

# Introduction

Nalaka Gunawardene and Frederick Noronha

*“In a disaster, everyone is a victim in one way or another; no one is spared. We as media are not there to merely and dispassionately report. We invariably become a vital link between the scene of the disaster and the rest of the world.”*

*“The under-reporting and non-reporting of many human interest and human development stories is a scandal. There are many silent emergencies that never attract sufficient media coverage or public attention...”*

*“As journalists, we’ve been trained to do quick, sharp and precise stories that will have the most impact with our viewers. In doing so, we lose many nuances in a story like the Tsunami.”*

*“If they want to engage the media, development professionals must first understand the complexity, nuances and diversity in what is collectively labeled as ‘media’. In fact, the very term ‘media’ is a plural!”*

*“The priority of development organisations arriving at disaster scenes is not primarily to communicate, but to respond to the emergency situation on the ground. This frustrates many journalists. It is therefore necessary for development organisations to see information as a ‘commodity’...”*

These were among the many wide-ranging observations and perspectives exchanged during an Asian regional brainstorming meeting held on 21 – 22 December 2006 in Bangkok, Thailand, on 'Communicating Disasters: Building on the tsunami experience and responding to future challenges'. Convened by TVE Asia Pacific and UNDP, the meeting brought together 33 leading media professionals, disaster managers and communication specialists from South and Southeast Asia to probe the role of the mass media and communication in times of disaster inspired crises and emergencies.

The meeting sought to discern the key communication lessons of the Indian Ocean Tsunami (December 2004), Pakistan earthquake (October 2005) and other recent disasters that impacted the lives of millions of people. It discussed both recent successes and failures in timely communication using a range of information and communication technologies, or ICTs.

Early on during the meeting, it became clear that both media practitioners and disaster/development professionals had different attitudes and approaches to managing information before, during and after disasters occur. Some of these arose from a failure to appreciate the different needs and priorities of these two groups. Yet, this division blurred as they agreed on the essential functions of information and communication, and recognised the need to serve the public interest over individual, corporate or agency interests.

The meeting agreed that the mass media must evolve their own ethics, guidelines and strategies for covering hazards and disasters, balancing the public’s right to know with the right to privacy and human dignity of disaster affected persons. These cannot and should not be imposed from outside. At the same time, greater understanding among media

practitioners, development professionals and disaster managers on each sector's needs and limitations would engender more sharing and collaboration. The final report of the meeting, presented as Appendix 1 of this book, captures highlights and recommendations of the Bangkok meeting.

The discussion on the role of information and communication in disaster situations continues. Media-based communication is vitally necessary, but not sufficient, in meeting the multiple information needs of disaster risk reduction and disaster management. Other forms of participatory, non-media communications are needed to create communities that are better prepared and more disaster resilient.

The recent spate of trans-boundary mega-disasters in Asia and elsewhere offers a firm reminder, if any were needed, of the increasing frequency and intensity of such calamities. Climate change, which the scientific community now acknowledges as already unfolding with far reaching consequences, will only exacerbate our vulnerability to new forms of emergencies at national, regional and planetary levels.

This presents formidable challenges to governments, aid agencies, civil society and the media. It calls for more strategic and collaborative approaches in our preparedness and response. It also demands that we think and act beyond the conventional framework of disaster risk reduction to take advantage of new technologies, methodologies and opportunities.

Old and new ICTs -- ranging from telephones, radio and television to computers, Internet and mobile devices -- can certainly play a part in responding to these challenges. But success depends less on technologies, and more on policy, institutional and human resource factors. After the Indian Ocean tsunami, Asia realised the inadequacies of existing communications systems and arrangements in relation to hazard warning dissemination. The region that leads the world in many areas of modern communications -- for example, having the world's largest TV audience and fastest growing Internet and mobile phone markets -- failed to provide any public warning of the disaster.

As the *Digital Review of Asia Pacific* (2005/2006 edition) noted: "Many of the communities struck by the waves were hit about two hours after the earthquake that triggered them. Anecdotal reports emerging in the aftermath of the catastrophe told of isolated teams of experts who tracked the progress of the tsunami remotely but did not have the means to raise the alarm among the communities that were in harm's way. There were also disturbing anecdotes of other experts who had forewarning about the tsunami but held back from raising the alarm owing to apprehensions about reprisals from restrictive gate-keeping regimes in case disaster did not occur."<sup>1</sup>

The tsunami communication failures inspired much reflection in the global humanitarian community. In the *World Disaster Report 2005*, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) made a strong case for a greater role for information and communication in disaster situations.

The report argued: "Information is a vital form of aid in itself -- but this is not sufficiently recognised among humanitarian organisations. Disaster-affected people need information as much as water, food, medicine or shelter. Information can save lives, livelihoods and resources. Information may be the only form of disaster preparedness the most vulnerable can afford. Yet aid organisations focus mainly on gathering information

for themselves and not enough on exchanging information with the people they aim to support...”<sup>2</sup>

Asia's recent experiences have shown how governments, civil society and aid agencies mismanage information and communication, aggravating the agony of affected people and wasting limited resources. There is growing recognition on the need for a culture of communication that values proper information management and inclusive information sharing. The 19 chapters in this book explore the different elements and combinations that could help evolve such a culture in Asia, home to more than half of humanity.

