years – demand for mobile phones has generated one of the most advanced telecommunications sectors in Africa, with 11 operators.

“While aid agencies hesitate, local communities are using communications technology to reshape the way they prepare for and respond to emergencies.”

Such anecdotal evidence is borne out by global research. According to the International Telecommunications Union, people in the developing world spend 17.5 per cent of their very limited income on information

communication technology (compared with just 1.5 per cent in developed countries). Given the scarce resources of the poor, this is a powerful indication of the premium those in developing countries place on communication. Similarly, the global growth market for mobile internet services and the use of social media is now centred in the developing world.

Why is this? Why do even the poorest people value communication technology so highly? The principle that information is a vital form of assistance for those affected by disaster is now established, if not acted on sufficiently by aid agencies. Research in recent years, however, has deepened understanding of the true value and conception of communication to disaster survivors.

While responders tend to see communication as a process either of delivering information (‘messaging’) or extracting it, disaster survivors seem to see the ability to communicate and the process of communication itself as every bit as important as the information delivered.

In Haiti, for example, users of an IFRC phone hotline in one camp expressed limited satisfaction with the information provided by the hotline (45 per cent of users interviewed) but were, nevertheless, highly appreciative of the communication service provided (85 per cent expressed satisfaction). The evaluation of IFRC’s communication work in Haiti also noted the importance Haitians placed on having conversations (in creole, “*ti parle*”) rather than simply acquiring information.²³ This reflects a consistent thread in research carried out by the Listening Project, which has spoken to over 5,000 recipients of international assistance from over 20 countries to date. One of the most consistent findings of the Project overall is the importance to communities of listening and of the communication process.²⁴

These findings suggest, first, that communication has a strong psychosocial dimension that can to some extent (as the IFRC example demonstrates) be captured in evaluative processes. Second, it suggests that the benefits of effective two-way communication for organisations – as opposed to an approach based on mere information exchange – are considerable. As the Listening Project heard again and again in the many different countries in which they carried out

research, “Listening is seen as an act of respect”.²⁵

There is also growing evidence that communities in emergencies are adept at leveraging communications technology to organise their own responses. Both the Radio 1 family reunification system and the Jalin Merapi network are examples of local groups that use networks rooted in community systems but that leverage Twitter, Facebook and local radio in a highly sophisticated fashion to organise and manage local responses to disasters. Neither has involved international agencies or local authorities in any significant way.

By using communications technology, survivors can also connect with other forms of support; family and friends in the diaspora, in particular, mobilise help and organise their own relief efforts on a real time basis. One example is the much-cited phenomenon of earthquake survivors being able to use phones when they are trapped under buildings to alert others to their plight. After the Haiti earthquake, discussion of this has focused primarily on whether and how USAR teams can use such incoming information to identify and help survivors. The greatest significance to Haitians, by contrast, was that they could connect with friends and neighbours to come their aid. Communications technology is empowering first responders in new and extremely potent ways that are, at present, little understood by international humanitarians. While aid agencies hesitate, local communities are using communications technology to reshape the way they prepare for and respond to emergencies.

What communication means to the aid agency

One welcome change over recent years is the growing evidence that those agencies that do invest in meaningful communication with affected communities reap a wide range of benefits. Research from Humanitarian Accountability Partnership, among others, suggests that designing operational approaches with this in mind can bear considerable fruit for agencies. The communication process becomes central to effective relationships, mitigating conflict and identifying and preventing rumours and misunderstandings. HAP’s research in Haiti in 2011 found that “Overall, agencies that employed an integrated approach to communicating and engaging with disaster-affected communities were viewed more positively by beneficiaries than those that did not”.²⁶ In Haiti, operational staff who had the benefit of working alongside dedicated expert communication staff commented unanimously that this support had enhanced their work and facilitated project delivery.

This is, to some extent, a question of good programming and project design, and many experienced humanitarians are already to some extent aware of the central importance of effective communication to their work. In practice, however, few have the expertise or the time for, adequate analysis of the communication environment or, as importantly, the funding to design and manage effective communication.

