

ASIAN DISASTER REDUCTION AND RESPONSE NETWORK
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“Communication as Aid”

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Ladies and Gentlemen

Firstly, let me thank you for inviting me to be here today. This is my first time attending the ADRRN Annual Meeting and I am very pleased to be here. I have heard much about the network, enjoyed prior engagement with Jemilah and Manu, and am looking forward to engaging more fully with you in my role as head of the OCHA Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. I am particularly pleased to be here as you commemorate ten years of joint work under the flag of ADRRN. Happy Birthday!

I have to admit that preparing for presentations like the one I am making today fills me with a mixture of dread, anticipation and excitement:

Dread - because at the start of the process there is a blank sheet of paper and I always seem to think that I have nothing to say.

Anticipation - because I know that, when it comes down to it, I have to get up here and say something and it needs to be relatively coherent, interesting and hopefully motivating.

...and, once I get going, excitement - because I realise just how lucky I am to be in a position where I CAN stand up in front of you and try my best to share what I think.

I guess that used to be something which was really unique – not many people had the opportunity to express their views and opinions to lots of people all at the same time. But now perhaps the most exciting and sometimes frightening thing about my being able to do this is that fact that whatever I say can be challenged, interpreted, supported, shot down, tweeted, posted on Facebook, and used by others (either as attributable to me or not) in many different ways, forums and places.

I've been on Facebook since 2007, I've done somewhere between 100 and 200 tweets and am the despair of my nephew and niece who think it's pretty sad that I keep count of tweets. I use the internet every day to find out in seconds things that it would have taken leafing through Encyclopedia Britannica for hours to do 20 years ago. When it comes to finding things out I need instant satisfaction. I am frustrated when the signal bars on my blackberry are weak and I can't get an internet signal, when I can't google immediately to get the answer to the latest question I have.

So – that's me. Now think of this. In Haiti after the earthquake in 2010 the going rate to charge your phone for 15 minutes was 40 gourdes, or one US dollar – that's a day's salary in Port au Prince. Here's a question for you: when you think of your daily priorities how much of your salary would you devote to charging your phone? Now put yourself into the position of a beneficiary and think about the question again. You're stuck in the middle of nowhere, everything you know is upside down



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and you don't have a clue what's happening, where to access services, find food, medicine, water. Think how your need for information would change in that situation. What I talked about when I opened my presentation was my need for information simply to satisfy my curiosity, not as a means to survive.

A friend of mine, who knows a lot more about communications with disaster affected communities, Imogen Wall (and if you're interested then google her and read her writings), interviewed a Somali in Kenya during the famine last year and was told "we might not have been able to afford lunch, but we have mobile phones". The poorest people in the world are choosing to put the tiny resources they have into mobile communications. Humanity's inherent need to be connected....

Information as aid. I have to admit that I find this proposition rather frightening. What does that sentence mean to you? Food aid conjures up images of bags of food. Medical services are also immediately imaginable. But what about information? Newspapers for affected populations? TV, radio, facebook, twitter, mobile phones noticeboards. Probably your immediate thought about this is how we can make use of these media to let affected people know what we can do to help them. After all, that's what we do – provide assistance – whether it's humanitarian or developmental or a combination of the two. For humanitarian assistance particularly we have a rather "safe" model – we identify needs and deliver relief items to meet those needs. We have become much better at consulting with affected communities on how that assistance can be best delivered in ways that provide maximum benefit. But we are



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still not there. Even recent evaluations continue the call for us to be more responsive to the needs of the people we are assisting, to listen more carefully.

My fear is that the world is changing around us – the humanitarians – and we are not paying sufficient attention. Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, Syria – clearly social media played a role in all of these countries. Governments were brought down, leaders changed. Two NGO staff were killed in their compound in Somalia in December last year. Al Shabbab had the names of the two people on twitter within 45 minutes. You can imagine the shock at the headquarters of this NGO on learning that this information had been made so public so quickly, and not by them. In Indonesia in 2010 during the most recent eruption of Mount Merapi just outside Jogjakarta a local communications group called Jalin Merapi made use of Twitter, Facebook, SMS and community radio to keep their communities informed of real time events and to understand and communicate emerging needs for assistance. This was a local initiative developed by local people who were prepared to invest time and energy into increasing their levels of resilience.

