Elevating communication and engagement in Sudan's growing humanitarian crisis

Priority actions for decision-makers and practitioners

August 2023

More than 100 days into the fighting in Sudan, the conflict has caused tremendous suffering for affected people and intensified humanitarian needs in an already insecure context. More than three million people have fled their homes and are now displaced within Sudan and across neighbouring countries.[1] Affected people are facing severe food insecurity, lack of services and skyrocketing rates of gender-based violence, with the most vulnerable people being left behind in areas that are increasingly dangerous.[2]

Communication, community engagement and accountability (CCEA) serve as a lifeline for conflict-affected people, empowering them to make critical decisions that impact their safety, well-being and livelihoods. Effective CCEA is vital for people to connect with one another and with service providers, and offers a form of aid in a context where physical access is restricted. Conversely, inadequate CCEA can propagate rumours and misinformation, exacerbating suffering, heightening expectations and inflaming conflict. Accessible, two-way channels for people to express needs and concerns to service providers improve aid quality, relevance and timeliness. **Simply put, communication is aid – and a right of affected people.**

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1   OCHA (2023) Sudan situation reports.

2   REACH (2023) Situation overview. 100 days into the conflict in Sudan: an emerging picture of the humanitarian impact, July.

Changes in Sudan's information ecosystem[3]

Since the onset of the crisis, several traditional and official sources of information in Sudan have ceased operation, or their credibility has been eroded by perceived political affiliations and connections to conflicting parties. With fewer official channels of information available to them, affected people are increasingly relying on alternative channels like social media and peer-to-peer networks to both generate and access vital survival information. This trend is particularly pronounced in Khartoum, where the limited availability of humanitarian services has seen people turn to social media to seek safety, solutions and guidance from peers both within the country and abroad. Indeed, a significant number of diaspora initiatives has been focusing on sharing critical information on the conflict and providing resources to those looking to evacuate Sudan.[4]

Many people have self-organised within their neighbourhoods as 'resistance committees' and other groups formed due to the conflict. These groups meet via social media, messaging platforms, calls and in-person meetings, with these channels providing vital localised support and information to communities. Trusted members share rapid and highly contextualised, first-hand information, but verifying facts is challenging, leading to the inadvertent spread of harmful or out-of-date information. It is worth noting that numerous neighbourhood collectives implement verification protocols to ensure that only individuals with a proven level of trustworthiness are granted access to these groups.

Internews uses social media influence mapping to understand in an ongoing way who are the trusted interlocuters and pages and, conversely, where sources and channels of mis- and disinformation are emerging. Internews is monitoring the evolution of a number of reliable public groups and pages across social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. These pages serve as valuable hubs for individuals seeking information and support and posing inquiries, and form an important digital community for those impacted by this crisis to ensure they can make well-informed decisions about their health and safety and plan their next steps. Interestingly, certain groups and influencers who previously centred their content on different subjects have shifted their focus towards addressing questions and disseminating information about the crisis to a larger audience – sometimes without formal verification (though this does not necessarily invalidate its accuracy).

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3   An information ecosystem is the 'complex organisation of dynamic and social relationships through which information moves and transforms and flows. [Information ecosystems] are complex adaptive systems that include information infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumers, curators, and sharers' (Internews (2015) Mapping information ecosystems to support resilience).

4   DEMAC (2023) Snapshot report of diaspora engagement in Sudan.

Priority actions

In the face of severe funding gaps that are challenging the capacity of humanitarian actors to respond to increasing needs, CDAC Network and in-country CCEA leadership call for all CCEA decision-makers and practitioners to mobilise around four priority areas.

1   Provide actionable information that upholds people's rights, dignity and agency

Actionable information that helps people shape decisions and cope with challenging realities can make a life-changing difference in a context where assistance and services may not be readily accessible to all. With ongoing displacement both within Sudan and across borders, people urgently need information on their rights, crossing borders (e.g. legal status, visa requirements and processing times) and access to services on arrival. Many affected people in border countries are also staying with relatives and neighbours in host communities and are at particular risk of being overlooked by humanitarian agencies.[5]

Internews' social media listening has found that health and protection have consistently been the priority information needs to date, though people are also requesting information on education, general financial support, employment opportunities and help with transportation and housing. People ask about what is available, where they can access it, how much it may cost them, how to get there, and who can help them access what they need.