Operational staff from agencies that have employed dedicated communications staff have stressed how this added value, with communication staff able to put time and resources that are not available to operational staff into delivery, and to manage the outsourcing of some services (such as a call centre) to the private sector. Some described this support as essential to service delivery



projects, with IOM in particular commenting that camp registration would have been “impossible” without support from communication. These staff often saw the value of communication in terms of improving community relationships, mitigating conflict and, in particular, materially improving service delivery.

Another significant trend in recent years has been that of agencies implementing feedback systems. Research in Aceh and Sri Lanka in 2006, cited in the previous Left in the Dark paper, found that many agencies expressed similar concerns about establishing feedback systems: that they would not be able to answer questions asked, that they did not have the skills or capacity to manage the anticipated volume of inputs and that they were unequipped to deal with people who would (it is assumed) be both angry and critical.

Four years later, such beliefs remain entrenched; fear appears to be the major factor in aid agencies deciding against establishing mechanisms that would allow survivors to feed back to them, despite the lack of evidence that this would be the case. It is interesting to note that in Haiti

(as elsewhere), these problems were not experienced to the degree expected by agencies who actually set up feedback systems. Several, including Oxfam, found that assistance from technology (the automatic management of SMS systems for example) and dedicated management by local staff (just one dedicated local staff member in the case of Oxfam) was enough to cope with demand.

Others, such as IFRC, outsourced management of a call centre to a local company, a process that required considerable investment in capacity development and dialogue but that resulted in an excellent service that was greatly appreciated by communities and staff alike.²⁷

Agencies consulted by the authors that had established feedback systems reported positive comments as well as critique from survivors. In the case of Danish Refugee Council, for example, staff expected to be inundated with criticism. To their surprise more than half of the SMSs they received via their feedback system, established in late 2011,

Above With a plough in one hand and a phone in the other, a farmer makes the most of the boom in access to mobile technology.

“Those agencies that do invest in meaningful communication with affected communities reap a wide range of benefits.”

have been positive, with people thanking the agency for their assistance (see case study box below). Many other agencies reported receiving fewer 'difficult' questions than anticipated. They also stressed, however, the need for a systematic and resourced approach to feedback, and the need to tackle the question of how to refer those who contact them on to other agencies better placed to respond to or meet their needs. These experiences suggest that the concerns expressed by agencies about feedback mechanisms may be far less of a problem in reality than is commonly assumed, and that the nature of interaction is complex, badly understood at present and would benefit from more research. But these experiences,

coupled with anecdotal evidence, suggest that survivors of disasters expect increasingly to interact with aid providers. Humanitarian agencies may benefit from a less cautious approach in this area.

Where is communication on today's humanitarian map?

The seismic shift in communication generated by increased access to communications technology is changing the world in which humanitarians work. However, the steps humanitarian responders are taking to improve communications are insufficient, largely because this first requires changes in perspective and in organisational commitment and resourcing.

The changing communication environment makes it more essential than ever to take these steps and adapt to this new world, not just to improve communication, but to have any chance of operating at all in the humanitarian responses of the future. As noted at the start of this paper, there has been some progress on communication within aid agencies but it remains limited, as shown by recent studies of disaster responses and the needs of affected communities. An analysis of displaced Ivorians in 2011 found that communication was a systematically neglected part of the response, and that "much greater information to displaced people is needed".²⁸ A recent assessment in Dadaab camp in Kenya by Internews (a camp that has been established for over 15 years) found that more than 70 per cent of newly arrived refugees lacked information on how to register for aid or locate missing family members, and that "serious communication gaps between the humanitarian sector and refugees in Dadaab are increasing suffering and putting lives at risk".²⁹

This section looks at the most pertinent developments and the challenges in communication with affected communities, providing a 'snapshot' of the sector at present and making recommendations regarding strategic priorities and next steps.

