Disaster Communications: The Need to Enhance Information Quality

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Introduction

A little under a year ago UNDRO hosted a conference in Geneva on Disaster Communications, many of you may have been there. The conference highlighted the technology of communications rather than the substance. To redress this balance I want today to address the message, not the messenger. I want to raise issues concerning what we communicate, not just how we do it.

The League as, I believe, the only NGO that stretches from village level in 147 countries to the international arena, is well placed to judge the international scale and changing face of disasters.

The number of people who are affected by disasters each year varies greatly, but the trend is upwards and has been since the Leagues' inception in 1919. This trend is bad enough, but what is even most disturbing is the escalating growth in the numbers who are vulnerable to disasters. At present the League judges that one billion people fall into this category. By the turn of the century a further quarter of a billion will have joined their ranks. It is these people who make up the constituency of the Red Cross Movement. Last year the League spent 130 million Swiss Francs on assisting them to prepare for and recover from disasters. This year the figure has already risen above 260 million.

In our practical field work, we increasingly find ourselves confronted with the causes of disasters, not simply in terms of natural agents such as floods, earthquakes and drought but in terms of their interface with human vulnerabilities: poor health, malnutrition, poverty and illiteracy. For us the purpose of disaster relief is basically the same as development; that is, to create a sustainable increase in the well-being of vulnerable individuals and communities. To return people to the brink of catastrophe after a disaster is not good enough. We may not be able to do anything to stop the earthquake recurring but we can design our disaster relief to reduce people's vulnerability to it.

But, this duality of disaster agents and vulnerable people, and the need for positive relief actions which look to the future to reduce vulnerability is not yet reflected in the way we extract and select the information we communicate about disasters.

Summary of Key Issues

To my mind this failure is reflected in three key communications issues which urgently need to be addressed if we are to create anything other than first-aid measures out of disaster relief. Namely: we need to take a critical look at the quality of the information we are handling, not just the quantity. We have to face up to the general failure of disaster agencies to communicate with and reflect the views of the disaster victims. We have to become more professional in our appreciation of the mass media's involvement in disaster situations and realise that we have a duty to ensure that it reflects accurately the nature of disasters. Let me address each of these issues in turn.

Information quality

Information scientists stress six attributes of information which contribute to its usefulness.

Clarity, Accuracy, Significance, Timeliness, Adequacy and Validity.

The qualities of clarity accuracy and timeliness are readily understood and their need is accepted by all, but significance, adequacy and validity require perhaps a little explanation. A report received recently at the League spoke of the arrival of 15 famine-displaced families per week at a local town. The information is accurate and clear and it was transmitted speedily, but is it significant? Does this rate of migration constitute a disaster or is it the norm for that poverty stricken area of the world? To judge the significance of information one needs standards and baselines against which to measure it. How can we set those standards and measure those baselines unless we know something of the disaster-prone community before disaster strikes?

Is the information we receive about disasters adequate as a decisions making basis? To know that 1,000 people are feared trapped after an earthquake is of little value to us unless we also know the type of construction used in the buildings and something about the rescue and medical facilities available locally.

Finally, let us look at validity. Information may possess all the qualities mentioned above, but if it lacks validity it does nothing to aid the disaster victims. Flood reports from Bangladesh which concentrate upon damage in the towns are simply irrelevant to the plight of the most vulnerable and disaster affected people who live in small scattered communities across the newly emerging lands of the Ganges delta.

Rapid and effective needs assessment is therefore critical to the success of any relief operation. This point was well recognised by the meeting of international search and rescue teams held in March of this year near Innsbruck. Protocols were agreed there which placed an obligation upon the international relief community to assist local authorities in developing their abilities to carry out rapid needs assessments. It is to be hoped that this specialised example can be extended to other spheres of relief work.

How to improve these qualities

All these three qualities; significance, adequacy and validity can only be achieved through a pre-disaster knowledge of an area. Whilst some of this can be gained from academic study (reading country profiles on the flight out to a disaster for instance) it ultimately has to be based upon field work in the disaster-prone areas. And behind that field work must lie an understanding of the dialectic of cause and effect in disasters. Our starting point must be that extreme natural events are inevitable, but it is their interface with vulnerable people which turns them into disasters. We can do very little to reduce earthquakes and droughts, but we can act to reduce earthquake injuries and famines. This preventative action, like relief, must be grounded on an understanding of who is vulnerable and why.

Let me illustrate. Lima is a city which knows it will be hit by a devastating earthquake sometime in the next 100 years. It is estimated that up to 26,000 homes will be destroyed and 128,000 people rendered homeless; but which people and which homes? A recent analysis shows that there are three distinct vulnerability classes in the city. The richer suburban housing areas will get off comparatively lightly. Surprisingly, so will the shanty towns around the city, as they are built of light weight materials and people there are well organised. It is the crowded, once rich, inner city areas which will suffer most. Here the poorest in the city crowd into the former town houses of the land owners and industrial elite who have long since retreated to the suburbs. Our disaster messages must express an understanding of this sort of vulnerability if they are to be of any value in aiding rehabilitation after disasters.

Improvement in the disaster message can also come about by the way we, as a relief community, act. The messages coming out of a disaster area are often needlessly conflicting and contradictory. Disaster agencies on the ground have a duty to project as true a picture as possible of what is happening. This requires both the ability and the willingness of relief organisations to talk to each other on the ground. The question of ability was well covered at the UNDRO conference on disaster communications, where the technology needed to allow search and rescue team to coordinate their efforts was discussed. The willingness to communicate and discuss on the ground is perhaps less easy to achieve. Flag waving is still a feature of many relief operations. Often this may only be a matter of demonstrating presence to one's donor community, but occasionally political and other overtones creep in. If we truly believe that the needs of the victim come first, this is something we must all guard against.