If I can speak plainly, my view is that we're simply not keeping up and are failing to understand how important communication (rather than plain simple information) is. Communications technology is reshaping the world that we live in, and is, by extension, reshaping humanitarian space. It's also redefining the role that we, as aid agencies, UN, NGOs, Red Cross, whatever, can play. But we're not really noticing. People have grown to expect interaction. We do it every day – email, social media, sms. And yet when it comes to the work that we do our general perception (and of



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course there are exceptions to everything) seems to be that communication is about us communicating our message to the people that we are aiming to assist. This is a rather unsophisticated world view and one that, I am pretty sure, would annoy us if we were only on the receiving end.

Some research has been done on the issue of aid agencies and communications with the people we try to help. And there are a number of emerging areas where it's clear that we need to do some more work:

Firstly – we are not allocating specific resources for this sort of communications. It's all muddled up with money for public information. If communications *really* is aid then it needs to have its own separate budget line and level of attention. All too often the poor press officer is charged with also doing a mass information campaign or similar. This simply won't do any more. Just as an example of something that is catching on, the Danish Refugee Council are running a complete online map of their projects in rural Somalia. It's a development project - pots of money given to selected villages, managed by committees, to implement jointly agreed projects. On the website you can click down to the village and details of each project. As a result, they've started to see independent Somalis in the diaspora choose, of their own volition, to join the project by getting in touch with the village and transferring money directly into the committee account, thus effectively topping up the DRC donor cash. That, incidentally, was a completely unexpected side effect of the project for DRC. But have they finally figured out a way diasporas and aid agencies can work meaningfully together in a concrete way in chronic emergencies, and thus -



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more widely - how individuals overseas like me can find completely new ways to donate. Imagine if we could apply something similar in the humanitarian world. In some ways we are already – donations by SMS, internet payments – but the level of sophistication is pretty low and soon people are going to be demanding greater connection, transparency, visibility and accountability between the money they give and the people they help in humanitarian crises. Interestingly, that DRC initiative was funded by the Humanitarian Innovation Fund.

Secondly, and I have already alluded to this earlier, there is a lot of confusion between “messaging” and two-way communication. Messaging is simply getting your agency’s message out – informing people about where they can go to get vital services, how a particular distribution mechanism works; effectively maintaining control. Two way communications in a humanitarian environment can, if done well, be a pre-cursor to effective recovery. Allowing people to discuss how aid can be most effectively delivered, listening to their feedback, complaints, and perhaps compliments all act to improve both the quality of the services we provide and the accountability we subject ourselves to. Accountability is a huge issue in the aid world and yet very rarely are we actually able to articulate HOW we are accountable to the people we are trying to assist. Interestingly, most agencies who establish channels for dialogue such as feedback systems report praise and thanks coming back as much as complaints (the majority of SMSs received by DRC in Somalia from beneficiaries, for example, have been saying thank you – something that DRC themselves were not expecting). They also find that perceptions of the agency and positive appreciation of



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their work increase markedly when the agency makes a systematic effort to communicate with – by which I mean listen as well as talk – those affected.

Thirdly, we're simply not up to the job at the moment. Humanitarian professionals have their own blogs, facebook pages, they tweet. But how many of them are actually trained in this brand new phenomenon. Very few actually. There needs to be investment in mainstreaming communications into the programmatic work that we do.

Fourthly, and linked to my previous point, is the fact that turnover in humanitarian agencies is high – especially in high pressure environments like wars and sudden onset disasters. We lack institutional memory and haven't yet managed to embed expertise on communications in the way that we have in our programming work. There is a collective need to address this.

