Message Library User Guide

In order to facilitate the integration of #commisaid approaches into humanitarian programming, the ‘infoasaid’ project, in partnership with a select number of clusters, developed a key resource – the Message Library. This document provides practical guidance on how to best use the Message Library to maximise its effectiveness with affected communities.

The aim of the Message Library is to have a set of generic, multi-sectoral messages targeted at crisis-affected populations. The Message Library includes alerts, advice on how to mitigate risk, what to do in the absence of any assistance, and prompts for messages on programmatic interventions/services available. Currently, the Message Library is available in English and will be made available in seven translated languages: Arabic, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Chinese (Mandarin), Bahasa Indonesian and Hindi. This translation service has been provided by the CDAC Network Member Translators without Borders.

The Library is not designed to be a ‘rip and read’ resource – instead it should be used as a reference for those working in emergency situations about what can be shared with affected communities during and after disasters be they natural or man-made.

Some of the messages have already been contextualised to specific emergencies. Contextualized messages are uploaded to the Message Library if they meet the following minimum criteria:

- they have been developed through a representative coordination mechanism (including activated clusters and key stakeholders such as the relevant government agency)
- a documented work-flow process for contextualisation can be demonstrated
- the messages have been piloted with multiple audiences (as per the Message Library’s terms of use).

For more information please refer to the Message Library FAQ section on the CDAC Network Website.

Using the Message Library Online

The Message Library is available on the CDAC Network website under Tools and Resources. The messages are searchable by a number of different filters.

Generic or Context Specific Library searches:

The Generic Library filter should be applied if you wish to search the messages that were developed at global level, in collaboration with select clusters. All the generic messages will soon be available in seven translated languages – the language filter can be applied when these are uploaded.
Refining Your Search – Finding the Right Message

To choose which search filter to apply, select one from the three in the ‘filter by’ menu (Threat, Sector and Hazard). The default filter is set as Threat.

Threat – This is related to the specific threat or problem that often occurs in an emergency. Examples include ‘Unsafe Water’ and ‘Diarrhoea’ – you can find the relevant messages using this filter function. If you have chosen to filter by Threat, there are no further filter options (as this is the most specific filter function).

Sector – This filter function allows you to identify all messages related to specific sectors. The sectors available for search options are CCCM (Camp Coordination and Camp Management); Education; Food Security; Health; Nutrition; Protection and WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene). Once you have filtered messages by a particular sector you can further refine your search by choosing the specific sub-sector (or issue). For example, if you have chosen to filter for all WASH messages you can now filter by Hygiene or Sanitation or Water. As a third and final filter, you can choose to filter by threat (please see above).

Hazard – This filter function allows you to identify all messages which have been developed for certain disasters. The options provided are: cyclone; earthquake; flood and tsunami. The secondary filter for this search function allows you to identify relevant messages for all stages of a response from Preparedness, Response and Recovery.

Contextualisation

As mentioned above, contextualisation is essential to making the Message Library work, and is key to effective and appropriate messaging to affected populations. By contextualising each message, it helps to avoid any potential harm that can be created by sending out the wrong information.

What factors should be considered?

- **The Do No Harm principle:** The ‘Do No Harm’ principle – making sure that people are not exposed to further harm during emergency response – is important in communication. Before disseminating any information, it is essential to consider whether any harm could possibly come about as a result. The risks can be serious: providing wrong or inaccurate information or using an inappropriate channel of communication may confuse or endanger people.

- **Language:** are you using words that the affected population understands? This is particularly important when dealing with matters of health. For example, western bio-medical terms for disease may not be accepted or understood. Find out how the local population describes the symptoms and then use their terms when phrasing the message. Also, try to keep the language positive and avoid scaremongering. Evidence shows that instilling fear is not effective and will only alienate audiences. Remember to use simple, every day words and keep it concise.

- **Existing knowledge:** knowing the level of education and knowledge of the people affected will help you in choosing and adapting the appropriate message. You may need to combine...
awareness raising messages alongside self-care or services so that affected populations are given enough information to make informed choices.

- **Cultural beliefs and practices**: knowing and understanding the cultural beliefs and practices of the crisis-affected community is very important. Some of these beliefs may act as barriers to what you are trying to achieve. For example, if a mother is not taking her child to be immunised against measles because the child has diarrhoea, you will need to choose the appropriate message that says it is safe to have a measles injection when the baby is sick.

