



Practice Brief: Communicating with Communities during the First Six Weeks of an Emergency Response

Purpose

This practice brief has been designed to provide guidance for staff working in a humanitarian response. It is based on the premise that **information and communication are critical forms of aid**. Without information and communication, affected people cannot access services or make the best decisions for themselves and their communities; neither can they hold aid agencies to account. When people are given the opportunity to voice their opinions and provide feedback this enhances their sense of well-being, helps them adapt to the challenges they face, and better enables them to take an active role in their own recovery. Information and communication are critical to ensuring that disaster-affected people are at the centre of humanitarian action. 'Communicating with Communities' (CwC) is the term adopted by the CDAC Network to encompass this 'communication is aid movement'.¹

This practice brief outlines the **essential 'core CwC elements' required during the first six weeks of a humanitarian response**. Many of the core elements are not 'new' to humanitarian response; however, while practitioners will be familiar with many of them, evidence from recent crises² indicates that CwC approaches are yet to be adopted as a predictable, consistent and resourced element of disaster resilience, response and recovery. The core elements aim **to place CwC at the heart of a response** to ensure that in a response, communities are better able to **access life-saving information, voice their needs, ideas and feedback, and make informed decisions about their immediate recovery**. They also aim to improve the effectiveness and quality of humanitarian programming.

The CwC elements aim to complement and support implementation of existing guidance provided by humanitarian quality and accountability initiatives including The Sphere Project, HAP, and People in Aid, rather than replace them.

This guidance has been **drawn from lessons captured from across the CDAC Network**, and wider, through field-level deployments, learning reviews, Member and stakeholder consultations and secondary data reviews. The identified core components have been designed to address common gaps and challenges at field level and build on identified good practice.

This guidance will help staff working on humanitarian response and preparedness to:

1. **Capitalise on existing and new partnerships** to establish innovative and adaptive information and communication channels which build on local capacities
2. Ensure that through comprehensive CwC assessment, monitoring and evaluation, **affected communities are able to drive decision making** as a result of improved access to information and better dialogue with aid actors

¹ Other terms used include: Beneficiary Communications, Humanitarian Communications, Communications with Communities (CwC), C4D, Communication for Humanitarian Action and Communicating with Persons of Concern, which are used, respectively, by IFRC, media development organisations, OCHA, UNDP, UNICEF and UNHCR.

² Gathered from field-level deployments, learning reviews, Member and stakeholder consultations and secondary data reviews, etc. across various humanitarian responses including Iraq, the Syria refugee crisis, Central African Republic, South Sudan, the Philippines, etc.

3. Enable stronger communication within affected groups and between affected groups and other stakeholders through **coordinated action and common services**³
4. **Draw on sector-wide expertise** to support effective CwC approaches which are able to respond to a range of complex humanitarian needs
5. Promote the significant role CwC plays in **improving humanitarian effectiveness** to ensure that all stakeholders commit to integrating it into the response planning and resourcing.

Guiding principles of CwC approaches

CwC encompasses a range of approaches and engages a variety of diverse stakeholders including humanitarian and media development organisations and technology providers. Collaboration and partnership underpins the way CwC actors work together to respond to the challenges facing humanitarian action. Whilst individual action may vary significantly from actor to actor, **all stakeholders share a common set of guiding principles which help shape their collective response:**

- Establish communities' needs to develop innovative, context-appropriate, approaches which are adopted to increase the quality and scope of the response
- Promote representative community engagement throughout the response to ensure that crisis-affected people are equal partners in, and agents of, their own recovery
- Ensure that the voices of communities – including the marginalised and vulnerable – are identified and amplified through consultation and dialogue
- Identify and build upon local capacities, to ensure that existing information and communication channels are complemented, promoting community recovery and resilience
- Forge partnerships to improve the quality and effectiveness of a response through the pooling of resources and experiences
- Generate evidence and learning to inform future programming, preparedness and response.

The core CwC elements described in this document will support practitioners to adopt and promote these principles, ensuring that **communities are well informed and actively communicating with those responding to the crisis.**

How to use this practice brief

The primary target audience for this guidance is **field practitioners responding to or preparing for humanitarian emergencies** that result from conflict or natural hazards. The guidance can also assist decision makers in their strategy development, planning and resource allocation. Donors can also use this to hold humanitarian actors accountable by ensuring that the core CwC elements are actioned; this will help donors identify the steps actors have taken to strengthen community engagement, promote transparency and establish feedback loops.

