A dangerous information gap

Flood-affected communities in Sindh and South Punjab lack the information they need to access assistance, avoid further harm, and prepare for future floods

Summary: what you absolutely need to know

Many communities affected by the flooding in Pakistan in June-August 2022 are still dealing with severe impacts to their livelihoods and the loss of essential infrastructure. They urgently need information on the assistance available and their right to compensation, but this is not reaching many marginalized language speakers in particular. Responders need to understand the language and communication challenges to improve information flows between communities, authorities, and civil society. We spoke with Sindhi-speaking communities in Sindh and Balochi- and Saraiki-speaking communities in South Punjab to understand the reach and comprehension of flood-related communication.

- **Some of those hardest hit by the flooding have received no information at all.** When we shared materials developed by the government, national and international organizations, almost none of our participants had seen or heard them before.

- **Women are largely excluded from information.** Some rely on their children to read information out loud to them. Most women did not own their own phones, and had to rely on male family members for information. They also felt that using a hotline would be impossible for them.

- **Existing materials need adapting to be effective.** Participants generally felt that materials like the ones we shared would have been useful, if they had been accessible at the right time. But they need adjusting to ensure the messages are clear. Participants found the visual materials complex and confusing. In some cases pictures were inappropriate or too vague. People preferred audio communication in local languages, using simple terms, and focusing on one key message.

- **Poor communication increases risks to individuals.** Participants described disinformation and scams made possible by a lack of access to reliable information. Confusion about relief distribution and entitlements caused tensions within communities.

- **Poor information provision has increased feelings of anger and injustice.** Participants in Sindh voiced anger that government assistance had not reached them and at perceptions that aid had been used for political purposes in the local elections. Communication barriers compound this frustration as people cannot report when they feel their right to support has been denied.

Recommendations to responding organizations

- **Prioritize audio communication in regional and local languages.** Comprehension testing found that people understand audio messages in simple Urdu much better than written messages in Urdu. But participants stressed that they would best understand audio messages in Sindhi (in Sindh), Balochi or Saraiki (in South Punjab).
- **Simplify posters and test them with your intended audience.** Participants found posters and brochures were unclear and tried to cover too much, but felt that well-designed posters in the right locations would increase their access to information. Each product should contain no more than 2-3 images, field-tested for comprehension and acceptability.
- **Provide any written information in plain language.** Avoid technical terms and explain the name and function of official institutions to increase understanding. Short, simple phrases using plain language increase comprehension of key messages.
- **Train community members, especially women, teachers and school children, to relay emergency information.** Training women face-to-face would increase their information access and support them to take appropriate action, especially in saving livestock. Both men and women faced literacy barriers and suggested school children, who can read, could be taught to understand disaster-related information and relay it to their families in emergencies.
- **Make a range of complaint, feedback and reporting mechanisms accessible across affected communities.** Participants were positive about the idea of hotlines, as long as they were for regional or district institutions using the same language as callers. Women especially need options to provide feedback face-to-face, as other methods are inaccessible to them.

People are almost entirely cut off from information flows

Effective communication is vital to ensure people in disaster-prone areas have access to information that will help them protect themselves and access services when disasters hit. Yet eight months after the floods caused by the River Indus overflowing and Lake Manchar dam breaking, many in the affected areas are still largely cut off from the flow of information.

Participants said they had received almost no warning before the floods hit. The little advance information communities did receive had been relayed by phone by family members and friends in other locations. Some participants in Punjab Province said their relatives in Balochistan told them the flood was coming, so they sent their young girls away to relatives in the mountains for safety. They also managed to send some livestock, valuables and documents.

Now the flood water has receded, people in South Punjab have started to rebuild their homes and resume their livelihoods. Yet, the villages around Lake Manchar in Sindh are still largely abandoned due to stagnant water. In both areas infrastructure and basic facilities are not yet restored, and many still live in temporary shelters in highly vulnerable situations. Community members in both areas lack information on health and hygiene, available assistance, and protection. Family, friends and social media remain their main sources of information.

Households even in more remote areas have access to Android phones and social media channels, but most of the flood-related information is in Urdu, which many struggle to understand. This is a particular problem in South Punjab: in Sindh, at least some official information was available in Sindhi.

