

Why Is Good Communication Important?

For social protection specialists, effective stakeholder communication takes on a heightened importance in the post disaster context.

By definition, the socially marginalized are among the most vulnerable. Their voices—which are difficult to hear in ideal circumstances—can become even more muted in the aftermath of a disaster. Therefore it is essential to identify outreach mechanisms capable of accurately assessing the needs of the socially marginalized people; involving them in decision making, and providing them with precise, timely, and relevant information that allows them to access services.

Communication Following a Disaster

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Post disaster communications are often initially implemented in an ad hoc manner and it is often not until tensions erupt during program delivery that a comprehensive communications strategy is developed and implemented. Such an approach undermines transparent and accountable programming, and contributes to corruption, abuse of aid, and ineffective implementation.

Moreover, the increasingly pervasive nature of communications technology means that communities in both high- and low-income countries now expect and demand interaction with governments and aid providers. Thus it is more important than ever that public communications and information strategies be integrated into all post disaster responses, particularly when it comes to issues of social protection. (See Box 1.)

Box 1. Communicating with flood victims in Pakistan

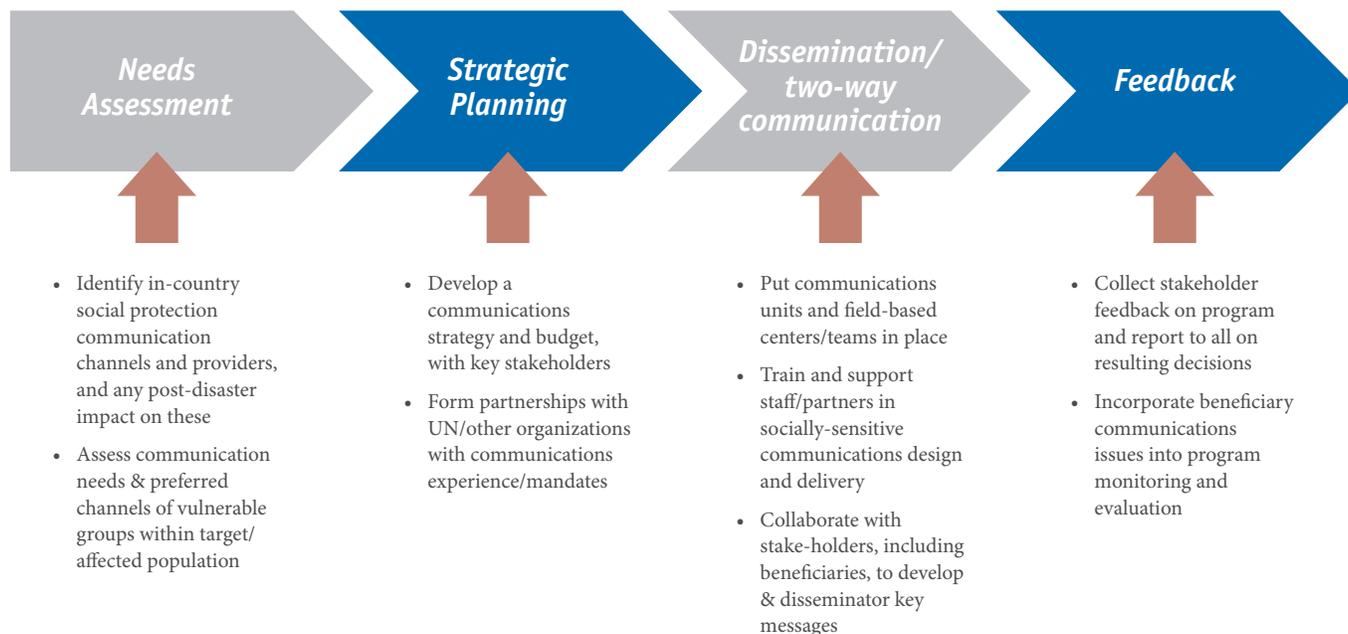
The Citizen Damage Compensation Program (CDCP) was a \$980 million cash transfer program that supported the recovery of an estimated 8 million people affected by major floods in Pakistan in 2010. Policymakers drew on the lessons learned from the program to develop an action plan for early recovery in future disasters. The plan emphasized the importance of having a communications strategy in place; training and supporting implementing partners, and providing clear, consistent, user-friendly information to the affected population.