Unfortunately, the reasons why so little systematic communication work takes place, and why so many communication needs remain, have changed little since they were outlined in the original *Left in the Dark* paper, including insufficient understanding or investment in communication, and lack of recognition and support from the humanitarian sector. The experience of the past few years has reinforced the idea, however, that it is possible to change this situation at agency level if the following steps are taken.

Hire and resource dedicated communication staff

This is still the single most important step that can be taken. Communication with affected communities is an area of work that is quite distinct from PR, donor relations or fundraising (all important in their own right) and needs to be supported and resourced accordingly (including dedicated operational budgets).

It is no coincidence that humanitarian agencies that deliver effective communication (and reap the benefits) are those with dedicated technical specialists in communication in-country. Of course, local capacity is as important, if not more important, than an international post. Communication with affected communities is a cross-cutting area of work that is actually much closer to programming than to conventional communications: again the best results on the ground have been seen in agencies with specialists

Feedback on community projects: The Danish Refugee Council

The Community Driven Recovery and Development (CDRD) project in Somalia provides small grants to communities for local projects identified and managed by community committees. In the interests of effective long distance management – and transparency – the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) has placed as much project information as possible online on a dedicated CDRD website and on facebook, including photos of the projects at key stages – a requirement for the release of new tranches of funding.

One unexpected and positive side effect of the online approach has been direct engagement from the Somali diaspora. DRC have seen a number of cases in which Somalis overseas have become interested in projects, especially those in their areas of origin, to the point of donating their own money to support these particular projects. "We have had people from the diaspora topping up the money for the community," said one DRC staff member.

DRC are now orientating their online strategy to target such members of the diaspora. "We hope that putting information online through social networks will give more opportunities to the diaspora that would like to support initiatives that take place in their community of origin, but with which they may not have strong links."

DRC then applied to the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) for support to establish mechanisms, primarily SMS, whereby beneficiaries could contact the project directly with feedback and complaints, and to support their social media work. All feedback is posted on the CDRD website, organised via the Ushahidi mapping system that is managed via one simcard installed on a galaxy tablet, requiring no special arrangement or set-up by a telecom company. The primary motivation was to open direct communication channels with community members without the mediation of gatekeepers – such as community representatives and local authorities – who liaise directly with field staff as a matter of course.

Feedback is translated and managed by two local staff members. DRC staff visit communities to explain the system and how it works to ensure everyone understands how to use it. To overcome problems of illiteracy, the project's Somali staff are developing partnerships between schoolkids and parents (as the children are often more comfortable with new technology).

"We see this as a pilot," said one staff member. "We also run a big wet feeding programme in Mogadishu. A system like this could allow us to collect statistics – if we get 500 messages from one kitchen then that will tell us about food quality".

To date the project has received fewer SMS than anticipated (under 100 in three months), most of them complimentary or saying thank you for support. One of the biggest challenges is working out how to respond and engage, especially with those whose information or requests do not relate to DRC's work. DRC believes that a system level approach may be needed in the longer term. DRC stresses that its work in this area could not have happened without support from the HIF, which has given them the space and staffing capacity to develop the software and models necessary.^{36 37}

tasked to provide support to all parts of the organisation, including operational delivery, M+E and transparency. In Haiti, agencies that did not hire specialist communication expertise found this to be an important gap, and several later recruited such specialists.

Recognise the importance of local skills

Communications systems are highly localised and changing fast, thanks to access to technology. Those who understand them best are always going to be local professionals, including local journalists, IT specialists and the private sector. In effective communication, affected communities need to be recognised and treated as experts and practitioners, not just audiences. In practical terms, this makes it essential to hire and empower local communication staff, and to recognise the potential of the local private sector as well as local media as partners. Aid agencies also need to note that local businesses organisations are capable of acting philanthropically or of implementing corporate social responsibility. The impact and post disaster capacity of the local sector should be included in rapid needs assessments, ideally carried out collectively by specialist agencies.

