Floods of information, drought of listening – communications in Honiara's floods

by Anouk Ride

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The recent floods in Honiara, capital of Solomon Islands, provided an illuminating example of how media can be used to communicate with the people most in need of information – those affected by the flooding.

In natural disaster response, the focus is rightfully on immediate needs – how government and aid agencies can get help to those who need it most. However, major agencies are staffed by communications professionals tasked by their directors with public relations, community awareness and media liaison activities. What should they be doing during a natural disaster?

A comparative research study that I worked on of five areas from different regions of the world that had experienced natural disasters, *Community Resilience in Natural Disasters,* found that resilience is found in all communities: people cooperate and cope during disaster. However, when aid arrives so too can conflict and dependency, which saps a community's sense of agency and ability to recover or adapt to the situation. What I have realized in the recent Honiara floods is that my profession – communications and public relations – also contributes to this phenomenon.

As I gathered the newspapers each day during the post-flood crisis, I was amazed to observe the "old school" public relations approach being employed time and time again by different agencies. Even in the early days after the disaster, aid agencies filled the newspaper with articles that their communications officers had written on what they were doing. Some went into overdrive. One major aid agency filled two pages with news about their distribution of relief supplies, at a time when media was still reporting on missing and found bodies, the health and water/sanitation crisis in evacuation centres and other critical issues.

Public relations or relating to the public?

Of course agencies need to let the public know what they are doing and seek support for their work (donations generally peak to civil society and international aid agencies during disasters). However, there is a time, a place and a tone for this kind of communication.

Immediately after a disaster is a time for media to focus on what people need to know – the dead and missing, where to get food, water and shelter, how to communicate with agencies about critical issues. If an agency has information that people need (e.g. how to treat diarrhea or the dangers in handling dead bodies) then those messages should be prioritized in the first week to 10 days.

Testing of communications is also critical, and a reality check on the information being distributed during the Honiara disaster would have been helpful. For instance, one agency issued information encouraging people to eat fruit and vegetables when food gardens had been destroyed and Honiara's normally crowded fresh produce market was lined with empty stalls.

Disaster-affected communities in remote parts of Solomon Islands have strong opinions on the language, tone, cultural appropriateness and practicality of the messages and advice in communications materials, according to a recent research report by ABC International, the National Disaster Management Office and Solomon Islands Media Assistance Scheme. Assessing what is known (rather than assuming knowledge levels), including traditional knowledge of what to do during natural disasters, is also seen as an important task before materials are distributed.

Most government ministries and agencies, such as the National Disaster Management Office in Solomon Islands, have few or no communications officers, while most aid agencies have at least one. Government offices are also less likely to enjoy the big communication budgets of their aid counterparts. There is potential for international agencies to help government get their messages out, particularly in the crisis response period. Such communications should be prioritized, or at least balanced, with the self-promotion of what aid organizations are doing.

A smart move for aid agencies is to tell communities what they need to know while mentioning their organization, rather than making it the focus. For example, when using radio (still the most popular media format across Solomon Islands) for awareness on health issues, ending the message with a simple "brought to you by [insert organization name]". People in crisis value useful information and may resent organizations' promoting themselves during a time when people are suffering.

Another way of relating to the public is to talk to the media rather than spoon-feed

them features and media releases. Local and foreign reporters who did deal directly with the agencies for information and interviews reported competition and confusion between the different agencies. One foreign journalist remarked to me: “if I meet another media officer pretending their agency is doing absolutely everything in this disaster I’m going to scream”.

While government agencies acknowledged donors comprehensively, aid agencies rarely acknowledged each other’s efforts, or placed their work within the broader context of government and non-government assistance. Instead, information from different sources was given in the same format with often confusing results – for example, there were at least four different agencies issuing “Situation Reports” to the media, leading to at least four different perceptions of what the “situation” was.

Joint media conferences by the agencies could have easily avoided this confusion, as well as giving journalists and the general public more idea of what the bigger picture of disaster response was and where they could direct questions. Similarly, a hotline or referral service would have been useful for flood-affected people, instead of turning up outside government and NGO offices in search of information. Such coordination and collaboration could also be a more efficient use of time by both the aid agencies and the media.

Images of victims or images of survivors?

Finally, there is the question of community resilience. In any disaster there will be a mix of people: those with some resources who help themselves and others, those who are in shock and unable to act without the support of others, and those who see aid as a chance for personal gain and/or become dependent on aid. Media and public relations can be used to influence these outcomes by shaping people’s perceptions of themselves, and other people’s perceptions of survivors of natural disasters.

The typical formula of an aid-agency written story about survivors of disaster is first a description of an individual’ personal loss, then an account of the help that was provided by the aid agency, and finally a report of the individual’s thanks to the agency or restatement of the agency’s message. The article might then call on others to help similar “victims”. The story will be accompanied by a photo of the individual or a few people with a package or some object showing the organization’s logo. In this formula, survivors are always reduced to an image of an individual (rather than a community organizing itself, for example), a helpless person, a passive “victim” whose only hope is the supplies or activities provided by the aid or government organization. It ignores what the survivors did for themselves, what ideas the may have about how to improve assistance or ensure that such a disaster

never happens again, and how local (not aid agency) strengths enabled them to cope. It creates a perception that such people need to be saved, not that they have abilities and strengths of their own that could be tapped for learning and adaptation after natural disasters. These articles provide predictable reading, as opposed to, for example, the *Solomon Star* newspaper reporter interviews with disaster survivors, which told truly heroic and extraordinary tales of survival, often related by the survivors in a matter-of-fact tone with lessons and messages of resilience.

Similarly, aid agencies would do well to present themselves not as “white knights” who rush in only after a disaster, but as longer-term friends who help with the underlying causes of natural disasters. For instance, there is a common public relations trick when an issue is in the media to brand old funding as new. So, an agency working on issues that were prominent in the media after the floods – health, water, housing, safety of women and children – might add up the amount spent on their relevant, ongoing programmes and present it as new funding. When any seasoned journalist will be wise to this trick, I am not sure why it persists, especially since it is much more sensible for an agency to have a longer term plan for these issues. It is better to present the agency as an old friend who contributes over the years than a new one with a lot of cash to spend quickly. Let’s call these agencies the “disaster weather friends”, that will soon be gone. Agencies can better use the interest in the longer term issues generated by the experience of disaster to build support for change to more adaptive and resilient societies (as happened recently when the Honiara City Council issued an ordinance against riverside development).

In *Community Resilience in Natural Disasters,* Pakistani NGO worker Naila Azam described a common sentiment amongst local development workers: “If organizations are going to go in and keep pumping in aid, obviously people would become dependent. If they [people] are dependent it is because they were made dependent.” The dependency problem in Solomon Islands will doubtless be blamed on the evacuees themselves, but if the aid agencies continue to depict them as passive “victims” in need of saving, rather than capable people able to articulate what is needed and solve their own problems, then that will fast become reality.

It is telling that most of the evacuees still in evacuation centres are squatters who lived in makeshift housing before the floods, mostly with a communal standpipe for water and no electricity services and struggled to pay for education for their children. How they survived before the disaster is testament to the coping and problem solving capacities of the poor.

There is much that communications and the media can do to provide disaster-affected communities with information and relay back their analysis to those who

wish to help. However, this requires less of a focus on organizational promotion in public relations and more of an approach that uses the media to highlight and build two-way relations and communications between the public and the humanitarian aid sector.

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