

## Chapter 7 – Role of the media in humanitarian and public health emergencies

### 1. Overview

About 250 million people a year are the victims of humanitarian emergencies, including epidemics, major accidents and natural disasters. Information is often unreliable in affected areas. Rumours, inaccurate information or the absence of news media can complicate evaluation of the relief that is needed. A lack of information and communication above all affects victims who are unprotected and disoriented. A media presence and good information not only help them to maintain a vital link with the outside world, but also encourage a desire to help the victims and the mobilisation of aid. The media play a crucial role when a humanitarian disaster occurs.

- The media can help to locate survivors and respond quickly to their psychological distress.
- A media presence stimulates understanding and empowerment. If victims are left in ignorance, they feel disempowered and have no reason to hope. Information and communication help them to recover their dignity as first-hand witnesses of the drama, capable of putting words to their distress and their needs. They become actors in their own lives again.
- Good information is also essential for defining priorities and urgent needs. Maintaining contact with the victims helps to promote transparency, mutual understanding and trust. Timely information can save lives, reduce the suffering sustained in a disaster and prevent additional suffering.

### 2. Measures to take

- Information and communication must be an integral part of the response to a humanitarian emergency. In each emergency, one organisation should be assigned the task of establishing and responding to the needs expressed by the affected population as regards information and communication.
- A media and communication package (“media in a box”) should be integrated from the outset in the emergency intervention provisions and should be operational within 48 hours of a disaster.
- The particular priorities of each emergency must be identified and the appropriate means found to respond to them.

### 3. Practical recommendations

- Use should be made of new technologies such as mobile phones and SMS.
- Radio can play a key role in establishing contact between survivors and rescue teams. Radio receivers should be distributed to the affected population.
- Radio stations should broadcast useful information in the local language. There should be regular programmes that provide updates on the situation, allow the population to express its needs and expectations, and help forge solidarity with the victims.
- Participatory communication, in which information comes from the affected people as well as being addressed to them, should include bulletin board announcements and individual messages.
- Journalists, both local and international, need to be protected. Around 1,200 journalists and media personnel have lost their lives in the past 12 years, mostly in targeted killings rather than accidents.

### 4. Procedures to follow

There are three essential requirements:

- I. Free flow of information as an immediate response to the emergency
- II. A start to recovery through consolidation of the means of information
- III. Long-term development, after the emergency is over

I. The free flow of information requires the mobilisation of various information sources including NGOs, local media, communities, the government and local authorities:

- The local media must be given information as a priority and must be able to transmit it promptly. They should be given the technical resources they lack and their access to news agencies should be facilitated. A network must be established to guarantee the best possible coverage of the situation and to ensure that the media convey the rights and needs of the victims.
- Local journalists' organisations should be given the help they need to set up radio stations. Volunteers and professionals should be enlisted to help run the stations and supervise content. Coverage should be centred on the problems that need an urgent response.
- Information should be specific, relevant, prioritised and impartial. Training of journalists is decisive in this respect. The information should be made accessible by means of appropriate programmes and should be provided in the local language.
- Professional ethics require that particular attention be paid to the dignity of the victims, that they be kept fully and properly abreast of the decisions affecting them, and that coverage be editorially independent and credible.
- The safety of the local media requires guarantees that soldiers, police and humanitarian organisations respect their work. Mechanisms must be established for the protection of local and international journalists. The media must also be made aware that humanitarian disasters give rise to turmoil and confusion.
- The population will benefit from the importance that is paid to local media that it trusts. The local media's infrastructure should therefore be treated as an integral part of the emergency intervention.

II. Various agents and factors need to interact to consolidate information mechanisms:

- Interaction is needed between local media, NGOs, international support for local initiatives, safety of journalists and the affected population. International actors must work with local media to determine common policies, evaluate ways to train journalists and establish links with journalists' organisations. It is together with the local media that affected communities can start the process of reconstruction. Promoting human rights, encouraging peace efforts and informing the population about their rights should all be priorities for the local media.
- The safety of journalists requires making governments aware of its importance, combating impunity in murders of journalists, and ensuring that it figures in social, economic and political programmes.
- Community media can provide considerable support for education, peace and dialogue within a population that has been marginalised as a result of an emergency. Young people can play a vital role in this area.
- The information and communication mechanisms established during the emergency should be available on a lasting basis for bloggers and those operating other forms of citizen media.

III. The existence of local structures, the creation of partnerships, the anticipation of future emergencies and UNESCO support can all help to extend the benefits of the provisions after the emergency is over. It is therefore important to:

- Assist the introduction a legal framework and regulations for these media
- Support the creation of journalists' networks and organisations
- Facilitate access to governments and communities for these media
- Promote the coordination and sharing of information about media development by means of a platform in which the United Nations, NGOs and others are associated

- Organise training for these media and their staff
- Encourage long-term sponsorship mechanisms for independent media.

The prevention or mitigation of future emergencies requires the creation of alert mechanisms staffed by people trained in communication that facilitate media access to information and are able to help the population anticipate this kind of event.

Useful links:

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/fr/index.html>

<http://www.msf.fr/>

<http://www.alertnet.org/>