- **Feasibility**: messages need to be providing information that people find useful and/or can act upon. There is no point suggesting to people to do something when the situation on the ground makes it impossible for them to follow that advice. For example, if there has been extensive flooding, it’s no use telling people to make their water safe by boiling it before they drink it because there probably isn’t firewood available to do this. This underlines the importance of knowing the context of people’s lives, what facilities are available and what the corresponding instructions should be.

**Translation and Pilot testing messages**

All messages will need to be translated into the language(s) the affected population best understands, preferably their mother tongue. Pilot-testing aims to ensure that messages are understandable, acceptable, relevant, and effective. It will also help prevent the dissemination of either meaningless or potentially harmful information. When choosing individuals for pilot testing, try to make sure all groups of society are represented, including women, disabled people, children, and older people. Consider too differences in economic status, education levels and rural/urban populations. There are a number of different methods for pilot-testing: focus group discussions, questionnaires, individual interviews or group testing.

**The importance of emergency preparedness**

If the country you are based in regularly experiences emergencies, a lot of groundwork can be done beforehand as an emergency preparedness exercise. If you are familiar with the types of threats the communities face, for example cholera or measles, you can take advantage of a non-emergency period to develop and prepare communication materials such as posters, banners, leaflets, SMS messages and radio spots. Once an emergency breaks, these can be quickly disseminated and can reach a large number of affected people in a relatively short space of time.

**Monitoring and evaluation**

Pilot testing can help ensure messages are understood but it does not guarantee 100% comprehension. Furthermore, emergency contexts change all the time which means the information needs of affected communities change too. Messages that are sent out in the first 12 hours may be redundant by day three. Monitoring therefore helps to not only make sure the messages going out are understood, but also to ensure that the messages reflect the changing information needs on the
ground. Generating feedback through participatory radio discussion programmes, telephone hotlines, community meetings, information boards, focus group discussions or individual interviews with the affected populations will provide the best information on how your messages are being understood and acted upon. Working closely with colleagues who are constantly assessing the situation on the ground is also essential for ensuring the continuation of successful communication interventions.

Needs Assessments

Rapid needs assessments are a regular tool for all humanitarian actors during emergencies. The information gathered informs what programmes will be delivered, when, where and how.

Selecting the Right Communication Channels and Crafting the Corresponding Message

Choosing the most appropriate channel is another important element in your communication strategy. The CDAC Network and ACAPS have developed Information & Communication Questions in Rapid Needs Assessments, and supporting guidance which is available on the [CDAC Network Website](http://www.cdacnetwork.org) which will help you to select the appropriate media or channel. Before you select you will need to ask yourself the following questions:

- a) Does the affected population have access to it?
- b) Does the affected population use it and trust it?
- c) Is the medium or channel appropriate for the actual message?

Once you have decided on the appropriate channel, you will need to adapt the message accordingly. For example, using text messages will only allow you to have 160 characters; participating in radio discussion programme will allow you to go into greater depth and to answer individual questions; public service announcements tend to last between 30 and 60 seconds.

People are more likely to trust information and act on it if:

- they are encouraged to discuss the information among themselves and to ask questions to clarify their understanding;
- they understand how they and their families and communities will benefit;
- the language is familiar and compatible with the local culture and social norms, avoiding judgemental or prescriptive-sounding ‘orders’;
- the person presenting the information or the source of information (such as radio or television) is well known and trusted;
- they hear repeated, simple and consistent messages from different sources.

Guidance on the characteristics of different communication channels can be found on the CDAC Network website.
Coordination, Collaboration and Partnerships

Emergencies tend to cause information overload. More and more actors are entering the humanitarian system and the result is that affected populations are either bombarded with information from many different sides or, more likely, they are left in the dark. Those involved in communicating with crisis affected populations should develop a mechanism on the ground to ensure messages are consistent across organisations and within them, and that communication initiatives are well coordinated. In this regard, partnerships are essential to successful communication interventions with crisis affected populations.

References

Action Contre La Faim WASH Manual, Chapter 15 Hygiene Promotion
IMAS Mine Risk Education, Best Practice Guidebook 4: Public Information Dissemination