



Rumour has it:

a practice guide to working with rumours



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Author: Jon Bugge

Editor and project manager: Angela Rouse

Steering group: Aphaluck Bhatiasavi, Charlie M Saceda, Emma Kelleher, Finn Rasmussen, Sarah Mace, Stijn Aelbers

Peer reviewers: Aivon D. Guanco, Anne-Laure Rambaud, Gilles Gasser, Heidi J Larson, Isaac Otieno, Nicola Pyatt, Sayeeda Farhana

Other contributors: Achel Bayisenge, Alex Sicotte-Levesque, Amy O'Donnell, Amy Rhoades, Anahi Ayala Iacucci, Barbara Devleiger, Bronwyn Russel, Cathryn Wood, Charlotte Lancaster, Chris Lunch, Chris McConnell, Chris Tuckwood, Drew Boyd, Fareed Ullah Khan, Fien De Baere, Gareth Benest, Gian Libot, Giovanni Congi, Isla Glaister, Jacobo Quintanilla, Jean Louis Mbusa Mango, Jerome Seregini, Joy Wiskin, Kai Hopkins, Katie Drew, Laura Walker-MacDonald, Malin Palm, Mara Frigo, Marian Casey-Maslen, Mark South, Martin Dawes, Maude Morrison, Meg Sattler, Mike Adams, Naima Saeed, Neelley Hicks, Ni Ni Thaung, Nick van Praag, Nurangiz Khodzharova, Ombretta Baggio, Phil Poirier, Rafiq Copeland, Rebeca Moreno Jimenez, Sarah Cechvala, Sari Setiogi, Sean McDonald, Soledad Muniz, Stewart Davies, Tom Mooney.

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Preface

“Onions and coffee protect against the Ebola disease.” Rumours, such as this one conveying incorrect information, can have catastrophic effects both for communities and the organisations working with them. Yet often little attention is paid to them – until it is too late.

Several members of the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network have recognised the need to work with rumours in their missions to prevent the loss of lives and alleviate suffering. Notably, Internews with their pioneering inter-agency model¹, the World Health Organisation and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs have made considerable efforts to innovate in this area and engage other humanitarian actors on the issue.

The CDAC Network commissioned this practice guide to draw both on their experiences and many others², in order to document approaches, practices and tools to working with rumours. It is aimed primarily at humanitarian programme managers and field staff to enable them to integrate working with rumours into their response programmes in a way that is achievable.

The guide is illustrated with experiences from a range of contexts and all of the examples given are based on real rumours.

How to use the guide

The guide is designed to help you develop a way of working with rumours. As with all humanitarian action, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, the guide aims to build your knowledge and understanding of rumours, and suggests key steps and considerations. A range of options and tools is presented that can be used in different combinations according to the context, and a ‘good enough’² approach is encouraged: integrate quick and simple steps immediately, and build from these.

The guide is structured as follows:

- ▶ **Part One** focuses on some of the theory behind rumours: the definition, nature and importance of rumours, and why we need to work with them.
- ▶ **Part Two** explains the key steps and considerations to identifying and addressing rumours: listening, verifying and engaging.
- ▶ **Part Three** examines different roles and responsibilities in working with rumours, and how coordination and partnerships can enhance what you do.

The CDAC Network welcomes feedback on this practice guide and encourages people to share their experiences and suggestions through case studies, blogs or other means via feedback@cdacnetwork.org.

¹ See case study on page 38

² A term coined by the Emergency Capacity Building Project: ‘being ‘good enough’ means choosing a simple solution rather than an elaborate one. ‘Good enough’ does not mean second best: it means acknowledging that, in an emergency response, adopting a quick and simple approach ... may be the only practical possibility. When the situation changes, you should aim to review your chosen solution and amend your approach accordingly’’. <http://www.alnap.org/resource/8406> [Accessed on 11 May, 2017]



Introduction

You and your family have finally reached the safety of a camp set up by the United Nations and partners in the Kurdish area of northern Iraq. Having fled your home because of intense fighting, you've been on the move for days. In the camp there is talk of yet another attack. People have read on Facebook that insurgents are less than a mile from the camp and are heading this way. All around you people are packing up their meagre belongings to flee again. You must decide in the next minutes what you and your family will do...

This was the reality in Iraq in late 2014, when rumours of attacks would empty camps overnight. People were forced to make their decisions based on unverified information and fled, despite this potentially placing them in even greater danger. Humanitarian organisations doing distributions would arrive at camps to find them empty.

In an emergency context rumours can be a matter of life or death. They can create suffering or anger and provoke detrimental behaviour or violent reactions. And yet rumours are often dismissed by humanitarian actors or they simply remain unaware of them and their potential risks until they have to deal with the consequences.

Being more attuned to listening for rumours and embedding a few straightforward steps into your work is a powerful way to start addressing the ones with the worst potential consequences.

A cycle of conversation and listening to identify rumours, verifying the facts behind them and engaging communities with new narratives can create a way of working to counter rumours. Approaching this in coordination with other actors and drawing on the expertise of partners will enhance the process.

As with almost every walk of human life, technology can undoubtedly help in rumour tracking and management. But it cannot – and should not – replace the need for good old-fashioned forms of community engagement. Meeting the community in their homes, talking to them in their own language and simply doing your best to have a natural conversation can still be one of the most powerful response tools available to us.

Our humanitarian mandate demands that we pay attention to rumours and that we act on those that threaten lives and create suffering. The 'Grand Bargain' participation revolution³, and other global commitments to improve accountability, will ring hollow if we fail to listen to the communities we work with and the rumours circulating within them.

It is not a question of whether there will be rumours when people are faced with crisis: there always are. The question is rather: how will we engage and work with them? This guide helps answer that question.

³ This is one of several commitments made by donors and humanitarian organisations at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016



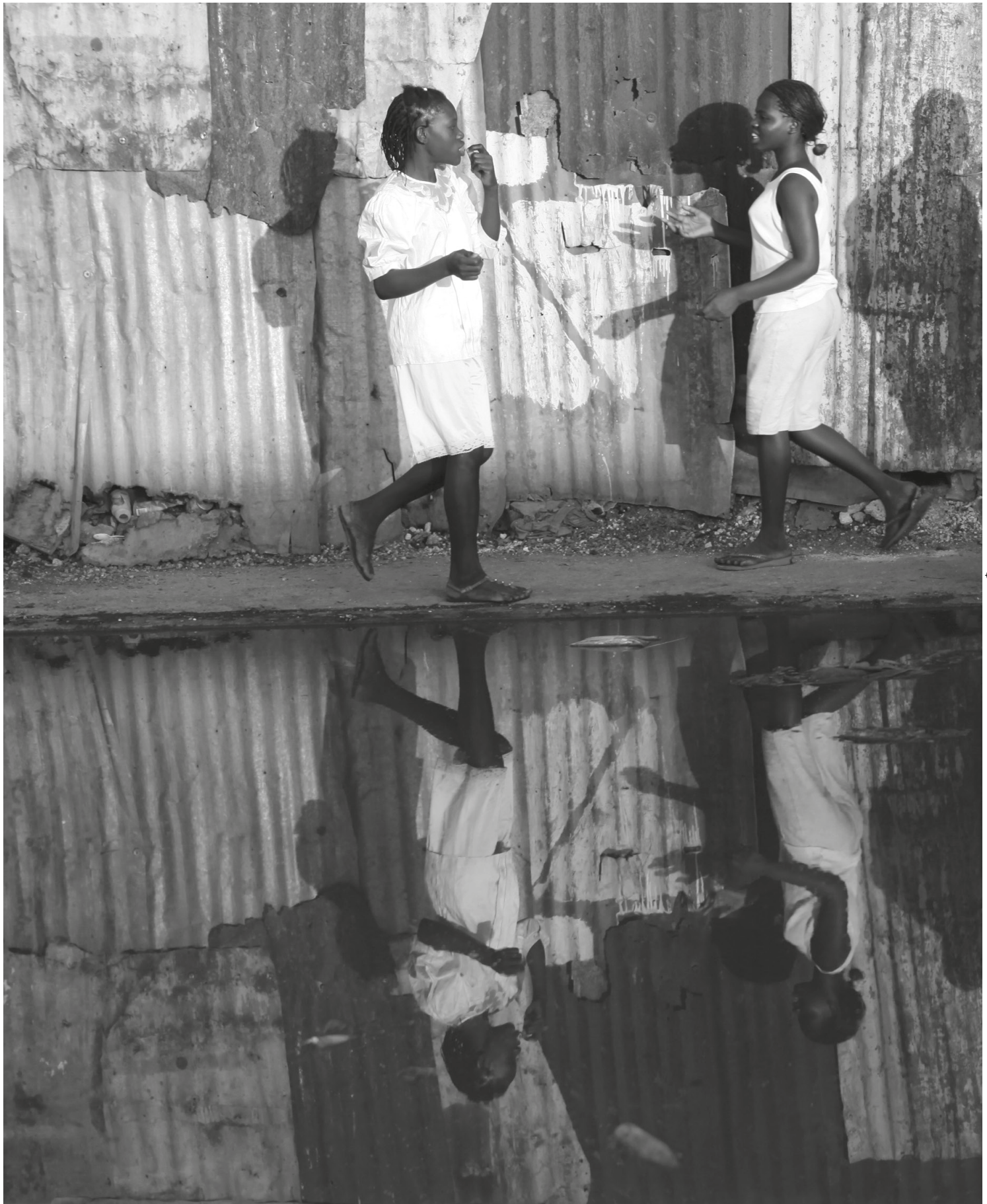
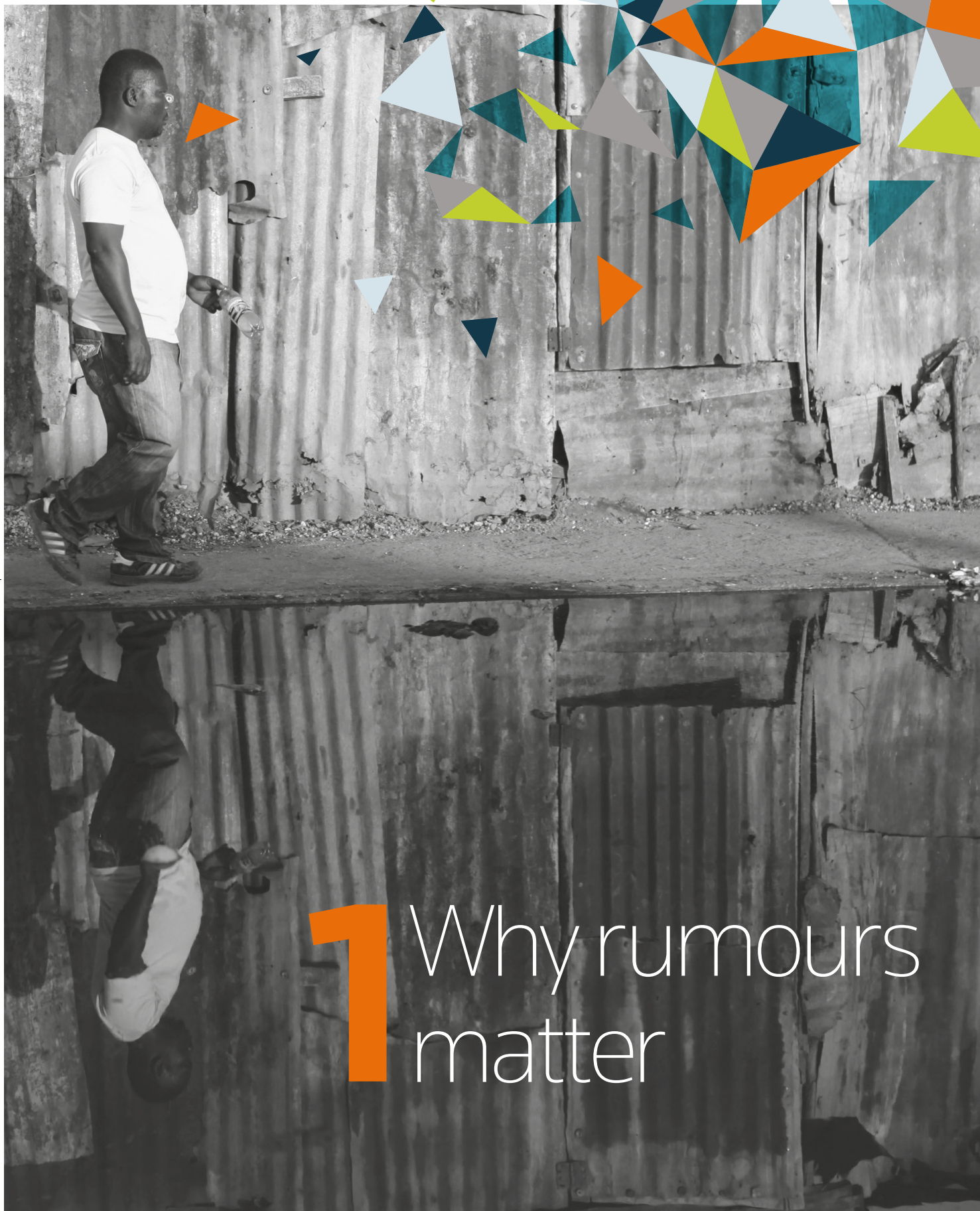


