



Communicating with beneficiaries: a two-way dialogue

40 year old Shamshad cannot read or write. She does not understand the official national language of Pakistan, and speaks only in her local tongue of Sindhi. She and her husband Nasrullah earn 6,000 rupees a month (59 Swiss francs), cultivating grains and rearing livestock.



Nasrullah and his wife Shamshad, explaining how they received information about the floods. Photo: Majda Shabbir/ IFRC

Before flood waters inundated their village in August 2010, an official from the revenue department warned them a flood was coming and urged them to flee to higher ground. They decided to stay, building mud walls to protect their home. Nasrullah relied on his mobile phone and a television in a nearby tea shop to get information about the rising waters.





“But I preferred direct communication with relief workers or government officials,” he says. “Some of my neighbours said what was being reported on television was not true, but after talking with aid workers, I found out it was.” He would then share this information with his wife, who is not allowed to use the mobile phone.

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Getting essential and relevant information to individuals during disasters can save lives. Finding an effective way to do that is what the Red Cross Red Crescent considers just as vital as providing essential food items, shelter, health care and water/sanitation.

Based on programming that was initiated in Indonesia and developed further in Haiti, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) launched a beneficiary communications programme in Pakistan. It relies on a mix of traditional and modern communication methods to disseminate messages, including radio, television, print, SMS messaging, as well as face-to-face contact.

But it’s the two-way dialogue that makes this programme most effective.

“It is critical that we give people a voice,” says Caroline Austin, IFRC beneficiary communications delegate. “We have a responsibility to engage disaster survivors in conversation. Getting their input means we can tailor and adjust our programming to better meet their

needs. It means we can deliver aid more effectively.”

One of the programme’s first outputs was an hour long weekly call-in radio show, broadcast by volunteers with the Pakistan Red Crescent Society (PRCS). It was complemented by a one hour television show, both of which delivered information on issues like health and disaster risk reduction. Hosts also fielded questions from the audience, including callers, ranging from the rebuilding of schools to plans for distribution of relief goods.

Text messaging is in the pipeline. The use of SMS allows subscribers to receive messages and respond to them, thus enabling the Red Crescent to rapidly tailor an appropriate response to the feedback received. SMS is also a valuable tool in promoting proper hygiene and disaster preparedness, and can be used as part of a national early warning system.

Communicating with survivors of disaster is a relatively simple concept that is fraught with many challenges, as was borne out in a survey of flood survivors commissioned by infoasaid.

Overcoming gender discrimination is one such challenge when trying to reach women. In many rural communities, particularly in northern Pakistan, women are not allowed to watch TV or listen to radio. They cannot read pamphlets handed out by aid organizations unless the men have first read and approved



A consortium of Internews and the BBC World Service Trust, infoasaid was one of several organizations mandated to deliver important information regarding humanitarian assistance when the floods hit. It commissioned a survey and found that half of all respondents did not have access to any electronic or mass media; 85 per cent of women were not allowed access to electronic media; and 75 per cent received helpful information from a friend or family member through word of mouth, or announcements on mosque loudspeakers.





them. In general, men feel it is their responsibility to pass along information to their families and wives.

“This is why it is critical for female Red Crescent volunteers to be involved in programming,” explains Austin. “In very conservative societies, female aid workers can meet with women, where a male volunteer would not be allowed.

They play an important role in disseminating vital information on issues such as health and hygiene – issues that are most relevant for women as the caregivers in the family.”

Walking through her neighbourhood in Charsadda city, Red Crescent volunteer Asma Saabzari spends much of her time talking to women’s groups at the local health clinic. “Here, most women get their information by talking with other women,” explains Asma. “They generally like to communicate. They are busy with their lives, they are raising their kids, cleaning house and are basically unaware of what is going around them, in their town, country and even the world.”

Aside from face-to-face discussions, diagrams and simple drawings also work well when the population being served is largely illiterate, which is often the case as those hit hardest by disaster tend to be the poorest of the poor. It is vital to communicate with people in ways they can understand, and is something organizations tasked with helping the most vulnerable need to factor into their programming if they truly want their aid to be the most effective.



A volunteer with the Pakistan Red Crescent Society, Maria Khan, gathers vital information from Abida who has come to see a doctor at a health clinic run by the PRCS in northern Pakistan. Maria belongs to the beneficiary communications programme which uses face-to-face interaction with people affected by the floods to improve programming.



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