Disruption in health service delivery contributes to people needing urgent information on how to safely access healthcare, such as what hospitals and clinics are still open and what services are available, including trauma health care as well as primary and chronic care. Where services are no longer available, people are seeking health advice on what they can do with the resources available to them.

Public social media and private local community networks also play a critical role in addressing protection concerns. They serve as vital platforms for swiftly disseminating early warnings, such as alerts about impending attacks or the likelihood of looting, enabling residents to proactively relocate in response to potential threats. These groups also facilitate the assessment of safety conditions for individuals who need to return home, whether to retrieve valuable belongings or essential documents or simply to take advantage of improved security situations.

Recommendations

➔ Communicate clear, actionable information on critical topics to support people to manage their daily lives. This information should be accessible and shared using people's preferred formats, channels and languages.

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5   SSHAP – Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform (2023) Crisis in Sudan: briefing note on displacement from Sudan to South Sudan, July.

➔ Work with diverse and trusted actors to share information, including community influencers, religious leaders, diaspora organisations and other community-based networks to disseminate messages widely including to hard-to-reach communities.

➔ Regularly communicate what services are available, when, and how people can access them, in the languages that people speak and without using jargon or technical terms. In addition, humanitarians should identify topics on which they can share information to help people make decisions when they cannot access services. This could include access to remote services as well as general advice on psychological and medical first aid. For example, some diaspora groups offer telemedicine and virtual medical care.

2   Leverage communication channels that people trust and use

In addition to the sudden lack of some traditional media, many areas within Sudan continue to face connectivity issues and intermittent internet access. Compounded by physical access issues and limited presence of humanitarian actors in some communities, groups of people are being left behind in an information vacuum. To date, the response has focused on the use of social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook as the primary means of communication. When humanitarian agencies share information on social media, the community actively shares this information among their networks, demonstrating it is seen as useful.

However, humanitarian communication to date has been dominated by one-way announcements, and engagement with the community is lacking, including responding to questions that follow any social media post. Unresponsive communication practices can contribute to an erosion of trust and confidence in the response overall, as well as the proliferation of misinformation and harmful rumours, which could harm service delivery and impact future collaborations with communities.

Identifying preferred channels will have to be a dynamic and continuous process with humanitarians tracking infrastructure changes as well as changes in community dynamics and trust. Poor network connectivity and internet access means that social media may not be the preferred channel for many people, underscoring the importance of identifying additional preferred and relevant options in consultation with communities.

Recommendations

➔ Review and understand the communication channels that affected people use and trust. Engage with the full spectrum of these channels, including public and mass media and non-digital forms of public information. Pay special attention to influential and trusted channels managed by the Sudanese diaspora.

➔ Provide consistent and ongoing two-way communication in a variety of online and offline formats. Ensure those working directly with communities have up-to-date information to provide.

➔ Continuously engage with and support media actors to build resilient communication and engagement strategies. Media actors have a unique and critical understanding of which channels are used and trusted by whom.[6]

➔ Invest in staff focused on accountability to affected people (AAP) and ensure that social media platforms are reconceived as a platform for community engagement, not simply announcements, which will ensure misunderstandings and misinformation can be quickly corrected and disinformation identified.

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6   For more, see: BBC Media Action (2018) Guide for humanitarians on working with media; Internews (2020) Local media and community engagement in humanitarian settings.

