In 2014, there was a sharp rise in the number of people affected by conflict and millions were forced to flee and became dependent on humanitarian aid for their survival. As the scale and frequency of humanitarian crises increased throughout the year, many humanitarian actors recognized that communication is a form of assistance as important as water, food and shelter.

**WHAT IS COMMUNICATING WITH COMMUNITIES (CWC)?**

Without access to information, communities cannot access the help they need, make informed decisions or be effective leaders in their own recovery. CwC is a specialized programmatic field of work that strengthens the ability of affected people to actively engage in their own preparedness, response and recovery by re-establishing two-way communication channels. CwC enhances the effectiveness of aid; fosters greater accountability, transparency and trust; and improves the outcomes experienced by affected people.

**OCHA’S ROLE**

In recent years, OCHA has invested resources into understanding and operationalizing “Communications with Communities (CwC)” as a humanitarian field of work. In its 2013 “Humanitarianism in the Network Age” report, OCHA argued that information is a basic need in crisis response. Since then, OCHA has set up pilot projects in a number of countries to ensure that CwC activities are effectively coordinated. OCHA’s Strategic Plan 2014-2017 promotes improved communications with affected people by ensuring accessibility of OCHA information products, services and data for national authorities, including affected communities. It also promotes a cross-sectoral approach to communications with communities as part of its inter-sector/cluster coordination role and advocates for funding of CwC programming.

**HIGHLIGHTS:**

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- WORLD HUMANITARIAN SUMMIT, Page 6
At the global and regional levels, OCHA led on the following initiatives in 2014:

- Scoping missions were conducted in the Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan. A CwC strategy for CAR was then drafted, and a CwC working group established in South Sudan.
- OCHA chaired the Communications with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network. Field Coordination Community of Practice (CoP) for the Ebola response, while UNICEF led all social mobilization/CwC activities in affected countries. OCHA worked with partners to draft guidance on the coordination of CwC in health emergencies.
- The OCHA-led CDAC CoP for Iraq resulted in the first CDAC inter-agency assessment.
- OCHA supported a review of communicating with communities initiatives and coordination in the response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.
- OCHA’s regional office for Asia Pacific, together with UNHCR’s Regional Centre for Emergency Preparedness co-developed and delivered a pilot 6-day regional training course on integrating a people-centred approach to humanitarian response. The 30 participants included government representatives.
- In support of the CDAC Network, OCHA developed and delivered a pilot five-day global training course on CwC in Bangkok. The overall goal of the training was to provide a solid foundation of CwC principles and practices in order to build a talent pool of qualified responders and mainstream this approach throughout the programme cycle, in particular needs assessments and planning.

“How can we today work with mobile phone and internet companies in West Africa to help stop the spread of Ebola? How can we harness the power of community groups, the media, international and national NGOs in Iraq, so that displaced people and host communities get the help including information, they so desperately need?... We can no longer afford to operate separately or in parallel with one another in silos, we have to work horizontally. We have to make the most of all the resources available, avoiding duplication and gaps, and prioritizing so that we meet urgent needs quickly, putting people at the centre of our response.” —Jan Eliasson, United Nations Deputy Secretary General, December 2014, Global Humanitarian Policy Forum

Given the growing number of crises and increasing CwC demands, OCHA will focus in 2015 on ensuring that CwC is integrated into all stages of its core functions, such as needs assessment, strategic planning, and resource mobilization.

In 2015, OCHA will:

1. **LEAD ADVOCACY** relating to two-way communications in humanitarian response, with strong linkages to cash-programming.
2. **SUPPORT MAINSTREAMING** CwC principles and approaches into the Humanitarian Programme Cycle and within the Inter-Cluster Coordination mechanism. **OCHA will encourage and support partners to lead on the coordination of CwC working groups, when and where necessary.**
3. **PROVIDE TECHNICAL SUPPORT SERVICES** for pilot projects in conflict settings, notably on gender and technology.
4. **BUILD INTERNAL CAPACITY** and knowledge on CwC.
IRAQ

By the end of 2014, over 2 million people were displaced throughout the country following fighting between Government forces and armed opposition groups which began in December 2013. Following heavy clashes in Northern Iraq between June and August, over 500,000 people fled to the Kurdistan region. OCHA responded immediately, sending humanitarian experts to assess and prioritize humanitarian needs and opening a country office. OCHA also managed the allocation of US$500 million provided by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, enabling aid groups to rapidly scale up efforts to reach over 1.5 million people with food, water, shelter, health care and supplies.

