Matt Abud, Early Warning for Protection conference, November 2010

Learning to Listen: Communications in Humanitarian Disasters

Humanitarian disasters and the social and political tensions that can lead to atrocity crimes, while they overlap, may seem to have as many fundamental differences as similarities. Atrocity crimes or even the risk of them, accompanied by likely large-scale displacement, can lead to urgent humanitarian needs – for refuge, for shelter, for health and food, as well as protection for vulnerable groups. Yet the political dynamics underpinning the risk and occurrence of atrocity crimes are fundamentally different to, say, a humanitarian disaster caused by earthquake or hurricane.

It would be a mistake to conflate the two too much. Nevertheless at a basic level, the effectiveness of a response to both kinds of crises relies on a few similar elements. Perhaps the main one is simply the level of pre-existing community strength and resilience, whereby those affected or threatened by the disaster, or by some of the threats or consequences of atrocities, have the ability to develop responses to it and defenses against it.

The ability of communities to communicate, amongst themselves locally, to the national public, and to international audiences, is fundamental to their own resilience and their ability to respond - to both natural disasters, and to political threats. If communities, or vulnerable social groups within them, lack the capacity to receive information about what is going on, and the capacity to raise their own voices and represent their perspectives, needs, and rights, then in both scenarios, notwithstanding many and broad differences, they are significantly weakened and at risk.

I will talk a little about how humanitarian disaster responses are slowly starting to recognize this, and attempting to incorporate it into their work – and I will talk about both the advances, and the remaining significant limitations, this effort frequently demonstrates. From there I will attempt to draw out a few observations about how communications efforts by humanitarian organisations may hold some pointers for especially international institutions who are working on early warning and responses to potential atrocity crimes. These observations will rest on two elements: the importance of indigenous communication capacity for local-level resilience; and the ability and limitations of large institutions to actually engage in effective dialogue with the communities whom they are mandated to support.

An understanding of the importance of communications in humanitarian response has gained traction in recent years, albeit slowly on many fronts. This is driven by growing appreciation of a quite basic reality: that aid is much more effective when people know what is going on. This can be as simple as making sure people know where to go to get emergency aid; how it is being distributed; and how to use it once it's been received. (Among many, many cases, recent examples of this include the 2010 floods in Pakistan: the sheer scale of the disaster meant that potable water couldn't be distributed to meet the need. Instead, water purification tablets were used; there are several anecdotes relating how communities were unfamiliar with how to use them, and distrusted the taste, which meant on a number of occasions they threw them out and continued using unsafe water).

Further appreciation of the need for better communication in disasters is driven by protection concerns. This can cover several areas, but at the most basic recognises that

vulnerable groups (women, children, minorities, the disabled, the elderly, among others) are more likely to be exploited, abused, or ignored in a disaster response. They need both information and an ability to communicate to defend their rights and access their entitlements. This can include providing information to vulnerable groups on how to register for aid entitlements – an initial defense against any who try for example to extort unwarranted payments from vulnerable members of society when they register. Vulnerable groups also need channels through which they can raise their own needs and problems; their very marginalisation can often mean they are absent from the demands and agendas of the general society, and targeted communications strategies that include their voices are one way of trying to counter this.

Until recently, the importance of broad communication strategies in disasters received little systematic attention; this is changing, but is still quite limited given the scale of the need[1]. Nevertheless there are more and more examples of positive practice that deserve attention – both for their own impact, and for the potential they have to provide lessons that promote better efforts elsewhere.

I'll draw on some examples that are more familiar to me from my own work; this is by no means a comprehensive reflection of overall communications efforts in disaster response, but more an illustration of some practices. Some of the most dynamic of these examples are from Haiti. One is the program 'Enfomasyon Nou Dwe Konnen', or 'News You Can Use' in Creole, implemented by Internews,[2] for whom I worked in Haiti in the first month after the January 2010 earthquake. ENDK was a 15-minute radio program of news and features on the humanitarian effort. It aimed to tell people what was happening with that effort, how they could get aid; and it also aimed to get feedback from communities about what was working and what was not. With that editorial mandate, it ran as a local media operation: journalists covered humanitarian events and needs in the community, and Internews liaison staff built up close interaction with humanitarian organisations, the UN, and the relevant Haitian government representatives on humanitarian needs.