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1 Why rumours matter

What is a rumour?

A rumour is defined as unverified information that is transmitted from one person to others⁴. The word rumour often has negative connotations – often dismissed as being idle talk or gossip. However, rumours are neither inherently good nor bad. They can be either true or false, or a mixture of both.

There are two sub-groups of rumours, which are defined by the intent of the people spreading them:

- ▶ **Misinformation** is incorrect information spread by people without the intent to deceive, for example through a misunderstanding.
- ▶ **Disinformation** is incorrect information spread by people in order to deceive or manipulate others. An example of this is 'fake news', which is disinformation disguised as news, often spread for political or economic gain.

A rumour can switch between these sub-groups as it spreads through a community. For example, a human trafficker can spread a rumour amongst refugees about how easy life is in Europe with the intent to deceive (disinformation), and a refugee can then pass this rumour to his friends and family not intending to deceive them (misinformation).

While means and motives may vary, the impact is the same – people are unable to make informed choices about their future. Basing these choices on unverified information can have devastating consequences.

Speed read:

- ▶ Rumours are unverified information that can be spread intentionally or unintentionally. They may contain correct or incorrect information, or a mix of both.
- ▶ They flourish when there is either too little or too much information and people are unable to check what is right or not.
- ▶ Rumours can help humanitarian staff better understand the communities they work with and deliver on global commitments to improve accountability and participation.

⁴ DiFonzo and Bordia, *Rumor Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches*, 2007



Photo: iStock/USO

Understanding the nature of rumours

What are the different types of rumour?

Rumours are a natural response to uncertain or threatening times. They can help people make sense of a situation, or take action against a threat. They can broadly be categorised into three types⁵:

- ▶ **Wish rumours:** these reflect the hopes of the community
E.g. *'I've heard that the Canadian government will allow the earthquake victims to work in Canada. What should I do to go to Canada?'*⁶
- ▶ **Fear rumours:** these reflect the anxieties of the community
E.g. *'If someone wants to return to Turkey from Germany, they send him to Assad in Damascus'*⁷
- ▶ **Hostility rumours:** these reflect threats to the community or prejudices and often target outside groups
E.g. *'The Iraqi refugees get less support than the Syrians'*

Fear rumours are the most prevalent type⁸. They allow people to respond either by taking physical action, or by insulating themselves against the emotional impact of such an event.

For example, following the 2015 earthquake in Nepal there were widespread fear rumours in both Nepal and northern India that another much stronger earthquake would occur. In Patna, India thousands of people gathered in a park in the city's centre, driven by fear of the predicted earthquake. Lucknow and other northern Indian cities saw a similar phenomenon⁹.

Rumours can serve as a community 'barometer', highlighting areas of social stress and anxiety, both for the community as a whole, and for the different groups within the community.

The next time you hear a rumour, ask yourself:

- ▶ What type of rumour is it?
- ▶ What role is it playing for the different groups in the community?
- ▶ What does the rumour illustrate about the groups in the community?

Why do people share rumours?

Different people will have different motivations to spreading rumours - these can include¹⁰:

- ▶ To explain a situation or an event
- ▶ To share useful or entertaining information
- ▶ To define oneself by being 'in the know' or making others look bad
- ▶ To develop relationships by using information as a currency
- ▶ To feel connected to issues affecting them
- ▶ To mislead or deceive: often economically or politically motivated.

With the exception of disinformation, people generally share rumours because they believe the rumour or parts of the rumour¹¹.

A crisis can alter how people assess the accuracy of rumours. A disruption to their social networks and usual sources of information at a time when there is a strong desire to understand what has happened can lead people to believe things or behave in ways that they might not usually. People are more susceptible to persuasive messages when they are tired or mentally depleted¹² - the inevitable conditions that communities find themselves in after a crisis.

In a crisis the disruption of both social networks and access to the usual sources of information can provide fertile ground for the development of rumours - sidestepping people's critical thinking and allowing those rumours to proliferate.

⁵ Donovan, *How Idle is Idle Talk? One Hundred Years of Rumor Research*, 2007

⁶ Open Mic project, Issue 3 <http://www.quakehelpdesk.org/openmic/issue3/English.pdf> [Accessed on 14 May, 2017]

⁷ News that moves, Rumours #3 <https://newsthatmoves.org/en/rumours-3/> [Accessed on 14 May, 2017]

⁸ Silverman, *Lies, Damn Lies and Viral Content*, 2015

⁹ Express News Service, *Fear, rumours on social media bring people out on streets* <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/fear-rumours-on-social-media-bring-people-out-on-streets/> [Accessed on 14 May, 2017]

¹⁰ Adapted from Moon, *Why People Share: The Psychology of Social Sharing*, 2014 <https://coschedule.com/blog/why-people-share/> [Accessed on 1 May, 2017]

¹¹ *The Psychology of Rumors: 6 Reasons Why Rumors Spread* <http://socialpsychonline.com/2015/09/psychology-why-rumors-spread/> [Accessed on 14 May, 2017]

¹² Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, 2011

Rumours in action

THE BASIC LAW OF RUMOUR IN EFFECT

In 2004, at the start of the Avian Influenza H5N1 outbreak, the WHO began its 'enhanced rumour surveillance'¹³ – a process of investigating and verifying unofficial reports of the disease. Their research found that the majority of rumours occurred in the first few weeks after the public health alert when there was a lot of concern and confusion around the virus. As more information became available about the virus and the outbreak – decreasing the level of uncertainty – the amount of rumours circulating decreased. This is consistent with 'the basic law of rumour', which states that the importance of the issue and the level of uncertainty around it will dictate the amount of rumours circulating.

What factors enable rumours?

The 'basic law of rumour'¹⁴ states the importance of the issue and the level of uncertainty around it will dictate the amount of rumours circulating.

Several factors can impact the importance and uncertainty levels.

The level of importance will depend on how relevant or urgent an issue is to somebody and how much of a threat they perceive it to be, and this will vary from person to person. The level of uncertainty can increase for a range of reasons; a common reason being lack of information.

Often after a crisis there is a vacuum of reliable, accurate information at the community level about what has happened, about when help will arrive, and about what can people do in the meantime.

Conversely if a community is exposed to too much information this can just as easily cause uncertainty¹⁶. The sheer volume of information can overload the ability to effectively process it¹⁷ - making it difficult to critically evaluate fact from fiction.

Rumours in action

CONFLICTING OR CONFUSING MESSAGES CAN GENERATE RUMOURS

An Internews assessment of the Ebola response in November 2014 found that there were over 300 different types of social mobilisation or messaging systems in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Some researchers have linked this proliferation of one-way messaging to the generation of rumours¹⁵ - misunderstood or poorly communicated messages can evolve into rumours. The assessment led to the launch of Internews' *Dey Say* project (see later case study on Internews) as a coordinated rumour management project.

¹³ Samaan, *Rumor Surveillance and Avian Influenza H5N1*, 2005

¹⁴ Donovan, *How Idle is Idle Talk? One Hundred Years of Rumor Research*, 2007

¹⁵ International Centre for Humanitarian Affairs, 2016, *Community Engagement and Health promotion in Countries Affected by the Ebola Crisis in West Africa*

¹⁶ Kimmel, *Rumours and the financial marketplace*, 2010

¹⁷ Donovan, *How Idle is Idle Talk? One Hundred Years of Rumor Research*, 2007

Why rumours cannot be ignored

Rumours can provide honest feedback on humanitarian programmes yet can also undermine them. Worse still, rumours can threaten lives and create suffering both for the people you are seeking to help and your staff, and thereby undermine the mission of humanitarian organisations – this is why they cannot be ignored.

Rumours also offer opportunities as a form of feedback on humanitarian action, informing course corrections and adaptations to ensure a more effective and efficient response. Rumours can help us better understand and build stronger relationships with people in the affected communities resulting in a more localised, more people-centred response. Rumours encourage better transparency and accountability practices. They can serve as an early warning of violence or risky behaviour so early action can be taken.

Listening to communities, including to rumours, is a fundamental part of the Core

Humanitarian Standard and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations.

Meaningful participation, enshrined in the 'Grand Bargain' at the World Humanitarian Summit, starts with organisations better listening and improving their understanding of affected communities. Rumours provide an opportunity to improve community engagement, which in turn leads to better participation – and to delivering responses that are truly localised.

Rumours in action

THE COST OF NOT LISTENING: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

Political and religious leaders of five northern Nigerian states led an eleven-month boycott of polio vaccination in 2003. It was fuelled by rumours that the polio vaccine was contaminated with HIV, anti-fertility and carcinogenic chemicals, and that it was against Islamic law.

The cost of not understanding and addressing rumours earlier in the campaign was high: there was a quintupling of polio cases in Nigeria, outbreaks spread to 18 countries across three continents. The estimated cost was \$500 million¹⁸. The boycott was only resolved after a concerted international effort that included:

- ▶ Sending Nigerian political and religious leaders to South Africa, India and Indonesia to see the vaccine in use and prove its safety
- ▶ Bringing attention to the fact that the vaccines were being produced in Indonesia, to demonstrate adherence to Islamic law

Once the boycott was broken, the work was not over. To ensure the rumour would not recur a meeting of religious leaders from Chad, Cameroon, Niger, Togo, Benin and Burkina Faso was convened to share experiences of successful vaccination campaigns and how to better support these in the future.

