Health Communication Resources Case Study
The Use of Radio in Disasters: 2008 Flood Response, North India.
Case Study of *First Response India*
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Trainer: Health Communication Resources (Non-Government Organisation)
Technical provider: Broadcast Warehouse & Randall Concepts
Field implementer: First Response India team

Background

Disasters continue to be of critical concern worldwide, particularly to those who are most vulnerable to them. Relief workers often prioritise meeting the basic needs of those affected – providing food, shelter, water etc. However, those affected often lack essential information that can help them survive before they receive help. Communication during this time is key, and yet often poor. People are desperate for information about what has happened, what they should do, and how they can get help. It was only after the devastating effects of the 2004 Asian tsunami that information began to be viewed as aid itself, as acknowledged in the 2005 World Disasters Report (Niskala, M. 2005).

It was also during the 2004 tsunami that the idea for *Rapid Response Radio* was first put into practice by Health Communication Resources (H-C-R). HCR media trainers and local partners scrambled together radio equipment to get on air and broadcast critical information. The team quickly learnt the need to follow their original plan, which had stated the need for a Rapid Response Radio Unit and training.

Rapid Response Radio

The aim
To provide critical information to people affected by disasters.

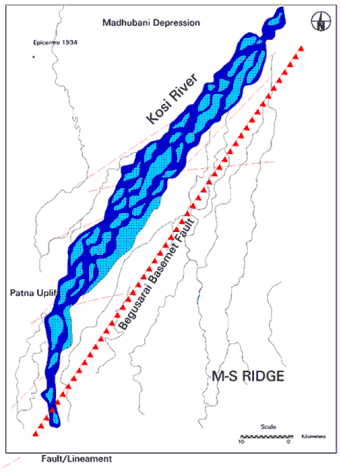
How
Technology and training.

The technology
Complete FM radio station packed into three suitcases, covering up to 20km.

The training
Local media people, government and relief people are trained how to use the unit, and work together to provide critical information to affected people.

Since that time, HCR has trained local media groups and relief workers in different countries on how to collaborate to get critical information to disaster survivors through the medium of radio. HCR-trained teams have responded to the 2005 Pakistan earthquake, 2008 Bihar floods, 2009 Padang earthquake (this was the fastest response, set up and on air within five days of the earthquake), Pangasinan floods (Philippines) and the 2010 Pakistan flooding.

2008 Bihar Flood Response



Geomorphological map showing shifting of Kosi river along faults

Introduction

On 18 August 2008, the River Kosi breached the eastern embankment in Nepal, near the Indian border, shifting 120km eastwards. The floods caused mass destruction and chaos – spreading through nearly 1,000 villages, across five districts, destroying houses, livestock, and people. The worst affected area was in the north Indian state of Bihar where around three million people were displaced. As local and international NGOs crowded the scene, affected people remained stranded wondering if and when aid would reach them.

It was into this situation that the First Response India team entered, having been trained only two months earlier at an HCR workshop in Delhi for media

practitioners and relief workers. The First Response India team was comprised by local media NGO, Feba India, who attended the workshop. First Response India used a radio station packed into a suitcase to make radio programmes for stranded villagers, providing critical information and a listening ear to many who believed they had been forgotten. First Response India broadcast for one hour on shortwave for six weeks.

During this time, the team received over 1,800 calls and SMS. Many would hang up after the first ring, leaving a 'Missed Call', and the team would call them back. The first caller requested help to bury the two dead bodies of his children, left on the roof in the evacuation. Others wanted information about jobs after the floods, whilst some called complaining no food or relief had reached them. The First Response team alerted relevant NGOs and the local disaster response coordinators, gathering information from them to communicate back to their listeners. Listeners reported their relief at having someone to communicate with, amidst their loss. The team collaborated with health workers to provide information, such as how to avoid sickness spreading as dead animals and bodies floated in the waters. The information provided included how to clean the camps, how to avoid food contamination, where to get water purification tablets from and how to use them. Health messages were aired repeatedly to re-enforce messages.

Aims and Objectives of the Project:
The goal was an improved humanitarian response through more effective communication. The overall purpose was to provide broadcasts with critical information for those affected by the disaster.