The government and other responding organizations have mostly shared information orally with affected communities. While oral information is easiest for many to understand, participants said this information wasn't specific enough to be useful. Without some written or visual document they were also unable to refer back to or verify what they had been told.

Inadequate and unequal information provision has led to frustration and anger

In South Punjab, some voiced frustration that government officials had shared information with landowners instead of those most at risk. Participants felt this increased the risk of incomplete or misleading information. They described a case where people were ordered to leave the safer area they had evacuated to. They later discovered the order had come from a private landowner, not the authorities. In Sindh, participants reported that the government had not provided assistance even when it was announced, such as compensation to rebuild houses. This perceived failure to honor promises has left people feeling angry and abandoned at a time of heightened vulnerability.

Participants also described how media teams had come to take photos and videos of the effects of the flooding, but had not been able to tell community members anything helpful. They felt local media should be mobilized to relay information, not just document the disaster. Incorporating local media into communication strategies as information relays could improve the reach of key messages.

Women are largely excluded from access to information

Female participants emphasized the multiple challenges women and girls face accessing and understanding information and communicating with responding organizations. Low literacy and phone ownership levels compound a chronic shortage of time made worse since the flooding: many are having to walk long distances to fetch unpolluted water.

Many women said they rely on male family members to pass on information, but the men do not always share everything the women want to know. Though social media is popular and mobile phones are an effective communication channel, very few women in this study owned their own phones. While low literacy created barriers for both men and women, women were more likely to have low or no literacy. Sometimes male family members or children who had learned to read in school read information out loud to them.

"We only get information from our men, we can't say what we want and what we don't want."
Female farm laborer aged 18–35
Nangar Khan Brohi, Jamshoro District, Sindh

We found that more women than men were unaware of key information about the flood recovery process. This included information about their entitlement to assistance and compensation, flood rehabilitation plans, and functioning health facilities. Women told us that some of the most devastating impacts of their displacement related to health issues in the camps, and they could not access any health or sanitation information to address or prevent these illnesses. Participants stressed that specific information provision needs to be made to address the health needs and concerns of displaced pregnant women.

Some male participants also stressed the importance of women receiving more information. They suggested that women should receive training on the information relayed in the information materials, which they could then pass on to others in the community.

> *"Training of women and their awareness is also important, so there should be some mechanism for that."*
>
> Male farm laborer aged 55+
> Panjotha, Jamshoroo District, Sindh

Gaps in information put people at increased personal risk, but they lack mechanisms to report protection concerns safely

In this context of severely limited information access, people are vulnerable to misinformation. Immediately after the flood, some participants received calls from people impersonating banks and government institutions requesting their personal details. In Sindh, where elections were held soon after the floods, some female participants had been threatened with losing their social security benefits if they did not vote a certain way. Better access to reliable official information would reduce people's exposure to manipulation of this kind.

None of our 80 participants was aware of mechanisms for making complaints, providing feedback or reporting abuse to the government or national or international organizations. None had received information about the risk of gender-based violence or preventing sexual exploitation and abuse. Some told us that they tried to mitigate the risk of abuse themselves by sending younger female family members away to their relatives in other parts of Pakistan. Risks of physical violence were also a concern. Some participants reported that both men and women had been physically attacked during the distribution of relief items. A lack of clear information encouraged perceptions that aid was allocated unfairly, leading to some disputes and fights between women as well. They wanted ways to express their grievances to aid workers and say when they had not received the assistance they were entitled to.

People's information needs change during flood prevention, response, and recovery

Participants told us that they needed information on different topics before and at different stages of a flood to plan what to do. They also wanted consistent information to help them mitigate risks and dangers, including on health and sanitation, theft prevention, and how to recognize and avoid scams.

Community disaster risk reduction and management committees should coordinate with government and civil society to provide this information. The national recovery plan provides for these committees, but at the time of writing they were not in place. Participants were also unaware of a Supreme Court decision ordering the establishment of women-led committees in every flood-affected district in Sindh.