Learn to work with the private sector

Aid agencies need to work with the private sector, and especially with the local private sector in the context of

telecommunications. Many agencies that do not have the capacity or technical expertise to manage call centres, run a website or a Facebook page, or that want to work with SMS, find that outsourcing this work or developing a partnership with a private sector company is an effective solution. IFRC, for example, has now leveraged its partnership with the Voila phone company in Haiti into an international partnership.

The private sector, especially telecoms, is a source of multiple levels of technical expertise, but partnership with the sector needs to be handled carefully. Several of those interviewed from the private sector for this paper commented that aid agencies had little technical understanding of their work (including that they were businesses) and were unrealistic in their demands (wanting access, for example, to a phone company's entire list of subscribers). One excellent model that is facilitating such relationships is the iHub, a centre for local developers and tech workers in Nairobi that has now been replicated in several other African countries (see case study box below). But even in Nairobi where it has been open for 18 months, the iHub is notably underused by aid agencies, even though it now offers services that include a dedicated research unit.

“In effective communication, affected communities need to be recognised and treated as experts and practitioners, not just audiences.”

The iHub

The iHub in Kenya describes itself as the “go-to place in Kenya for all things techie”. This collective brings together Kenya's young developers, designers, web and mobile phone programmers, researchers and technology entrepreneurs, many of whom work from the iHub space in central Nairobi. The iHub provides an entry point into the tech sector for investors, venture capitalists, and partners (including NGOs), hosting events, brokering partnerships and fostering innovation. Founded in March 2010 with support from the Ushahidi foundation, Hivos and the Omidiyar Network, the iHub will shortly become financially independent, charging for the use of its space and services. It has now expanded to include an iResearch unit that has, for example, analysed a mobile



JONATHAN KALIAN

Wireless Application Protocol (WAP) tool developed by Refugees International to support family reunification.

The iHub is also widely used by the private sector in Nairobi, and is currently in partnership with the Nation media group, providing training in using web- and phone based tools including social media for Nation journalists. Other corporate partners and supporters include Nokia, Google, Microsoft and PesaPal. There are now more than ten iHub type models across Africa, with groups founded recently in Botswana (Wenovation), Ethiopia (Innovation Collaboration Entrepreneurship), Senegal (Bantalabs) and Uganda (Hive Colab). As iHub staff stress, each model is different, created by – and to work within – their local environments.

www.ihub.co.ke

Above The iHub in Nairobi, Kenya, is a place for innovation and an entry point in the tech sector for investors and other interested parties.

Analyse the communications landscape

One of the most positive developments of recent years has been systematic investment in research as a common service. The Communication Landscape Guides produced by the infoaid project, which provide detailed analysis of all available information on communications, media and telecom use, are an invaluable resource open to anyone online (see www.infoaid.org). Analysis of communication access and needs during an emergency, such as the recent study carried out in Dadaab, are also essential and serve

an important advocacy function as well as supplying data. The sharing of research at country level, as illustrated by Internews’s distribution of their regular survey findings in Haiti to humanitarian partners, is also important, providing agencies that lack the capacity or expertise to carry out such research with the data they need to develop strong communication work.

“Communication is a completely cross-cutting area of work that is relevant to everything aid agencies do and needs to be resourced and managed as such.”

Below Foibe Akelo holds the radio she took with her when she fled from the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda.

Research techniques also need to evolve. The new communications landscape is characterised by a complex interweaving of different channels: from Twitter to radio, radio to print, SMS to communities and communities to radios via SMS, for example. It is also notable for the extent to which local communities are developing different ways of using various communications tools and evolving their own channels. In Haiti, for example, local telecoms companies have developed a way for subscribers to subscribe to Twitter feeds via SMS – known as Twitmobil. Again, agencies need to understand that the true experts in communication are always going to be local. Analysing different communication channels in parallel (i.e. access to radio or mobile phones) is an increasingly outdated approach and one that can lead to misjudged interventions.