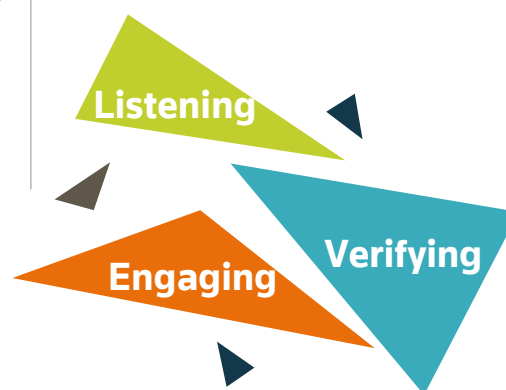
¹⁸ Ginhai, *Listening to the rumours: What the northern Nigeria polio vaccine boycott can tell us ten years on*, 2013

2 Working with rumours

Working with rumours in its simplest form is about three complementary steps: *listening, verifying and engaging*.

Although presented here in a linear way, these steps represent a cyclical process of dialogue with the community that builds trust, enhances relationships with the community and improves programme impact. Ideally the cycle would be completed quickly, for example through a conversation where a rumour is discussed and a response is provided immediately, though depending on factors such as its complexity, how widespread it is and people's beliefs it may require a longer process.

The three steps are described in more detail below, providing key considerations, suggestions, tools and examples to help you develop a 'good enough' system of working with rumours into your response.



Speed read:

Listening is more than just hearing what is said. To effectively listen to rumours you need to:

- ▶ Build on existing and trusted relationships as ways to listen.
- ▶ Ensure you can listen to the language the community is most comfortable using.
- ▶ Have open and unstructured conversations with the community- Assessing the risk when prioritising responding.
- ▶ Assess the potential risk that a rumour poses to help you decide on a response.

Listening...

The first step to working with rumours is listening to the community to create the opportunity to hear rumours. You will then need to assess the risk the rumour poses to help you decide how to react.

Identify how to listen

Listening is much more than the simple reflex of hearing – it involves understanding who you are listening to, the issues they face and their concerns. It is about letting people decide what information to share according to their own priorities. There may already be ways that your organisation listens to the members of the community, or you may have to develop new opportunities.

Identifying rumours is not as simple as asking people about any rumours they have heard. This will not necessarily uncover rumours, for example because people may believe a rumour to be true and therefore not even consider it a rumour, or people may not trust you as someone to discuss this with.

One of the most important factors in how to listen is language. To truly listen to a community and for them to be able to truly express themselves, it helps significantly to speak the language that the community is most comfortable with. Language matters because it can provide a rich diversity of nuance, implication and inferred meaning. You should know which languages people are most comfortable using and make sure you have the capacity to communicate with them in that language, which may mean working indirectly through colleagues, partners or other trusted intermediaries.

Speaking the right language and using appropriate formats for dialogue will help you uncover rumours. Informal and unstructured

conversations are one of the best ways to create opportunities to listen to rumours. They allow the community member to dictate the topics and flow. Such conversations help build trust and relationships by showing that you value and respect the opinions and experiences of the local community. It will be through trusted relationships and less formal conversations that people feel confident and secure to share issues and concerns. Very often, this will include rumours they have heard.

The ways you already interact with groups in the community could provide opportunities for such conversations. Discuss the ways your teams, colleagues and partners interact with the community and how they currently hear rumours. They are likely already hearing them but may not be reporting them. Similarly, existing mechanisms such as a complaints mechanism may also already be an avenue to find out rumours.

An effective method is to have members of the community listen to rumours and to then share these with you¹⁹. Establishing a community-based network can work well because the individuals are already trusted

within the community and they already understand the religious, social, cultural and political context. Developing a new network can mean they can focus solely on listening to rumours, they can also provide a two-way channel and help you later communicate the outcomes of your verification.

Make sure to pick people who represent the diverse and dynamic groups within the community – this will enable you to develop a network that reaches deep into the community. Consider identifying the existing groups or networks who already represent different groups in the community, such as women's groups or youth groups.

Members of the network should have credibility within their community, you want to be sure people trust them. You will need to invest time to build relationships with your network to help build trust and enable the flow of rumours.

The table overleaf highlights five channels that are likely to already exist in your organisation's ways of working as opportunities to listen to rumours. The table lists characteristics of the channels, guiding

Rumours in action

COMMUNITY-BASED NETWORKS OF INFLUENCERS REDUCING THE POWER OF RUMOURS TO CAUSE CONFLICT

The Centre for Diversity and National Harmony, a conflict prevention NGO in Myanmar, knows the power that rumours have to incite violence. They established community-based network of individuals to identify and mitigate the impacts of such rumours.

When they first visit a new community they meet with community groups, such as youth groups or women's groups. They also meet with other formal and informal community leaders. From these discussions they get an understanding of who the community influencers are, and who will be willing to work with them. By including a diverse representation of groups within the network, they ensure they are not reinforcing existing power structures.

The central programme team regularly contacts the monitors to listen to rumours they have heard. The team then verifies this by talking to the relevant stakeholders and triangulating with social and traditional media monitoring. Once the information is verified it is shared with the network of community monitors to enable them to share accurate verified information with the community.

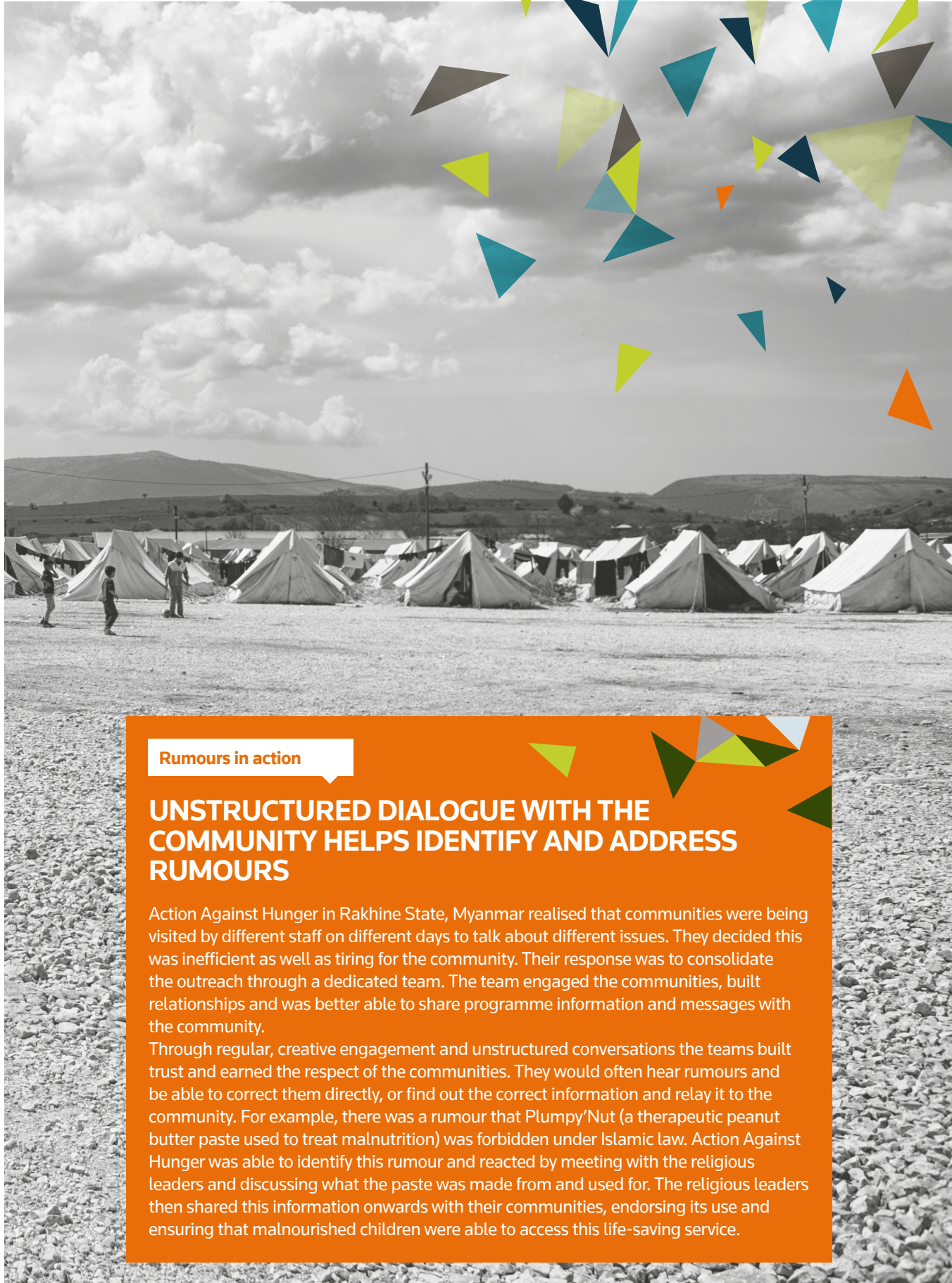
The project is piloting a mobile application to connect the network of community monitors. The idea would enable the network members to interact and to see all the rumours – so the community could become self-verifying and self-correcting.

¹⁹ Enria, *Power, fairness and trust: understanding and engaging with vaccine trial participants and communities in the setting up the EBOVAC-Salone vaccine trial in Sierra Leone*, 2016

questions and possible actions to help you take advantage of the opportunity. If these are not in place or not sufficient, you will need to be more proactive and create new opportunities to listen. A simple step for example is to include an open question

at the end of any surveys, assessments or meetings your organisation is conducting to start a conversation, such as: what are people talking about?

Existing channels	Questions to ask	Possible actions
Field staff, partner staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Do staff speak the local language or dialect that the community are most comfortable using? ▶ Do staff understand the importance of rumours? ▶ Do they know what to do when they hear a rumour or how to report it? ▶ Do they know how to ask about rumours? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Discuss the importance of rumours to build a common understanding with all staff ▶ Train staff in unstructured conversation methods ▶ If you do not have the language skills consider working with an interpreter ▶ Establish a system for reporting rumours in your organisation ▶ Add rumours as a standing agenda item in your meetings ▶ Liaise with other colleagues such as those working on security or drivers as they may also be aware of rumours that are circulating
Feedback / complaints mechanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ What currently happens or should happen if the mechanism identifies a rumour? ▶ Who should follow up on the rumour? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Add a 'rumour' classification into how you process the feedback received ▶ Develop a system for following up on the rumours: to help you verify and engage ▶ Explain to the community they can also use the feedback system to ask questions or share rumours
Community-based networks or groups, e.g. women's groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ What networks already exist? ▶ Do they have the capacity to listen to rumours? ▶ Do they understand why rumours are important? ▶ Do they know what to do when they hear a rumour or how to report it? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Reach out to the networks to explore partnership opportunities ▶ Discuss the importance of rumours and why you want to work with them as part of your programming ▶ Establish a system for reporting rumours and for follow up
Local media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Does your organisation have a local media focal point and/or strategy? ▶ Which media do your target groups listen to, read or watch? ▶ What support do the local media need? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Identify a focal point who can engage local media ▶ Map media that are used by your target groups ▶ Explore partnership opportunities for working with them to identify and address rumours ▶ Share any monitoring data on a regular basis – both internally and externally
Social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Does your organisation have a social media focal point and/or strategy? ▶ Which social media do your target groups use? ▶ Do you have an organisation social media account that could be used? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Identify a focal point who can monitor social media ▶ Map which social media are used by your target groups ▶ Discuss with your target groups who are community influencers on social media ▶ Develop a system to monitor these accounts to start listening



Rumours in action

UNSTRUCTURED DIALOGUE WITH THE COMMUNITY HELPS IDENTIFY AND ADDRESS RUMOURS

Action Against Hunger in Rakhine State, Myanmar realised that communities were being visited by different staff on different days to talk about different issues. They decided this was inefficient as well as tiring for the community. Their response was to consolidate the outreach through a dedicated team. The team engaged the communities, built relationships and was better able to share programme information and messages with the community.