Working with experienced partners, the government of Pakistan has gradually improved its population outreach, ensuring the selection of locally appropriate and accessible communication channels, the capacity to deliver and receive communications at all levels, and the presence of clear and consistent messaging across all audiences. A 2012 survey of flood-affected communities found that the CDCP had widely circulated information, reaching 68 percent of the population (IOM 2012b).

Setting up an Effective Postdisaster Communications System

Figure 1 summarizes the key actions required in developing a communication system for postdisaster social protection/safety net programming.

Figure 1. Key Actions to Establish a Post-Disaster Communication System



Assessing Needs

A rapid assessment of communication needs and gaps should be carried out with a cross-section of stakeholders, including vulnerable groups in the affected population, within one or two weeks of the disaster. The assessment can be conducted

as a component of a broader rapid needs assessment or as a separate exercise. Table 1 identifies the main areas that should be covered.

Table 1. Areas for assessment following a disaster

Subject of analysis	Description
Political risks, challenges, and opportunities	Includes such issues as perceptions of the government’s disaster response and plans and perceptions of how the government and other service providers have performed since the disaster
Stakeholders	Inventories and analyzes stakeholders who will be directly and indirectly affected by the social protection or safety net program
Media, communications channels, and local capacity	Analyzes how groups within the target population communicate formally with one another, as well as issues related to local capability and acceptance of media institutions
Social and participatory communication	Provides an understanding of informal systems and community communications practices

Practitioners can be tempted to skip the communications needs assessment during the early stages of a disaster response, when pressure to provide relief assistance is most intense. However, communications decisions that are based on unfounded assumptions and do not involve local stakeholders run a high risk of being ineffective and missing socially marginalized groups. The ability of the affected population to act on information depends on access to, and familiarity with, different forms of communication (OECD 2004; IFRC 2012). Initially, the consultative processes will be limited in coverage and depth; more in-depth follow up takes place once the immediate emergency period is over.

Program planners need to identify the communication barriers faced by different vulnerable groups and to target specific measures to overcome them. They must recognize that mainstream communication methods and tools will not be equally effective with all segments of the population and that community leaders will not automatically and clearly communicate messages to socially marginalized groups within communities. Cultural restrictions or physical disabilities may prevent some people from attending community meetings at which information is disseminated; illiteracy may prevent people from reading posters or pamphlets. Communications specialists must find innovative ways of overcoming such as obstacles such as making use of visual messages.

People who are isolated by socio-cultural and economic barriers are often more reliant on traditional communication methods, such as face-to-face communications or communications through local community groups. Where regular social protection programs are already established, planners can draw on the knowledge and experience already in place.

Planners need to choose communications means that are appropriate to the setting (Box 2). Urban areas are generally more geographically compressed but may be more socially diverse than rural areas. Messaging in these areas may need to be done using many formats and channels. In contrast, rural areas may be geographically disparate but more socially uniform, allowing for the use of fewer information channels (BBC Media Action 2012).

Box 2. Adapting communications to the setting in Haiti

During its 2010 Haiti earthquake response, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) found that large-scale message distribution worked better in communities with higher social cohesion. Where there was less social cohesion, its messages became distorted. Within the compressed setting of internally displaced persons camps, sound trucks, house-to-house visits, and SMSs were more effective than they were outside the camps.

Source: IFRC 2012.

Developing a Strategy or Action Plan

The communications strategy or action plan should be developed in consultation with key stakeholders. It should ensure that the affected population receives the information needed to make informed decisions and access program benefits and can provide feedback on the program. It should identify the objectives and desired outcomes for the communication activities, the audiences that need to be reached and the stakeholders that need to be engaged (Box 3), the key messages and most appropriate modes to deliver them, the human and financial resources needed to implement the strategy, the timeframe for implementation, and activities to monitor and evaluate the strategy or plan.

Box 3. Using field offices to reach beneficiaries in Mexico

A number of large-scale programs have used field offices in towns or districts to reach beneficiaries. The emergency response component of Mexico's Temporary Employment Program (PET) sets up combined information/registration desks within each municipality in which the government issues an early warning of probable disaster to help households prepare for the event and to advise on assistance. PET's emergency response teams combine postdisaster assessments with preliminary information sharing on the types of support available to eligible households.

