

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN EMERGENCIES

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INDIA: A woman and a girl draw water from a pump set up in a tent camp for people displaced by the tsunami in the seaside village of Mudtukadu, near Chennai, capital of the southern state of Tamil Nadu, India.

Communication initiatives are not a 'luxury' in an emergency. It is a necessary component of efforts to ensure the survival, health, development, protection and psychological recovery of an affected population.

In past emergencies, many relief and humanitarian aid workers relied on IEC (information, education and communication) materials alone without the benefit of strategic planning with relevant partners and affected communities based past evidence or on a rapid assessment. Posters and pamphlets were churned out without clearly defined behavioural results and without a communication plan in place. This was done with the hope that behaviours would change if the affected people receive the "right" information as quickly as possible. While providing information to affected populations is essential, it is only one ingredient in the larger process of behaviour and social change in an emergency.

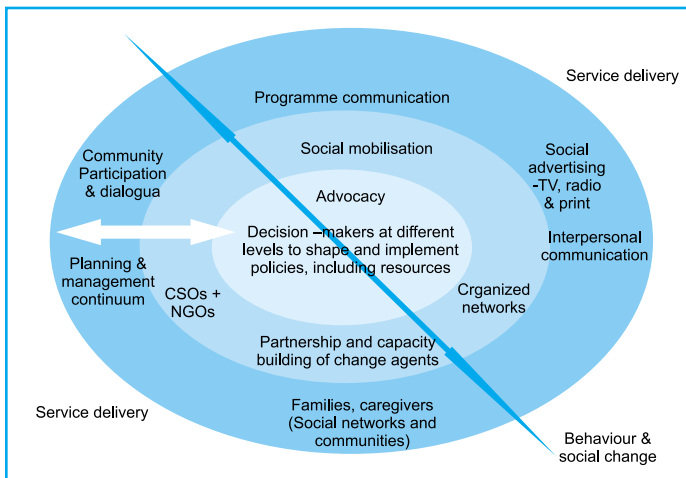
We need to keep in mind that effective communication strategies for emergencies, as for stable situations:

- Are grounded on concepts that range from social psychology, learning theories, role modelling through audience-appropriate combinations of mass media and interpersonal communication approaches, and the proper use of advocacy and social mobilisation.
- Are informed by the policy and legislative environment.
- Are evidence-based and results-oriented.
- Never work in isolation. Communication initiatives must be planned, based on evidence, coordinated and implemented in close synchrony with the programmatic, service and relief supply components of an emergency response.
- Are based on dialogue with and active participation of affected community members, including the children.
- Are based on close collaboration and networking with partners to synchronize messages, materials and channels, and to scale up communication efforts.

UNICEF engages three strategic communication approaches: behaviour change communication, social mobilisation and advocacy. The following figure illustrates how the three distinct dimensions of communication are united through the planning and management continuum (represented by the arrow on the left). The figure shows how communication is integral to programmes and affirms the importance of linking communication activities to service delivery.

Strategic communication model²

Communication approaches: some definitions



Remember that information alone, using IEC materials, is not enough to influence sustainable healthy behaviours and to create a supportive social environment in an emergency situation. If your strategy is dominated by one-way information dissemination, it may result in increased awareness but may have limited impact on improving behavioural and social norms. It is critical for you to stimulate shared learning through dialogue, participation and discussions with members of the affected communities in emergencies. Involving affected families and communities allows them determine among themselves what needs to be done, and by whom in the long run, thus establishing a sense of ownership of the processes in the different phases of their recovery. To support such positive behaviour and social changes, you need to employ three interrelated, interdependent and interactive strategic communication approaches in emergency situations.

Behaviour change communication

Behaviour change communication (also referred to as programme communication in UNICEF) attempts to bridge the gap between information, a person's knowledge, attitudes and subsequent behaviour. This approach addresses the knowledge, attitudes, practices and skills of individuals, families and communities as they relate to specific programme goals. Within a participatory communication framework, individuals and communities gain knowledge, appreciations and skills that motivate them to develop positive, healthy and protective practices. BCC requires a sound understanding of the audience(s) and the use of an appropriate mix of communication channels - interpersonal, group, community and mass media. It also recasts the role of the "communicator" as facilitator rather than "expert". Behaviour change communication has proven to be more effective when complemented by well-planned and implemented advocacy and social mobilisation strategies.

Social mobilisation

The purpose of social mobilisation is to bring together relevant inter-sectoral partners to determine needs and raise awareness for a particular objective in an emergency response. It involves the identification of organisations, institutions, groups, networks and communities who can contribute their efforts and resources. It involves facilitating their participation to realise the goals of an emergency response. Social mobilisation helps build the capacity of these mobilised groups in the process, so that they are able to mobilise resources, plan, implement and monitor programme activities with the community or camps as the case may be. This approach should support actions and priorities identified by communities, especially the most vulnerable groups whose rights tend to be consistently denied. Social mobilisation activities should stem from community action, but must receive support and coordination services.

Advocacy

Advocacy is directed at different levels of decision makers - people who have the power to create policies, programmes and structures and to allocate resources. By persuading decision makers to decide in favour of a cause, advocacy seeks to develop, change or modify an existing law, policy and/or administrative practice that would enhance the emergency response. It is a continuous and adaptive process of gathering, organising and transforming information into arguments. These arguments are then communicated to decision makers, to influence their choices to raising resources (human and financial), or demonstrate political or social leadership and commitment to an emergency response. A goal of advocacy is to influence leaders and decision makers at different levels to make it easier for affected communities, families and individuals to make healthy choices for their own physical and social well-being, and ultimately to protect the rights of children.