Objectives
The objectives of the project were to:

- Improve coordination between relief workers, government and affected people.
- Ensure aid reached more people affected.
- Ensure the affected population knew where and how to receive help.
- Reduce stress through information flow.
- Reduce communicable diseases through health promotion and education.
- Advocate for the use of Sphere standards.

Project Evaluation: A Summary
Participatory methodology was used to assess the team's success in meeting the objectives. The lessons learned draw on the stories and interviews with people affected by the floods, gathered by the field producers in 2008. They also draw on the field producers' and team leader's account of events, and the challenges that they faced.

Lessons Learned

1. Relationships are key
Local partners
The First Response India team has a partnership with the local hospital in Bihar. During the response, they learned the significance of understanding each other's work and having a good relationship. It was this working relationship that allowed the First Response team to conduct a needs assessment on the ground before responding. It also meant that it was easier for the First Response India team to get information from the authorities as they were working with a well-known, respected group of professionals. Relationships with NGOs meant that they could work directly with relief groups on the ground to gather critical information in order to enable them to respond to listeners.

Government support is needed
During the Bihar response, the First Response team learnt how important government support is. Despite attempts at several levels, the government did not grant the FM license which meant First Response India could not do local broadcasts. Instead, First Response India used an existing Shortwave outlet. This posed the extra challenge of finding somewhere to upload the programmes especially as at that time they did not have good internet connection or USB storage systems. Since then, First Response India has begun to build

a relationship with the broadcasting department of the Indian government and the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), seeking agreement for licenses during disasters.

2. Ensure field staff are local

Local field staff have a better understanding of the community. The main field producer had a deep care and commitment to the people affected by the Bihar floods, because he is a North Indian himself. The combination of local knowledge, care and compassion gave him the ability to sustain the long hours and difficult conditions.

Flood survivor phone call:

'Please do something for us. There are more than one thousand people here. We are not getting safe drinking water. Children are suffering from fever and there is no medical help. I do not know what will happen tomorrow.'

3. Have a pool of trained team members who can respond, to enable field staff to rotate

A team of six traveled to Bihar initially on 6 September. The majority of the team had to leave after a week, leaving only two producers (one trained in Disaster response, one not). Managing calls from emotional, grieving listeners each day was emotionally and psychologically draining. The project was not able to rotate staff with such a small team, and had to work consistently. Since this time, First Response India has more trained people. A larger pool of people who can respond means they can rotate staff in the future. The team is managed by the First Response India coordinator, based in Delhi.

4. Ensure disaster plans (including allocation of funds) are in place to allow quick response

Flood survivor phone call:

'This programme gives us hope. I believe that now our voice can reach the people in power.'

The First Response India team arrived from Delhi to the disaster zone nineteen days after the Kosi breached its embankment and began flooding. By this time, the place was crowded with international NGOs who dominated the scene. The team struggled to find a place to set up its station and somewhere to stay. To avoid this in the future, the team now has a local plan in place, which includes an emergency fund. This will enable the team to make a quicker decision without having to go through a hierarchical request process. Funds may also be used for air travel, which would cut the two days lost for on the ground transport – and reduce the level of tiredness on arrival.

Conclusions

Since the Bihar flooding, First Response India has gone on to train other teams in disaster radio response. Its aim is to equip other teams across India with the skills needed to improve collaboration and communication with people affected by crisis.

Radio can also play a key role in other phases of the disaster. This was demonstrated in the 2005 Pakistan earthquake where radio was used in a variety of ways during the rehabilitation stage. Broadcasts included interviews with experts on stress management, medical treatment and dealing with after shocks. Community members spoke on tolerance, promoting dialogue (following outbreaks of violence in the community). Radio also has a role to play in mitigation and in reducing communities' vulnerabilities to disasters. This is part of Feba's community radio strategy. Feba has provided two rural community stations in Nepal with suitcase studios and training, which they use for community based programming – including health, sanitation, governance, rights, local music and dialogue.

Effective communication and information flow has the potential to transform communities and save lives. In the disaster context, this potential can only be realized if accurate and timely information is combined with effective communication at all stages of the disasters and between all players. In the right hands, radio can be a powerful tool to help this process. It can provide a voice and a platform for the people who, ironically, are often not included or consulted in the humanitarian response – the affected community.