Fifthly (and I have seven in case you're wondering how long I am going to go on for), we don't have a coordination platform for communications. This is linked to the issue of recognizing that communications is a form of aid and needs to be treated in the same way – programmatically. We have invested in coordination quite substantially. If we hadn't I wouldn't be standing here today. But we (and that's a collective we) need to ensure that we are coordinating how we are using communications technology to improve the quality and relevance of what we deliver. The collective capacity of aid organisations is always greater than the sum of the parts – but only if we get the coordination right.



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Sixthly (nearly there), we also need to be careful not to blunder in and make a mess of things. The value of the international humanitarian system is limited by its poor capacity to respect and understand the environment into which it is all too often jettisoned. In post-tsunami Indonesia in 2007 I worked on a project to strengthen civil society organisations. Let's be clear; they were not inherently weak before the tsunami – but they were weakened by the massive international presence that flooded into Aceh after the December 2004 event and effectively priced them out of the market.

Understanding how the local media works and working with it rather than trying to reinvent the wheel is critical. Understanding how people communicate with each other is similarly vital. More often than not it seems that we choose **one** medium to communicate with the people waiting for our help. We use that medium to “message” rather than to communicate and so don't actually achieve our stated objective of delivering timely, relevant and quality assistance. So taking the time to do a media landscape survey or to find out whether one has been done is also important - it reveals how media “works” in the environment you've just arrived in.

Finally – we have no clear monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in place. Our learning capacity on the communications front needs rapid development. The available literature is quite sparse. Despite what we might think the humanitarian system does actually learn - especially on the basis of experience. But if we are not



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documenting and effectively sharing the work that is being done on this front then we are likely to learn less quickly.

So - perhaps the usual list of gloom and doom about the things that we are not doing right. As I said earlier as a group of practitioners we're not doing very well at communicating *with* the people that we are aiming to assist. But I hope that, when it comes to ADRRN, I am over-generalising. I checked your Strategic Focus Areas before I came and found two that resonated well:

Firstly, - amplifying civil society voices through strategic policy advocacy and communications at multilevel platforms. If I am not mistaken this means making sure that we listen to people who have something to say about their situation - either as they prepare for potential disaster or after they have been hit by one. Can we perhaps take this one step further and consider how we can act as the enabler rather than the amplifier; putting people where they actually already are - in the driving seat?

Second, facilitating institutional and organisational support to national and local civil societies in Asia to enhance accountability. Two way communications between the people we are trying to help and our organisations will help us a lot with accountability. But we have to invest in this - and we haven't as yet. We also need to lobby for investment in this area of work by those who pay our bills.



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As a last point, I think we need to recognize that no one has the answers right now – it is all about getting to grips with this new environment and figuring it out ourselves, locality by locality. One of the most exciting things about this emerging area of work for a group like ADRRN is that you are perhaps uniquely positioned to work in the way that is needed. Your members are rooted in communities and thus in the best possible position to start analyzing and working with how local communities use communications technology. We need to pilot, experiment, support innovation. Talk to other, non-traditional partners working in this area, like local communications businesses, technology groups and telecoms companies. Tap into the ways communities are already sharing information, discussing their needs and using the tools that are opening up to them (remember they are all learning and experimenting too). Understand and work out how to work with what is already going on – initiatives like the Jalin Merapi group. Think about how technology is changing relationships with other actors in an emergency, like the diaspora (who in Haiti supported the relief effort not just with funding, but by contributing translation capacity, mapping skills and their own family reunification and support networks).

The objectives I outlined a minute ago could, if the network saw fit, also encompass the development of a position on the importance of communications with disaster affected populations. You might argue that ADRRN members are already doing this through the strategic focus areas. My argument is that we need to be doing more - not because communications is the new buzz word in our professional world, but rather because if we don't somebody else will. And without engaging with communications technology, and understanding how it is reshaping both humanitarian response and



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communications in disaster response, we risk once again planning for the disasters of the past rather than those of the future. This is to some extent a question of our own preparedness, and I include myself and my organization in that. We are all on a learning curve here. If there are those in this conference who are ahead of me, and are already working on such strategies, please share them with others, including me. I'm sure there are. The future in communications is a fascinating, challenging and rapidly changing place which we will be best equipped to explore if we do so together.

Thank you.



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