

Humanitarian Broadcasting in Emergencies

A synthesis of evaluation findings

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Executive summary

Since 1994, when a new Kinyarwanda-language service was set up in response to the Rwanda genocide, the BBC World Service and (since it was established in 1999) BBC Media Action have responded to 28 emergencies providing critical information to meet the needs of people affected.

In recent years, the humanitarian community has increasingly recognised the importance of getting critical information to and from people affected by disasters. The systems, learning and co-ordination around such communication support have improved since 2012 when, along with other media and humanitarian actors, BBC Media Action helped to establish the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network.

However, there is still little systematic learning around what does and does not work in using communication to help people respond to and recover from disaster. This research report is designed as a contribution to address this gap, using insights from BBC Media Action's own monitoring and evaluations of four specific case studies.

BBC Media Action responds to different emergencies in different ways, ranging from establishing emergency programmes, often with the BBC World Service, to supporting and working in partnership with community, commercial or state broadcasters in the countries affected through to emergency preparedness training and capacity strengthening. This report, however, focuses mainly on mass communication programming – broadcasting that can reach millions of people when disaster strikes – informing them about what has happened, what to do, how to find missing loved ones and how to protect themselves and their families during the crisis.

Chapter 1 provides a brief review of some of the most salient literature and clarifies some of the terminology used in the context of media and communication in humanitarian responses.

Chapter 2 reviews the special challenges of carrying out effective research and generating robust evidence from communication

interventions in humanitarian crises. These challenges are both ethical (such as ensuring research does no harm and benefits those affected at the time) and practical (such as the difficulty of establishing baseline data or of carrying out focus group discussions during an epidemic). Some of these challenges are common to all humanitarian response work, some of them are specific to evaluating mass media information and communication interventions (such as how to determine what constitutes “good” information or what is the specific effect of a programme often reaching millions of people).

Chapter 3 outlines BBC Media Action's research approach to humanitarian responses, and then explains the method used here to synthesise research findings across the four cases studies that form the basis of this report. This synthesis is framed around selected OECD/DAC (Development Assistant Committee, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) evaluation criteria.¹

Chapter 4 outlines the four case studies that form the focus of this report: (i) a project providing audiovisual content screened mainly in UNHCR registration centres in Jordan and Lebanon designed to enable Syrian refugees to access humanitarian support and articulate their needs (2013–2014); (ii) a set of radio broadcasts to provide people in Gaza with practical humanitarian information and enable them to access help around the period of the 2014 crisis; (iii) a major communication response to the 2014–2015 West Africa Ebola epidemic, initially through an existing BBC Media Action partnership with 36 radio stations across Sierra Leone, and then with a series of broadcast partnerships reaching across Liberia and Guinea, together with capacity strengthening and emergency preparedness training; and (iv) rapid response broadcasts to the April/May 2015 Nepal earthquakes with the BBC Nepali service and several hundred partner radio stations covering the entire country.

Chapter 5 provides a synthesis of these four case studies into a set of findings and insights that can collectively be drawn from the evaluations. Findings show that audiences were

able to identify strongly with the characters and topics in the programmes, and that they were relevant and appropriate for a mass audience. They highlight the importance of partnership in further addressing more localised needs and issues. Findings also show that issues of engagement, access and trust are key to the programme's effectiveness in achieving its outcomes across the six identified areas: connecting people to each other; giving people a voice; enhancing discussion and dialogue; positively influencing attitudes; encouraging and motivating people to act; and enhancing knowledge.

Chapter 6 suggests an indicative theory of change, informed by these evaluation findings and other literature, for the use of mass communication in humanitarian interventions.

Chapter 7 provides a conclusion making four points in particular. First, that while mass media is effective at reaching large numbers of people with potentially life-saving information across a range of topics, it is less effective at providing more context-specific, localised information that people also need. A combination of mass media and local partnerships is needed to address this.

Second, information needs to be practical to be useful, and mass media is most effective at providing practical information that can be universally applied, such as information about the situation, what to do and how to protect yourself and your family, rather than more specific details of what to do in any given context or situation. More localised, context-specific information provision is also important. Third, mass-scale broadcasts are particularly effective at achieving psychosocial impacts, such as helping people feel more connected with others going through the same experience and providing confidence to act in the face of crisis. Finally, crisis exacerbates and heightens existing issues and people make choices about where to get their information based on access, quality, trust and relevance of content. People in crisis place an especially high value on information they can trust, and trust can be lost or gained very quickly. Verifying the trustworthiness of information, which normally involves having strong relationships with local actors and humanitarian responders, is paramount.

1. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC), 1999. Guidance for Evaluating Humanitarian Assistance in Complex Emergencies. Paris: OECD. [online] Available from: <http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/2667294.pdf> [Accessed 7 September 2015].