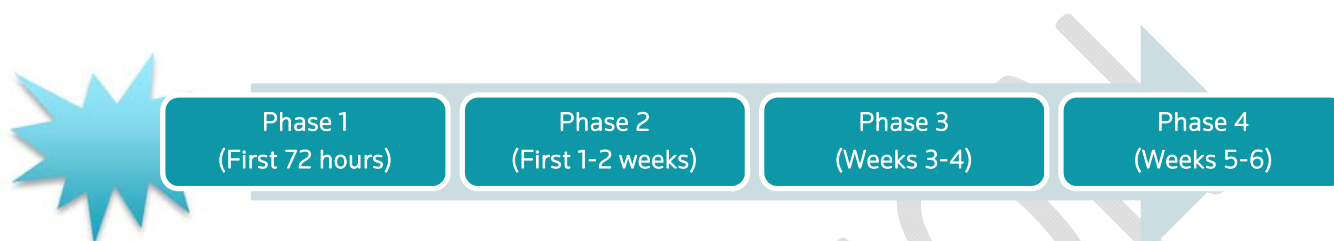
It can be used at project, programme and coordination level as:

- A **preparedness or response planning tool**, informing key activities, processes and resourcing
- A **progress monitoring tool**, used periodically throughout the response to identify change and inform further planning and decision making
- A **real-time analysis tool**, to identify CwC needs and good practice
- An **evaluation tool**, to support after action and evaluative processes and generate learning.

³ i.e. a service such as an inter-agency needs assessment, humanitarian liaison staff or complaints mechanism that serves the humanitarian response as a whole, rather than an agency

The phases of a response

This practice brief details the core elements during the initial period of an emergency response; for the purposes of this document, this has been defined as the **first six weeks**, although this will vary between contexts. Every emergency is different; for example, slow-onset disasters may allow more time for assessment. The phases below align with the ACAPS⁴ and CDAC Network's Guidance on Assessing Information and Communication Needs⁵ and aim to the support time-bound deliverables/outputs detailed for 'sudden onset emergencies' in the Humanitarian Programming Cycle (HPC)⁶.



Supporting CwC activities in a response – key work streams

The core CwC elements have been categorised into five inter-related work streams - each working towards a specific objective. Organisations and individuals may be engaged in one, all, or some of the work streams depending on their organisational background and the context. Jointly, all work streams, and all CwC actors, **are working towards the common aim of embedding CwC approaches into the humanitarian response.**

The **key work streams** are:

- **Speaking with and listening to communities** to ensure that communities are better able to access life-saving information, voice their needs, ideas and feedback.
- **Assessment and evaluation** – to ensure that through comprehensive CwC assessment, monitoring and evaluation affected communities are able to drive decision making
- **Technical Support** – to draw on sector-wide expertise to support effective CwC approaches
- **Coordination of CwC** – to enable stronger communication through coordinated action and common services
- **Advocacy and representation** – to promote the role CwC plays and ensure that all stakeholders commit to integrating it into the response planning and resourcing

Core CwC elements


The core CwC elements for each phase of the response have been developed to help practitioners put the guiding principles of CwC into practice at field level. They are outlined in the table below and expanded in the section that follows. These elements are generic and will need to be contextualised to the response. Where possible practical examples and recommendations have been made in the core elements guidance section below.

⁴ The Assessment Capacities Project

⁵ <http://bit.ly/1tUN5Qz>

⁶ The humanitarian programme cycle (HPC) is a coordinated series of actions undertaken to help prepare for, manage and deliver humanitarian response. This approach, agreed by IASC Principals as part of the Transformative Agenda, is based on innovations that have become good practice in the field.

