

Access to information – inclusive or exclusive?

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Do new technologies increase access to information and knowledge for all – or are they deepening a technological divide?

Under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, access to information and freedom of expression are recognised human rights. Yet, in times of disaster, affected populations and displaced people in particular often have no formal avenues to seek or obtain information, to share their knowledge or to raise their concerns or complaints.

Over recent years there has been considerable emphasis on improving access to information to facilitate international humanitarian coordination and to guide relief and response efforts, such as OCHA's One Response¹ and, previously, humanitarian info web portals, the WFP-led Humanitarian Emergency Platform,² IOM's Humanitarian Call Centres, InterNews projects such as infoasaid,³ a range of SMS applications such as FrontLineSMS⁴ and over 500 Emergency

Management Group pages on Facebook.

However, there is often inadequate focus on addressing the information needs of national and local actors and disaster-affected populations and on accessing information and tacit knowledge held by the local population.

Findings from the 2006 Tsunami Evaluation Coalition⁵ highlighted the need to ensure that affected populations – particularly women and marginalised groups – have full access to information in order to facilitate their inclusion. They also emphasised the importance of building on and developing national capacities for information sharing. Lessons from the devastating earthquake in Haiti five years later are similar,⁶ as are those of



Burmese refugees at Umpium refugee camp, Thailand.

the 2010 evaluation of the Cluster Approach,⁷ which also emphasises the importance of adopting context-sensitive communication strategies and appropriate technologies in doing so. A 2008 publication by the Communication Initiative Network called *Left in the Dark* concluded that effective information and communication exchange with affected populations is among the least understood and most complex challenges facing the humanitarian sector in the 21st century.⁸

New initiatives, both international and national, are trying to facilitate better and more appropriate communication and inclusion of disaster-affected populations. Schemes such as Ushahidi in Haiti⁹ or Google's People Finder in Pakistan and Japan aim to facilitate the exchange of information within disaster-affected communities and with humanitarian actors. The Communication to Disaster Affected Communities programmes established in 2010 following the earthquake in Haiti and flooding in Pakistan supported their members with a number of strategies, including texting, radio and public information campaigns. However, in many rural communities the preferred method of accessing information is through spoken communication – through public announcements, meetings, events, radio and TV broadcasts as well as face-to-face contact.

Alternative means of accessing information

In recent years electronic media have significantly increased their role in facilitating access to information in emergencies. However, there are still many countries and regions within countries where internet access is low; for example, fewer than 1% of the overall population in the Democratic Republic of Congo or Central African Republic have access to the internet. Limited coverage can affect the applicability of technologies such as Google's People Finder, which had limited success in the aftermath of the 2010 Pakistan floods where internet access was poor. In contrast, the same application was highly successful in Japan following the earthquake and tsunami in 2011 as access to electronic media is considerably more reliable and widespread there.

The **All In Diary** is an information tool for field-based humanitarian actors, particularly those at national and local level. It is available in print and electronic format and in country-specific and translated versions, and:

- combines information in a practical field diary and notebook to enable 'hands-on' reference
- has regularly updated content
- keeps information to a minimum with links to further detail if needed
- uses simple language and clear concepts for ease of translation and adaptation
- is open source and offers free, unrestricted access.

www.allindiary.org

Globally, mobile phone coverage is generally greater than internet access, and is increasing. The average coverage in Africa is estimated at over 40% (compared with 77% globally) – but coverage remains very low in some countries such as Burma/Myanmar where it is estimated at less than 0.1% of the population.

There are increasing numbers of free mobile phone-based services and applications providing critical information, such as infectious disease reporting and earthquake or tsunami warnings. However, phone purchase or subscription costs still limit access for many poor and vulnerable groups and even reasonably high mobile phone coverage does not necessarily translate into high levels of usage for receiving humanitarian information. In a survey of over 1,000 people in flood-affected districts within Punjab and Sindh provinces of Pakistan, 27% had access to a mobile phone but fewer than 0.5% had received information from a humanitarian organisation.

Print or electronic?

The All In Diary [see box] is an information tool aimed at facilitating a minimum level of awareness and common understanding of key humanitarian principles, standards and concerns across all humanitarian actors. Evaluations of the initial project launch and subsequent country-specific versions of the All In Diary in Sri Lanka and

Zimbabwe provide valuable insights into the importance of print media and reinforce its importance in facilitating access to information for local actors. Despite availability of the All In Diary in electronic format, the majority of field-based staff in local and national organisations expressed the need for print-based material due to lack of or poor access to electricity, computers or the internet, particularly in the field.

Patterns of usage of the All In Diary in the field also illustrate the significance of face-to-face communication at community level, with numerous examples of how the content has been used interactively in meetings and workshops, in supporting staff inductions and training, and in community-based training and awareness raising, e.g. on HIV and AIDS.

As technological innovation increases, attention to the importance and value of traditional technologies and funding to support them diminish. But what is the impact on displaced and disadvantaged populations who are unable to access new technologies? Humanitarian organisations with a role in facilitating access to information face the dilemma of how much to invest in new technologies to meet the growing needs and expectations of international humanitarian staff and programmes, and how much to continue to support the need for print media in facilitating access to information for many local actors – and to work hard at convincing donors to support this. If they focus on providing web-based applications which are easier to maintain and low cost, they risk excluding a large proportion of local responders and affected people.

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1. <http://oneresponse.info/Pages/default.aspx>
2. www.logcluster.org/mobile
3. <http://infoasaid.org/> See box p37.
4. www.frontlinesms.com/ See box p37.
5. www.alnap.org/initiatives/tec/thematic/capacities.aspx
6. http://ochanet.unocha.org/p/Documents/Haiti_IA_RTE_1_final_report_en.pdf
7. www.gppi.net/fileadmin/gppi/GPPI-URD_Cluster_II_Evaluation_SYNTHESIS_REPORT_e.pdf
8. www.comminet.com/en/node/279690
9. See article by Imogen Wall pp4-6.