Table 1: Participants called for timely, specific communication

Phase	Information needs
Before a flood	• Weather alerts and early warnings • Safe locations and evacuation routes
During a flood	• Health and sanitation information, especially for pregnant women • Theft prevention and personal safety • Length and duration of stay in camps for people displaced by flooding • Details of government compensation packages
Directly after a flood	• Transport back home • Condition and re-opening of school buildings • Status of health infrastructure • Availability of clean drinking water to avoid waterborne diseases • Warnings of possible scams and misinformation
2-3 months after a flood	• Information collected from government damage surveys so that people can apply for compensation • Distribution and timeline of flood relief compensation packages • How long it will take to restore key infrastructure • Whether assistance is available for rebuilding houses
Long-term recovery	• Ongoing information about infrastructure, services and compensation • Future safety measures and updates to flood prevention and preparedness • Warnings of disruption to aid or people falsely claiming assistance, and ways to make a complaint or seek support

Available information materials are not understood

We tested information materials on early warning and preparedness, health and hygiene, and rights and compensation released by the National Disaster Management Authority. These included posters, brochures, text-based announcements, and audio messages in Urdu and Sindhi, several of them developed with the support of international organizations involved in the flood response. None of the participants had seen any of the visual or text materials before through any of their usual information sources (community notice boards, social media, WhatsApp groups or in-person meetings). Only one audio message was familiar to any participants.

All participants agreed that the types of material shared in the focus groups would be useful in their current situation as well as for future preparedness. They recommended sharing materials in communities, on social media and in WhatsApp groups, and in public places like schools, mosques, shops, tea stalls, and intersections.

However, participants found most of the materials difficult to understand. The language, format, style, and images all need adapting to be easily accessible. Participants called for communication:

- In local languages
- In plain language
- Focused on one key message at a time
- Containing precise and complete information
- In audio format
- Shared on public loudspeakers and social media

> *"If we had been warned by announcing in this way, we might have avoided a huge loss."*
> Female farm laborer aged 36-55,
> Nangar Khan Brohi, Jamshoroo District, Sindh

Audio messages in local languages are easiest to understand

Most of the participants had a low level of literacy and struggled to read written text, especially in Urdu. This was a particular challenge for women: only 6% of women found written messages in Urdu easy to understand, compared to 25% of men. Oral communication greatly improved comprehension: 88% of men and 73% of women found audio messages in plain Urdu easy to understand. Despite most participants understanding some spoken Urdu, they all stressed that they would understand more if the messages were in the languages they speak at home - Sindhi, Balochi or Saraiki.

> *"We can only understand voice messages. It is better if it is in Balochi or Saraiki. Urdu is difficult for us to understand."*
> Female cotton picker aged 18-35
> Atta Ullah Lillhani, Rajanpur District, Punjab

The only message received by at least some male participants in Punjab Province was an early warning audio message from the Disaster Management Authority, which the men had listened to via the radio function on their phones. When we played this message, all participants agreed that this kind of early warning in audio format would have been immensely useful to them if they had received it before the floods. Participants found audio messages easily accessible and wanted other information in this format as well, including on health and hygiene, weather forecasts, climate change and natural disasters in general. While most of the participants had no access to radio or television, they suggested that audio messages could be shared through loudspeakers at local mosques, and on social media and WhatsApp.

Hotlines could be an important channel of information, but only for men

Some of the materials we tested contained phone numbers for hotlines run by government agencies and district authorities. As the participants had not received the information materials before, none knew that these hotlines existed. All participants thought the hotlines a potentially useful information channel, and easily accessible for less literate individuals. But participants said they would not be able to call or make themselves understood using a national hotline that operated in Urdu. Instead, they felt posters should only list regional hotlines and phone numbers of district-level government bodies, where they would be more likely to speak the same language as the operator.

Female participants also considered hotlines a good opportunity for their communities to access information, but didn't feel they could call a hotline themselves. For some this was because they don't own a phone, while others felt it was inappropriate for them to call a government hotline.

> *"When the flood came and we didn't understand where to go, we could have called these numbers and got information."*
> Male laborer aged 36–55
> Kaachi Abaadi, Rajanpur District, Punjab

Written information needs to be in plain language

Written information is not accessible to everyone, but organizations can make it easier to understand for those who can access it. Men especially felt that translating text into local languages was an important first step to improving their comprehension of written material. Most women said they generally don't understand written material and prefer to hear the information instead.

