

---

## **Humanitarian Communication in the times of Crisis Management**

**Dr. Ashima Singh**

Amity University, Noida

Email: ashimasgureja@gmail.com

**Arushi Gulati**

(PR professional) Fabel Street, Delhi

Email: arushigulati26@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

The existence and multiplication of suffering is universal. A disaster is a massive destruction to the everyday functioning of any state, government body, organization or an individual. In many cases the impact of the disaster is very serious, to an extent that it gets beyond the coping capacity of the authorities. Such times call for measures that are not just intended towards saving lives but also limiting suffering, preventing injuries and moreover, preventing the collapse of the state.

Communication both theoretically and practically has been proven to build and strengthen societies. When you communicate your thoughts, doubts, resentments about the society, it creates a righteous path for the authorities to function accordingly. Humanitarian communication is the action taken when there is a crisis with insufficient capacity of the national institutions. Often Humanitarian Communication is misunderstood with being a state's ethical responsibility. However, it is far beyond that. This research will throw light on the key elements and challenges of humanitarian communication with major emphasis on its significance.

### **Introduction**

While we talk of disasters, there are several kinds of it. Two of the major crises the authorities face are natural disasters and environmental threats. While many people lose their lives, many are left scanty of their livelihoods, followed by a whole state feeling confused and perplexed of what should be done. In these otherwise uncertain times, communication is fundamental.

Humanitarian leg of communication, by its mere name suggests its lineage with humans and their lives. More than the ethical responsibility, it is a moral responsibility of the state. Humanitarian



principles are a mix of both ethics and deontology i.e. creating a balance between good and bad aspects of events at an individual or institutional level and the duties within a profession including medical professionals, journalists etc.

There are several speculations of how to determine the fundamental grounds of humanitarian action however, there still is no internationally agreed definition to it as yet. With varied topographies around the world, each state has its own concerns and builds its own methods to suffice it. Having said that, humanitarian communication calls for humanitarian action, an effort which is taken when there is a crisis along with insufficient capacity of the authorities or national institutions. The idea of responding to the population's needs remains the same.

Unlike various complex models of crisis management, humanitarian action has a tri-fold aim of saving lives, limiting suffering and preventing injury. Leading to a development project, humanitarian action programmes are usually short termed (until the authorities map out a long-term aid programme) with immediate outcome oriented projection.

### **Why humanitarian action**

Several instances across the globe have shown how devastating the aftermath of any crises looks like. Hundreds and thousands of people are left homeless, starving, and losing the basics of what calls for human dignity. To alleviate suffering, saving the population and moreover, delivering life-saving assistance along with restoring human dignity is the primary aim of the humanitarian action. But why do we study about it ?

There is a preconceived notion about how humanitarian actions work. Most people believe it is an involuntary act that is bound to be undertaken by the authorities. However, ground realities are different. Several studies and instances stated that in almost all cases, first helpers are the community members. This makes the study an essential part of every curriculum as 'ready' community members will only be able to take measures which are logically sound and limit misery.

---

A ready community is the one which is enlightened on how to react in case of a crisis. A community's framework is its people. When people are educated and equipped with the right resources, they act; in a way which sustains trust in the society and responds effectively.

### **Principles**

While we talk of any action that affects masses (community, state, nation), there are certain principles that follow as fundamentals. With the world changing everyday, there are various interpretations that are added to what should be the ground principles for humanitarian communication. However, traditionally, there have been four umbrella principles that shelter all possible concerns and society must face at the time of crisis. Humanity, Neutrality, Impartiality and Independence. Several researchers and studies have divided the first two as ethical and later ones and practical principles.

All of the principles are grounded on two major objectives which is delivering aid and support rapidly with no bias on the basis of color, caste, sex etc and with the purpose of outrightly safeguarding human dignity. It is paramount to understand there are no good or bad victims. Everyone affected deserves to receive requisite assistance. Assistance must be provided with equity and not equality. It should also not promote any biases within the community. Should serve one camp along with another and not against each other.

In order to protect the population, there is a chain of steps that must be taken by the governing authorities or institutions aiming to extend humanitarian aid.

Initiation → Organisation → Coordination → Implementation

Crucial times require initiation of any effort, help, support or aid. Followed by organizing through requisite resources then coordinating with relevant and related stakeholders and finally and putting the aid programme live. One major analysis that must be undertaken post the short -term

---

humanitarian aid programme is through, to understand how it performed. Assessment of the legitimacy of the action taken along with assessment of the needs of the population is one very important aspect to study by the authorities. Along with ensuring a consistent dialogue between the aid organization and the affected population.

