

USING APPROPRIATE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

In the initial relief phase of an emergency you must find ways to reach as many affected people as fast as possible with your messages. During this phase, communications systems may be temporarily out of



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INDIA: With the aid of a mobile loudspeaker system UNICEF animators demonstrate how to prepare Oral Rehydration Salts (ORS), part of a health campaign in relief centres for tsunami-affected displaced people, in the Union Territory of Pondicherry. The teams are promoting the use of ORS and good hygiene practices to prevent and treat diarrhoea and other water-related diseases.

commission. Low cost and low-tech communications systems are often the most practical and effective during such difficult circumstances. Megaphones, car battery-operated public address systems, community radio (also powered by battery or generators) are good ways to quickly disseminate messages to affected families and communities. Properly organised public gatherings and community or camp meetings provide further opportunities to quickly share information.

Choose more than one communication channel to help reinforce the information. Beyond using mass and small media, interpersonal and participatory community based media are indispensable channels to lead communication efforts aimed at improving or changing behaviours and in sustaining such behaviours.

To choose the right mix of channels in the different phases of an emergency response, consider the following:

- How do affected families and communities seek information?
- How do affected families and communities share information?

- Who are trusted and respected spokespeople in the community or relief camp?
- Which groups have access to generators, mobile phones, megaphones, public address systems, radio or TV? Which groups among the affected population do not have access to any media?
- What traditional, telecommunications and mass communication channels are available? If available, using these in an emergency is often easier and more efficient than setting up new ones.
- Which groups can you reach via community-based group channels such as social or religious functions?

Example of mixing communication channels

UNICEF India supported the following post-tsunami child protection initiatives in Tamil Nadu using a mix of different channels and strategies:

- Government officials attended a conference with multi-media presentations designed to educate them on the importance of preventing child abuse, trafficking and other harmful practices to children.
- A child protection awareness campaign was initiated where booklets, posters and banners with information on abuse and trafficking were printed along with phone numbers of a helpline to report child trafficking cases.
- Posters with relevant messages and Child Line hotline phone numbers were printed and distributed to schools and child care centres.
- Several hundred community "watch dog" committees were set up and trained to identify and report child abuse and trafficking cases.
- A state level action plan was drafted to respond to trafficking issues and commercial sexual exploitation of children and women.

Soon after the tsunami that hit on 26 December 2004, UNICEF Maldives collaborated with the Health Education Unit of the Ministry of Health to produce, approve, pre-test and disseminate a new package of materials on the proper disposal of dead fish and dead bodies, on mosquito control, diarrhoea prevention and treatment guidelines. This was done via fax and emergency supply channels. Videos were also produced and aired as TV spots and shown in hospitals and health centres that were equipped with Closed Circuit Television (CCTV). Radio spots were also produced and aired by the Voice of Maldives, the state-run station.

In the Maldives, 24 hours after the resumption of telecommunications services, TV transmissions were available on almost all the islands that have a high penetration of TV and radio signals. The director-general of health services delivered messages on how to prevent and control diarrhoeal diseases and on personal hygiene and sanitation via his daily TV address.

Useful communication channels in an emergency

Mass media

The mass media include print, radio, television and cinema. When operating during an emergency, these media can reach large numbers of people in a short time. The mass media are most effective when coupled with other communication approaches through which the affected community can talk about the new information with someone whom they trust, such as community opinion leaders.

Consider these points when you use mass media in an emergency:³

- Depending on the consequences of an emergency, the mass media can reach a substantial number of people.
- Enjoys credibility.
- Can be important channel for advocacy as it can reach and get the attention of policy-makers, senior officials and community leaders.
- Not participatory in nature.
- Messages may tend to be for general consumption, not taking into account the unique needs of the affected community.
- Might reinforce gender based stereotypes (e.g. portraying women as helpless victims)
- The affected population may not have access to radio or TV.

Small format community media

Small format community media are often the most practical, useful and effective in reaching affected people during an emergency. These media include community radio (generator or battery-powered FM transmitters), community bulletins or flyers, and loudspeakers or megaphones - stationary (e.g., those in mosques) or itinerant (connected to vehicles). In an emergency, you can use these types of small community media to quickly disseminate information to a camp or affected community. With community coordination and support, you can plan, conceptualise, produce and disseminate messages with affected community members.

Points to consider in using small format media in an emergency:

- Participatory in nature, involving all possible community groups.
- Requires how-to knowledge, therefore you need to engage participants in basic training.

UNICEF India used the loudspeakers from mosques to broadcast news about the measles and vitamin A campaign in the tsunami camps of Nagapattinam. During the first two days, more than 14,000 children were immunized and given vitamin A.

- Easy to set up.
- Needs oversight to make sure it is not abused or exploited by political factions.