Communications activities aimed at providing the affected population with information should not be confused with public relations activities, which aim to promote an organization. Such efforts dilute the clarity of messaging and can create resentment. (ARC n.d.)

Ensuring Adequate Delivery Capacity

Communications expertise is required to conduct a needs assessments and design and implement communications strategies. Preferably, the communications experts should be locally based, although the World Bank has made effective use of international expertise when necessary. The communications unit should combine communications, journalistic, and community facilitation skills. It should understand crisis communications, political risk management, stakeholder engagement, media management, internal communications, and coordination.

The unit needs to share its expertise with other social protection professionals following a crisis, in order to provide program context. For example, if commercial banks are used to distribute relief or recovery payments, their staff may need training on how to communicate effectively with beneficiaries who are not familiar with banks or financial instruments. Local government officials tasked with running communication activities in their areas are also likely to need technical advice and support.

Resources need to be mobilized at the local level to ensure effective two-way communications with the affected population. The use of trained community facilitation teams has been found to be one of the most cost-effective investments an agency can make, saving time and money that would otherwise be spent defusing tensions (BBC Media Action 2012). Such communications can be established by augmenting existing outreach mechanisms or forming partnerships with local actors. Partners can include civil society organizations that are trusted and respected within the communities, international organizations that are experienced in communications, and media/communications organizations. Pakistan's CDCP engaged the International Organization for Migration as a communications implementing partner, drawing on its experience during a 2009 civil crisis.

Selecting Appropriate Forms of Communication

A mix of modern and traditional communication methods should be used after a disaster. Modern communications technology was used effectively following the floods in Pakistan and the earthquake in Haiti in 2010 (IFRC 2012; Ljungman 2012); it has also been used to mitigate the effects of drought in Africa (Box 4).

Box 4. Mitigating the effects of drought through cell phone technology in Kenya

ActionAid—an international NGO that partners with the World Food Programme to provide food aid to more than 90,000 people—ran a pilot communication project in Isiolo, Kenya, as part of its ongoing response to a major drought. The project helped local people better plan their purchases based on the price information received, reduced the need for travel by field monitors to rural communities for face-to-face meetings, and increased the efficiency of communication regarding food distribution and field-level data collection.

The program provided 250 local relief committee members and 30 ActionAid field monitors with cell phones and solar chargers. Every week, ActionAid staff sent information on the prices of staple food commodities and livestock in the town market via SMS to the relief committee members, who posted it on a community bulletin board. The information was also provided through recorded voice messages, which are more accessible for the illiterate. Community members could leave phone messages about issues of concern and use the system to report disease outbreaks, weather patterns, and security incidents. Field monitors also reported on food distribution.

Source: ActionAid 2012.

Cell phone use tripled in the developing world between 2005 and 2010. Subscription rates rose 20 percent a year between 2010 and 2012 while costs dropped by more than 50 percent (World Bank 2012). The ability of social media platforms to operate in multiple languages and provide real-time communication services is a major benefit following disasters. Given the projected growth of these technologies and their potential applications, there is a clear need for them to be taken into account when designing a post disaster communications strategy.

Forming partnerships with the private sector can help harness this technology following a disaster (Box 5).

Box 5. Reaching Haitian earthquake victims by SMS

In 2010, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies partnered with a telecommunications company to establish an SMS-based communications system to reach hundreds of thousands of Haitians affected by the earthquake. It outsourced the management of a call center to a local company that provided free hotlines over which people could provide feedback on their aid. An evaluation found that although the program required substantial investment in capacity development and dialogue, it provided an excellent service that was appreciated by communities and program staff (IFRC 2012).

Although modern technology is transforming postdisaster communications, traditional face-to-face, radio, and other community-based forms of communication will continue to remain essential, especially for socially marginalized groups. SMS messaging can be used only where there is sufficient network coverage. The endorsement of communications approaches by community leaders, the use of local institutions and the building up of relationships through regular visits by program personnel instills trust in the information-sharing process—provided that decision makers act on the issues identified.

The experience of Pakistan's CDCP illustrates this point. A 2012 nationwide survey by the International Organization for Migration, a communications partner of the program, found that respondents, who were mostly poor and illiterate, rated word of mouth as their most trusted source of information. It found that many beneficiaries could not understand the posters the program had custom designed for people with low literacy levels on how to withdraw cash from automatic teller machines. According to the survey, 65 percent of respondents relied on assistance from a third party to use the debit cards issued to provide cash transfers. The program has since introduced financial literacy training (IOM 2012a).