In August 2014, an inter-agency team carried out a rapid assessment with displaced populations and host communities in Northern Iraq to understand their information needs and access to communication channels. The findings reveal that displaced Iraqis often have only limited access to conflicting and broken information regarding the provision of and access to basic services. Although information is not always accessible, internally displaced people (IDPs) and host communities have been proactive at using existing communication channels, especially mobile phones, to reach out to family members. However, misinformation is a particular concern. Among suggested next steps to improve communications with communities, the team recommended the launch of an inter-agency two-way communications centre (i.e. call centre) to provide IDPs with timely information and to refer complaints, feedback and urgent needs to the humanitarian community. Together with the GSM Association, OCHA requested a short code from Iraq’s Communications and Media Commission to ensure that IDPs can call-in free of charge. Thanks to the commitment of a number of UN agencies and iNGOs, the national toll-free hotline will be fully operational as of February 2015.

The findings of the inter-agency report were articulated in the country’s Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) and the Strategic Response Plan (SRP). The report also led to the establishment of a working group, led by OCHA, which has raised the profile of CwC within the humanitarian response. Capacity building of local authorities in Dohuk Governorate led to the government providing displaced people information about relocation processes, which reduced tensions and stress among affected populations.

TO WATCH IN 2015:
An inter-agency, national toll-free hotline to provide IDPs with timely information and refer complaints, feedback and urgent needs.

Photo © OCHA/Iason Athanasiadis
SOUTH SUDAN

Violence and displacement in South Sudan escalated during the first weeks of 2014. In February, the worsening humanitarian situation was classified as a Level 3 Emergency – the worst level of humanitarian crisis. Over 800,000 people had fled their homes. In March, with the country facing possible famine, the humanitarian community issued an appeal to provide 4 million South Sudanese with life-saving aid.

An important lesson drawn from the South Sudan experience is that two-way communication minimises suspicion, improves transparency and enables affected people to express their needs, ask questions, and provide feedback on humanitarian services.

Partners have been creative in ensuring a two-way communication process between aid agencies and affected communities, diffusing tensions through dialogue and recorded audio programmes, as was the case in Malakal, with a project called “Boom Box Talk Talk” designed by Internews specifically for the Protection of Civilian site. It consists of two 20-minute programmes produced every week that are played on speakers and megaphones. The programmes include a three-minute drama, Q&As, feature stories, music and bulletins to share information.

OCHA is co-leading a Communications with Communities working group to ensure that all activities by partners are coordinated and that feedback from communities informs the overall humanitarian response.

TO WATCH IN 2015:

A CDAC Network initiative to strengthen knowledge, skills and preparedness systems for communicating with communities in South Sudan, funded by DFID’s Disaster and Emergency Preparedness Programme (DEPP).

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Over the past year, the country has experienced a major political crisis which has resulted in a violent conflict that has affected nearly the entire population and has left some 2.5 million people, over half the population, in dire need of assistance.

Despite the various challenges posed by the CAR context and the nature of its current conflict, many initiatives to establish or improve communications with affected people are already underway—and more innovative mechanisms are feasible. In February 2014, OCHA conducted an evaluation of CwC activities in CAR, followed by a CwC workshop in-country. A CwC strategy was then drafted and reflected the views
of over 40 national and international organizations, outlining steps to strengthen CwC coordination and engage with the private sector. For example, it recommended work with mobile phone companies to design a package of tools to drive down cellular prices and increase connectivity, notably in hard-to-reach areas.

OCHA also organized the “Talk to Me” photo project. The objective of the project was to strengthen dialogue between affected populations and humanitarian service providers. Aid workers were photographed with questions they wanted to pose directly to affected populations—with no limitations on the types of questions permitted. Over 100 affected people were interviewed and photographed by local photographers holding their signs expressing their needs and opinions. The photos were ultimately exhibited at the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs in Bangui.

PHILIPPINES

As the year began, OCHA and its partners were still responding to the devastation wrought by Super Typhoon Haiyan, which hit the central Philippines in November 2013. An estimated 14 million people were affected by the crisis.