Think of the whole population, not just beneficiaries

Many aid agencies tend to think of communication as, primarily, a matter of how they share information with (and listen to) their beneficiaries in the context of specific projects. This is, in part, a result of the importance of the transparency and accountability agenda. While this work



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has obvious value, it seems to have a profoundly limiting effect in practice. Agencies that take this approach do not tend to think of either the wider communication needs of their beneficiaries (such as what they might need to know about other sources of aid) or the communication needs of the wider population. At best this means that needs may be unmet; at worst that agencies may contribute to an information divide, with only those who already receive assistance benefiting from access to information. Communication is a completely cross-cutting area of work that is relevant to everything aid agencies do and needs to be resourced and managed as such.

Focus on meaningful interaction, not message delivery

Where agencies do address the question of communication with affected communities, this still tends to be seen as a question of relaying information (often described as 'messaging') to an unspecified 'audience' through a channel selected as appropriate (usually local radio). It is to be delivered when the agency thinks that it has something to say, rather than in response to demand. In an environment in which, as noted, interaction is increasingly expected, this approach is becoming more and more out of touch with community needs. It also represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature and potential of many technological tools particularly Twitter, which work on a real time many-to-many information model rather than a simple broadcast.³⁰

Get better at listening

Listening benefits agencies, as well as those with whom they communicate. Any agency that does not monitor local media – including social media – for misinformation or rumours about their work or about important issues, such as cholera awareness risks, could be caught out by the speed at which information can move. When two international staff members were murdered in an INGO base in Mogadishu recently, for example, Al Shabab had the details of the incident on Twitter within 45 minutes, including the names of those killed. The agency in question was unaware of this, according to journalists who made contact with them at the time.³¹

Overcome fears around feedback

As outlined, agencies that elicit feedback have far more positive experiences than many realise. When disaster survivors are able to communicate with aid agencies their perceptions become more positive. One notable phenomenon is that many aid agencies are in fact now running de facto feedback and information line systems without realising it. While senior staff may make a policy decision not to run a feedback system (often because they feel it is too complex, not a priority or they do not have the resources), most staff who work directly with disaster survivors will be asked for contact details by those they interact with, and will give their own personal mobile numbers. All community mobilisers interviewed for research in Haiti reported passing on their numbers, echoing research in Aceh and other locations.³² Staff who give out their numbers report receiving phone calls at unsocial hours from desperate survivors, being asked questions they are not equipped to answer, and being called on their personal numbers long after they have left an organisation. Those interviewed for this paper, and many others, say consistently that a formal system run by the aid agency would relieve their pressure and mental stress.

Kenya Red Cross and use of social media

As the use of social media in Kenya grows, the Kenyan Red Cross (KRC) has developed a strategic approach to work with this new phenomenon to support their beneficiaries. Strategies include using social media channels such as Twitter to support early warning of disasters and to gather information about serious incidents. Following the recent deaths of more than 100 people when a pipeline burst near a slum settlement, for example, the KRC used social media to advise people on safety measures, direct them to emergency shelters and to provide real time information to media covering the story. "20 million people in Kenya have access to phones and many use Facebook or Twitter – it's a powerful platform for us", said one staff member, explaining the decision to invest in a dedicated staff member.

KRC has also noted how much information about incidents comes in to them via social media. In some cases, KRC is alerted to incidents before the police or fire services. "We get alerts from volunteers via Twitter or Facebook," says one staff member "and with that we are able to act within our mandate, including passing the information to other agencies, the fire department." After a recent bus crash, for example, the driver tweeted KRC immediately, who alerted the police – previously unaware of the incident. While most alerts are still made by phone, KRC now has a team to monitor their Twitter and Facebook services 24 hours a day, in addition to the four people staffing the existing toll-free KRC emergency hotline.

The team uses social media to identify and respond to misinformation and rumours to calm a situation quickly. "During a recent fire at Kisumu airport, for example, there were many inaccurate reports about what was happening – and so many tweets. We were able to respond immediately with the accurate information via twitter before people panicked," says one team member.

