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, UNCOM 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.
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.

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.

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 underlined the difficulties when people’s suggestions for communicating with them.

How People Accessed Information

- 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 this 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.

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.
- Convergence 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.