

The report 'Are You Listening Now?' is to be published at the end of May 2016. It was funded by UK Aid through the CDAC Network with additional support provided by UNICEF, WFP, UMCOM and ActionAid, and by Save the Children and World Vision staff in Nepal, although this does not imply endorsement by the organisations of the research, findings or conclusions. The research was led by Margie Buchanan-Smith with field work conducted by Sarah Routley and Subindra Bogati.

In the context of humanitarian action Communicating with Communities, which is sometimes abbreviated to CwC, refers to activities where the exchange of information is used to save lives, mitigate risk, enable greater accountability and shape the response, as well as supporting the communication needs of people caught up in conflicts, natural disasters and other crises.



## Are You Listening Now?

The challenge to humanitarian aid of communicating with people affected by disaster

A Briefing from the CDAC Network at City University, London 5th May 2016



**'My house completely collapsed and our 14 goats were killed. My husband was not in the village, and I was afraid about my would-be baby. I was really in trouble and had so many questions in my mind. However, I had no idea who I should contact'.**

16 year old Kumari B. K.



The CDAC Network's research, 'Are You Listening Now?' considers whether, in the aftermath of the Nepal earthquakes in April and May 2015, people were getting information that was useful and relevant to their needs. The report emphasises their experiences rather than evaluating communicating with communities' projects. Affected communities were consulted about their information needs immediately after the earthquakes and seven months later (in November/December 2015).

The research represents a commitment by many partners and agencies within the CDAC Network to fill a knowledge gap about the 'added value' of such efforts, and to place affected people at the centre of humanitarian response. It is a rare effort to focus on what communities actually heard and what they really wanted, rather than what was done by individual agencies.

Fieldwork for the research was undertaken in five locations selected for their varying accessibility and contexts. Affected communities were asked about their information needs and what they had taken in through various channels immediately after the earthquake and seven months later. Consultations were held also with agencies about their different communication activities.



## Background

Nepal's mountains, remote villages and poor infrastructure provide a challenging context for communicating with the affected population. Agencies responding to the emergency launched a wide variety of communication activities, some of which utilised social mobilisers and networks established through long-term development work in the country. In the immediate aftermath a Communicating with Communities (CwC) Working Group was established as well as a mechanism (the Common Feedback Project) to act as a platform for the coordination, aggregation and analysis of feedback from the population.

## Main Findings

Overall, while there was clear dissatisfaction from respondents about the information they received, in the first weeks after the earthquake there was a better match between the information that people said they wanted and the type of information that humanitarian responders were providing. Seven months later much of the information that people wanted related to government support.

- Many affected people said that their immediate information needs related to shelter and temporary settlement, how to access relief, and how to stay safe in future shocks. These needs were partially met, although widely circulating rumours caused concern and confusion.
- Women in particular wanted information about future earthquakes that would make them feel safe and to help deal with trauma, while countering or confirming the many rumours that were circulating. They did not feel these needs were well-met.
- Women also wanted health-related information, for example, on caring for children, older people and pregnant women after the quake.
- Men had practical concerns: how to treat the injured, and how to deal with the dead (including animals), but also wanted information about government support.
- There were a number of cases of people not knowing how to use the relief received, for example water purifiers and seeds of vegetables with which they were not familiar. This was more of an issue in remote areas which had less contact with humanitarian agencies.

### The Most Useful Information

- The research shows that the most widely reported benefit of information received was when it enabled people to get access to the relief items provided by aid agencies.
- The second was new knowledge around earthquakes, including how they are caused and measured, how to stay safe, and the risks of people trafficking in the chaotic period after the earthquake.
- The third most-widely reported benefit was psycho-social, where information helped people to feel calmer and safer, for example in the cases where rumours were dispelled. Much of the behaviour change information, for example about health and sanitation, pre-dated the earthquake response although there were cases of women, in particular, gaining new knowledge.

### How People Accessed Information

The research underlined the difficulties when people are sending messages, or hearing information from new sources, those they were not used to trusting and when there are misconceptions about access to media.

- Initially most information came from family members and friends using mobiles and subsequently from external sources – although less accessible locations received very little information from external sources.
- Generally communities looked to the government and local officials for information, particularly when it came to issues around shelter and assistance payments, as well as finding long-term solutions.
- There was a preference in most contexts for face-to-face information exchanges and discussion, especially for information that was more personally relevant as people sought to rebuild their lives and communities, and this was the most trusted channel.
- Information about imminent relief distributions for particular communities usually reached people through their community leaders and local government officials. Only rarely had people heard about relief distributions on the radio, although agencies used this medium for this purpose.
- Information channels reaching men and women varied considerably. Men usually had better access to

information about the external context and external assistance, from local government representatives and from discussions in teashops, while women relied more on personal contacts for information – their relatives and friends as well as social workers and health workers active in their communities.

- Marginalised groups were generally less well-served with information, as were more remote communities.

### Notable points for Humanitarian Responders

- Although communities were used to receiving information 'face-to-face' many humanitarian responders favoured radio broadcasting. It was assumed that they were reaching large numbers of people relatively cheaply; an assumption that needs to be tested. This is particularly important as it is evident that certain groups in the population, such as women, the marginalised and the elderly, may have less access to radios or available time to listen.
- Where agencies (international and national) had a strong presence on the ground, they were better able to meet people's demand for face-to-face communication, especially if spending time in the community was an organisational priority and was adequately resourced.
- According to the affected people interviewed, agencies generally placed more emphasis on the outflow of information and on messaging to affected communities rather than on dialogue and listening.
- Although the CwC Working Group played an important coordination role, in practice each agency tended to develop its own messaging leading to some duplication at district level. There were surprisingly few examples of media organisations partnering with humanitarian agencies.

### Recommendations

Within the immediate context of the Nepal recovery and planning for future emergencies, there is a need to strengthen the ability of organisations to:

- Reach all population groups in Nepal.
- Collaborate with Government to disseminate information.
- Invest in face-to-face communication – and build on local people's suggestions for communicating with them.

### Overall the research points to a need for:

- Improved guidance for humanitarian workers on communicating with communities.
- Incentives for agencies and staff to spend more time with, listening and responding to affected people. This should become a donor requirement and would do a lot to put the 'human' back into humanitarianism.
- Integration of communicating with communities across emergency planning and response processes and within agency programmes.
- More efficient and effective coordination is required – and advocacy is required to ensure agencies understand the critical role of coordination when it comes to communicating with communities
- There should be more recognition in international humanitarian response about how communication within communities can help address trauma and psycho-social needs, lessen stress and be used to reduce rumour.
- Better monitoring, research and evaluation of communication activities in humanitarian emergencies.