The core elements for communicating with communities during the first six weeks of a humanitarian response

	Phase 1: First 72 hours	Phase 2: First 1-2 weeks	Phase 3: Weeks 3-4	Phase 4: Weeks 5-6
Speaking with and listening to communities	Rapidly (re)establish information and communication channels	Strengthen multiple channels for dialogue with communities	Establish (or strengthen) partnerships with local ICT providers and local media	Ensure information and communication channels are maintained
	Disseminate relevant lifesaving information through existing channels	Work with local media to ensure the transmission of reliable, timely and useful information	Support/establish 'safe spaces for dialogue'	Engage and strengthen local 'new' communication initiatives and actors
		Establish common service mechanisms for community feedback	Establish a common service complaints handling mechanism	
Assessment and evaluation	Conduct a rapid assessment of the existing (remaining) information and communication eco-system	Conduct a mapping of Government and local agencies capacity re: CwC	Conduct ongoing community consultations regarding information and communication channels	Conduct a real-time review of CwC activities
	Conduct a secondary data review to gain a better understanding of the pre-existing information and communication eco-system	Comprehensive multi-stakeholder information and communications needs assessment	Establish a system to monitor the 'local narrative' concerning the humanitarian response	
	Ensure that key CwC questions are integrated into multi-sector inter-agency assessments	Document CwC challenges, successes lessons learnt		
	Ensure that CwC learning informs planning and response			
Technical Support	Map existing preparedness materials and draw on resources for appropriate/prepared messages	Develop context specific and effectively targeted common messages for sector specific and cross-cutting issues	Conduct training on CwC with relevant stakeholders	Continue identifying opportunities for 'profile raising' and training on CwC with relevant stakeholders
Coordination of CwC	Circulate 4Ws for CwC	Establish a 'scope of work' for CwC 'platform'	Continue to actively support coordination mechanisms	Review (and if appropriate adapt) the CwC strategy
	Conduct a mapping of CwC focal points/agencies	Develop a common CwC strategy including costs		
	Establish a common CwC 'platform'	Link with cross-cutting initiatives, relevant working groups and clusters		
	Map intra/inter agency information 'referral' pathways			
Advocacy and representation	Ensure CwC is represented at coordination meetings	Ensure CwC is represented in sector planning and budgeting	Ensure that community voices are listened to at sector level, and used to inform programming	Ensure that community complaints are listened to at sector level and appropriately responded to
	Advocate for the importance of access to information beyond humanitarian agency work	Link CwC approaches with other cross-cutting initiatives to establish common themes/advocacy messages		
	Identify CwC funding opportunities/ mechanisms			
	Liaison with global level regarding advocacy asks			

Core CwC elements: guidance notes

Phase 1: First 72 Hours

Speaking with and listening to communities

- **Seek to rapidly establish information and communication channels** – the feasibility of re-establishing infrastructure/channels is context specific. Restoring connectivity and communication networks is a priority. This requires a holistic approach and during the first phase may include distributing wind-up/battery radios, mobile phones and solar chargers as critical elements of non-food item distributions. Pre-positioned stock may be in place through preparedness planning processes. This should facilitate community-to-community communication as much as community-to-response actor communication.
- **Use the information made available through rapid assessments. Relevant information should be disseminated through existing (and rapidly re-established) channels** – this should be useful, actionable ‘News-You-Can-Use’, for example this can include: information on how to treat water, immediately available healthcare services, planned distributions, updates on security situations and potential ongoing risks in relation to the crisis (aftershocks, flooding). Depending on the context, information channels may be through public-speakers, radio stations, community outreach and SMS alerts.

Assessment and evaluation

- **Conduct a rapid assessment of the existing (remaining) information and communication eco-system** – this may be possible through agencies’ field teams conducting rapid field assessments, through direct contact with media outlets and service providers, through the collation of anecdotal information or direct testing/observation. This will help rapidly determine which information and communication channels still exist/could be quickly restored.
- **Conduct a secondary data review to gain a better understanding of the pre-existing information and communication eco-system** – this includes mapping what preparedness materials exist (messaging/tools/response plans). The level of information available will be dependent on the context, key resources may include a ‘Media and Telecommunication Landscape Guide’ which were originally developed by the infoasaid project and provide comprehensive and detailed information on the media and telecommunications landscape in a variety of countries.
- **Ensure that key CwC questions are integrated into multi-sector inter-agency assessments** (for example the MIRA). The ACAPS⁷ and CDAC Network’s Guidance on Assessing Information and Communication Needs facilitates the systematic inclusion of key CwC questions in rapid needs assessments.
- **Ensure that CwC learning informs planning and response** – by quickly reviewing the available CwC case studies/evidence from similar contexts or previous emergencies key learning can be drawn upon and used to inform response planning.