Like other organisations that provide feedback and social media networks, KRC receives positive feedback including thanks and offers of assistance. Staff report that complaints are rare, and tend to be about ongoing issues (such as volunteers asking to be paid).

KRC believes that the use of social media will accelerate in Kenya, and is planning further investment, including formalising their current online network by developing a team of 'ivolunteers', building on the existing volunteer model at the core of the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement. iVolunteers will be responsible for providing support such as relaying information, retweeting and sharing KRC updates and helping those in emergencies get the information they need. The KRC communication team sees social media as being increasingly at the heart of KRC's work in the future. "It relates to everything we do, and enhances our understanding of the impact of our work. It has also really enhanced trust for us - people are able to see that we are there in times of disaster, and people are willing to give us support. It really improves our credibility. We can use it in so many ways. It is changing our relationship with Kenyans – it is changing the whole way we work".

Don't forget about people

Too often, technology is seen as a 'silver bullet' and the automation of information delivery and collection that it facilitates as the ultimate goal of communication. Veteran aid workers interviewed for this paper rightly caution against this idea. Face to face communication will continue to remain essential, and investment in trained community mobilisation teams one of the most cost effective an agency can make (as UNOPS found in Haiti, such a team can become the single most useful aspect of a project). Communication, whatever the medium, is fundamentally a social activity rooted in social and cultural mores, needs and structures, and the value of a conversation lies as much in its importance for trust and relationship building

“When disaster survivors are able to communicate with aid agencies their perceptions become more positive.”

as in the relaying of information in either direction. The success of initiatives such as the Jalin Merapi is based on the levels of trust, community interaction and person-to-person relationships on which participants can build. While technology facilitated and amplified these, it did not replace them.

Take a multi channeled approach

Communities find and share information through a myriad of channels and develop their own ways to manage communication, often transferring information from one medium to another as it moves around a community. A radio presenter, for example, may read out a story from the local paper on air, which was, in turn, written from information

“Like everyone else in an emergency, journalists need food, water, shelter and support.”

sourced on the web. Aid agencies still tend to try and identify the single channel that they consider most effective and focus exclusively on information delivery through their chosen medium. When asked if they had considered investing in a local Twitter feed or Facebook page, for

example, many agencies respond by saying few of their beneficiaries can access these social media. While true, this neglects the possibility that the sources that poor affected communities can access, such as radio, are run by staff who depend increasingly on web-based tools for their own research.

Good communication work is, by definition, multi-platform. It is about integrating media, non mass media and technology tools in a manner that is rooted firmly in an understanding of how communities approach information issues. This includes even the most basic tools such as bulletin boards. All available evidence to date suggests that the most effective communication work is multi-platform and based on an integrated approach.

Improve monitoring and evaluation

One of the most significant gaps that is emerging as agencies step up communication work in emergencies is the lack of monitoring and evaluation (M&E). The challenge is two fold. First, as with every sector in an emergency, communication faces huge difficulties in establishing any kind of mechanism in the hectic and overworked early days of a disaster. Second, because this is a new sector, there is also a serious lack of methodology and frameworks to capture and evaluate communication work in emergencies. This is particularly acute in the context of mobile technology and web-based tools: no models for this exist at present. For a number of reasons, attempting to adapt development methodologies to evaluate communication work is not appropriate – the complexity and fluidity of emergency responses requires streamlined, simple approaches that can turn findings around fast. An alternative model is emerging from the positive experiences that agencies such as Internews and the World Food Programme have had in recent years in systemising feedback from affected communities in such a way that it generates information that is useful for daily operations during a response, while creating a repository of data that can be analysed to understand impact (see WFP case study in Haiti, page 4).

There is great potential to consider iterative approaches to M+E in which data captured in a timely fashion (possibly every 24 hours in the early days) can be fed directly back into programme development. There is also great potential to use data generated automatically as a part of the communication process in the context of projects using web- or phone-based tools: how many people actually

call a hotline after it is promoted via an automated SMS, or SMSs, for example.

