

What is beneficiary communication?

Overview: empowering vulnerable communities

Beneficiary communications is about empowering people through strategically employing communication channels to effectively connect humanitarian programming with the people they are designed to support. It is classic community engagement – with its roots in community outreach, local media, public health and emerging technologies. It is especially these new technologies – such as SMS and social media tools – which now make beneficiary communications more feasible and indispensable than ever before.

Beneficiary communications works right across the disaster environment i.e. preparedness; early warning; disaster and post-disaster environments. It is a cross-cutting function that serves and facilitates greater quality and accountability of aid delivery and promotes enhanced proximity and understanding between program managers and their clients.

Beneficiary communications straddles the spectrum from (lo-tech) face-to-face communication and town hall meetings to (hi-tech) crowd sourcing via SMS and crisis mapping – it aims to harness the humanizing power of technology. New innovations in social and mobile technologies are especially important in terms of nurturing productive partnerships with the private sector.

At its core, beneficiary communications is a participatory approach that empowers communities by delivering potentially life-saving information into the hands of the people who need it most. Importantly, it is also about enabling disaster-affected populations to channel critical data about their situation and needs to aid agencies, thereby increasing the speed, relevance and effectiveness of aid.

In Haiti for example, the IFRC has successfully partnered with a private sector telecoms company, Trilogy International, and carried out extremely effective SMS-based communications with millions of people and set up free phone hotlines for people to be better informed or to register feedback on our service delivery. We have managed to reach more than 360'000 people on an issue as sensitive as sexual violence for instance, with more than 10% of that number responding directly to our offer of support and help – this is a staggering success in a 24-hour time frame with minimal human resources and demonstrates how mobile technologies are already bringing – with private sector partnership – enormous added value to humanitarian operations.

Beneficiary communications therefore fosters a genuine two-way communication flow that is as much about listening as disseminating. The Red Cross Red Crescent, as part of its commitment to work in partnership with the people of Haiti in their recovery is systematically embedding bencomms as a

cross-cutting function across all program services. This initiative is being carried out in close collaboration and partnership with Trilogy International, as well as a consortium of NGO's and media development organizations including OCHA, Save the Children, Internews and BBC World Service Trust.

Future Challenges and Opportunities

How new technologies can change disaster response

Here is a summarized version of what we can consider the main challenges and opportunities ahead if we are to truly be more effective at humanitarian aid by using available technologies that ensure people affected by disasters are more involved - that they become genuine partners in their own recovery. There are many more institutional-type challenges which need not be listed here.

- **Relevance:** is information being received directly from people – which includes third party curators – relevant information that is actionable? Can we do something with the information or is it just wasting valuable time?
- **Privacy:** much of the personal information gathered by aid workers in the course of their duties is personal and confidential information. In some contexts, more than we might imagine, such information needs to be treated with utmost sensitivity and confidentiality. Protocols on the handling of personal data gathered and disseminated by SMS technologies (for instance but others too) should be developed.
- **Verification:** is the information accurate? Is it true? Is it a ruse? Could it create a security problem?
- **Duplication:** are we the only ones who received the info? Is someone else dealing with it? Do we need (yet again) new coordination mechanisms?
- **Access:** do the people who own the aid outcomes i.e. the most vulnerable people, do they have access to the information channels created by new technologies, better use of SMS portals etc?
- **Expectations:** Are we creating excessively high expectations which we will not be able to manage? That is, by gathering so much data and info from people are we contributing to a misperception that all these needs will be addressed?
- **Proximity:** Mobile technologies and satellite communications are bringing everyone—humanitarian organizations, international institutions, volunteer technical communities, and the affected populations—ever closer together. More often than not, victims of disasters and conflicts have cell phones and can communicate via SMS in real time.

- **Speed:** As a result, information flows are accelerating, raising expectations around increasing the tempo of information management and coordination in emergency operations.
- **Duality:** At the same time, the methods for data and information exchange are moving from document-based systems to flows of structured data via web services. This movement from the narration of ongoing events in long stretches of unstructured prose to streams of data in short, semi-structured formats require humanitarian staff to perform double duty. They are simultaneously working within an existing system based on the exchange of situation reports while filtering and analyzing high volumes of short reports arriving via SMS and web services.

Community engagement is nothing new but there is an exciting new dimension which brings new momentum and opportunities. But it's not about technologies alone. It's about how we use them to really put power into the hands of the people whose destinies we (as humanitarian organizations) influence.