Through regular, creative engagement and unstructured conversations the teams built trust and earned the respect of the communities. They would often hear rumours and be able to correct them directly, or find out the correct information and relay it to the community. For example, there was a rumour that Plumpy'Nut (a therapeutic peanut butter paste used to treat malnutrition) was forbidden under Islamic law. Action Against Hunger was able to identify this rumour and reacted by meeting with the religious leaders and discussing what the paste was made from and used for. The religious leaders then shared this information onwards with their communities, endorsing its use and ensuring that malnourished children were able to access this life-saving service.

Photo: iStock/Ashley Wiley



Things to consider

- ▶ People may be reluctant to share rumours with people they don't trust – always try to build your ways of listening to rumours around existing trusted relationships.
- ▶ You may need to train the people who are listening to rumours. Make sure they know what kind of information you are looking for and why so they can explain to the community.
- ▶ Are there are existing groups with whom you could partner, such as civil society, local media, community-based groups, teachers or health workers?

Rumours in action

RUMOURS CAN HIGHLIGHT PROBLEMS WITH PROGRAMMES

In Iraq, the IDP Information Centre, commonly known as the 'call centre', is an inter-agency accountability mechanism that collates feedback and questions from the affected community on behalf of all organisations working on the response. In March 2017, the call centre handled a rumour relating to an issue with a food distribution in one of the camps. The rumour was serious enough that camp residents were threatening to protest. The call centre followed up with the relevant organisation, which investigated the issue, exposing a genuine distribution issue with an implementing partner. The agency quickly resolved the issue, reporting the cause of the issue and the corrective action it had taken back to the call centre. The call centre operator who had handled the original call relayed this to the caller who first reported the rumour. The caller was extremely grateful for being able to provide feedback that would prompt a change in how programmes were delivered.

Rumours in action

VIRTUAL AND REAL COMMUNITY NETWORKS PROTECTING REFUGEES

In Lebanon the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) created a series of Facebook groups run by refugees for refugees to help share information and monitor rumours. Currently the groups have over 100,000 members. The groups self-correct rumour and misinformation and when they can't, they ask UNHCR to clarify. This online network is complemented by a physical network of focal points and community outreach volunteers, which ensures that information flows between the community and UNHCR. When there is a fraudulent rumour circulating in the community that poses a risk UNHCR will activate their 'anti-fraud shield'. The shield uses relevant information and communication tools to correct the rumour, including notices in reception centres, face-to-face community outreach, Facebook posts, WhatsApp communication tree cascades and SMS blasts. This system enables the correction of rumours within hours and ensures the community can make informed decisions about their future based on accurate and verified information.

Create a rumour logbook

However you choose to listen it can be very helpful to document the rumours that you do hear as part of the reporting process. Good practice is to document the rumours in a 'rumour log', a register or electronic spreadsheet that allows you to record details of the rumours, classify them (as discussed later in this section) and keep a note of any subsequent actions taken. Keeping a rumour log will enable you to analyse trends, patterns and recurring issues as well as share information with other organisations working in the community (see the later section on coordination). As rumours are a form of feedback, if you have a feedback and complaints mechanism, an option is to embed the rumour log into that rather than keeping a separate log.



Photo: iStock/J Carillet

Rumour log (example)

Date	Location	Rumour	Channel	Risk rating	Verification status	Engagement activities	Monitoring outcome
<i>When was the rumour heard?</i>	<i>Where was it heard?</i>	<i>Details of the rumour</i>	<i>How was the rumour heard?</i>	<i>Low Medium High</i>	<i>True Untrue</i>	<i>Details of who, what, when, where and how you engage the community</i>	<i>Has the rumour stopped?</i>
15/1/14	Tacloban, Philippines	Another typhoon was going to hit the city even stronger than Haiyan	During outreach to the communities about why people were not sending their children to school	Medium	Untrue	Radio Abante began to broadcast regular weather forecasts to help people feel confident about sending their children to school	The Education cluster reported an increase in children attending school

Decide when to react

Depending on the potential consequences, not all rumours will require a response.

A rumour about a visiting pop star would likely not require a response, but a rumour of unfair recruitment practices of an organisation may well do to avoid demonstrations against it.

The risk that a rumour poses should be the key factor in your decision to respond. This risk depends on two factors: the severity of the potential consequences and the likelihood those consequences will happen. You will need to consider both of these factors in deciding when to react.

Below you will find a table of guiding questions to help you assess the potential consequences of a rumour, as well as illustrative rumours and examples of what the consequences of those rumours might

be. Work through these questions to help you think about the possible impact of a rumour.

Once you have assessed the potential consequences you can categorise the rumour: label the rumour as having minor, moderate or major consequences depending on their potential to do harm.

Questions to assess the potential consequences	Example rumours and their potential consequences
Could it cause harm?	<i>'You need to puncture your raft before you arrive or they will send you back'</i> This rumour could lead to injury or loss of life
Could it stop people accessing services?	<i>'The food being distributed is poisoned'</i> Could lead to people not eating the food and suffering from a lack of nutrition
Could it cause conflict?	<i>'The rival tribe will attack us at dawn'</i> This rumour could lead to pre-emptive attacks or population movement that deepen existing divides
Could it result in risky behaviour?	<i>'Eating iodized salt protects you from radiation poisoning'</i> This rumour could lead to a false sense of protection from radiation, high blood pressure and associated health risks
Could it put certain groups at risk?	<i>'Having unprotected sex with a virgin will cure you of AIDS'</i> This rumour could lead to a rise in cases of child or youth rape
Could it put your staff, your partners or the community at risk?	<i>'That organisation is smuggling illegal immigrants into the country'</i> This rumour could lead to protests and/or problems of access
Could it pose a significant reputational risk?	<i>'That organisation is corrupt, look at the big cars they all drive'</i> This rumour could lead to protests and/or problems of access

You also need to assess the likelihood of the rumour having the consequences you have listed. Even though a rumour may have a major consequence, if it is extremely unlikely to occur then your efforts may be better spent on dealing with other matters.

Your assessment of likelihood will be based on context specific issues and observations. Ask yourself, for example:

- ▶ Have there already been any examples of the potential consequences listed occurring as a result of the rumour?
- ▶ Historically, how have people reacted to this kind of rumour before?
- ▶ How fast is the rumour travelling? How widespread is it?
- ▶ Who is the reported source of the rumour? Is it a source that people tend to believe?

There will be other factors that you will have to consider that will be unique to your context, such as the political or economic landscape. To complete your assessment of the likelihood, categorise the rumour as having probable, possible or improbable consequences.

Based on your assessment of the severity of the potential consequences (minor, moderate or major) and the likelihood of the consequences occurring (probable, possible or improbable) you can now determine if the rumour is low, medium or high risk. Using a matrix such as the one shown can be helpful to visualise this.

It may be helpful to repeat the exercise for different segments of the community, as generalising the assessment may overlook that a rumour could pose a severe risk to certain groups.

Remember at a minimum to conduct your analysis by differentiating the risk for women, men, boys and girls as well as considering factors such as age, disability and known marginalised groups.

Now you've understood the level of risk you can decide which rumours require a response, which may be undertaken by your own organisation or in partnership with other organisations or groups. Responding to a rumour involves first verifying the rumour and then engaging the community to share verified information about the issue.

		Consequences		
		Minor 3	Moderate 2	Major 1
Likelihood	Probable A			
	Possible B			
	Improbable C			

Key

Green Low Risk	Yellow Medium Risk	Red High Risk
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Things to consider

- ▶ **The system for deciding how to respond should ideally be in place before you start listening, so you can easily make the decision upon hearing a rumour.**
- ▶ **Discussing rumours with your team or colleagues can give you different perspectives and insights, which can make for a more accurate risk assessment.**
- ▶ **Your decision shouldn't be swayed by how widespread the rumour is – it only takes one person to hear a rumour to potentially cause suffering and rumours can spread quickly. Instead always base your decision on your risk assessment.**
- ▶ **You may need to refer the rumour to a partner organisation (if a rumour is about them) or to local authorities, a cluster or other coordination body if it has a wider potential impact than your organisation alone.**

Verifying...

Speed read

Verification means finding out the facts behind a rumour. To do this you should:

- ▶ Identify where or with whom to check the facts.
- ▶ Triangulate these facts by checking with more than one source and ensuring these are reliable and independent of each other.
- ▶ Understand the issues and concerns highlighted by the rumour and why it occurred to inform how you later develop your community engagement strategy to the rumour.

If you have identified a rumour, assessed that the risk is sufficient for you to take action you will need to first verify it. Verifying involves uncovering the truth behind the rumour and the possible causes. Understanding why a rumour occurred in the first place will help determine how you address it.

Identify reliable information sources

To verify a rumour you need to check the facts behind it with credible information sources. This could be written sources, e.g. laws, rules, policies, factsheets, or it could be people with first-hand experience and/or an in-depth knowledge of the subject matter.

For example, a medical doctor would be best placed to advise on how certain diseases are spread, or the local disaster management unit may be best placed to advise about compensation entitlements.

If you are using written sources things that you should consider include:

- ▶ How recent is the document? Is it still accurate and relevant?
- ▶ Where was it published? Is it a credible publication?
- ▶ Who wrote it? What are the person's qualifications, motivations or biases?
- ▶ Is it clear? Would it help explain the situation to the community?

Importantly, consider how they know what they know and don't be afraid to ask them that. You don't want someone's opinion; you want the facts, so it is helpful to consider a person's qualifications, position, interests and biases.

Find out the facts and triangulate

If you are speaking directly to a source you need to find out the facts and be confident that these are accurate. Below is a series of steps that can help guide you.

1. Explain to your contact that you are verifying a rumour, which may or may not be true, and explain the rumour that you have heard.
2. Ask them what is true/untrue²⁰ about the rumour and to state in simple terms the facts and how they know them.
3. Ask for any supporting documentation, or where members of the community could get more information.
4. Repeat to them what you have heard to check that you have understood correctly. You should finish with a clear understanding of the facts – if you aren't sure ask again.

It is good practice to triangulate the information you gather. Triangulating means checking with a minimum of three different sources. If each of them provides the same information then it is more likely to be correct.