Although agencies can and will tackle this question on their own, it will require an agency or group of agencies to work on this on behalf of all actors in the sector to leverage the possible benefits of improved M+E in communication. Ideally, they would receive funding to do so. This also applies to the need to develop techniques to capture the impact of the communication process as well as the impact of mere information transfer (in either direction). M+E in communication is a long term project that needs to evolve constantly, particularly to take account of the changing technological environment.

Emergency support for emergency communication

Communication systems often collapse just as people need them most in an emergency. This includes radio and television stations, mobile networks and internet connections. People lose their phones (or are unable to charge them), their radios, their televisions. Restoring and supporting these systems needs to be a priority. In many emergencies, this can be as simple as ensuring that radio stations have generators and/or sufficient fuel to stay on air. Increasingly, it means ensuring that they have sufficient phone credit and restored internet access – vital to support their work.

The recommendation of the previous *Left In The Dark* paper, that wind-up radios be included in emergency responses as non-food items for distribution, remains both essential and unfulfilled. To radios can now be added solar phone chargers and/or phone credit. There is still insufficient recognition of the humanitarian needs of local media themselves: like everyone else in an emergency, journalists need food, water, shelter and support. Successful models such as the media support centres launched in Haiti by Reporters Sans Frontieres and International Media Support should be replicated – and supported – elsewhere. The restoration of mobile phone networks must be a particular priority, especially where people may be trapped (e.g. following an earthquake) or where further warnings need to be issued urgently about, for example, spreading floods.

In Haiti, planes carrying vital equipment for the local phone companies were denied landing permission at Port-au-Prince airport because their cargo was not seen as humanitarian.³³ This must not happen again. It is just as important, if not more so, for local people to be able to communicate with each other (and with the diaspora, particularly with rapid growth of mobile-based cash transfer systems) as it is for humanitarians to be able to share information. This work needs recognition at system level, as well as funding and expert support from media development NGOs.

Coordination and the systems level challenge

New challenges and opportunities are emerging at the level of the humanitarian system (both globally and in-country). The previous *Left in the Dark* paper commented that “the humanitarian system as it stands is not equipped with either the capacity or the resources to begin tackling communications challenges”. Sadly this remains true, even though the need has increased.

First, as more agencies invest in communication and the sector becomes more populated, the need for coordination is growing. At the most basic level, there is



a need for a mechanism at field level to: ensure consistency in the information provided to communities by numerous agencies (e.g. in the event of an epidemic); prevent duplication; coordinate campaigns across several different forms of media/communications networks; help provide access to research and learning in-country; and convene practitioners to establish standard working practices.

The evaluation of the only effort to date to introduce a staffed and reliable coordination service in communication – the experiment of the CDAC deployment in Haiti – emphasises the value added of the mechanism to partners, and the extent to which the system enabled them to develop their work, secure funding and work together to improve communication.³⁴ Unfortunately efforts to build on this experience and develop coordination mechanisms elsewhere have not progressed. These efforts should be ramped up to generate progress on this key issue.

Since communication is a cross cutting issue, it also needs to be considered at cluster level across such sectors as health, education and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). The solutions will, of course, be different for different sectors, but it is worth noting that in clusters where communications is seen as crucial, such as WASH, it is already common practice to establish, fund and support communication working groups.

There is also the question of information management. Access to information about a humanitarian response would be improved hugely if existing information management systems were opened up to local populations, with information provided in local languages and accessible formats. And how can information be analysed effectively

and shared across a humanitarian system in a way that helps local voices and perspectives feed into policy, advocacy and high level decision making? There is much to explore here with great potential benefit for both affected communities and humanitarian responders. One model developed recently is an Internews project in Central African Republic, which supports local radio stations in keeping audiences up to date on humanitarian work, and in the collection of information about humanitarian needs from their audiences.³⁵ This information is synthesised into regular reports shared among humanitarian partners (see case study box below). Internews has also just secured

Above A heap of mobile phones being charged in a camp for internally displaced people in Uganda. Many of the camp's inhabitants rely on mobile phones for communication with relatives and the outside world.