ENDK was produced in-house by Internews on a production-house model, with journalists that came from different local radio stations; and it was then disseminated and broadcast on radio across the country, with 36 stations carrying it after the first few weeks. Audience research conducted up to September showed a remarkable 66.2% of the public accessed the program. In the early days when I was there, the most crucial material was often also the most basic. For example, WFP was managing food distributions; ENDK set up a number to which listeners could SMS their questions and concerns, and the overwhelming majority of responses reflected confusion and anxiety over the methods of food distribution. As a result, night after night, ENDK had a WFP representative on-air explaining how the distributions worked.

This sounds straightforward; however it rested on the continuous liaison that Internews, as an international development organisation, had undertaken to develop the relationships, awareness, and trust between ENDK and WFP, along with many other humanitarian

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1 Perhaps one of the key recent texts used to promote the need for better communications in disasters is the IFRC's 2005 World Disasters Report, (http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/wdr2005) which focused especially on information provided to communities in the Asian Tsunami response; and from the same disaster the Office of the Special Envoy's 2006 report, The Right To Know. (http://www.wpro.who.int/NR/rdonlyres/94653175-72B4-4E69-9075-D1921FF119FA/0/the_right_to_know.pdf) Others include meetings and reports by the Global Symposium +5 (http://www.reliefweb.int/symposium); the BBC World Service Trust's 'Left in the Dark' (http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/pdf/humanitarian_response_briefing.pdf), along with various project case-studies by Internews (http://www.internews.org/global/er/default.shtm) and others.

2 http://www.internews.org/InfoSavesLives/haiti.shtm

organisations. Local media simply wouldn't have had the access to the international aid response in the same way; a humanitarian response involves its own extensive organisational systems that are very unfamiliar and difficult for many local organisations to access. In addition, local media was far less practiced in the type of reporting needed in a humanitarian response: what information do people need about health services or food supplies? How would this be organised and delivered? Although local media (primarily radio) put out many stories about what was happening *to* their communities, and performed vital roles such as linking up separated family members, much of this concrete information was lacking. That's because, as well as existing barriers to access, most local media was unable to identify and track down this information, and then disseminate it - as well, of course, as struggling with their own immesnse personal and institutional challenges caused by the earthquake; journalists were struggling to survive and cope with destruction, grief and loss as much as anyone else.

ENDK is an example of a particular project that provided a service for urgent humanitarian communications. But it can also be seen as an effort to *compensate* for humanitarian organisations' general limitations in local communications capacity – which, despite some recent improved practice, reflects limitations in the focus and prioritization on communications as a humanitarian need. The program had impact; but if had not existed, it's feasible there would have been little systematic communications response to, or possibly even awareness of, the confusion that existed on the ground. This is a reflection of the fact that the importance of local communications in a disaster response is still a long way from being universally appreciated and mainstreamed. (This is not, by the way, singling out WFP; in fact their are several examples where their communications efforts are positive and commendable. i The example of food distribution in Haiti rather serves to illustrate some more general points.)

But also crucially, ENDK rested on *what already existed* – a country-wide, dynamic, responsive radio station sector that had mushroomed after the Duvalier dictatorship fell in 1986, leading to a much more open media environment; the first community stations began in the 1990s. Radio was a powerful platform in Haiti in ways that it is not always elsewhere. For example, I was involved in a similar humanitarian communications project in Sri Lanka after the tsunami. Yet the tsunami-affected areas had almost no local radio stations, and the ones they did have were run by the government broadcaster and lacked the equipment, staffing, skills, and administrative freedom to develop a strong response to the disaster. This is not a casual feature: while several private radio licenses have been given out in Sri Lanka over the past decade, they are all centralised in the capital, Colombo, with audiences in the districts extremely under-served. This centralisation reflects both economic and political priorities in the capital; and it weakened the communciations capacity of tsunami-affected communities, thus weakening their resilience and ability to respond to the disaster.