Technical Support

- **Map existing preparedness materials and draw on resources for appropriate/prepared messages** – the CDAC Network Message Library⁸, a searchable database of messages that acts as a reference for those wanting to disseminate critical information to affected populations in an emergency is a key resource. Context specific messages may have been generated during preparedness planning and available in local languages.

Coordination of CwC

- **Circulate 4Ws for CwC** – this can be a simple matrix mapping which agencies have/are planning CwC activities and who are the key contact points. The frequency of how and when this will be updated needs to be established.

⁷ The Assessment Capacities Project

⁸ The Message Library was originally developed by the infoasaid project.

- **Conduct a mapping of CwC focal points/agencies** (including CBOs, local Media, and the government) – many agencies may have pre-established contacts and some information may be available from secondary sources. If disaster preparedness planning has been conducted this process might have been started.
- **Establish a common CwC ‘platform’** – this is to determine how CwC coordination will be facilitated during the response; existing coordination mechanisms, resourcing, data and personnel security are all considerations that will need to be factored. Examples of common CwC platforms include information sharing portals or CwC working groups. A preferred platform may have been discussed during preparedness planning and/or previous responses. Working groups could include a diverse range of actors, including humanitarian responders, local government, local media, telecommunications companies and others.
- **Map intra/inter agency information ‘referral’ pathways** – this is an important step for establishing information flows within the response – between sectors and working groups; this is critical for reducing duplication and confusion when communicating with communities, ensuring that dialogue is as effective as possible.

Advocacy and representation

- **Ensure CwC is addressed at coordination meetings** – this will help ensure that needs assessment, response planning and resource allocation reflect that communication is a form of aid in its own right. Ask for CwC to be included as a standard item on meeting agendas and ensure that at least one regular attendee is a CwC advocate. Identify when key moments in the response happen which can be used for advocacy, e.g. MIRA, Humanitarian Needs Overview or Strategic Response Plan.
- **Advocate for the importance of access to information beyond describing humanitarian agency work** (for example the political and security situation, the weather, additional natural threats such as aftershocks, prevention of diseases that are common post-disaster).
- **Identify CwC funding opportunities/mechanisms** – it is important to ascertain which funding mechanisms may be available for resourcing common CwC services. This may have been conducted during preparedness planning; local funding sources should also be considered. DFID’s Rapid Response Facility can provide funding within 72 hours once activated for pre-qualified partners. The UN - through the ERF - has previously funded common CwC services e.g. in Haiti.
- **Liaison with global level regarding advocacy asks** – providing a consistent, coordinated message to regional and global headquarters regarding the importance of CwC as well as CwC needs will help the common ‘advocacy push’. Key CwC advocacy messages may have been created during preparedness planning.

Phase 2: First 1-2 Weeks

Speaking with and listening to communities

- **Strengthen multiple channels for dialogue with communities** – strengthen and diversify channels for dialogue with communities to increase reach and built trust – this may include re-establishing radio broadcasting, providing access to printing services, community theatre, and engaging local religious leaders. Preparedness planning may have pre-identified appropriate channels and key stakeholders. The rise in mobile telephony, mobile internet access and social media use in emergencies continues to grow; however the reality of digital, age and gender divides should not be underestimated. It is important to consider the specific information needs and access to communication channels and digital literacy of women, children, the elderly, people living with disabilities and other potentially marginalised groups.
- **Work with local media outlets and/or independent journalists/citizen journalists to ensure the transmission of reliable, timely and useful information** – this includes working with key media outlets to improve their capacity to broadcast quality humanitarian reporting by better understanding relief operations, effectively liaising with aid agencies and managing/sharing audience feedback.
- **Establish common mechanisms for community feedback** – this should include the development of robust information sharing channels with communities. The response should adopt common (inter-agency) service vehicles for sharing information and collecting feedback, such as newsletters, radio shows, and hotlines. Information needs to be centrally channelled, analysed and managed.