Building a communication network through community radio: Internews in CAR

An 18-month intervention by Internews in Central African Republic (CAR) has linked existing community radio stations – owned and managed by their communities – into an effective humanitarian communication network. Internews has formed partnerships with 15 radio stations that communicate through a coordination centre managed by the Association for Journalists on Human Rights, another local Internews partner. This community radio network now covers almost all of CAR, resulting in an effective two-way flow of information between the local and humanitarian communities. The network provides humanitarian organisations with timely (and sometimes the only) information from remote areas. With support from Internews, community radio stations are now communicating about the most pressing issues in CAR; peace, food security, access to basic services, health, religion and education. Internews has now received funding from the Humanitarian Innovation Fund to introduce SMS systems into the management of the information received and provided by the radio stations.

Right A man operates a repair shop for mobile phones on a table in a street in the area of Bhuleshwar, Mumbai, India.



FREDRIK NAUMANN/PANOS

a grant from the Humanitarian Innovation Fund to help stations integrate SMS into their work, thereby increasing their ability to share information with – and listen to – their audiences.

“Access to information about a humanitarian response would be improved hugely if existing information management systems were opened up to local populations.”

A systems level approach also needs to consider how communication work can support and draw on other systems level functions such as information management (for the overall response, especially the systems managed by OCHA) and advocacy. Clearly, the voices of those affected by disasters need to be heard by those working on humanitarian policy in-country (as well as

by those designing individual projects), and to be amplified by those working in advocacy. There is an additional challenge, slightly tangential to the communication question, of whether and how a humanitarian response

could and should run a collective complaints mechanism. This complex question involves fundamental issues such as mandate, management and responsibility and relationship with the national authorities. While the mechanics of such a system would clearly depend on technically strong communications systems, and any feedback/complaints system would clearly need a separate communications strategy to promote it, the fundamental challenges of running a feedback system involve complexities and challenges that go far beyond communication itself.

Funding

Funding remains a key issue. Organisations that aim to include communication from the earliest days of an emergency response, including the media development organisations, at present depend almost entirely on their own core funds, or funding from a bilateral donor. There is almost no scope for the main basket funds of an emergency response – the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), the national Emergency Response Funds (ERFs), or the Emergency Relief and Response Fund (ERRF) – to fund communication, which – like information – is not covered by the cluster-based funding criteria. Models for coordinated appeals such as the Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) also contain very few opportunities to recognise and support communication work. The only successful attempts to date (in Pakistan and Haiti, for example) have been included in the protection cluster, as this is the only cluster that mentions information needs. This is not adequate. Humanitarian basket funds, including the CAP, CERF and ERRF models, must find explicit ways to recognise and support work to meet the communication needs of people affected by disasters. Donors should also recognise this need and support it accordingly.

Jalin Merapi in Indonesia

The Jalin Merapi network was founded following an eruption of the Mount Merapi volcano on Java, Indonesia in 2006. Three community radio stations who felt that the reporting of the eruption by the mainstream media had been inaccurate and unhelpful to those affected joined up with a group of local NGOs and other radio networks to produce accurate information on volcanic activity for those living on the mountain's slopes. By the time of the 2010 eruption the network involved 800 volunteers, a presence online, on Twitter and on Facebook, and a hotline. During the first eruption on 26 October 2010, the team found that their online accounts – especially Twitter – had become extremely busy. Ten volunteers were assigned to manage the information flow: sorting incoming information (they agreed 27 hashtags to share information), cross referencing it and checking for veracity. For example, when one report came in about a need for food for 6,000 internally displaced people, the team checked the report for veracity then redistributed it as a request for help, a request re-tweeted by followers of the Jalin Merapi account. Within 30 minutes, the same volunteer called and said that enough food had now been supplied, and asked people to stop sending food – a message that was distributed by the team immediately. The work of Jalin Merapi continues today, using the time between eruptions to raise awareness of dangers and help communities plan for the next incident.^{38 39 40}

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