Coordinating Activities

Social safety net programs should establish communication lines with the relevant disaster management authorities and the UN cluster system, when activated. In some clusters, it is already common practice to establish, fund, and support communications working groups. Coordination is important to ensure consistency in the information provided to communities by numerous agencies, prevent duplication, coordinate campaigns across several different forms of media/communications networks, and help provide access to in-country research and learning (BBC Media Action 2012).

Establishing Feedback Mechanisms

Feedback mechanisms, for both program beneficiaries and the broader affected population, are an essential element of program quality, transparency, and accountability. Feedback can be solicited through radio talkback show segments, phone hotlines, mobile information services on market days, SMS/Twitter/online feeds, beneficiary satisfaction surveys, and other channels.

Many decision makers are wary of using these mechanisms, out of fear of being overwhelmed with complaints or requests for assistance. But research has shown that the benefits of such initiatives often outweigh the costs and that feedback is often positive (HAP International 2010, 2011). Case studies from Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Mexico, and Pakistan illustrate the effective use of feedback mechanisms, including grievance systems, which have helped reduce inclusion and exclusion errors.

Both program staff and communities should be involved in designing feedback systems, in order to increase their

understanding and confidence in running them. Efforts must be made to assure community members that they will not be punished for providing negative feedback. Planners must also recognize that culturally appropriate ways of providing feedback vary from place to place.

Social impact analysis and social impact monitoring—two new processes used in World Bank-supported multiagency postdisaster needs assessments (PDNAs)—offer an opportunity to more systematically incorporate feedback into reporting systems. Social impact analysis is the qualitative assessment of the social consequences of disasters and postdisaster aid efforts. It highlights issues such as the exclusion of particular subgroups, social accountability, and local political economy dynamics. Social impact analyses have been incorporated into a number of postdisaster PDNAs since 2008, starting with Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008. Follow-up social impact monitoring was conducted in Myanmar and the Philippines following typhoons in 2009, and in Pakistan following floods in 2010.

Tips for Practitioners: Principles to Follow in Crafting a Communications Strategy

The following principles can help social protection practitioners communicate effectively following a disaster:

1. Integrate communications strategies and functions into program plans and budgets as a core area of activity from the outset. Communication is most effective when it is integrated with program design, delivery, and monitoring and evaluation systems.
2. Assign clear roles and responsibilities to the various stakeholders.
3. Ensure that communications is genuinely two-way, providing mechanisms for all key stakeholders to give, receive, and act on information. Approach communications as an ongoing dialogue between intended beneficiaries, the program's decision makers, and other stakeholders (including the broader public, the media, donors, and so forth) rather than as only the delivery of information to different audiences.
4. Take the time to become familiar with the local communications landscape and capacity, drawing on the expertise and knowledge of local communications experts, information technology specialists, and affected communities. Develop an understanding of the socio-cultural context and the preferred channels and methods of communication for different targeted groups. Understand the beliefs, culture, opinions, and knowledge about the forms of social protection being provided of beneficiaries, other people affected the disaster, and the public at large.
5. Involve beneficiaries in the design and delivery of the communications strategy. Inclusive communication depends on stakeholder and context-driven program design. Rapid needs assessments should include consultation with a cross-section of affected people on their issues, needs, and preferred methods of communication. Communication tools should be field-tested to the extent feasible.
6. Focus on identifying the most effective communication channels and methods to reach vulnerable people who face the most difficulty accessing information and services. Inclusive communication should be informed by social and gender analysis and be sensitive to social and gender issues.
7. Use multiple communication channels and methods, including face-to-face, mass media, and social media mechanisms, to increase outreach and effectiveness to a wide range of beneficiaries and other stakeholders.
8. Invest in community facilitation teams to support the delivery of communications strategies and plans. Draw on local expertise to the extent possible.
9. Be transparent. Ensure that communication is candid, easily understood, complete, and accurate. Given the widespread availability of modern communications technology, the beneficiaries and public are likely to learn about withheld information, which will contribute to a loss of confidence and trust.
10. Coordinate and collaborate with the private sector, the media, and other aid organizations to avoid duplication, inconsistency, or overloading of the affected population in communications activities, as well as to identify ways to combine or complement communications resources and messaging/feedback systems across programs.

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