EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Global Disaster Preparedness Center

Breaking the Circuit of Information Poverty: Early Warning Messages and DHH Communities in Vietnam

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Disasters impact people regardless of their abilities or locations, yet early warning systems are often designed with an able-bodied perspective. While Disability Disaster Risk Reduction (DiDRR) has gained attention, the specific needs of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) individuals in less developed countries have been largely overlooked. **Many existing early warning systems rely on audible signals, lacking the sensory and visual components that DHH individuals depend on for information access.** Research on the intersection of disabilities and disasters tends to treat disabilities as a single category, focusing on People with Disabilities (PwDs) broadly, rather than on specific types of disabilities. In contrast to high-income countries, studies that explore the lived experiences of the DHH in low- and middle-income countries are limited. **This study, set in Vietnam, one of the Southeast Asian nations most vulnerable to climate-related disasters, aims to fill that research gap.**

Methodology

This study addresses this gap by exploring disaster-related information poverty within Vietnam's DHH communities. Through 20 interviews with key DHH organization personnel and 10 focus group discussions involving 88 DHH individuals, we investigated the causes of information poverty—defined here as the lack of access to disaster-related information due to exclusionary communication practices and inequitable dissemination methods.

Key Findings

Despite Vietnam's relatively advanced disaster management systems, inclusive communication for DHH individuals is inconsistent. Systemic stigma and limited resources contribute to their information poverty. **DHH individuals often rely on each other and hearing people because public disaster information is neither inclusive nor appropriate for their needs.** Complex language and dominant Northern Vietnamese sign language further alienate DHH individuals, particularly those in Southern Vietnam.

To overcome this exclusion, **DHH individuals have engaged in grassroots initiatives to create, recreate, and share disaster-related content tailored to their experiences.** They translate information from mass and social media into sign language videos, sharing them with those in their community who lack proficiency in Vietnamese or sign language. These collaborative efforts reflect a resilient grassroots response to exclusionary and inaccessible disaster communications. However, this also underscores the continued neglect of DHH experiences in disaster communication design.

The DHH communities recognize the challenge of breaking the cycle of information poverty, especially given the lack of institutional support and weak participation of DHH individuals in disaster communication processes. **They call for more Deaf-friendly early warning messages, increased support for DHH organizations, and stronger collaboration between hearing and non-hearing individuals**. Furthermore, they advocate for capacity-building programs and access to sign language interpreters to better equip DHH individuals with the skills needed to navigate natural disasters.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Enhance Visual Features in Early Warning Systems:** Incorporating more visual elements in disaster communications can better address the needs of DHH communities. The use of light-based signals improves the likelihood that DHH individuals will recognize warning messages. Additionally, replacing graphic designs or animations with real images may improve the accessibility and equity of disaster communications. Simplified language in early warning messages can more effectively engage DHH individuals with limited reading skills or access to digital technologies. Non-digital communications should use concise content and images to enhance readability.

- **Employ Culturally Proximate Sign Language Interpreters:** In regions with diverse sign languages, using interpreters familiar with the local sign language will minimize misunderstandings and miscommunication. Working closely with local interpreters in disaster communication and capacity-building programs can ensure more accurate and culturally relevant messages.

- **Expand Access to Sign Language Education:** A national initiative is needed to increase the number of Deaf teachers, schools, and sign language interpreters. Greater access to sign language education will not only improve diversity among interpreters but also expand their presence in critical sectors, including disaster communications.

- **Provide Institutional Support for Deaf Organizations:** Increased support for Deaf organizations can help improve the dissemination and acceptance of early warning and disaster communications. These organizations, with their cultural knowledge and local networks, can serve as information brokers and lead the creation, adaptation, and co-production of inclusive disaster communications.

- **Strengthen Leadership Among Deaf Youth:** Enhancing leadership skills in Deaf youth can extend the reach of early warning systems to younger generations and foster autonomy in responding to disasters. Strong leadership can also encourage the regeneration of aging Deaf organizations, ensuring sustained advocacy for inclusive disaster communication practices.

- **Foster Collaboration Between Hearing and Non-Hearing Communities:** Encouraging partnerships between hearing and non-hearing individuals can promote the integration of inclusive principles into disaster communications and support the co-creation of culturally appropriate content. People-to-people activities that foster collaboration between these groups can help bridge the gap between hearing and non-hearing worlds and strengthen collective disaster response efforts.

Follow this link to read the full paper.