Communicating with beneficiaries in emergencies:
How can international aid organisations improve?

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Abstract

This research investigates the challenges faced by international aid organisations in communicating with the beneficiaries of their emergency projects and suggests ways in which these challenges can be overcome. The research questions guiding this study are: What are the challenges faced by international humanitarian organisations to communicate with beneficiaries in the field? How can these challenges be overcome?

Over the past decade, as the humanitarian sector has come under increasing scrutiny, aid agencies have developed their ability to communicate with media, donors and the public. At the same time, debates about accountability to beneficiaries, programme quality and other aspects of humanitarian work have suggested that organisations are not so good when it comes to communicating with those who are the very beneficiaries of their work in the field.

This study starts by providing a review of the literature in the field of development communications, which will form a conceptual basis for the research. This is followed by a review of current debates in the humanitarian field - participation, accountability and quality – in which the role of communication with beneficiaries is explored. In order to inform the research and provide practical insights, two case studies are examined: Oxfam’s tsunami relief programme in Banda Aceh and an intervention by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to fight an epidemic of Marburg hemorrhagic fever in Angola, both in 2005. In addition to a background review of each case, semi-structured interviews were conducted with aid workers involved in the programmes. The case studies are complemented by interviews with key informants involved in accountability work, providing additional insights to the research.
By drawing together the literature review and the insights from the case studies, the research describes the main challenges faced by organisations in communicating with beneficiaries in the field. The first challenge in implementing projects where communication with beneficiaries is effective is to understand what the communications process entails. In order to clarify this, the research proposes a typology of field communications, which can help organisations develop policies that include communication with beneficiaries.

Understanding the communication process, however, is not enough. Aid organisations are often subject to a number of pressures coming from a variety of sources, which become practical obstacles to optimal communication with beneficiaries. The research describes these challenges and concludes by proposing ways to overcome them, thus creating space for communications in the field to thrive.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ 3
Acknowledgements ..................................................................................................................... 7
List of Acronyms ....................................................................................................................... 8
Chapter One
Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 9
  1.1 A brief background analysis: context and concept .................................................. 10
  1.2 Methodology ............................................................................................................. 12
  1.3 Research structure .................................................................................................... 13

Chapter Two
Communicating with beneficiaries: a fundamental approach .............................................. 15
  2.1 Communication: from data to knowledge ............................................................. 16
  2.2 The role of communication in development ......................................................... 18
  2.3 Communication with beneficiaries in emergencies .............................................. 22
    Communication with beneficiaries: a crosscutting issue in humanitarian action .......... 23
    Communication with beneficiaries and participation in emergencies .......... 25
    Communication with beneficiaries and humanitarian accountability .......... 29
    Communication with beneficiaries and programme quality .......................... 31
    Communication as a form of aid in itself ............................................................. 35
  2.4 Conclusion to Literature Review ............................................................................ 36

Chapter Three
Communicating with beneficiaries in practice ................................................................. 38
  3.1 Oxfam’s tsunami response programme, Aceh, Indonesia ..................................... 40
    Context ..................................................................................................................... 40
    Findings from Interviews ........................................................................ 43
  3.2 MSF’s response to Marburg Fever outbreak in Uige, Angola ............................... 47
    Context ..................................................................................................................... 47
    Findings from Interviews ........................................................................ 49
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List of Acronyms

ALNAP - Active Learning Network for Accountability and Participation in Humanitarian Action

BOND - British Overseas NGOs for Development

Groupe URD – Groupe Urgence, Réhabilitation, Développement

IEC - Information, Education, Communication

IFRC - International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

HAP - Humanitarian Accountability Partnership

MSF - Médecins Sans Frontières

NGO - Non Governmental Organisation

TEC - Tsunami Evaluation Coalition

WHO - World Health Organisation
Chapter One: Introduction

With growing public attention to humanitarian crises and the humanitarian sector under increasing scrutiny, much consideration has been given to communication efforts in humanitarian organisations. Aid agencies have invested in communication with media, donors and the general public, transmitting institutional values, reporting on activities and conveying compelling messages about the impact of their actions in the field. However, are international aid organisations communicating just as well with those who are supposed to benefit directly from their programmes?