Be sure to select who you verify with carefully – they should be the right people to ask from a technical perspective and be independent of one another. If the three

²⁰ A rumour is often a mix of true and untrue elements

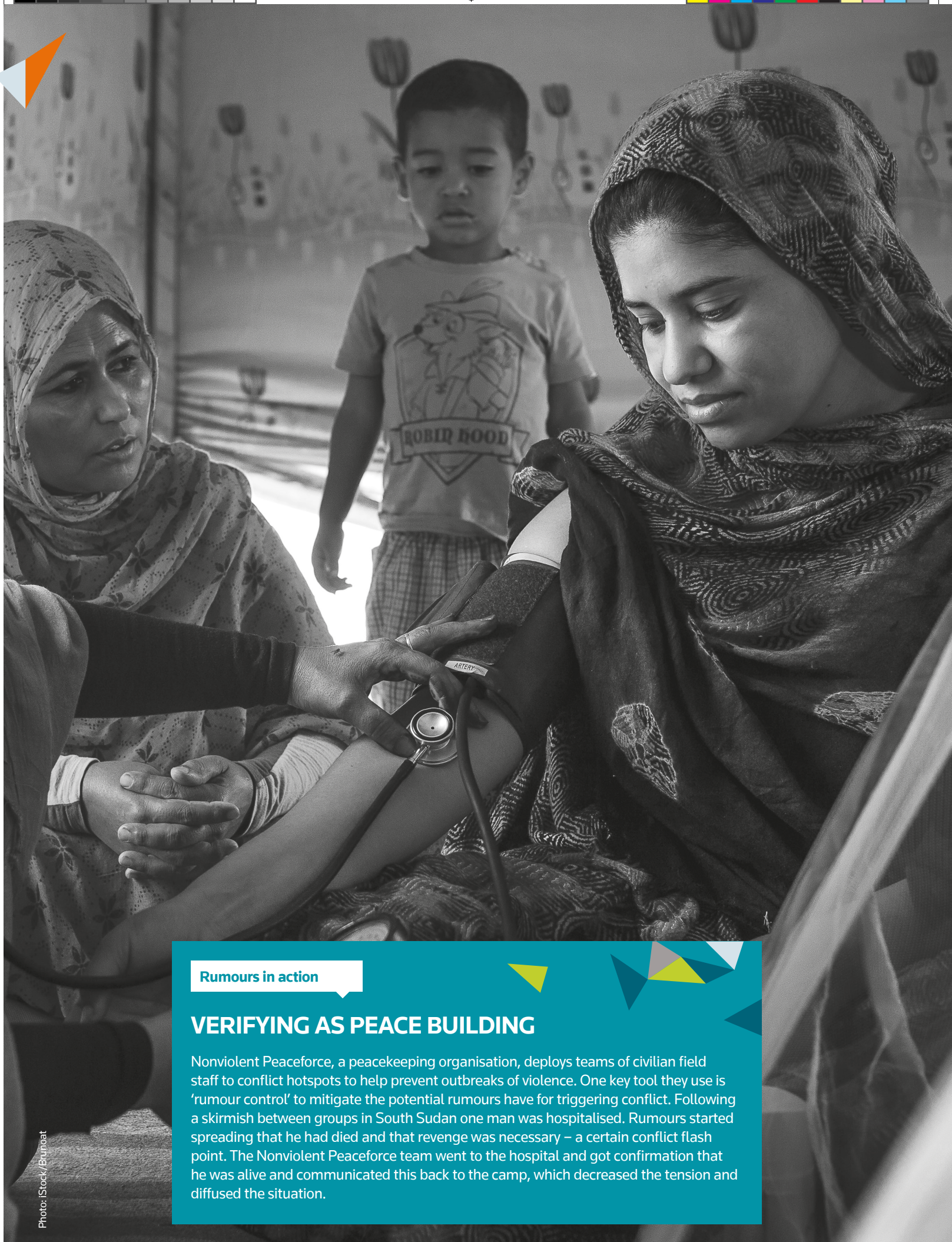


Photo: iStock/Burjoat

Rumours in action

VERIFYING AS PEACE BUILDING

Nonviolent Peaceforce, a peacekeeping organisation, deploys teams of civilian field staff to conflict hotspots to help prevent outbreaks of violence. One key tool they use is 'rumour control' to mitigate the potential rumours have for triggering conflict. Following a skirmish between groups in South Sudan one man was hospitalised. Rumours started spreading that he had died and that revenge was necessary – a certain conflict flash point. The Nonviolent Peaceforce team went to the hospital and got confirmation that he was alive and communicated this back to the camp, which decreased the tension and diffused the situation.



sources do not agree then you will need to check with more sources and possibly review how you are selecting them.

The verification process so far should have allowed you to know which elements of the rumour were true or untrue. If you are keeping a rumour log, you can add the relevant verification outcome.

Understanding the rumour better

Understanding what triggered a rumour gives you the opportunity to address the root causes. For example, it may be something your organisation has done or hasn't explained properly that needs to be addressed to stop the rumour recurring.

A rumour may be being spread by a group of influential individuals, so working with this group directly could address the issue. Rumours can illustrate stresses and anxieties of people in the community, thinking about what the rumour can tell you about these can deepen your understanding of the issues and concerns affecting the community.

Ideally you would discuss the cause of a rumour with people in the community themselves or through the community-based network if you have been working with one.

However, this will not always be possible in which case you can discuss the underlying causes with colleagues or partners. The questions in the table provide a useful guide for discussion.

Answering these questions will help broaden your understanding of the context and the possible issues and concerns that people might have. It will help you ground the facts in the reality of the situation faced by the community, which will help you better decide how to engage them.

Sometimes it is not possible to easily identify why a rumour starts. Even if you cannot you can still find effective ways to address the rumour when you come to engaging the community.



Things to consider

- ▶ Is supporting documentation in an accessible format/channel for the community to access and understand? If not, you may need to consider developing it.



Identifying the possible causes of a rumour

Questions for discussion

Links to rumours

Was there an unusual event in the community?

- ▶ Misunderstandings about unexpected activities in a community can start rumours

Was there a group of people who fell sick?

- ▶ A cluster of illness can trigger rumours about the cause of the sickness

Was there a distribution of relief items?

- ▶ Distributions can often trigger rumours about the selection criteria or favouritism

Was there a change in programming? Or is there one planned?

- ▶ Changes can lead to rumours of humanitarian assistance stopping, or corruption organisations running out of money, or that the community has been 'unselected' based on their ethnicity/religion

Was there an outreach activity that shared a new message?

- ▶ A poorly communicated message can cause misunderstandings, which lead to rumours

Are there people in the community who might benefit from the rumour?

- ▶ People may spread a rumour for their own economic or political gain



Speed read

To use verified information to engage a community around a rumour you should:

- ▶ Work out your target audiences, and develop and deliver a new narrative to replace the rumour.
- ▶ Use the language that your target groups are most comfortable using.
- ▶ Use communication channels and cite sources of information that are already trusted by your target groups, or develop these.
- ▶ Check that the messages and the new narrative are being received, understood and believed.

Engaging...

Once you have listened to and verified a rumour you need to engage the community to share the verified information. This engagement with verified information empowers people to make informed choices. Engaging the community enables you to deliver a message and provides another opportunity to listen and to continue the dialogue.

Develop a new narrative

Make sure that you know which language or dialect your target groups are most comfortable speaking – remember that this can vary between different groups within a community. For example, groups with lower education levels might prefer to speak different languages or dialects compared with well-educated people in the community.

Simply denying, confirming or ignoring the rumour is unlikely to change what people believe. Neither will simply providing the facts behind the rumour because the complex emotional roles rumours can play can override the facts. You need to develop a new narrative that is compelling enough to replace the original rumour.

This new narrative will be conveyed through a message or a series of messages depending on the complexity of the rumour and context. For example, the message may be something relatively simple such as including additional information in a health worker's existing community outreach sessions, or it may require a longer-term, more complex and resource-intensive intervention such as a large behaviour change communication campaign.²¹

Depending on the complexity you may need to undertake additional work to understand the context of the rumour better including people's culture, beliefs, practices and knowledge to inform the new narrative.

This could be done through a Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices survey²² or other research methods. It may be extremely useful to coordinate or partner with other organisations or groups to do this, or to develop your messages or help you reach your target groups.

For example, partnering with a media

development agency could help create content based on the verified information that is user-friendly and jargon free. Partnerships are explored in more detail later.

Develop effective messages

At the core of your new narrative will be a message, or series of messages, and ensuring these are effective is critical to people understanding, believing and acting on the information they contain. As important as developing it, is testing the message to ensure they do not cause more confusion or misunderstanding, which could lead to more rumours.

Effective ways of creating messages to support your new narrative are to:

- ▶ **Keeping it simple** – the facts are more likely to be remembered
- ▶ **Use visuals** – images and graphics can be effective in dislodging a rumour
- ▶ **Express it as a positive** – positive messages are more likely to be recalled
- ▶ **Tailor your message** – to your target groups in the community
- ▶ **Be timely** – a rumour can travel fast and your counter message should be delivered as quickly as possible
- ▶ **Include actionable information** – what can people do differently when they hear the message(s) and signpost - where people can get any additional information
- ▶ **Ensure it is trusted** – attribute the information to a source trusted by the community.²³

You should always test your messages before using them to ensure that people understand and believe them. If the message is to encourage people to take action of some kind, check that it is indeed actionable for your target groups. A poorly crafted or communicated message can cause more rumours and do more harm.

²¹ See for example UNICEF's approach https://www.unicef.org/cbsc/index_65736.html [Accessed on 18 May, 2017]

²² A Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP) survey is a quantitative method (predefined questions formatted in standardized questionnaires) that provides both quantitative and qualitative information.

²³ Adapted from Lewandowsky, *The Debunking Handbook*, 2011



Photo: iStock/Dinos Michail



Things to consider

- ▶ **Be very careful not to spread a rumour when trying to verify one.**
- ▶ **Don't spend too long assessing the external motivations for starting or spreading a rumour. Simply try to identify what triggered the rumour so you can decide the best way to respond.**

Ideally you should test the message with members of your target groups in the community. If this is not possible you could test the message with colleagues or partners, preferably those without knowledge of the subject matter.

When testing the messages use the same channel you will use when engaging the community. For example, if you are planning to engage the community via SMS, consider sharing the draft message with your test group on a phone to make the test as realistic as possible.

With your group of message testers work through the following questions to see how well crafted your message is:

- ▶ If you were going to tell someone else the message what would they say?
- ▶ Which parts of the message didn't make sense?
- ▶ Do you have any questions about the content?
- ▶ Do you believe the message?
- ▶ What action can you now take based on the message?
- ▶ What did you like about the message? What didn't you like?

Decide whether to reference the original rumour

You will need to decide whether you mention the original rumour as part of your message, to which there are advantages and disadvantages. Including the original rumour can mean that it is easier to target the people who have heard or believe the original rumour; it can allow you to clearly

flag the rumour as false and enable people to correct the rumour themselves should they hear it again in the future.

However, there are also disadvantages to citing the original rumour such as inadvertently reinforcing or spreading the rumour, or overcomplicating your message with too much content making it harder to understand or remember accurately. If you decide to cite the rumour you will need to clearly label it as a rumour and immediately state the facts to counter it.