3   Strengthen collective CCEA and cross-border information-sharing for a coherent regional coordination approach

For many organisations, the Sudan response spans multiple regions – Middle East and North Africa, West and Central Africa, and East and Southern Africa – necessitating a regional coordination approach within and between agencies. Standardisation of CCEA efforts – including collective complaints and feedback mechanisms (CFMs) with clear referral pathways, two-way communication channels and cross-border information-sharing between agencies – is imperative to a coherent regional approach. At the regional level, agencies should maintain a close eye on regional tensions and the risk of conflict being triggered by the major influx of people into border countries, as well as knock-on effects of the broader economic impacts of the conflict in the region.

Recent good practices to strengthen CCEA efforts in the Sudan response include leveraging social media for information-sharing, working with trusted local actors, information analysis and media mapping. The role of the AAP Working Group for Sudan in coordinating collective CCEA and rolling out initiatives like training opportunities for members, coordination of mapping exercises and engagement with cross-border actors has also strengthened the CCEA response.

Recommendations

→ Understand cross-border communication and community engagement priorities and strengthen information-sharing and learning between relevant initiatives at the country and regional level to improve coherence and ensure data can be jointly used to inform programmes and decision-making.

→ Promote mechanisms for data access, sharing, analysis and utilisation at country and regional response level.

4   Collectively advocate for CCEA funding for diverse and local response actors

Severe funding gaps are a major impediment for the broader humanitarian response in Sudan. In addition, globally, funding for collective CCEA remains less than 1% of humanitarian funding, and the insufficient dedicated funds means that CCEA often remains a weak link in humanitarian responses. Yet resource-constrained environments often particularly benefit from community engagement efforts that allow humanitarian actors to effectively communicate uncertainty and changes in assistance, and that can mitigate potential conflict related to real or perceived resource competition.

In the ongoing Sudan crisis, the response is also actively driven by existing and emerging local NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) with access and relationships to affected communities. Despite being at the front lines of the response, these actors face limited funding and systemic barriers to their participation in coordination and decision-making processes.

Recommendations

➔ Support and coordinate with the current community-based first responders like neighbourhood and resistance committees. The humanitarian response should ensure these mechanisms are not undermined and are supported to serve community needs.

➔ Collective advocacy to increase direct, flexible and unrestricted funding to enhance access by local NGOs and CBOs, while simplifying reporting and due diligence processes.

➔ Document and advocate for the benefits of coordinated and cohesive collective CCEA efforts. Develop case studies and rationales to be used in project proposals.

Key resources for practitioners

– Flash reports: Sudan crisis social media listening – Internews *(Arabic and English)*

– How-to guide on collective communication and community engagement in humanitarian action – CDAC Network *(Arabic and English)*

– Assessment of communication, community engagement and accountability in Sudan *(Arabic and English)*

– Misinformed: Sudan's centralisation problem and the pandemic: an information ecosystem assessment – Internews *(English)*

– Information landscape dataset: methodology guidance on the analysis and information events and trends in humanitarian settings – ACAPS and Internews *(English)*

– Snapshot report of diaspora engagement in Sudan – DEMAC *(English)*

– Rumour has it: a practice guide to working with rumours – CDAC Network *(Arabic and English)*

– Communication needs assessments – CDAC Network *(English)*

– Digital access and barriers in displacement-affected communities in Sudan (White Nile and West Darfur) – GSMA *(English)*

– Social science resources for Sudan – SSHAP *(English)*

Accessible and Responsive Information Services and Engagement for Sudan (ARISE)

In June 2023, CDAC Network, Diaspora Emergency Action & Coordination (DEMAC) and Internews formed the Accessible and Responsive Information Services and Engagement for Sudan (ARISE) consortium with the objective of bringing together critical humanitarian stakeholders and knowledge to protect, adapt and develop timely CCEA systems, ultimately to provide reliable, timely and coordinated communication services to people affected by the conflict. Funded by H2H Network, the project builds on learnings from the 2022 CDAC assessment of CCEA in Sudan and the 2021 Internews Sudan information ecosystem assessment.

CDAC is a network of more than 35 of the largest humanitarian, media development and social innovation actors – including UN agencies, RCRC, NGOs, media and communications actors – working together to shift the dial on humanitarian and development decision-making – moving from global to local.

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