This research aims to investigate the communication taking place between international humanitarian agencies and their beneficiaries during emergency response work. The main questions underlying this research are:

*What are the challenges faced by international humanitarian organisations to communicate with beneficiaries in the field? How can these challenges be overcome?*

These questions are based on the assumption, which will be tested in the literature review and illustrated by the case studies. Firstly, it considers that the volume and quality of communication taking place between humanitarian agencies and their beneficiaries could be improved. Secondly, it implies that there is value in engaging in communication with beneficiaries in emergencies, therefore agencies should strive to achieve it.

This study will attempt to demonstrate the importance of paying greater attention to communication with beneficiaries in emergencies by taking a closer look at the
stand that the humanitarian sector in general take on it, exposing the gap between what agencies preach and what they practice.

The reasons behind these gaps are thus the main focus of this research, which aims to investigate the challenges in translating principles into practice as regards to improving communication with beneficiaries. Once this question is examined, it will then be possible to propose ways forward.

At this point, it is important to clarify the scope of the research as well as what its limitations are. Due to the particular and complex nature of humanitarian work in open conflicts and the widely recognised challenges it poses to participation and communication with local communities, this research will refrain from covering such contexts. The challenge of communicating with beneficiaries in contexts of violent conflict would deserve a research on its own, in which the risks involved in establishing an open dialogue with local communities and supporting local capacities would deserve thorough consideration.

Another limit to the scope of this study concerns the stage of humanitarian response that it intends to cover. This consideration is fundamental as the challenges in communicating with beneficiaries may change at different moments of a humanitarian intervention. This study focuses on the immediate stage of relief assistance, as this is the stage of humanitarian response where communication with beneficiaries appears to be mostly overlooked. Yet, aid agencies are, at this stage, involved in some sort of information exchange – or, as this research will show later, information-extraction – with operational purposes (Anderson and Woodrow, 1998).

1.1 A brief background analysis: context and concept

The growth in scale and complexity of emergency responses and the realisation, mostly after the Rwanda genocide of 1994, that aid can at times do more harm than good (Anderson, 1996), has triggered a myriad of debates concerned with
issues such as humanitarian responsibility, safeguard of humanitarian principles, programme quality, participation, accountability to beneficiaries and transparency.

As a result, the humanitarian sector has undertaken a number of initiatives aiming to provide a regulatory platform for humanitarian agencies and therefore improve their performance in providing aid. These regulation mechanisms have tried to establish sets of principles, as well as technical and ethical standards for humanitarian action, including frameworks for quality and accountability of relief work. However, recent evaluation reports, which will be discussed in this study, show that translating principles into action has not been a straightforward process.

Among the number of issues that have been explicitly or implicitly tackled in all these mechanisms is the need to engage in proper\textsuperscript{1} communication with beneficiaries during relief operations. As this study will demonstrate, such communication – or the lack of it - has implications that go beyond the mere exchange of information. Rather, it is a crosscutting theme related with participation, accountability and quality.

The conceptual background for the research will be largely drawn from the field of development communications. Born in the 1960s and having evolved as much as the theories of development themselves, development communication has introduced the notion of communication activities within an aid programme. Like participation, which has been borrowed from development thinking and applied with adaptations and limitations to humanitarian practice, development communications can provide a conceptual framework for communication in emergencies.