You will need to assess what approach is the right one in the context. There isn't a 'correct' approach and indeed different humanitarian agencies take different approaches. Internews' approach, which is described in the later case study, uses direct citations.

An alternative approach is to frame the rumour as a question, which can help you raise the issue without fear of spreading the rumour further.

Using the right communication channels

A communication channel is the way in which a message is shared – such as a radio programme, poster, SMS or focus group.

Engaging the community through channels that they already use and trust is key to delivering a message that they will believe.

If you don't already know which communication channels your target groups use and trust you will need to find this out. Remember that this may change

Rumours in action

POSE A QUESTION RATHER THAN SHARE A RUMOUR

In March 2016 the International Organisation for Migration was asked by the Government of Greece to help counter a rumour amongst refugee communities. The rumour was that if they enrolled their children in Greek school they would not be eligible for the EU relocation programme. Understanding that the community would most trust other refugees, they created a video of testimonials from refugees who had enrolled their children in the school and were part of the relocation programme. Rather than mentioning the rumour directly they reframed it as a question: 'Can I enrol my children in school and be eligible for the EU relocation programme?'

²⁴ <https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2016/11/07/rumor-control-fema-disaster-assistance-concerns-answered-1> [Accessed on 14 May, 2017]



Rumours in action

NAME THAT RUMOUR

During an emergency the United States Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) hosts a page²⁴ on their website that is dedicated to rumours about the agency control. Each rumour is clearly stated, along with the facts behind it.

after a disaster. Check what existing data is available and, if necessary, conduct a rapid assessment. Two tools available for this:*

- ▶ **Assessing Information and Communications Needs and Access: A Quick and Easy Guide** from the CDAC Network and Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS), which has questions on information needs and access, trusted sources of information and guidance on how to use the information collected.
- ▶ **Mapping Information Ecosystems** from Internews, which provides a more comprehensive analysis through a series of questions on eight elements of community information and communication flows, including trusted channels and sources of information.

Using more than one channel can help you reinforce the message and reach different audiences. Men, women, boys and girls may get their information from different channels, and may not necessarily trust the same ones. Wherever possible prioritise two-way channels that can let you hear back from the community, which will help you check if your message is being understood.

Trust is a critical issue. Delivering a message via a trusted channel and from a trusted source can have a great impact on the effectiveness of a message. For example, if your target group is female-headed households and you've assessed that they listen to the radio (the channel) to get information and that they trust

Rumours in action

SOCIAL MEDIA'S GLOBAL REACH REDUCES RISKS AND PREVENTS HARM IN A CRISIS

The World Health Organization (WHO) monitors social and traditional media on a routine basis. After the Japan earthquake and tsunami, during the subsequent Fukushima nuclear crisis, WHO listened to rumours spreading via Twitter and Facebook. The rumours said that eating large quantities of iodized salt or drinking iodine-based wound cleaner would protect people from radiation exposure. The media reported panic buying of these supplies from supermarkets in Japan and China. Having assessed that both these practices would cause harm WHO responded. After verifying the rumours as false, WHO engaged the community through Twitter and Facebook. They explained that neither iodized salt nor iodine-based wound cleaner would protect them and in fact would do harm. WHO also told people to follow the advice of their Government about how to stay safe. The messages were widely retweeted, shared and liked – including being retweeted by the account of the Japanese Prime Minister. This enabled WHO to rapidly engage a large amount of people and share the verified information, quickly addressing the false rumour. The impact was immediate, the next day queues formed outside supermarkets in China and Japan with people returning the salt and wound cleaner that they had bought in bulk.

*See page42, Additional Resources.

Rumours in action

THE POWER OF LOCAL MEDIA TO ENGAGE COMMUNITIES

BBC Media Action used radio in their response to the Ebola outbreak. Kick Ebola Nar Salone (Kick Ebola out of Sierra Leone) was a 30-minute show that was produced weekly and broadcast three times a week on 35 partner stations across the country. The programme provided verified information and dealt with rumours and misinformation directly. In one programme they interviewed an official from the Ministry of Health to help counter the false rumour that drinking bitter Kola nut would cure Ebola.

Rumours in action

USING COMMUNITY NETWORKS TO LISTEN, VERIFY AND ENGAGE

The inter-ethnic massacres in the Tana Delta, Kenya in 2013 were fuelled by rumour and mistrust. In response the Sentinel Project launched Una Hakika (Swahili for 'Are you sure?'). The project counters rumours by providing accurate and impartial information to communities through a network of trained community ambassadors. The project uses community networks to listen, verify and engage.

- ▶ **Listening** - Una Hakika subscribers can report rumours they hear through text messages, voice calls, or by talking to one of nearly 200 trained volunteer community ambassadors present in 16 villages.
- ▶ **Verifying** - the community can often be best placed to provide the verification. Una Hakika's community ambassadors verify rumours either by contacting community members or investigating the matter themselves to find out the real story.
- ▶ **Engaging** - includes strategies for containing and countering false information on a community level before it can spread and do harm. This is where community partners such as chiefs, elders, youth leaders, and women's representatives will be essential.

An evaluation of the project found that people's access to timely and accurate information had improved, people felt the project had reduced inter-communal tensions, and that the project had become one of the most trusted sources of information in the community.

information from midwives (the source). With this information you could pair the source and channel in a radio chat show with Q&A to reach your target groups with a new narrative that they are most likely to believe.

Depending on the context it may not be possible to reach everyone in an area or to reach them directly. Consider that your message could reach the wider community by targeting a smaller group of trusted

individuals who could share it more widely. Working with groups such as community elders, religious leaders or community outreach workers. Remember that reaching women, men, boys and girls may require a different or multi-pronged approach.

Check the message is being understood

You should monitor that the message is being understood: check that people are hearing, understanding and believing the verified information being communicated.



Rumours in action

FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE CAN BE THE MOST POWERFUL MESSAGE OF ALL

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) harnessed the power of testimonials when countering disinformation in countries where migrants come from, such as Niger. IOM listened to the rumours being spread by human traffickers that everything was free in Europe.

The disinformation was often reinforced by doctored images of refugees who had migrated to Europe, pictured with big cars and nice houses. IOM discussed this issue with communities - in particular to understand who they would trust to tell the truth. Community members said they did not trust governments or organisations, instead they would believe their 'brothers and sisters' who had already made the journey to Europe. Based on this IOM recorded direct-to-camera unscripted testimonials of people who had undertaken the dangerous journey and were able to talk openly about the reality of their current lives.

These videos were shared via social media and were seen by the target groups in the community. By using a trusted source of information and harnessing the power of testimonials IOM countered the disinformation and empowered communities to make informed choices.

Rumours in action

THE POWER OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS TO CHANGE MINDS AND SAVE LIVES

An inter-faith working group was established for the Ebola response bringing together religious leaders from Islam, Christianity and traditional religions in Sierra Leone. The objective was to spread accurate information to counter dangerous rumours through these trusted religious leaders. The religious leaders drew on their respective religion's history and teachings to validate and explain certain behaviours or actions that the community should take to protect themselves. This helped coordinate messages and avoid further confusion.

This is where the cyclical process of listening, verifying and engaging comes full circle. You should maintain a dialogue with the community and listen to understand what happens to the rumours, and check that people understand your messages. You also need to check that no one else is sharing contradictory information as this could create confusion and potentially result in your information not being trusted and believed.

If your message is not working you will need to go back to earlier steps to work out a new approach on developing and sharing the message. For example, if your target audience isn't receiving the message then review the channels used, or if the audience doesn't trust the message then determine why this is before proceeding with a new approach.

3 Anticipation, Responsibilities, Coordination and Partnerships

Sharing accessible and relevant information with communities is one of the best ways to reduce the prevalence of rumours. When they do occur, knowing who to work with on rumours in your organisation, in other organisations or groups, and what possible partnership opportunities exist are three further important elements to working with rumours. Taking the time to explore these areas as part of your preparedness work will help you reduce or effectively and efficiently work with rumours during a response.

Photo: iStock/J Carillon



Anticipation

Whilst it is impossible to prevent rumours altogether, rumours about your humanitarian programmes or the conduct of your organisation's staff are within your organisation's power to avoid. Strong adherence to commitments like the Core Humanitarian Standard, and using tools like those in the Good Enough Guide on Impact Measurement and Accountability can help improve transparency, information sharing, and provide the community with the opportunity to raise questions and issues. These steps can help provide accessible and verified information to the communities, which can devalue the power of a rumour as the only accessible information source.

Remember that often rumours come from misunderstandings about processes or situations, so be sure to explain clearly the reasons for decisions that your organisation makes. For example, clearly explaining your programme selection criteria can head off rumours of favouritism.

Similarly, you should test your outreach and mobilisation messaging before you use it – a poorly crafted or communicated

message can lead to misunderstandings and rumours.

A further useful tool is the 'do no harm' framework to consider the intended and unintended consequences of your actions for different people in the communities you are and aren't working in, and how these might generate rumours. If there is potential to generate rumours, take action immediately to mitigate that.

Rumours in action

ANTICIPATING AND MITIGATING RUMOURS: GOOD COMMUNICATION FROM THE START

In 2009 CARE International worked with a team of community mobilisers and a network of hundreds of community volunteers to communicate about cash voucher distributions to thousands of internally displaced people living in host families in Goma, the Democratic Republic of Congo. Cash transfer programming was a relatively new concept and the team anticipated potential confusion and rumours about it, including about the targeting process. To avoid this, messages were developed early on and communicated through the mobilisers and volunteers. To help them stay on message they received key message bulletins. Official copies of these were made available on a community noticeboard to avoid issues of mistrust. As a result of this approach the programme ran relatively smoothly and was evaluated positively by both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the programme.

Responsibilities

Knowing how responsibilities for listening, verifying and engaging are split across staff roles, and how rumour reporting and management is integrated into your organisation's programming, will help embed the process.

Firstly, a common understanding of rumours is useful. Consider making a presentation during a team, staff or partner meeting about why they are important and why we need to work with them, drawing for example on the elements outlined in Part One of this guide. Everyone in your organisation should understand the importance of working with rumours and know what to do if they hear one. It is useful if the senior leadership is supportive and enabling of this and it may be necessary to also take the time to discuss the importance of working with rumours with them. Use relevant examples from your own experience or from this guide to illustrate the impact and importance.

You should set up a mechanism for identifying, reporting and addressing rumours, ideally as a preparedness measure rather than in response to a rumour. When considering your mechanism, first identify the capacity and responsibilities the community will have in working with rumours, how your organisational capacity complements this

and co-develop a mechanism based on trust, ownership and sustainability.

Review what your organisation has in place in regards to the three steps of identifying, verifying and engaging as outlined earlier, and what needs to be done to address any gaps. An important part of this will be to identify and allocate roles and responsibilities. Local and national staff will be key in working with rumours and it is helpful to include any security focal points in the discussion. Security focal points will have their own contacts and networks that may uncover rumours but these may not necessarily be reported back to programme teams. To establish roles and responsibilities you could work through the questions in the table below. Remember your organisation does not have to do everything and may not have the capacity to do everything – there may be specialist organisations or local groups with whom to coordinate or partner.