> *"We will not understand what is written unless someone reads it to us."*
> Female cotton picker aged 36–55,
> Kaachi Abaadi, Rajanpur District, Punjab

Both men and women found it easier to understand information in plain language and without technical terms, which participants called "smart" or "high-level" language. This was the case with information on specific and technical topics, such as how to build a safe and resistant house, and official government announcements. But some less technical words like "food supplies" or "lowlands" were also unfamiliar. Names of institutions that were less familiar to participants caused confusion, such as Disaster Management Authority. Participants suggested that organizations add explanatory descriptions to help people understand their function, such as "national institute for disaster mitigation".

Women in particular stressed the need for plain language and simple words in written information, as they often rely on their children to read out and explain written information to them. They suggested that organizations develop written materials with school children in mind as the main audience.

> *"The message should be something that our children can read easily and explain to us."*
> Female domestic worker aged 36–55
> Kaachi Abaadi, Rajanpur District, Punjab

Posters are confusing and imprecise and try to cover too much

Information materials combining text and images are often considered more accessible in contexts where people have low levels of literacy. But participants said they would prefer clear written messages that someone could read out loud to them: for many, understanding the images on a poster was as hard as understanding the text. No more than 50% of men and 30% of women in each community correctly understood the posters tested.

Participants identified several confusing features of the posters shared. The posters were often crammed with information, trying to give an overview of several messages or complex processes on a single page. This mass of information made it difficult to grasp the main message; it often meant that text and images were also too small to decipher.

Individual images on the posters often lacked the right level of detail and were not self-explanatory. One poster showing a man standing next to a river was intended as an instruction to closely observe water levels. But participants who could not read found this image confusing: they thought the poster was telling them to stay out of the river to avoid being swept away. A more effective use of posters would be to present only a few large, detailed images that clearly convey a precise message.

"The information given in this poster would certainly be useful, but we neither understood the message clearly from the pictures nor could we read the writing. […] It is important that the pictures are clear and easy to understand and the written information is in Sindhi."
Female farm worker aged 18–35
Nangar Khan Brohi, Jamshoro District, Sindh

Image 1: Example of a poster that participants found too complex and unclear

# Testing material is essential for comprehension and acceptance

Localizing images helps people to understand key messages, but only if they reflect sensitivities about what it is appropriate to show, and use symbols the intended audience understands. Participants considered an image of a man listening to the radio out of place, because none of them has access to a conventional radio. Instead they felt an image of someone listening to the news on a mobile phone would better reflect how people access information. Another image showed a person defecating in public. While participants considered this a realistic and localized depiction of their living conditions, they also found the image offensive. They suggested a better way to get the message across would be to draw a latrine and a sign saying to use latrines, or for a poster to explain what to do in the absence of latrines.

Symbols like arrows and crosses to explain processes and causation were totally unfamiliar to people with lower literacy levels. When shown a poster that used arrows to explain how germs contaminate drinking water, all participants said they did not understand the purpose of what they called the "lines". Because the arrows added another level of confusion, they preferred that posters didn't use them at all.

> *"It's hard to understand the signs and signals [arrows]. Educated people may understand these signals, but we don't."*
> Male farm laborer aged 36–55
> Atta Ullah Lillahni, Rajanur District, Punjab

