What is Communications with Communities?

Communications with Communities (CwC) is an emerging field of humanitarian response that helps to meet the information and communications needs of people affected by crisis.

CwC is based on the principle that information and communications are critical forms of aid, without which disaster survivors cannot access services or make the best decisions for themselves and their communities. People working on CwC help disaster survivors to access the information they need and communicate with people assisting them. CwC is an operational field of work distinct from conventional public information/advocacy.

Communication is a two-way process, and effective CwC strategies facilitate dialogue between survivors and responders, both local and international. CwC projects establish ways disaster survivors can source the information they need and ensure their voices are heard by responding agencies. For example, CwC projects have included humanitarian radio programmes and newsletters. CwC work utilises all available communications channels, including newsletters, mass media, SMS and face-to-face conversations

CwC is a philosophy and an approach, the principles of which are applicable across the humanitarian programme cycle, from

preparedness (such as early warning systems) to programme implementation, and monitoring and evaluation (such as including affected communities' perspectives in evaluations).

CwC is also an essential element in ensuring accountability and transparency, which require the effective exchange of information between disaster survivors and responders.

In the case of self-help information—such as advice on treating diseases at home, especially for those who cannot be reached by conventional aid—CwC delivers information as a form of life-saving assistance.
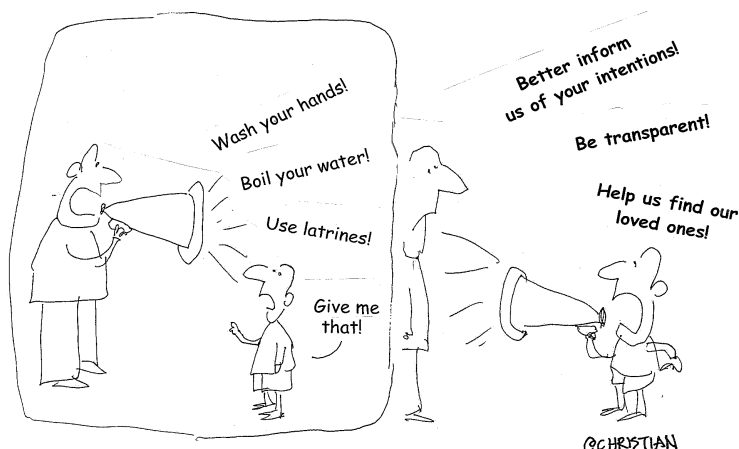
What is OCHA's role?

OCHA advocates CwC approaches and services as a central component of disaster response. It coordinates and supports CwC actors where necessary, and ensures CwC principles and approaches are integrated into OCHA's work.

OCHA is also a founding member of the Communicating with Disaster-Affected Communities (CDAC) Network. Since 2010, at the request of those in the CwC sector, OCHA has supported a number of projects providing CwC coordination services in

places such as Bangladesh, Haiti and the Philippines. Internally, OCHA incorporates CwC materials and approaches into tools and services, including needs assessments, situation reports and websites.

What does OCHA say?

1. Communication is a form of assistance as important as water, food and shelter. Without access to information, disaster survivors cannot access the help they need, make informed decisions or be effective leaders in their own recovery.

2. Communication is a two-way process. Efforts to ensure disaster survivors can communicate with responders are particularly important.

3. Effective communication is an operational issue that requires resources and a consistent, clearly articulated approach.

Haiti: Talking and listening in a crisis

In January 2010, Haiti was struck by a 7.0-magnitude earthquake that affected over 3.5 million people. As part of the response, OCHA supported the establishment of a communicating-with-communities coordination mechanism.

CDAC Haiti, as it became known, was established as a cross-cluster working group. It included specialist NGOs, local organizations, the Ministry of Information, media associations and international agencies in a collective effort to improve two-way communication between aid providers and the affected Haitian population. CDAC Haiti was led by a dedicated Coordinator who was hosted by the media NGO Internews. CDAC Haiti initially focused on improving the accessibility of information for affected communities, such as explanations of aftershocks and the locations of emergency services, such as field hospitals. CDAC Haiti also coordinated assistance and supported capacity building and training to local media, which was badly affected by the earthquake, coordinated assessments of information needs, supported dedicated humanitarian radio programming and promoted services such as IFRC's "SMS blasts".

When Haiti was hit by a cholera outbreak in October 2010, CDAC Haiti brought responders together with the Ministry of Health to develop standardized messaging and advice, appeal for funding for communications projects, and advise responding agencies on the best ways to talk with Haitians about cholera and listen to their perspectives.

The CDAC Network carried out a learning review of CDAC Haiti. It found that the group helped humanitarians collaborate on and expand their CwC work, and it offered advice and support to partners, which saved them time and resources. The review found that without CDAC Haiti, more lives would have been lost in the cholera outbreak and the overall quality of the response would have been diminished.

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To find out more

- Global Symposium +5 on Information for Humanitarian Action: www.cdacnetwork.org/public/content/global-symposium-5-information-humanitarian-action

- *Humanitarianism in the Network Age*: www.unocha.org/hina

- BBC Media Action Policy briefing: *Still left in the dark: How people in emergencies use communication to survive – and how humanitarian agencies can help* www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publicationsandpress/policy_still_left_in_the_dark.html
- www.infoasaid.org