In the aftermath of Super Typhoon Haiyan, the humanitarian system made it a priority to establish communication networks in order to provide critical information to affected people and to strengthen the humanitarian response. A CwC Working Group was created and co-chaired by the Philippines Information Agency and OCHA. The working group undertook outreach efforts that immediately improved communications and bridged gaps in the work of international humanitarian partners, local government bodies, local NGOs, civil society, voluntary groups and the affected communities.

The Haiyan experience taught government agencies, humanitarian actors and affected communities the importance of investing more on communication preparedness in order to reduce the number of casualties. The creation of the Philippines Community of Practice is now an integral part of the overall national preparedness strategic action plan of OCHA Philippines.

When Typhoon Hagupit hit in December 2014, the overall preparedness response, early warning systems, communication protocols and evacuation procedures worked well in reducing damages
and casualties. Affected communities in nine regions were evacuated on time, which demonstrated the national and local government’s capacity, as well as organizations in the country, to urgently mobilize resources in preparation for the potential impact of the typhoon. For example, organizations like Mercy Corps, utilized their early warning text blasts to at least 25,000 beneficiaries in Leyte, Eastern Samar and Northern Cebu.

MYANMAR

Over 100,000 people were displaced in the north of Myanmar, due to fighting between Government forces and the Kachin Independence Army. Up to 50,000 people were living in displacement camps beyond Government control. Local NGOs were struggling to meet their needs. Conflict and travel restrictions prevented international organizations from delivering emergency relief supplies, food, shelter and medicine.

In Kachin, concerns around return and resettlement were one of the primary communication needs identified among communities. OCHA drafted an awareness raising strategy for humanitarian partners to implement, as well as an inter-agency Complaints Response Mechanism on behalf of the CCCM cluster. The mechanism was subsequently rolled out in the 23 priority camps, reaching approximately 100,000 people. OCHA also worked closely with local NGOs who implement the majority of the response and advocated for their active involvement in coordination fora.

In Rakhine, OCHA continued to provide support to partners through the provision of CwC technical advice to respond to a variety of issues, such as with the last census and rice ration reduction cut.

The Typhoon Haiyan CDAC Learning Review

“Findings highlight that ownership or access to information via communication technologies alone does not ensure communities’ preparedness for disasters. This was demonstrated by the fact that, as the typhoon approached, people were receiving early warning information via text blasts, TV, radio and social media but did not evacuate. This is because there was a lack of familiarity with the terminology of ‘storm surge’. More work on preparedness programmes to sensitise communities to terminology could lead to behavioural change in the future and potentially save lives.”
Improved communication with affected communities in humanitarian preparedness and response has emerged as a key recommendation in each of the three World Humanitarian Summit regional consultations that took place in 2014. OCHA is currently working with existing CwC networks to leverage the opportunity presented by the summit as a chance to advocate for communication with affected communities to become a predictable, consistent and resourced element of disaster resilience, response and recovery.

For the 2014 WHS regional consultations, OCHA’s office in each region ensured that the voices of affected communities were well represented. For example: OCHA’s regional office for West and Central Africa partnered with IRIN news to conduct consultations with affected communities in seven countries in the region; OCHA’s East Africa office supported the participation of community-based organizations and affected people to attend the WHS grassroots and regional consultations in September and October 2014; OCHA’s regional office for Asia Pacific advocated for a stronger community-centred approach, including how CwC can operationalize commitments which arose through the event— in particular, the ‘humanitarian effectiveness’ and ‘reducing vulnerability and managing risk’ thematic areas; OCHA’s Middle East and North Africa office has been working with UN Country Teams, NGOs and civil society groups from around the region to conduct focus group discussions with affected communities ahead of the regional consultation meeting in Amman in March 2015.

TO WATCH IN 2015:

WHS regional consultations for Europe and Others Group (Feb); the Middle East and North Africa (March), Latin America and the Caribbean (April), the Pacific (June) and South and Central Asia (Q3).

JOIN THE CONVERSATION: www.worldhumanitariansummit.org

CwC Global Events to Watch in 2015

✓ **29-30 APRIL**: 35th Working Group on Emergency Telecommunications: ICT Humanitarian Forum, Dubai, UAE

The WGET will look at operationalizing CwC (data standards, security (cyber/info), ethics, protection)

✓ **27-28 MAY**: Humanitarian Data Conference, London, UK

A task team on CwC, led by OCHA and GSMA, will be examining how to bridge the digital divide and the gender gap

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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