Image 2: People interpreted arrows as lines, without any further meaning or purpose
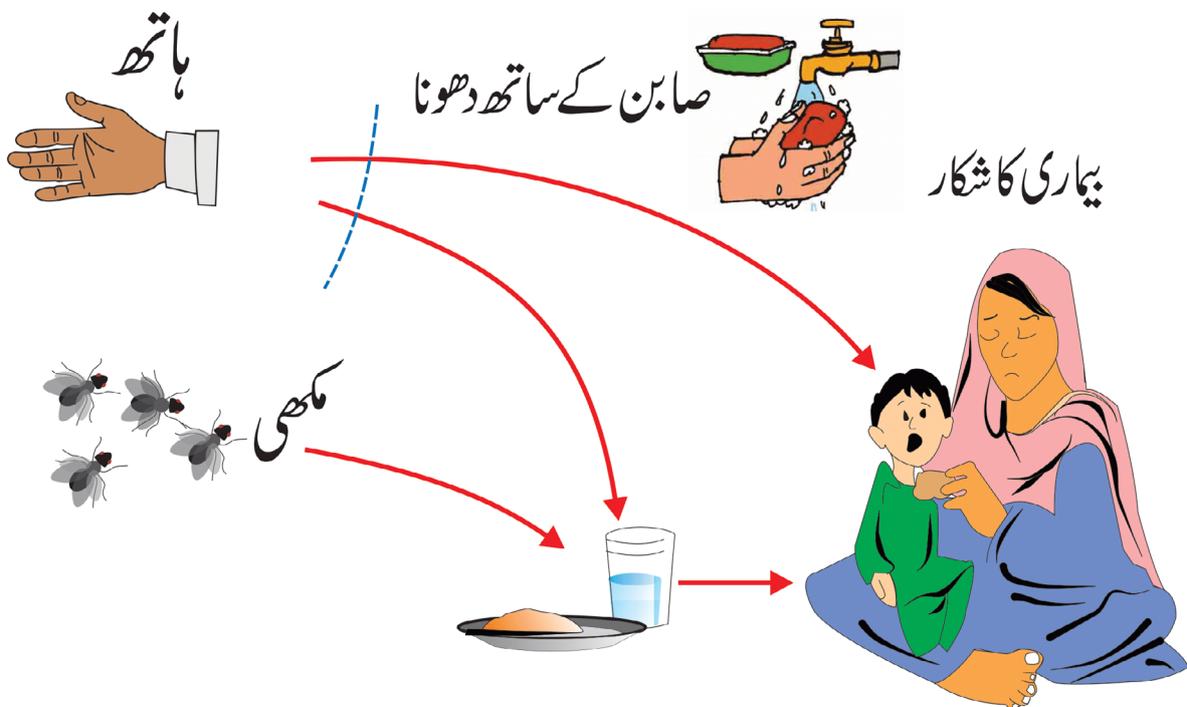
To properly understand the posters, participants said they needed someone to explain them picture by picture and word by word. Once they had those explanations, the posters could be very effective communication tools to share with other members of the community. They also suggested that posters and other information materials should be developed and tested with community members to make sure that both images and text are easy to understand and contain the information people need.

For information to be trusted it needs to be complete, and carry government logos

While participants felt most materials tried to cover too many topics, they stressed that they still needed complete information. Rather than a list of all the different things to remember during a flood (as in image 1 above), they preferred to receive more detailed information and practical guidance on the most important issues, such as determining what is a "safe place". They highlighted that the lack of detailed information on such critical issues has serious implications. Not only do people not know how to react properly; they also find an incomplete message less trustworthy. This made them more doubtful when they received messages relayed by others. They also insisted that to be credible, all information on early warning, health and hygiene, rights and compensation should come from the administration, or list the government agencies involved with their respective logos.

> *"We should get full information about where to go, how to go and what arrangements will be made for us there, and all this should be told to us by the administration. Because of this incomplete information, we don't even trust each other."*
> Female domestic worker aged 18–35
> Kaachi Abaadi. Rajanpur District, Punjab

Table 2: Adjusting to people's communication preferences increases comprehension

Format in order of preference	Participants' recommendations for improved accessibility
Audio	• shared on WhatsApp, social media and radio channels accessible on mobile phones (instead of traditional radio) • shared via loudspeakers of mosques by clergy • shared on a regular basis • in case of emergencies, shared via loudspeaker by revenue officers (patwaris) and police coming to the neighborhoods • in local languages: Sindhi in Sindh, and Saraiki and Balochi in South Punjab • using short, plain language sentences
Video	• shared on Whatsapp and social media • in local languages; Sindhi in Sindh, and Saraiki and Balochi in South Punjab • using short, plain language sentences
Face-to-face meetings	• community meetings • led by local authorities, national and international NGOs, health department teams, teachers • in local languages; Sindhi in Sindh, and Saraiki and Balochi in South Punjab • involving community committees
Training	• thematic training on health and hygiene, recovery, protection, rights and compensation • training to understand and share information especially for women, school children, and teachers