Activity	Guiding questions to identify roles and responsibilities
Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Who already works with the target groups in the community? ▶ Who do the community already trust? ▶ Who speaks the same language or dialect as the community? ▶ Who has the time to have unstructured conversations with the target groups in the community regularly?
Verifying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Who can reach out to technical specialists and authority figures for information? ▶ Who will be able to find out the necessary facts from the key informants? ▶ Who can assess and analyse the rumours and the context they arise from?
Engaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Who can create a compelling message? ▶ Who can make sure it is delivered via a trusted channel and from a trusted source? ▶ Who can check that the community is understanding and believing the message?



Photo: iStock/J. Claudiad

Coordination

Coordination brings together humanitarian actors working on similar issues to share information and undertake joint planning to avoid gaps or duplication in services. Coordination fosters collaboration and unlocks the potential of joint fundraising and advocacy. Coordination can avoid community members having to answer the same questions again and again, conflicting or confusing messages and overburdening communications channels.

The first step to coordination is knowing who else is working with rumours in your community. Map organisations working in the communities you work in and identify what existing local coordination structures are already in place.

There may already be a Government-run coordination mechanism, an NGO forum or similar entity. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) or the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) are often designated coordination leads in large disasters.

Another option could be a security focal point forum, which may already have a system for listening to rumours that you could link to. For example, in South Sudan in late

2010 the security group of the NGO Forum developed some basic guidelines for rumour management. This coordination helped ensure a common understanding of rumours and some guidance on working with them in their organisations, it also provided a forum where they could share plans and discuss issues.

Reaching out through these coordination structures will enable you to raise the issues of working with rumours, refer issues you cannot deal with as an individual agency and enable you to find potential collaborators and partners.

In some contexts there may be a common service approach to communication and community engagement. This approach

brings together different projects working on engaging the community and consolidates the feedback and insights into a mechanism that can deliver a rich stream of information to help guide decision-making.

The approach does this on behalf of all humanitarian organisations – thus the ‘common service’. This approach coordinates the engagement as well as the delivery of the consolidated feedback to link the response decision-makers with

the concerns and issues being faced by the communities they serve. Linking rumour management to this common service mechanism would be very relevant.

Coordination can help organisations work together to overcome common challenges and to more effectively work with rumours. It also provides a good opportunity to identify other organisations who are working on the same issues and who may have complementary skills to your organisation – the basis of partnerships.

Rumours in action

WORKING WITH RUMOURS AS PART OF A COMMON SERVICE APPROACH TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

An inter-agency Common Feedback Project was established as part of the response to the 2015 earthquake in Nepal. The project provided a common service to humanitarian partners by collecting, analysing and sharing feedback from communities to help humanitarian decision-makers make choices about adapting and localising the response.

There were three components of the project:

- ▶ Short perception surveys were conducted in the affected areas on a monthly basis. These included issues such as how people felt the response was going, how they were participating and what their needs were.
- ▶ Consolidation of feedback about needs and complaints from over a dozen humanitarian partners.
- ▶ Rumour tracking and management. Volunteers and partner organisations listened to identify rumours, a central team would assess and verify, and volunteers, partners and local media then engaged the communities with the verified information to counter the rumour.

The project is significant as it was the first systemic and response-wide initiative focused on influencing decisions about the response by providing consolidated feedback from the communities.

Partnerships

Building on coordination, partnerships enable organisations to work jointly to achieve a common goal. This can be extremely effective and efficient as it draws on the respective strengths of different groups, networks and organisations. Think creatively about potential partners and don't limit this to traditional partners. This section provides some considerations when identifying partners for your work with rumours.

The community should be your primary partner, as discussed earlier. Other partners can prove powerful allies and the following should be considered when identifying and establishing partnerships.

Strong partnerships arise from:

1. Defining common aims and objectives
2. Ensuring effective leadership
3. Ensuring an enabling internal culture for partnerships
4. Demonstrating visible support and reliable commitment
5. Prioritising staff time to facilitate and support the process
6. Ensuring transparent, effective communication
7. Clarifying roles and responsibilities
8. Resourcing the partnership in terms of appropriate time and funds
9. Finding common approaches
10. Managing disputes and issues quickly²⁵.

The list of potential partners will be as diverse and dynamic as the communities you work in. The two in-depth case studies

Rumours in action

RUMOURS, MEDIA LITERACY AND THEATRE

In Rakhine State, Myanmar, Save the Children, Myanmar Art Social Project (MASC) and Search for Common Ground partnered to build the media literacy capacity of youth and raise awareness about the dangers of rumours. They employed a variety of creative techniques including theatre as a way of engaging the wider community in the dangers of spreading rumours and how to critically assess information that they heard.



Photo: iStock/verve231

²⁵ Adapted from Emergency Capacity Building Project, 2012, *What we know about collaboration: the ECB Country Consortium Experience*. <http://www.alnap.org/pool/files/ecb/downloads/resources/ECB-What-We-Know-Collaboration-Country-Consortium-Learning-FINAL-July-31-2012.pdf> [Accessed on 18 May, 2017]

provided at the end of the guide illustrate different partnerships in action. Some options and why to partner with these types of organisation:

- ▶ **Community-based networks or organisations, local non-governmental organisations**
These types of organisations often have deep and trusted networks within the community, are built on local knowledge and are well placed to provide local means and perspectives to better listen, verify and engage.
- ▶ **Local media, community-based radios**
These will already have existing audiences and their own ways of listening, verifying and engaging as part of their work. They can help reach a large number of people quickly, and through different channels.
- ▶ **Media development agencies**
These provide capacity building for institutions or individuals related to freedom of expression, pluralism and diversity of media, as well as transparency of media ownership. They often have expertise in understanding audiences, and in creating and delivering messages through diverse channels.
- ▶ **Diaspora groups**
People often retain strong ties to their community of origin and find different

ways to stay in touch with friends and family there. These groups can play a key role in providing information and other support to communities in crises.

- ▶ **Private sector companies**
Companies, through their products and services, will have their own relationships with people affected by crisis. An obvious example is mobile network operators who want to retain or grow their customer base and will provide support in times of crisis such as by providing early warning via SMS. They may also have technical or niche expertise, which can help your work with rumours.
- ▶ **UN and INGOs**
These often large, international organisations can provide coordination and technical expertise. Potentially they will have existing networks within the communities and be part of the local, national and international coordination structures.

A good way to assess potential groups or organisations to partner with is to conduct a rapid SWOT²⁶ analysis of your organisation in relation to working with rumour to identify where partnerships could add value.

Rumours in action

PARTNERING WITH LOCAL MEDIA CAN TACKLE RUMOURS BEFORE AID ARRIVES

In April 2017, as Somalia edged closer to famine and drought ravaged parts of the country, Radio Ergo began broadcasting information about the newest threat to communities, cholera. Rumours had been circulating about how it was spreading, with some Radio Ergo listeners sharing rumours with the station that chlorine being used to purify water was making people sick with diarrhoea. As a result, the Health Cluster partnered with the radio to explain the facts and how people can avoid getting sick. The radio station is based in Nairobi and broadcasts via shortwave, which reaches remote rural areas of Somalia not covered by local FM stations, where access is challenging and aid in many cases has not yet arrived. The programming is also rebroadcast through 15 local FM stations throughout the country. This partnership with local media has overcome challenges of physical access and harnessed a trusted channel to deliver accurate information to communities when they need it most.

²⁶ Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. See e.g. https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_05.htm [Accessed on 26 May, 2017]

Conclusion

Rumours cannot and should not be simply dismissed as local gossip. They affect crisis-affected communities around the world. They have the power to undermine all that we strive for as humanitarian actors: they can paralyse programming and confuse individuals and communities at exactly the time that they face life or death decisions – with disastrous consequences.

But the power they hold can also be harnessed for good; giving us early warning of impending potentially critical events, and very often painting a much more honest picture of how well our programmes are working.

You can start to build measures into your work around rumours today simply by being more aware of them and discussing them with colleagues, partners and the communities you work with.

Take action to the most critical ones, and develop your approach to something more robust over time. Your programme will be stronger and safer for it, and most importantly, the communities we all work to support will be better protected.



Photo: iStock/Ididemir

Case study

PIONEERING APPROACHES: CONNECTING COMMUNITIES AND HUMANITARIAN ORGANISATIONS WITH FACTS NOT RUMOURS

Internews, a media development organisation, has pioneered coordinated and networked models for working with rumours at an inter-agency level in four large-scale responses. These have enabled rapid and effective management of potentially harmful rumours and empowered the affected communities to make informed and timely choices about their futures.

Internews has implemented several rumour management projects:

- ▶ *Dey Say*²⁷ in Liberia in response to the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak
- ▶ *Open Mic* in Nepal in response to the 2015 earthquake
- ▶ News that Moves in Greece in response to the ongoing refugee crisis
- ▶ *Sak Di Sak Vre*²⁸ in Haiti in response to the 2016 Hurricane Matthew

Every context is different and each project reflects the specific needs of the different communities, but at their core is the same process of listening, verifying and engaging.

The projects share common characteristics – they are:

- ▶ Participatory: the community knows the issues that are important to it.
- ▶ Built on partnerships: leveraging strengths and fostering collaboration.
- ▶ Fact-based: coupling the truth with actionable information.
- ▶ About dialogue: valuing unstructured and open conversations.
- ▶ Built on trust: community trusted networks and channels.
- ▶ Coordinated: with other humanitarian partners.
- ▶ Cyclical: engaging the community in ongoing dialogue.

Building projects on the channels of communication that the community trust is fundamental to the Internews

approach. For example, after Hurricane Matthew an assessment found that the community preferred radio as a channel to receive information. As a result existing radio stations were chosen as a primary channel for the rumour management project *Sak di Sak Vre*.

Equally paramount is building on local capacity, which starts at the community level. For example, in Greece refugee liaison officers were recruited from the affected community. This enabled rapid identification of the concerns and misconceptions that were driving the rumours. Once the rumours were documented, a team worked to investigate and verify them -

checking with authorities, legal advisers, security forces, humanitarian agencies and other key informants. The focus was on finding out why the rumour was so prevalent and to respond to these community concerns by providing relevant, reliable and actionable information. These locally recruited refugee liaison officers were also an invaluable way to engage the community and share information once it has been verified.

Partnerships are fundamental to how Internews implements their rumour management projects. It is faster and more efficient to have partners that have existing community-based networks – be they Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies, local organisations

Internews rumour tracking model at a glance

Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Using existing networks and trusted relationships ▶ Supported by enabling technologies ▶ Open unstructured conversations to collect qualitative (as opposed to quantitative) data ▶ Prioritised based on risk assessments rather than prevalence of rumours
Verifying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Centralised team engaging technical specialists and coordination mechanisms ▶ Involving the affected community for a more detailed understanding ▶ Prioritisation based on a potential impact not prevalence of a rumour
Engaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Outputs based on facts with additional information sources signposted ▶ In the language of the affected population ▶ Building blocks not a communication ready output

²⁷ How people refer to rumours in Liberian English

²⁸ 'What is said is true', in Haitian Creole



RUMOURS



NAMDU, DOLAKHA

"They are distributing white earthquake victim ID cards in our village. They say the colour of the card is the reason for the delay in disbursement of Rs 15,000. If we had received red cards instead, we would have been eligible to travel to Canada and Australia for work. I would prefer the red card because my son is unemployed and I am in debt".