Interpersonal communication channels

Interpersonal communication (IPC) refers to face-to-face communication. IPC can either be one-to-one or in a small group. IPC makes it possible for people to exchange information, express their feelings and obtain immediate feedback, respond to questions and doubts, convince and motivate others to adopt certain behavioural practices. IPC requires listening skills, the ability to empathise and be supportive. IPC in a crisis situation is particularly useful in counselling approaches such as through hotlines, clinic consultations, in training service providers and community volunteers as peer educators, through pep talks by specialists, and for facilitating group meetings where the affected community can share and discuss the issues at hand.

Peer educators

Peers are persons who belong to the same age group and social cultural background. In addition to promoting healthy behaviours, we can build local capacity by training peer educators in effective communication and participatory approaches. Even after the end of a emergency communication initiative, these individuals can continue to pass on messages through casual conversations with friends, family members and their wider peer group.

Points to consider in tapping peer educators in an emergency:

- They can be easily organised in emergencies but you must invest in training which takes time.
- They need supportive supervision.
- Affected individuals can both give and receive information.
- Does not need to be costly.
- If planned and supported well, can be an effective way to motivate people.
- Affected people may not have a lot of time in an emergency to participate in meetings.
- Sharing personal information may not be culturally acceptable in some affected communities and will require time to establish trust.
- Messages spread via word-of-mouth may diminish message accuracy.

Through the community-based approach, UNICEF Sri Lanka worked with partners to train individuals within villages to identify, assist and refer other community members who may need psychosocial support. UNICEF reported that an estimated 43,000 children participated in and benefited from this effort.

Participatory drama

Participatory drama is an important aspect in the preparedness and recovery phases.

This type of communication method allows the affected community to be directly involved in the drama itself. This gives individuals greater control, and helps them to explore issues and possible solutions. Participatory performance emphasises working with and from the affected community's own reality, and choosing their own modes of expression. Local people replace outside scriptwriters, illustrators, editors, directors and actors and become actively involved in creating and exploring solutions to a real life situation. Through participatory drama, you can encourage participation in the decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation phases of relief and recovery projects.⁴

Points to consider when using participatory drama in an emergency:⁵

- Stimulates critical thinking, stresses process rather than outcomes.
- Community can prioritise their needs.
- Develops a sense of community ownership.
- Offers a creative approach to deal with distress and trauma and thus supports healing among affected community members.
- Can be time consuming for the initial emergency response because of need to raise consciousness through IPC and relationship-building while it promotes sustainability.
- Castes, class, gender and other social variables can create different realities for some members of the affected community. Be sensitive to the cultural and gender-based specifics and act accordingly, by resorting to locally appropriate and innovative means of achieving equal participation.
- Community members may lack the commitment to the process if there are no perceived benefits.

Local folk media

Local folk media can include music, local art forms, local theatre, puppetry, drawing or dance. Many affected communities have their own traditional media forms to express themselves. Local ways of communicating are powerful avenues to stimulate psychosocial healing, return to normalcy and motivate affected families and communities to practice healthy behaviours.

Points to consider for an emergency:

- Information can be presented in the most culturally appropriate forms.
- Messages can be adapted to suit the needs of the affected community by local as well as imported experienced performers.
- Most folk media are entertaining and hold the attention of the audience, allowing them to be temporarily distracted from the realities at hand.
- It takes time to research on which folk media are acceptable to the affected community.
- Local participants need to be identified and trained on the messages to be shared.

- Technical information can be difficult to communicate.
- The actors may not be able to ad-lib or be spontaneous in acting out the local art forms.

Information, education and communication (IEC) materials

IEC materials with prepared messages can be conceptualised as part of a communication preparedness plan before a disaster strikes. You can easily adapt and produce these as part of your BCC programme provided messages, design and presentation are duly pre-tested with the intended audience groups. Once a disaster strikes, producing and disseminating IEC materials can be a quick way to reach a large number of affected people. This form of communication typically leads to 'awareness raising' of an issue, and serves to reinforce existing knowledge and



practices, such as the importance of hand washing, but this may not necessarily lead to changes in behaviour. IEC materials include radio public service announcements in print form, posters, leaflets, brochures, videos, flip charts, banners, and promotional items like T-shirts and badges.

Points to consider when using IEC materials in an emergency:

- Generic messages addressed to and pre-tested with specific audience groups, for example, on hygiene, can be conceptualised, researched, tested and printed before a disaster strikes.
- Easy to do in initial response.
- Good way to get information out fast.
- Awareness of message does not equal action.
- Messages disseminated can easily be ignored, forgotten or cause confusion.
- Each message needs repetition and reinforcement through other communication channels.

To prevent loss of lives due to landmines that might have been unearthed by the tsunami, UNICEF Sri Lanka launched a land mine awareness campaign. A total of one million school timetables with mine risk education messages were produced and included in the school-in-the-box.

When you decide on the communication channels to use in an emergency situation, keep in mind to mix media and interpersonal communication channels based on audience realities to achieve better results. Numerous communication research studies have documented that individuals are particularly influenced to adopt new or improved practices through interpersonal communication with their peers or with opinion leaders. The studies have shown that using communication materials tend to reinforce the effectiveness of interpersonal communication.