Written	• in short, plain-language sentences • in Sindhi for Sindh Province, in Urdu for South Punjab • with phone numbers of local authorities • with logos of relevant government institutions
Posters and banners	• developed and tested with community members before dissemination • posted in public spaces like shops, tea stalls, schools, public offices, intersections • with few, large, clear, detailed, brightly colored images • without confusing symbols like arrows • with no more than two key messages • in short, plain-language sentences • in Sindhi for Sindh Province, in Urdu for South Punjab • with phone numbers of local authorities • with logos of relevant government institutions • explained to village communicators during training

How CLEAR Global can help

CLEAR Global's mission is to help people get vital information and be heard, whatever language they speak. We help our partner organizations to listen to and communicate effectively with the communities they serve. We translate messages and documents into local languages, support audio translations and pictorial information, train staff and volunteers, and advise on two-way communication. We also work with partners to field test and revise materials to improve comprehension and impact. This work is informed by research, language mapping and assessments of target populations' communication needs. We also develop language technology solutions for community engagement.

As part of this project, we also developed operational language maps of Pakistan to help organizations include language and communication data in their planning. These maps visualize languages, flood risk and cell tower infrastructure, to help responders plan more effective communication.

Existing resources to support effective two-way communication are available on our website:
- Language and communication questions for surveys (questions available for individual, household, and key informant level, in Urdu, Balochi, Sindhi, Saraiki, Punjabi, and Pushto)
- Tipsheet on how to use language data in programs
- Guide to writing in plain language
- Short free online training on humanitarian translation and humanitarian interpreting
- Core PSEA principles in 100 languages (including Urdu, Balochi, Pushto)

For more information, contact us at info@clearglobal.org.

Acknowledgements

Annex 1: Methodology

This study was conducted in February 2023 with a total of 80 participants. We used a qualitative approach, including semi-structured focus group discussions with people affected by the floods and structured observation in the research locations. The groups discussed access to information and services with a special focus on early warning, health and hygiene, rights and compensation, and protection issues. We further discussed seven information materials made available as part of the flood response, including posters, brochures, text-based announcements, and audio messages. These information materials were in Urdu and Sindhi. Focus groups were conducted in Sindhi and Saraiki.

The research was conducted in four flood-affected locations:

- In Sindh, we conducted focus group discussions in Nangar Khan Brohi and Panjotha, two villages in Tehsil Sewan, Jamshoro District. Both villages are close to Lake Manchar and were hit by floods when the lake dam was breached. Panjotha village was almost completely destroyed. Most of its population is still displaced; infrastructure and basic facilities have not yet been restored. Sindh is the main language of communication in both villages.
- In South Punjab, we conducted research in Atta Ullah Lillahni and Kaachi Abaadi, in Tehsil Rohjan, Rajanpur District. Both villages were affected by the flooding of the Indus River and flash flooding from hill torrents. Members of these communities returned to their villages at the end of 2022, but still live in temporary shelters. Schools re-opened in December 2022 but infrastructure, health facilities and livelihoods are not yet fully restored. Kaachi Abaadi is Saraki-speaking, but community members also understand Balochi fluently. Atta Ulla Lillahni is Balochi-speaking, but all community members understand Saraiki fluently.

We conducted two focus groups of 10 participants each in each location. Groups were divided by gender and participants were aged 18 to 55+. The majority of male participants were earning their livelihood as laborers, while most women were working as cotton pickers and domestic workers. The sample also included teachers, craftsmen, retired government workers, a midwife and a social worker. The majority of the sample had a low level of literacy.

One limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size, as it cannot be considered representative and doesn't allow for generalizable conclusions. However, these indicative findings shed light on the barriers to access of information and services that will likely be experienced by affected people in other areas. Another limitation to this study is the low level of literacy of most of the participants, which did not allow us to conduct a more in-depth comprehension study of the existing materials. Written information had to be read aloud for participants to engage with it. While this limits our ability to compare comprehension levels between different languages in detail, we take it as a key finding that existing information does not align to the communication needs and preferences of flood-affected communities.