As a result the Sri Lanka program I worked with was carried by the national broadcaster to mostly Sinhalese audiences in the south, and mostly minority Tamil-speaking audiences in the east. The broadcaster was however set up to target a national audience, which gave it a very different position from that which a local station, with direct relationships to its audiences, would have. This was reflected in many of the anecdotes we gathered, which showed the program had much greater response in the south, whereas in the east, where many had a negative view of the government and state broadcaster, listenership was low – despite the fact that those who did listen were quite appreciative.

This differences between the Haiti and Sri Lankan radio experiences serves to show that

effective communications capacity depends on what platforms already exist, and what relationships they have to the communities in question. This sets the parameters of what's possible on the ground. It is an important measure of communities' own resources, resilience, and ability to respond to a disaster – resilience whose relevance to the ability of communities to respond to the threat of atrocity crimes is also worth exploring.

At the risk of stating the obvious, effective communications in a disaster must build on existing local platforms. Of course this doesn't mean just radio; common platforms include conventional media (radio, TV, print) and more recent technologies (mobile phone SMS, online). They also include community networks, which operate both through and independently of media technologies, and range from community leaders and religious figures, through local government representatives, civil society organisations including NGOs, and so on.

While many platforms are present in a wide range of contexts, they vary in their relative strength and impact, and often the practices – cultural, economic, political – that surround them. The most effective communications strategies will work to link up these platforms in ways that recognise their local use, and aggregate their impact.

Some other examples from Haiti and Pakistan serve to illustrate these points. IFRC (reflecting the priorities in its 2005 report, cited earlier) has developed some examples of strong practice in a few countries now. In Haiti they built on experiences in Aceh; one of the new platforms they developed in collaboration with the telecom company Trilogy International was an 'SMS gateway' (called TERA Trilogy Emergency Response Application). Through a google map interface, this gateway is able to send an SMS, and receive a response, to all mobile phone users connected to a particular tower (which is illustrated on the map). Messages can be sent to one tower, a cluster of towers in a given area, or to the whole country; in effect it's a one-stop mobile-phone broadcasting platform. This enables IFRC to rapidly gather specific data on localised concerns, issues, and needs, and to develop responses to them.

However crucially IFRC seeks to integrate this gateway with other platforms. Issues raised directly from the field, by SMS or through face-to-face field teams, informs responses on the ground, whether that be targeted service delivery, or local-level advocacy with officials or other aid organisations to fix a problem. However when these interactions demonstrates key general issues, this informs mass communications efforts: national TV talkshows, radio programs, print, and even nation-wide SMS 'blasts' aimed at national audiences. The intention is to link local interaction with broader mass-media advocacy and awareness-raising efforts, by integrating across different platforms and linking communication efforts directly with advocacy for change.

Again, specific features in Haiti facilitate this: mobile phone coverage and ownership is extremely high, and the country is relatively small, enabling greater travel by and integration of field teams. Pakistan's situation following the 2010 floods was quite different, and imposed different limitations which demanded changes in response. The most obvious is the limitations in media infrastructure; despite extraordinary growth in radio and TV stations in the last eight year, and in mobile phone ownership and coverage, many areas affected by the floods lacked access to media; in areas where access did exist, many social groups were still excluded due to marginalization based on economic, gender, or other factors; for example, they either couldn't afford phones or radio sets, or (especially in the case of women) were largely denied access to them by male family members, or highly-restricted in their permitted movement outside the home, among a host of other

scenarios

This means that whille local media channels remain key, they face more limitations in reaching audiences than in for example in Haiti. Because of this, any community network that can spread the word and engage with local needs becomes increasingly important. One such network is the Lady Health Workers (LHW), established over a period of years under Ministry of Health programs funded and supported by Unicef, WHO, and others. The LHWs conduct village-to-village and house-to-house outreach on health programs; but they're also a means by which other issues can be communicated and identified – for example, issues of gender protection where women's movement outside the home is restricted. Recognizing their importance as a communication and community support network, one of Unicef's first actions on the onset of the floods was to provide direct support to LHWs, many of whom had also lost their own belongings, so that they could continue work and conduct some of the outreach so essential in the response. Radio, SMS, and other media technologies were still vital; but the lack of physical coverage by radio signals or mobile phones in many locations, or exclusion from access due to factors of social or cultural marginalization, meant that their limitations were far more extreme than in Haiti.Communities were far more vulnerable as a result, meaning other responses were also urgently required to compensate for this as much as possible.