\textsuperscript{1} The meaning of “proper communication” will be further developed in the first chapter of this study.
## 1.2 Methodology

This research is based on primary and secondary data. The first part comprises literature review both in the areas of development communications and the role of communications with beneficiaries in humanitarian emergencies. To illustrate the practical challenges faced by humanitarian organisations in communicating with beneficiaries in emergencies, two case studies have been examined: an intervention by *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) during an outbreak of Marburg fever in Angola and Oxfam’s tsunami response work in Indonesia, both in 2005. The case studies were chosen due to their relevance to the debate. The already existing literature examining these two interventions – more limited in the case of Marburg than the tsunami – suggests that communication with beneficiaries was poor in both cases, leading to consequences both in terms of accountability and operational impact. This research therefore sets out to discover, from the perspective of those involved, what the main difficulties were. The analysis is also enriched by the fact that they are two very diverse contexts and two different organisations.

The first part of each case study presents the context of the interventions and includes an analysis of the available literature relevant to the topic of communication with beneficiaries in these two particular emergencies. Once the context is established, including the overall challenges of the interventions, the second part of the case studies presents the particular challenges perceived by the staff involved in the programmes. For that, semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff directly involved in the programmes, in which they were given the opportunity to reflect about the obstacles they faced in communicating with beneficiaries in the programme. The interviewees were chosen on the basis of their role in the projects.

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2 Marburg is a rare and highly lethal viral disease, for which there is no vaccine or curative treatment available (WHO, 2005).
To complement the case studies, interviews with key informants were also performed. The key informants are professionals in the humanitarian field that work on accountability to beneficiaries, therefore reflecting on how agencies communicate with them. The interviews were not related with the particular case studies, but with the overall challenges they see in the way agencies communicate in emergencies.

1.3 Research structure

Following this introduction, Chapter Two of this study will examine the literature and outline in greater detail the contextual and conceptual backgrounds of the research by examining the literature relevant to the subject of communication between relief agencies and affected communities. The Chapter starts by providing the definition of communication that will be used throughout the research. Secondly, it provides a brief literature review in the field of development communications, before concentrating on current debates that are relevant to the field of communication with beneficiaries in emergencies, such as participation, accountability and quality. This will provide justification for two arguments: firstly, that communication taking place between aid agencies and communities is both poor and insufficient. Secondly, agencies have overall recognised this need, but filling the gap between words and action remains a challenge. This analysis will enable reflection on possible reasons for this gap, which will be complemented by the case studies in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three will focus on the two case studies. As mentioned in the Methodology section, each case study comprises background information (context) and findings from interviews. The specific case studies will be complemented by interviews with key informants. This Chapter will provide an analysis of the challenges in implementing projects where good communication with beneficiaries occur, from the point of view of those involved in the projects.
Chapter Four will present an analysis of the findings in the light of the previous literature review. It will compare and contrast the practical aspects observed in the case studies with the literature review - both in the development and humanitarian fields. Based on such analysis, Chapter Four will propose possible functions and contents of communication with beneficiaries in emergencies in a typology of field communications. It will then discuss the main challenges in implementing such communications.

A Conclusion, summarising the main arguments and findings of this research and proposing ways forward to improve communication with beneficiaries in the field, completes the study.
Chapter Two

Communicating with beneficiaries: a fundamental approach

The issues of communication with beneficiaries of aid and the integration of communication in programmes have deserved much attention in the development field over the past decades. In fact, the first development communication theories were contemporary with the origins of development thinking. In the humanitarian field, however, only in the past decade the idea of communication with beneficiaries has gained prominence and therefore deserved consideration in the literature. Yet, rather than becoming a field of study in itself, communication in humanitarian programmes have been embedded in the debates around accountability, participation and programme quality.

This chapter will examine different approaches to communication with beneficiaries of aid. The first section will briefly define what communication means in this study and how it differs from data and information. The second section will focus on development thinking and the role of communication in development programmes, which may provide some insights for the discussion about communication with beneficiaries in emergency contexts. The third section will then concentrate on the role of communication with beneficiaries in current debates held in the humanitarian sector and will be divided into four sub-sections: accountability, participation, programme quality and communication as a form of aid.

Even though some analysis will be done when relating the literature with the main topic of this research, a more in-depth discussion of these topics will be provided in Chapter Four.
2.1 Communication: from data to knowledge

This section aims to discuss the concept of communication and how it differs from data and information. This is not, however, a section on theory of communication and the analysis it brings is limited to the scope of this study. In order to reach a definition to these terms, contributions will be drawn both from the development and humanitarian fields.

Catalina Gandelsonas, in her work “Communicating for Development”, defines communication as “any method by which human beings pass on information to one another, and is generally recognised as the process of successful transfer of meaningful information” (Gandelsonas, 2002, p. 1). This definition brings some important elements that are crucial in any communication process.

Firstly, it considers information as an essential part of communication, but does not limit communication to information. Secondly, it states that communication entails the successful transfer of information. This means that making information available does not mean to communicate, if the transfer from one part to another is not successfully completed. Thirdly, the information transferred must be meaningful. In other words, information has to be relevant and accessible, otherwise it will not complete the communication cycle. The concept of meaningful information is crucial in this definition, as it highlights the difference between relevant message that is conveyed in an appropriate way to the intended audience and therefore is assimilated, and the dissemination of information for the sake of information. This last element also implies the participation of the recipient, as meaning can only be produced in the light of personal experience and understanding. And lastly, communication is a process that takes place between human beings, which makes it in essence different from data.

The World Disasters Report 2005 – Focus on Information in Disasters, published by the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, provides another useful clarification of different terms related to communication,
based on the work of disaster expert Ben Wisner. However, even though it reproduces a diagram originally named “communication” by Wisner, the IFRC publication presents them as “types of information”, which adds to the confusion around the use of these terms.

The IFRC publication makes the distinction between data, information, knowledge and wisdom. Whilst data are basic facts, information is defined as organised data and descriptions of situations. At the top of the list are knowledge, which combines information with understanding generating awareness and ability to predict events; and Wisdom, defined as a “capacity to make judgements based on experience, understanding and principles” (IFRC, 2005, p. 13).

This definition shows that there is a long distance from data to wisdom, which can only be reached by means of communication: “Gathering data is a one-way process. Acquiring knowledge and wisdom involves exchanging and analysing information in the light of experience, through dialogue and multiple channels of communication” (2005, p. 13). Like Gandelonas’, this definition highlights the importance of transferring information through dialogue. Moreover, by arguing that knowledge is generated by information analysed in the light of experience, it embeds the notions of meaning and relevance.

For the purpose of this study, communication will be understood as Gandelsonas defines it, whilst the definitions of data and information will be borrowed from the IFRC publication. In summary:

- **Data**: Basic facts and figures. Does not necessarily involve analysis or human interaction.
- **Information**: Facts and figures put into context and enhanced by analysis.
- **Communication**: The successful transfer of meaningful and relevant information through dialogue.

Fig. 1: Definitions
Overemphasising data to the detriment of communication is not an unusual approach in the humanitarian field. There are numerous examples that illustrate such imbalances, and the most obvious may be the design of early warning systems, which can be technically and technologically impeccable and generate accurate data in a timely fashion, but failing to successfully transfer information leading to inadequate preparedness. As the IFRC publication summarises: “The lack of an official early warning of the tsunami disaster is a reminder that scientific knowledge alone is not enough: information only becomes useful as a result of human interaction and communication” (2005, p. 15)

2.2 The role of communication in development

The relationships between communication and development were first elaborated after World War II and further consolidated in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Communication was a one-way, non-participatory method used to export the Northern concept of development to the nations in the South (Gandelsonas, 2002). The prevailing model of development, synonymous to industrial and technical progress leading to economic growth, fostered the notion of a top-down communication process aimed at transferring the knowledge necessary for development. Knowledge transfer was thus at the center of ‘diffusion of innovation’ (Rogers, 1962), a theory that emerged in the early 1960’s treating communication as synonymous to information and was mainly concerned with economic growth.