Our 21 contributors -- most of them from Asia, and representing media, development or humanitarian sectors -- do not engage in mere theoretical discussions. In 19 chapters of this book, they draw on their rich and varied experience working in either preparing disaster resilient communities or responding to humanitarian emergencies triggered by specific disasters. Some are journalists who have reported on disasters from the 'ground zero'; others are aid workers, public information officials or development professionals who have been at the forefront in emergency responses or are engaged in disaster risk reduction.

Diverse as their backgrounds and experiences are, our contributors share a belief in the central role that communication can play before, during and after disasters occur. Within this, they offer a kaleidoscope of perspectives as well as a great deal of practical advice on how to communicate hazards and disasters at inter-personal, inter-agency, inter-sector and public levels. The tools, technologies and methods may vary, but there is a broad consensus that to be effective, communication needs to be two-way, inclusive, participatory and sustained over time. It is not an 'add on' to other development interventions, but an integral component in its own right.

This book comes out at a time when both the media industry and the global humanitarian sector are undergoing rapid change. Our contributors are among the 'change agents' leading or consolidating these changes, and thus able to offer insights from the cutting edge in their respective spheres.

The proliferation of ICTs has enabled many forms of new media with higher levels of interactivity and audience engagement than is typically possible in newspapers, radio or television. This, in turn, has inspired a movement of citizen journalists who provide independent reporting and analysis on many areas of public interest, including post-disaster situations.

It marks the media's return to the grassroots where most stories originate and develop.

As Sir Arthur C Clarke, futurist and communication guru who has written a foreword to this book, noted in an essay written in 2005: "Historically, organised and commercialised mass media have existed only in the past five centuries, since the first newspapers – as we know them – emerged in Europe. Before the printing press was invented, all news was local and there were few gatekeepers controlling its flow. Having evolved highly centralised systems of media for half a millennium, we are now returning to a second era of mass media -- in the true sense of that term. Blogs, wikis and citizen journalism are all signs of things to come."<sup>3</sup>

The new media tools and platforms provide more opportunities for disaster affected persons to directly voice their concerns, influencing how the mainstream media and humanitarian players react to ground realities. For too long, media professionals and aid

workers have carried out their professional work with little or no meaningful interaction with the affected people (sometimes called 'victims'). As we find out in this book, the affected people are not only asserting their place in the relevant discussions, but expressing themselves using digital technologies ranging from mobile phones to grassroots radio.

The humanitarian community recognises this sea change and is reorienting itself. While this book was under compilation, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) convened the Global Symposium +5 on 'Information for Humanitarian Action' in Geneva, Switzerland, from 22 to 26 October 2007. Representatives from governments, aid agencies, non-governmental organisations, academia, private sector and the media discussed and debated the state of humanitarian communication in the digitally-empowered and media-rich world. Their statement (still in draft as this book went to press in November 2007) attempted to define a common vision of the central role of information and communication in support of effective humanitarian preparedness, response and recovery.

It noted: "Information [and knowledge] has always been a key element in humanitarian action but recent emergencies and disasters have demonstrated how vital its role is in providing a basis for effective and informed advocacy, decision-making and resource allocation for affected population as well as humanitarian actors. Timely, accurate [and independent/objective/impartial] information is central to saving lives and strengthening recovery; the power lies in its effective management, analysis and application..."<sup>4</sup>

What does all this mean to a reporter or aid worker who is thrust into the midst of an unfolding humanitarian emergency, challenging all professional training and norms that work well under 'normal' circumstances? How can a community development worker or school teacher add elements of disaster risk reduction to their regular work, trying to raise awareness and preparedness at the local levels? And how can everyone enhance their capacity to listen, reflect and learn -- essential steps in good communication?

This book does not claim to provide all the answers, but we hope it has at least raised many pertinent questions. Instead of trying to be comprehensive or definitive, our contributors are being provocative and imaginative.

As editors, we have resisted imposing our heavy hand on their diverse styles of expression, allowing a free play and free flow of ideas. Thus, the book reflects the plurality that is characteristic of both the mass media and wider communication processes. If this comes across as a cacophony as a result, that is as intended.

This book is aimed at media professionals, disaster managers, development workers and civil society groups across Asia -- in short, all who share an interest in using information and communication to create safer societies and communities. We hope the contents of this book challenge and engage them in ways that expand their horizons.

Endnotes:

---

1 [http://www.digital-review.org/05\\_preface.htm](http://www.digital-review.org/05_preface.htm)

2 <http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/wdr2005/>

3 <http://outlookindia.com/fullprint.asp?choice=2&fodname=20051017&fname=KC+Clarke&sid=1>

4 Symposium proceedings can be accessed at: <http://www.reliefweb.int/symposium/>