### **Key challenges**

As a matter of fact, it is easier said than done. While we map out several definitions, implications, principles of any prospect, the challenges that come along tend to get missed. Humanitarian communication and aid is all about people and their dignity but considering there are various different cultures and setups, one size doesn't fit all. Several challenges pertaining to ethics, crisis communication, and public communication exist.

Ethical challenges are where the established thought of what's good or bad is questioned. At the time of a disaster or a crisis, the first professionals present at the scene are medical and media professionals. In the haste of the situation, several ethics are seen to be missed. For example, any victim or patient has the full right to know and understand the severity of their medical condition. They have the right to accept or decline the kind of treatment being offered to them. Also, they have the complete confidence of confidentiality of their condition with their medical professional. Talking of the journalists and media, a lot of instances have suggested that the data that goes out through media channels is mostly unverified and is bound to suit the beneficiaries. There becomes an ocean of information which is unverified, has no factual accuracy to it and is mostly misinformation. The biggest example we all have is the covid19 pandemic that hit the globe. There have been several interpretations to what caused the spread, where the authorities lagged or the count of the number of people who suffered because of the unavailability of resources across. However, these are all interpretations. There is still a lack of substantial evidence of the projections quoted by various spectators.



Crisis Communication flows in 3 legs. The first one is pre-crisis, then during the crisis and finally once the crisis has happened. All these cycles of crisis communication are meant to either warn, inform or to manage. The first leg includes warning the community about the speculated disaster. The impact, the possibilities and ways out for it. During the crisis it is mostly the coordination between damage containment and local support stakeholders. Once the crisis has happened, it is to evaluate the preparedness and preventions for the aftermath.

While we talk of people's communication during a crisis, it is crucial to understand that the public is not just the victims or neighboring societies, it is a whole lot of people. Decision makers, civil societies, humanitarian aid providers, natives, community leaders, community members, armed forces, donors and so on. While dealing with the public what's important is to understand that any communication message must be picked very carefully and not jeopardize the public. Also, it is paramount to know that no communication is the biggest communication an organization, state, institution does.

Communication post crisis is one of the most important yet the trickiest propositions. It is all about restoring people's faith in you, in society, in the authorities. While you reorganise the plans that didn't work, you continue to provide rationale and sustained relations.

### **Steps of different humanitarian communications projects**

While we talk of humanitarian communications at the time of disaster or crisis management, it is critical we understand 'why' we need to practice humanitarian communications and aids more aggressively.

Communication is essential. Media channels, newspapers, social media platforms, word of mouth, are all means of communication. But why is it so important! For an organization, communication is essential to offer astute assistance, to be in the position of being accepted by the affected population, to come as accountable and a functioning mechanism, to build and sustain a good



---

image of the organization, to coordinate with various other organizations and stakeholders and finally to develop partnerships and associations.

Any communication plan aiming to build an aid program is not charted in one day. A whole mechanism follows through it; starting from why you communicate to analyzing and knowing your public to designing the plan to implementing to finally evaluating results.

There are 5 major components of the humanitarian communications plan. First one is answering what the objective is. In case of a disaster, the objective is to promote safety of everyone in the community, to make them aware of what might happen, the repercussions, the impact along with creating a state of confidence in them.

Next is where you analyze your audiences, your people. Every topography is different, every culture is different, socio-economic stances are different hence, needs post and during disaster would be different. For example, during the onset of covid19 pandemic, some parts of the world needed more medical infrastructures, some needed more dumping yards, some needed more medical supplies while there were some that needed food for their people. Communications channels, messages, language, would differ from place to place and person to person.

Once through with the analyses, it is time to chalk out the strategy you want to use during and post crisis. Food, shelter, clothes, the basic necessities, how will you provide them? How will you rescue the victims? How will you safeguard their livelihoods? How will you limit suffering and deaths? All of this needs to be planned well in advance, along with a plan B.

The indication of a crisis or disaster is when you implement what was planned. This is where everything changes. The on-ground impact you had initially anticipated might be lesser or more,

---

the plan would need to be altered on spot. The aim remains the same, alleviate suffering and safeguard human dignity.

The main objective that was underlined at the initiation of the whole strategy must never be forgotten, rather the overall plan and implementation must contribute to the objective.

While you monitor everything at all stages, it is crucial to mark every single point while you evaluate the whole situation post-crisis.

### References

"Humanitarian Communication in Disaster Situations: Best Practices and Lessons Learned" by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

"Communication for Disaster Risk Reduction: Saving Lives, Building Resilience" by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

“Humanitarian communication : Addressing key challenges offered by University of Geneve”

"Communicating Risk in Public Health Emergencies: A WHO Guideline for Emergency Risk Communication (ERC) Policy and Practice" by the World Health Organization.

"The Role of Communication in Disaster Risk Reduction" by the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR).

"Humanitarianism and Communication: Toward More Effective Engagement" by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative

