

Language Kills!

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Languages can be a crucial barrier to humanitarian responses. In one documented case during an investigation into the 2008 Pakistan earthquake, it was revealed that NGO workers did not participate in humanitarian response meetings because they did not understand English well enough to participate, or benefit from the discussions and as we know, poor coordination costs lives.

When we consider that there are over 400 natural disasters globally, every year, of which over 70 require significant external input of humanitarian aid, an inability to communicate costs lives.

The number of people affected by these disasters is growing. Coordinated poorly, each disaster event has the potential to set back the attainment of the MDGs as the ability to cope among affected populations weakens.

The use of English as the sole form of communication between government officials and NGOs during a humanitarian response meeting after the earthquake in Padang, Indonesia, in 2009 undermined relief efforts.

A UN official coordinating disaster response management in Haiti this year said the lack of translation and interpreting services in the aftermath of the earthquake was a vital missing link in the relief effort and the ability to coordinate humanitarian aid effectively.

Poor communication kills and communication breakdowns need to be addressed, when we take into context the statistic that the number of people affected by disasters will rise from 250 million people per year now, to 375 million by 2015.

Ongoing reform of the humanitarian sector led by the UN demands that aid expenditures are used as efficiently as possible. However, the very people who know their needs best – those directly affected by disaster – become disenfranchised because in too many cases they do not speak the same language as the international aid workers that have arrived to support them.

As a result of this, it is estimated that a significant percentage of humanitarian aid is squandered through poor appreciation of the need and consequent misallocation of incorrect relief supplies.

Internationally-recognized “good practice” guidelines for disaster response stipulate the inclusion of the affected population into the operational decision-making process. Yet, every recent evaluation of external humanitarian assistance specifically cites the language barrier as one of the major constraints to achieving this.

Conclusions:

Companies whose business is communications could help bridge the communications gap effectively in collaboration with the not-for-profit sector.

Humanitarian aid workers, NGO’s government officials should have a consistent and high quality translation and interpreting service using stand-alone portable systems and web-based applications managed by local humanitarian enterprise initiatives.

In conclusion, the essential motto is: “Better Communications-Better Work-Better World!”

Discussion:

Q. What other innovative approaches have you used?

A. One good example of the innovative use of technology was in Haiti during a recent cholera outbreak. NGOs advised local people to call or text medical workers to inform of any family/community members who fell sick so that they could be taken to medical facilities and isolated from the rest of the population. This simple but highly effective measure helped aid workers on the ground to administer rapid treatment. It was also highly cost effective.