However, the application of communication within development has evolved as much as development theories themselves and different trends in the development debate have been reflected in the field of communication for development. As critics voiced their concerns about the one-way communication approaches, triggered by increasing poverty in developing countries, new theories promoting two-way participatory approaches to communication and development emerged (Gandelsonas, 2002). In the 1970’s, Paulo Freire, a Brazilian scholar, developed theories of participatory development that place the individual at the centre of
education and communication process. Communication is then seen as a dialogue in which each recipient must also be able to take the role of a sender in a cycle that can lead to personal and collective development (Freire, 1972).

Today, the notion of “information-dumping” is generally rejected as an effective way to communicate in development, whilst the need for a participatory approach to communication is widely recognised. The participants on the 1st World Congress of Communications for Development, held in Rome in 2006, have agreed that:

“Communication for Development is a social process based on dialogue using a broad range of tools and methods. It is also about seeking change at different levels including listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change. It is not public relations or corporate communication (The Rome Consensus, 2006)”.

An analysis of different authors, however, reveals that there is not as much consensus around the functions of communications in development as there is about the methods and the processes needed to achieve effective communications.

Moemeka, in his work “Development Communications in Action”, acknowledges the distinctions between communication and “information-dumping” and the importance of talking with people instead of talking to people, in a process that includes, amongst others, respect, dialogue, freedom and quality (Moemeka, 2000). Nevertheless, he does not reject the principle of “diffusion of innovation” per se or questions whether this is a legitimate goal of communication in development. Instead, he highlights that this new paradigm sees diffusion as the process by which innovation is communicated through a system. In other words, Moemeka considers that the value of a participatory approach to communications lies in the fact that it is a more effective way to perform “diffusion of innovation”.
Moemeka also argues that communication in development creates an environment conducive to dialogue and ensures that people “understand the rationale and accept the need for change and fully participate in planning and execution of development programmes”. Although he advocates for a genuine dialogue and argues that this process is not directed at persuading people, this approach does represent a risk of performing communication with the objective of persuasion, which may be dangerously conducive to manipulation. Even though he rejects a communication top-down process, it reflects a top-down rationale behind the ultimate goals of communication for development: “If what the change proposal entails is difficult for the target social group to understand, the people may not be easily persuaded” (2000, p. 75).

In their work “Communicating for Development - Human Change for Survival” (1998), Colin Fraser and Sonia Restrepo-Estrada establish a close link between communication and participation: “when communication processes are used to inform people, enable them to contribute their points of view, reach consensus, and carry out an agreed change or development action together, it can be said that communication is participation.” (1998, p. 59) In contrast with Moemeka’s definition of development communication, Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada’s approach places emphasis on an effective contribution from the targets of communication efforts, thus creating a meaningful dialogue. They argue that communication in development stimulates debate and “conscientisation”3 for participatory decision-making. They define communication for development as:

“[…] the use of communication processes, techniques and media to help people towards a full awareness of their situation and their options for change, to resolve conflicts, to work towards consensus, to help people plan actions for change and sustainable development, to help people acquire

3 Conscientisation is a term created by Paulo Freire in the field of education to describe the process of developing consciousness, or critical awareness, in a way that enables one to transform the reality (Freire, 1972).
Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada believe communication for development has three different and complementary functions: social communication, educational communication and institutional communication. As social communication, they define the process of mobilising people in a way that they can develop insights and confidence to tackle their problems. Educational Communication helps people to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to be able to implement changes agreed and decisions made within a development framework. And lastly, Institutional Communication is the information flow between all those involved in promoting and implementing change, helping to create common understanding and organise implementation.