Disaster victims as part of the communications chain

Our mandate is to provide assistance to those in need. To do this effectively we have to understand what is the best form of assistance, and this, I would maintain, can only be ascertained by including the disaster victims in our communication chain. To assume automatically that we know what is best for disaster victims is at best high-handed and at worst may actually increase vulnerabilities. The well-meaning supply of food aid may destroy local markets and render farmers more susceptible to famine. Flying in prefabricated housing after earthquakes or floods may put local artisans out of business.

Bringing the disaster victim into the communications network can also help with the problem of prioritisation which often crops up after disasters. Which of the many deserving groups should be helped first? What are the priority relief items? Is it food, shelter or medical care?

As a natural extension of this, the disaster victims should be much more fully involved in the running of relief operations. Relief, like development, should never be imposed. In the aftermath of earthquakes the vast majority of the rescue work is done by the local community. The international teams only play a role in rescuing those few people who are still trapped one or two days after the earthquake, but how often are the disaster victims brought into the decision-making process that runs relief operations?

If we are to take this participatory approach to disaster relief then I would make two suggestions for the international organisations involved. The first may seem obvious, but is not always adhered to. Disaster response teams must contain someone who speaks the language of the affected people. In many countries this will not always be the official national language. Obviously, keeping a troop of linguists on standby is not feasible, hence my second suggestion. In most disaster-prone countries, local NGO or community based organisations exist. External relief organisations should make every attempt to team up with such groups to implement their work. Ideally, such linkages should be set up before disaster strikes. This may well be practical for countries which suffer repeated disasters. We all know that Bangladesh will have many more floods over the next ten years and that the Horn of Africa will continue to have food security problems. Surely it is worth investing time, outside of the disaster time, to identify potential local partners?

This need to interface with the local community highlights another aspect of disaster communications which is often overlooked: that of scale. Our experience over the last seventy years has shown us that there are three very different communication scales we need to be aware of.

First, the disaster site. The site may be small, such as after a single flash flood, or stretch for hundreds of kilometres, as is the case in famines. Here communication is essentially about ensuring that there is coordination and cooperation between the various relief parties, and between the relief effort and the disaster victims. Institutional setups, coordination centres, briefings, regular discussions with victims, become as important as the technology of short-wave radios.

Secondly, at the national or sub-national level, the relief effort has to interface with the Local Authorities. Disasters cut across jurisdictions and ministerial mandates. The regular and reliable flow of information is an essential oil to keep the machinery of government working. In this context we are often dealing with the need to get information from a distant field site back to a national capital. The arrival of fax technology which utilises radio rather than telephone links is a development which holds much promise here.

Finally, we have the international level. The headquarters of international organisations, and the donor community, need and nowadays expect, accurate and almost instant reporting. The development of portable, user-friendly, satellite communication systems has been one of the biggest developments of the past few years. It has allowed relief workers to talk direct to their

headquarters from the disaster site. Such a powerful tool though, has to be used intelligently. There is a danger that the local authorities of the disaster-affected country may find themselves bypassed by the high technology which is generally only possessed by the international organisations. Thus the development of reliable site-to-international communications makes the needs for good communications at our second level site-to-government even more imperative.

The Role of the Media

Of course, the relief organisations are not the only outsiders to arrive at the disaster site with high technology equipment. Where disaster strikes, the cameras follow. This brings me to my last point, the relationship between the victims and the media and the mediating role played by the disaster agencies. It is understandable that the media should seek out the unusual and photogenic. That is what makes news. But it is not acceptable that their participation in disasters should end there. This point was well recognised at the last meeting of officers in charge of National Emergency Relief Services, hosted by UNDRO in 1989 where the media's impact on public opinion and decision makers was highlighted. The international news media is a major actor in shaping the course of disaster relief. The experiences in Ethiopia in the mid 80s should have taught us that and if the message needed reinforcing, we only have to look at the critical role the media played in shaping opinion during the Gulf Crisis and over the past few weeks in Turkey and Northern Iraq.

I would maintain that the media have a duty to seek out the victims' perspective on the disaster either independently or through the aid agencies. The portrayal of disaster victims as helpless, lazy or greedy individuals is a too-often seen distortion of the truth. Since 1964, the international community has spent about 6.6 billion US dollars on disaster relief. Self-help from local governments and institutions comes to some 18.1 billion, and this does not include self-help at the community and household level. After the Armenia earthquake, 15,000 people were pulled out of the collapsed buildings alive. 14,936 by local people and organisations, 64 by the international search and rescue teams.

The news media as part of the disaster communications community, must play a more informed and educational role, not just with regard to real-time information about disasters but also with regard to the deeper analysis and background information they present. Most disasters are repetitive, Iran has earthquakes every other year, famine hits the Sahel and the Horn of Africa regularly. If we continue to speak of disasters as events caused by one-off problems, then the present worries about compassion fatigue and donor boredom will become a reality. Disasters are symptoms of a process, just as unemployment and poverty are. Presentations on disaster causes must be framed in this context if we in the relief community are to have any chance of redressing the balance and reducing vulnerabilities to future disasters.

Conclusion

To conclude, my message is simple. We have to put the views and perspectives of the disaster victims centre-stage. This makes not only moral sense, but practical sense. Without their perspective on relief needs and disaster causation we cannot effectively bring about a reduction

in disaster vulnerability. Without their inputs, no matter how sophisticated our communications technology becomes, our message will lack the cutting edge of reality.

Thank you.