Assessment and evaluation

- **Conduct a mapping of government and local agencies capacity re: CwC** – emergencies offer a unique opportunity to create and build strong relations and partnerships across sectors with non-traditional humanitarian actors such as media, local journalists or mobile companies; understanding the capacities of local actors is key to understanding how best to engage them in the response.
- **Comprehensive multi-stakeholder information and communications needs assessment** - just as more in depth needs assessments follow the rapid assessments, aid agencies and media development organisations need to partner to assess local information ecologies. Assessments should follow the principals of inclusivity and equity - starting with the collection of sex, age and ability disaggregated data.
- **Document CwC challenges, successes lessons learnt** – ongoing documentation will help contribute to the body of evidence and support advocacy, fundraising, planning and preparedness issues; it will also inform any response evaluation processes.

Technical Support

- **Develop context specific and effectively targeted common messages for sector-specific and cross-cutting issues** – as the context evolves, priority information needs will be highlighted. Sectors/clusters/working groups should be supported to develop common messages; with specific support for sensitive issues (non-refoulement, protection, gender, targeting of aid, etc.). In the design and delivery of messages the target audience should be engaged in order to ensure maximum uptake and utilisation.
- **Access additional CwC support as required** – identify CwC capacity gaps and identify means to request additional support, including draw down on relevant rosters to avoid gaps in being able to deliver on the core CwC elements.

Coordination of CwC

- **Establish a scope of work for the CwC platform** – depending on the chosen platform a scope of work should be established to improve coordination and effectiveness of the platform. Detail out roles, responsibilities, resourcing requirements and anticipated outcomes which are clearly linked to response planning. A scope of work may have been drafted during preparedness planning.
- **Develop a common CwC response plan, including costs** – based on all available data (primary and secondary) a common CwC response plan (based on a CwC strategy if one exists) covering immediate response and recovery should be developed. This should be needs based and draw on local capacities as well as response stakeholders' capacities; key objectives and actions should be clearly articulated. It is important to consider the different information and communication needs within the affected population (IDP, host, gender, disability, age, etc.). Again, potential strategies plans may have been discussed during preparedness planning.
- **Link with cross-cutting initiatives, relevant working groups and clusters** – information sharing between initiatives, working groups and clusters will help facilitate the development of common CwC tools (including generic messages, complaints response mechanisms, etc.).

Advocacy and representation

- **Ensure CwC is represented in sector planning and budgeting** – engaging in coordination mechanisms (e.g. cluster and working group meetings) and ensuring that response plans include CwC approaches is key at this stage in the response. This can include highlighting key CwC gaps in cluster meetings and the Humanitarian Needs Overviews, advocating for the inclusion of key CwC activities at sector level and advocating for a commitment from the Humanitarian County Team (or alternative leadership structure) to support CwC activities.
- **Link CwC approaches with other cross-cutting initiatives to establish common themes/advocacy messages** - by working closely with and in support of colleagues and initiatives on Accountability to Affected Populations⁹ including a greater focus on gender, age and disability across the response, including CwC activities.

⁹ <http://bit.ly/QBt3Ki>

Phase 3: Weeks 3-4

Speaking with and listening to communities

- **Establish (or strengthen) partnerships with local Information Technology and Communication (ITC) providers who can support CwC approaches** – these providers often have the capacity to reach people at scale, beyond those communities immediately receiving humanitarian assistance. In conflict-affected contexts this can facilitate communication with people in inaccessible/insecure areas and provide them with essential lifesaving information. When ascertaining if/how ICT can support the response (from basic SMS feedback systems to mobile apps), the target audience need to be involved in the design of products and services to maximise impact and be able to adjust the new tools to the changing environment on the ground. The most successful use of ICT tends to build-upon a communities' existing ICT consumption. These partnerships may have been established prior to the onset of the emergency, through preparedness planning.
- **Support/establish 'safe spaces for dialogue'** - dialogue helps manage community expectations and reduce and mitigate potential for existing and new conflicts; creating physical and media spaces for dialogue and exchange can be key to avoiding polarisation, victimization and politicisation of certain situations. Monitoring those narratives, and establishing how to counter them as necessary will be essential. Examples of media spaces include local radio stations or Facebook – spaces which have established relationships with the local population and provide trusted independent information, and a space for debate.
- **Establish common complaints handling mechanism** – the community feedback mechanism needs to include channels for secure complaints referral, including serious protection and child safeguarding complaints. In consultation with the relevant sectors rigorous protocols (including roles and responsibilities) should be established. Inter-agency mutual accountability must ensure that complaints are referred to a relevant party when they do not fall within the scope of the organisation who has received the complaint.