In the area of health, communication with beneficiaries of has gained wide recognition and led to the development of IEC: Information, Education and Communication. Aimed at changing or reinforcing sets of behaviours in a group, IEC draws from different fields such as social marketing, behaviour analysis and anthropology, to fosters positive health practices. A WHO review of IEC Lessons Learned shows the need to centre such approach on meaning and genuine participation:

“Values, meaning, and cultural context have risen in the list of priorities and motivational factors that must be considered when strategies are being designed (whether aimed at individual behaviour change or at changing social norms), and this in turn has led to increased respect for genuine participatory approaches that go beyond the usual rhetorical commitment to “client-centred” campaigns (Clift, 2001, p. 27).”
This section provided an introduction to the theory of communications in the development field. The next section of this chapter will examine the issue of communication with beneficiaries within the humanitarian sector and how it fits into current debates in this field. It will also provide insights into the main challenges faced by organisations in improving communication with beneficiaries.

2.3 Communication with beneficiaries in emergencies

As the humanitarian sector grows and the nature of emergencies changes, their roles and practices of humanitarian actors have been subject to continued questioning. Fiona Terry (2002) draws from the response of humanitarian agencies to the Rwanda genocide in 1994 to question humanitarian responsibility and argue that humanitarian organisations have become integrated into the dynamic of certain conflicts, claiming that choices in programme will determine whether the impact is negative or positive.

The questioning around the effectiveness of humanitarian response to the Rwanda genocide also prompted the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (JEEAR)\(^4\), an unprecedented effort to assess the performance of international humanitarian organisations in responding to the crisis. The JEEAR had an evident impact in the areas of humanitarian accountability and evaluation (Borton, 2004), triggering an important debate about humanitarian responsibility and the safeguard of humanitarian principles. As a consequence, in the last decade, various initiatives have been put in place aiming to set guidelines and frameworks for humanitarian action, such as the Red Cross Code of Conduct, the Sphere Standards, and the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership. Such initiatives are born from the common acknowledgement that quality of humanitarian aid and responsibility of humanitarian actors needed to be improved, and set out to define the basis for quality and performance in the humanitarian sector.

\(^4\) The Joint Evaluation of the International Response to the Genocide in Rwanda was a multi-national, multi-donor effort aiming to draw lessons from the experience in Rwanda for future emergencies and for the work in Rwanda (Milwood, 1996).
**Communication with beneficiaries: a crosscutting issue in humanitarian action**

Following the JEEAR, the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief\(^5\), developed and agreed upon by eight of the world's largest disaster response agencies in 1994, was the first joint initiative to establish standards for disaster response. By July 2008, this voluntary professional code had been signed by 447 organisations from all over the world, which declare their adherence to the ten commitments expressed in the document (IFRC, 2008).

The Code of Conduct highlights, amongst others, the need to respect culture and customs, to find ways to involve beneficiaries in the management of relief aid, to strive to reduce further vulnerabilities and to be held accountable to beneficiaries and donors (IFRC, 1994). Although none of these principles tackles directly the need to engage in communications with beneficiaries, communications can contribute to help to achieve them or, in some cases, even be a pre-requisite for so. For example, involving beneficiaries in the management of aid is only possible if proper communication between agencies and aid recipients is in place. Also, the principle of accountability to beneficiaries, which will be further developed later in this chapter, entails communication with beneficiaries as one of its crucial elements. However, the tenth principle, which deals with information and communications, mentions relationships with the media and the portrayal of beneficiaries in a dignifying way, *i.e.* beneficiaries involved as the objects of communication, rather than participants in the process\(^6\).

\(^5\) This publication will also be referred to, in this research, as the Code of Conduct.