These examples show that effective communications in humanitarian response rest on the communications capacity that already exists within communities – *and that this capacity is essential to their own resilience.* Where capacity is low, as in many parts of Pakistan, then communities are much more vulnerable to disaster and much more limited in the responses they can develop. The ability to simply communicate is a fundamental part of community resilience[3]. Strengthening local and national media capacity *before* a disaster gives much greater ability to respond when a disaster hits. Where media has not been developed – generally because of restrictive or rigid govenrment media regulations – then the development of communication-for-development platforms, such as the LHW, can provide some recourse.

Communciations capacity is a measure of local community strength; any community that lacks this – whether it be those in specific geographical areas that without local media, or marginalised social groups that without economic means to access media, or are socially marginalized and so not included in media coverage – is at a much higher level of vulnerability in disaster response. Research that maps communication capacity – including what local media platforms exist, what community and social networks operate, and so on – can therefore provide a long-term indicator of community vulnerability to disaster, and point to some measures to reducing that vulnerability. A centralised media structure that responds less to communities outside the capital, for example in Sri Lanka, increases the vulnerability in those areas and the ability of communities to respond themselves to disasters. Those communities may be able to access national media as audiences, but their problems and perspectives are under-represented within it; it doesn't respond to them. A media sector that doesn't cover large patches of territory, for example in Pakistan, is even more limiting, with whole communities then lacking both access to information, and

[3] Members of an assessment mission for AMARC, the World Association of Community Radios, related to the author how they asked the displaced a simple question: 'How did you hear about the floods coming to your village?" Answers varied greatly, but a great many people related how they heard it from friends and family members, who heard it from others, tracing back perhaps to one person who had access to radio or received an SMS. The lack of media and communications access meant that community members were enormously vulnerable, often only preparing to flee at the last minute – and this despite the fact that the floods took weeks and months to travel down the country, which should have enabled plenty of time at least for individual households to make their preparations.

important means by which they can voice their own concerns.

Greater local communications capacity strengthens local resilience. A number of key features are needed for this to be established: for example, a media regulatory environment that facilitates local and community radio stations; campaigns supporting freedom of expression; media training and transparent rule-of-law that supports professional, ethical media; greater equity in access to communications technologies, such as mobile phones and internet; and so on.

People who do not have the capacity to communicate among themselves and source their own information – whether that's because there is predominantly only national, rather than local, radio stations as in Sri Lanka; or because of lack of any radio or mobile phone coverage, as in many parts of Pakistan – become *dependant* on those who can provide information to them. This means they lose much of the capacity to come up with their own solutions and their own responses; their resilience is greatly weakened, their vulnerability increased.

This indicator of vulnerability also relates to early warning for protection. A media sector that is overly-centralised is more at risk of falling under direct control of political interests; if a central political agenda is driving towards conflict and vicimisation, central media is more at risk of being seized upon as a tool towards that agenda. Communities that have little or no access to media are more invisible, their voices undrepresented; this makes them more vulnerable to victimisation as it denies them an avenue of recourse. The structure of the media and communications sectors, then, is worth exploring as a long-term indicator of community resilience and vulnerability not just in natural disasters, but also political risk in situations of abuse and rights violations. (Frohardt (a frequent colleague) and Temin explore exactly this aspect of vulnerability in their USIP paper, 'Use and Abuse of Media in Vulnerable Societies; http://www.usip.org/publications/use-and-abuse-media-vulnerable-societies.)

This needs to be coupled with an understanding of how resilience, while based on some similar factors, plays out in different ways between the two contexts. In a humanitarian setting information and communication allows communities to develop their own responses after a disaster, and provides means whereby aid organisations can engage with communities, develop dialogue, and increase aid effectiveness. Communications are also crucial in developing preparedness before a natural disaster takes place.