FACTS

There are differences in the colour of the earthquake victim ID cards distributed in the affected districts. For instance, in Dolakha, the colour of the cards is white. In Gorkha, it is red.

This difference is because there are no guidelines on the colour of the cards. A District Disaster Relief Committee (DDRC) can choose to print ID cards of any colour in its district.

The colour of the card has no bearing on the card-bearer's eligibility for claiming relief material and other aid.

The government does not have specific plans to send members of earthquake-affected families abroad for work.

The delay in disbursement of relief amount could be due to a number of factors but the colour of the cards is not one of them.



The Rumour

Anonymous, but with a reference to location, indicating it's genuine and making it easier for people to relate to it.

The Fact

Beyond 'True' or 'False', but unwrapping the concern and provide actionable information.

The Context

Local (!) and reliable for follow up information/action

or local media. Partners can help with the verification of the rumour and in engaging the community and sharing accurate information. For example, in Liberia *Dey Say* was in partnership with the Liberian National Red Cross Society, UNICEF and Project Concern International. It also built on Internews' existing partnerships with local radio stations and journalists across the country.

Internews has championed the need for coordination in communications and community engagement, and working with rumours is no different. All Internews humanitarian rumour management projects are embedded in the humanitarian coordination systems. The *Open Mic* project in Nepal was integrated into the Common Feedback Project, which drew together two-way communications projects into a response-wide feedback mechanism, which helped guide the course and content of the response.

In Liberia, Nepal, Greece and Haiti the output of the rumour project was a bulletin, which flagged the original

rumour clearly along with where it was documented. This was followed by the facts about the issue, including where to get additional information, and actionable information. The bulletins were shared on a regular (weekly or bi-weekly) basis with the humanitarian actors, local media and government to guide the onward outreach to the affected community. The trends and issues are also reflected in the coordination meetings in order to enable changes in programming or outreach to better meet the needs of the affected community.

Internews' analysis of the rumours tracked in the four projects revealed that the majority of rumours arise from processes that are poorly explained and lead to misunderstandings in the community. For example, poorly explained selection criteria for a food distribution can easily become a rumour of corruption or favouritism.

This evidence base for their programming and analysis helps the Internews' rumour management model to serve two clients. One

'client' is the affected community who get access to verified, relevant and actionable information. The second 'client' is the humanitarian community who are provided with feedback to improve their programmes.

This client focus has allowed the rumour management model to be tailored and localised to different contexts, illustrating the power of rumours and how humanitarian organisations can work with them.

Reflective questions

- ▶ Which elements of this approach could you integrate into your programming?
- ▶ Building on your existing community networks, could you also ask them to serve as a channel to listen and engage?
- ▶ How could you improve your programmes by listening to rumours?

Case study

EMPOWERING COMMUNITY NETWORKS TO PROVIDE COUNTER-NARRATIVES TO CONFLICT

Search for Common Ground focuses on transforming the way people deal with conflict by promoting collaborative solutions to conflict. The organisation focuses on three areas: community, media and dialogue. In Myanmar it piloted a community-based project to manage rumours to reduce inter-communal violence and support the country's transition to democracy.

Myanmar has an ethnically diverse population with 135 officially recognised ethnic groups. Historically there have been tensions across ethnic and religious dividing lines. Myanmar began the transition from military rule to democracy in 2010 and since then has opened up to the outside world. This transition has seen a huge growth in mobile phone penetration, media outlets and internet access. This increase in access to information has had both positive and negative impacts.

Rumours, spread by these new communication channels, have created an enabling environment for conflict in several parts of the country over the last five years. As a result national and international organisations have made efforts to increase inter-communal dialogue and social cohesion. However, relatively little work had been done on addressing rumours that were inciting violence. In response to this, Search for Common Ground, in partnership with the Myanmar Information Development Organization (MIDO) implemented a nine-month pilot project on community information management to reduce inter-communal violence in Myanmar.

The overall goal of the pilot project was to minimize the impact of rumours and manipulated information as triggers of violence in two areas where there had been previous outbreaks of inter-communal violence: in Lashio, Shan State and in Amarapura, Mandalay Division. Three specific objectives were set:

1. To increase key stakeholders' and influencers' understanding of how information and rumours can be manipulated, resulting in violence;
2. To strengthen the skills of key community influencers to reduce the impact of rumours and manipulated information in their communities; and
3. To catalyse joint action amongst diverse stakeholders and influencers in order to reduce the violent impact of rumours and manipulated information.

The research phase of the project was two months long, which allowed in-depth analysis and relationship building with individuals and communities. This enabled project implementation to build on relationships of respect and trust.

The starting point was the understanding that rumours are unverified information that are neither inherently good nor bad. However, rumours could have either positive or negative impacts in the community. The research looked at how people

An example that project responded to:

Listening	▶ In April 2016 a rumour spread through Facebook that a large number of swords were seized from a mosque in Yangon. This news was widely shared by Buddhist nationalist network members across Shan state. This increased tensions between Buddhist and Muslim communities in the state
Verifying	▶ The Community Information Management committee checked with their network of contacts and also the Laisho news portal. They found the posting originated from a man in Jakarta, Indonesia who had included a photo of a sword in his Facebook post spreading the rumour. They reached out to him and explained that there had been no seizure of swords and that he was posing a security risk by spreading this false rumour. He deleted the photo and apologised for his mistake
Engaging	▶ The Community Information Management committee spread the verified information through the media (Laisho News and Radio Free Asia) as well as through social media via the Community Information Management Facebook page as well as the personal Facebook pages of the committee members



share and receive information, the trusted sources of information, local verification methods and how rumours are contributing to tensions and inter-communal conflict in the two areas. It identified key community influencers, those trusted with information, in accordance with a criterion as perceived by the community themselves.

The research findings indicated that people's feelings of insecurity – whether a result of economic insecurity, political, or ethnic/religious conflict – made them more susceptible to believing and sharing rumours. The findings also highlighted that people were less likely to verify a rumour if they perceived a direct threat to their existence/self. Research also verified the assumption that rumour management was needed, and the communities agreed with the need for it and its importance.

Based on the evidence gathered key community influencers, identified during the community level dialogue, were mobilised. They were given training in conflict transformation²⁹, media literacy, ICT³⁰ skills and rumour management.

The community influencers self-formed into Community Information Management Committees (CIMC), which received support from MIDO and Search for Common Ground through monthly refresher trainings, mentoring, and collaborative design of positive messaging campaigns to counter rumours they identified. These committees were able to grow in confidence as a result of their new skills and to contribute towards the resilience of their communities to rumours. The committees have continued to flourish under local leadership long after the pilot was completed.

The project worked with 43 community influencers, which included journalists, youth activists, female representatives from civil society, religious figures, village heads, local authorities, police, local businesspeople, medical practitioners, tea and Internet shop owners, and market vendors.

These influencers had developed 28 positive counter-narratives to potentially harmful rumours and supported conflict transformation in their communities. The project also saw the establishment of a community of practice (for the CIMC members in both locations) to share learning and foster future collaboration.

An independent evaluation³¹ found that the project had:

- ▶ Increased awareness about the potential negative impact of rumours.
- ▶ Built skills amongst participants in rumour management, verification, conflict prevention and media literacy.
- ▶ Helped establish an informal process of:
 - ▶ **Listening:** via word of mouth, online news sites and social media.
 - ▶ **Verifying:** through local contacts/authorities, reporters, CIM members.
 - ▶ **Engaging:** producing positive counter-narratives and disseminating them.

The committees have continued to function and to implement their rumour tracking system after the project finished. Search for Common Ground is planning to replicate the project in other areas of inter-communal tension in Myanmar.

Reflective questions

- ▶ Is this approach - or are there elements in this approach that are - relevant to your work, or to committees, groups or networks that you work with already?
- ▶ How could you implement a simpler version of this with your existing community networks and staff?
- ▶ Could you run a training session for the existing community networks on why working with rumours is important and the basic steps of listening, verifying and engaging?

²⁹ Using Search for Common Ground's 'Common Ground Approach'

³⁰ Information, Communication and Technology

³¹ S.Dungana, *Final Evaluation: Community Information Management to Reduce Inter-Communal Violence in Myanmar*, 2016

Additional resources

Tools

Mapping Information Ecosystems – Internews

This tool asks a series of questions about eight components. A comprehensive picture of the community information and communication flows can be developed.

http://www.internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/Internews_Mapping_Information_Ecosystems_2015.pdf

Characteristics of Different Channels of Communication – infoasaid

This table outlines the pros and cons of using different channels of communication. Channels range from mass media such as TV, radio and print to the more traditional methods such as drama or music.

<http://www.cdacnetwork.org/tools-and-resources/i/20141104143357-jeupo/>

Assessing Information and Communication Needs: A Quick and Easy Guide for Those Working in Humanitarian Response – ACAPS and the CDAC Network

Guidance on steps how to assess and determine how to enhance communication with and among communities at different stages of an emergency. Including explanations of why these questions should be asked, and how agencies could act on this data to improve communication in humanitarian response.

<http://www.cdacnetwork.org/tools-and-resources/i/20140721173332-ihw5g>

Documents

Managing Misinformation: a practical guide – The Sentinel Project

Written to help organisations and individuals implement misinformation management projects. The guide provides instructions, examples and case studies as well as information about necessary hardware and software (see Wikirumours)

http://docs.wikirumours.org/brand_candy-content/uploads/2016/07/sp-managing-report.pdf

The Debunking Handbook – John Cook, Stephan Lewandowsky

Provides a short summary of psychological research into misinformation. It is aimed at communicators to help them find effective ways to counter misinformation.

https://skepticalscience.com/docs/Debunking_Handbook.pdf

The Verification Handbook – Craig Silverman

Guidelines on how to use user-generated content during emergencies – in particular on how to verify and use the information provided by the crowd.

<http://verificationhandbook.com/>



Training materials

Dynamic Listening and Rumour Management – WHO

This presentation covers:

- ▶ Using dynamic listening to know the audiences and address their concerns
- ▶ Identifying rumours that could cause confusion or mistrust
- ▶ How to develop a strategy to address the rumours

<http://www.who.int/risk-communication/training/Module-B7.pdf>

Software

Wikirumours – Sentinel Project

Is a web and mobile-based platform for moderating misinformation and disinformation. The software is free and open source. WikiRumours is a workflow and technology platform designed to counter the spread of false information through transparency and early mitigation of conflict.

<https://www.wikirumours.org/> or
<http://docs.wikirumours.org/>

Verily

Is an experimental web application designed to rapidly crowdsource the verification of information during humanitarian disasters. The platform has also been piloted by international news organizations. In addition to rapidly verifying information during crisis events, Verily aims to educate members of the public so they can become better 'Digital Detectives'.

<https://verily.ly/>

Other

Additional tools and resources either curated or created by the CDAC

Network available to your organisation to build capacity for communication and community engagement.

<http://www.cdacnetwork.org/tools-and-resources/i/20160718145418-t2inw>

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CDAC Network
27 Dingley Place
London
EC1V 8BR
UK

Companies House Registration No: 10571501