Assessment and evaluation

- **Conduct ongoing community consultations regarding information and communication channels (including trusted sources and preferred channels)** – it is important that CwC activities are assessed for their relevance and effectiveness on an ongoing basis. Understanding if, and how, communities engage with different channels of communication post-emergency is key; new channels may become available, communities perceptions regarding trusted sources may change and information needs will evolve.
- **Establish a system to monitor the 'local narrative' concerning the humanitarian response** – how the local/global media (including social media) reports on the response may impact local perceptions and mitigate/fuel rumour. Analysing the media story and changing local perceptions regarding the response is a critical way to track trends and pre-empt dissatisfaction/concerns which could hinder the response (in terms of access/security, etc.). In some contexts 'proxy-indicators' for monitoring community perception have been established, and alternative is to include 'community satisfaction' questions in regular monitoring activities.

Technical Support

- **Conduct training on CwC with relevant stakeholders** – consider conducting a dedicated CwC workshop for local NGOs/INGOs; where relevant tailor training to cover specific topics/sensitive issues.

Coordination of CwC

- **Continue to actively support coordination mechanisms** to enable complaints handling and effective feedback.

Advocacy and representation

- **Ensure that community voices are listened to at sector level and used to inform programming** – it is important that feedback from the community is channelled back to the humanitarian response and, when appropriate, planning is adapted in response. Examples can include changes to programming activities (distribution timings/type), re-prioritisation of services and the identification and inclusion of specific/marginalised groups.

Phase 4: Weeks 5-6

Speaking with and listening to communities

- **Ensure information and communication channels are maintained** – it is important to ensure that channels established during the first phases of the response remain open. It may be necessary to re-supply batteries through regular distributions, or alternative energy supplies as the context and individuals' needs change.
- **Engage and strengthen local 'new' communication initiatives and actors** – intra-community dialogue following an emergency is often supported by local information and communication initiatives; these channels are key for enabling communities to self-organise as they respond to each other's humanitarian needs. The response needs to avoid duplicating – or worse still marginalising – these initiatives and should seek to engage them. Examples of local 'start-ups' include theatre and dance groups, pop-up radio stations, graffiti art and dedicated wiki-pages.

Assessment and evaluation

- **Conduct a real-time review of CwC activities** – a real-time review will help identify if changes to programming/planning are necessary. The review process should involve all relevant stakeholders to ascertain the appropriateness, effectiveness and scope of the response. It is important to ascertain how communities have been impacted by the CwC activities rather than simply 'if they received information'.

Technical Support

- **Continue identifying opportunities for raising the profile of CwC and training on CwC with relevant stakeholders** – continue to identify specific topics/sensitive issues which require additional support/follow-up training.

Coordination of CwC

- **Review (and if appropriate adapt) the CwC strategy** – during the early stages of a humanitarian response the context is dynamic. For the CwC strategy to remain relevant, it is important that it is responsive to the expressed needs – including key issues raised through ongoing community dialogue. Jointly, the CwC strategy needs to be reviewed and, where appropriate, adapted.

Advocacy and representation

- **Ensure that community complaints are listened to at sector level and appropriately acted on** – it is important that complaints raised by the community are fed back to the humanitarian response. Where relevant, changes to programme design/planning need to be advocated for.

Preparedness

Preparing ahead of a disaster to be able to implement the core CwC elements in a timely and effective manner is highly recommended. This will help to pre-position relationships and build trust, work through details and make plans ahead of a response and ultimately launch activities quicker and better. As part of the preparedness process this guidance can be worked through to identify and detail further what is needed and how it will be implemented in a response, to contextualise approaches, build the necessary relationships and partnerships, and so on.

Feedback on this resource

This guidance is a pilot and is being field tested, before a final revision. We want to hear from you on your experience of using this guidance for preparedness and response so that we can improve it. Tell us your story of how you've used it and what you liked – or didn't like – about it by emailing katie.drew@cdacnetwork.org

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