In a protection setting, however, communications capacity is most valuable for the extra ability it provides for *preventing* atrocities: by identifying and responding to risks more quickly and collectively at a local level; and by allowing communities to raise their voice locally, nationally, and internationally. This can include quite basic elements: informing people of their rights to protection, and about institutions where they can raise their concerns, for example, rest on communications capacity and can increase local ability to prevent atrocities. Publicly holding government agents to account for their actions is also one preventive measure to counter any escalation of abuses, which again relies on the ability to communicate. However once a protection crisis escalates towards atrocity crimes, communications capacity – of media outlets, of individuals – is one of the prime targets of abusers, and so becomes heavily restricted. It will still be crucial – but the level of pressure it comes under will greatly restrict its ability to have an impact. The greatest strength of local communications capacity is likely to be in providing means to prevent atrocities, more than to counter or defend against them once they are taking place.

Local communication capacity means communities are more able to mobilize constituencies for peace among themselves, as they recognize threats and identify means to counter them. Communities that have this capacity can also themselves flag early warnings of atrocity crimes to all audiences, including international. Building up this capacity is key to creating the ability to provide early warnings for protection.

Taking account of these differences, good communications practice in the humanitarian sector and in protection efforts can hold several positive lessons for both contexts, with any cross-fertilization potentially quite valuable – including in the way *how* organisations take communications goals on-board, and structure themselves in order to achieve them.

An understanding of communications capacity as an essential part of community resilience can point out directions in boosting disaster response; it is an essential asset and tool to effective relief. However this understanding also implies significant changes to *how* humanitarian responses conceive of communications with communities. Generallyy within humanitarian response, this understanding still faces limitations. The most frequent phrase heard in disaster response communications is the need to 'get the message out' – whether that be messages on health, on shelter, on food distribution, on protection issues, and so on, in the form of radio spots, printed flyers or ads, and so on. 'Messaging' is vital and important – but it's only one part of what's needed. This is because it's essentially one-way communication, telling communities what the humanitarian sector decides they 'need to know'. This over-simplifies and under-appreciates the roles and strengths of local communication capacity; It conceives of communication platforms as means by which messages can be transmitted to them, but little else.

Where communications capacity already exists, communities will already be using it in their responses. Radio stations in Haiti began broadcasting about what was happening immediately after the earthquake, gathering information, and sourcing advice and support, well before international humanitarian aid programs began gathering steam. Radio stations and other media in Pakistan began calling for donations and identifying areas of local needs almost as soon as floods hit different parts of the country; especially in the south, they were engaged in facilitating hyper-local aid responses well before international supplies began to arrive. They were a means whereby communities already gained knowledge of what they needed, and mobilized donations – from citizens, from businesses, from all sources – to meet those needs.

Local-level communications capacity is not then primarily a channel for transmitting messages: it's a means by which communities engage in dialogue, with themselves and their neighbours, about what is happening and how they can help each other respond. Where the capacity exists, that dialogue exists; and that's an opportunity for humanitarian organisations in disaster response to engage directly in dialogue with communities about their needs, their perceptions, their strengths and their goals.

Too often this doesn't happen – the possibility and importance of dialogue and engagement is not sufficiently appreciated, and international humanitarian organisations have not structured or resourced themselves in order to achieve this. One reason for this is the frequent conceptual conflation of different kinds of 'communication', which throws together the roles of public or media relations (with both international and national media), public information, and communication for dialogue. All three areas are important, all three require certain skills, but they're not the same practice. When one person is hired or one office set up to do all three, the risk is that the PR or PI aspect can gain prominence;

communication as dialogue with communities can become sidelined as a result.[4] This doesn't always happen; but it happens often enough in operations for it to be a noticeable feature.

An appreciation of the need for communication capacity to strengthen community resilience can provide some indicators of local vulnerability – in both natural disaster, and in many circumstances in protection contexts. This can point to some measures that can improve community preparedness and resilience. Existing examples, some noted here but many more available, show some ways in which humanitarian organisations can build dialogue with the communities they aim to serve – if they adapt their own conceptual frameworks, and to some degree their operations, to incorporate this goal. Circumstances and challenges vary immensely between disaster and atrocity contexts. Yet the fact that community resilience is the fundamental, underlying principle in both cases means that further examples of humanitarian organizations developing effective local dialogue are certainly worth sharing, and cross-fertilizing, with those organizations that focus on protection from atrocity crimes.

My thanks to Mark Frohardt for several substantive comments on the first version of this paper, which added much to the quality of the text.

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[4] Many of these points have been explored in much more detail, and with far more nuance, in previous publications; see in particular 'The Right To Know' cited earlier