\(^6\) IFRC Code of Conduct. Principle 10: “In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognise disaster victims as dignified humans, not hopeless objects. Respect for the disaster victim as an equal partner in action should never be lost. In our public information we shall portray an objective image of the disaster situation where the capacities and aspirations of disaster victims are highlighted, and not just their vulnerabilities and fears. While we will co-operate with the media in order to enhance public response, we will not allow external or internal demands for publicity to take precedence over the principle of maximising overall relief assistance. We will avoid competing with other disaster response agencies for media coverage in situations where such coverage may be to the detriment of the service provided to the beneficiaries or to the security of our staff or the beneficiaries” (IFRC, 1994).
The Code of Conduct is, however, a set of general principles, which does not aim to establish operational standards. In order to provide an operational framework for humanitarian action, in 1997 various humanitarian NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement launched The Sphere Project, aimed at setting minimum standards for humanitarian intervention. The standards are categorised by different sectors of activities and complemented by a group of common standards, applicable to each sector. In addition, The Sphere Project introduces the Humanitarian Charter, which spells out the rights of people affected by disasters (The Sphere Project, 2000).

Amongst the principles applicable to all sectors, common standard number 1 tackles participation and describes it as the “active participation of disaster-affected people in assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the assistance programme” (The Sphere Project, 2000, p. 28). As a key indicator, the Sphere Project recommends: “Women and men of all ages from the disaster-affected and wider local population, including vulnerable groups, receive information about the assistance programme, and are given the opportunity to comment on the assistance during all stages of the project cycle” (2000, p. 28). This statement describes a two-way communication process, involving meaningful and relevant information exchange carried out at an individual level.

In summary, both the Code of Conduct and The Sphere Project stress the importance of being accountable to beneficiaries and promoting participation as a measure of quality and ethical approach in humanitarian action. At first sight, it is possible to suggest that these concepts bear close relationship with communication with beneficiaries. However, in order to establish the nature of this relationship more accurately, the next two sections will examine the concepts of accountability and participation with views to their application to emergency response, and draw attention to the role of communication with beneficiaries.

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7 The Sphere Project categorises the sectors of activities in humanitarian work as: water, sanitation and hygiene promotion; food security, nutrition and food aid, settlement and non-food items and health services.
Communication with beneficiaries and participation in emergencies

Concerns regarding the lack of involvement of affected populations in humanitarian programmes led to the development of the Global Study on Consultation and Participation of Affected Populations in Humanitarian Action, facilitated by the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Participation in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) 8.

The Global Study aimed to improve the understanding of participation dynamics in humanitarian programmes and contribute to improve accountability to beneficiaries within the humanitarian system. Its main output, the Practitioners’ Handbook9, provides a “road map for field workers for involving affected communities in the design and implementation of humanitarian interventions” (ALNAP, 2003).

An examination of the different approaches and types of participation suggested in the Handbook enables the establishment of linkages between participation and communication with beneficiaries in emergencies and provides insights to the benefits and risks associated with such practice.

The Handbook defines participation in humanitarian action as “the engagement of the affected population in one or more phases of the project cycle: assessment; design; implementation; monitoring; and evaluation (2003, p. 20). It also claims that this engagement creates links between relief, rehabilitation and development.

ALNAP argues that participation can be seen as a moral duty, a means of improving programme quality, increasing security, gaining access to a certain
population, supporting local capacities and giving voice to traditionally marginalised groups. In order to achieve one or more of these goals, the Handbook suggests three different approaches to participation, which will be analysed here.

The instrumental approach suggests that participation is a means to achieve programme goals; the collaborative approach is based on exchange and implies that both agencies and beneficiaries bring resources to achieve a common goal; and the supportive approach means that organisations support the affected population carry out its initiatives (ALNAP, 2003).

Each approach has its implications and risks. Whilst the instrumental approach may lead to manipulation of beneficiaries by the agency, the collaborative approach implies a minimal social structure within the affected population and involvement throughout the project cycle. To implement a supportive approach, it is essential that the organisation recognises the existing capacities within the affected population (ALNAP, 2003).

These different approaches are translated into practice by means of various types of activities in the Handbook in a proposed Typology of Participation. According to this typology, there are seven different ways in which the affected population can participate in humanitarian action, from a minimal level of involvement (passive) to one that is described as the affected population carrying out its own initiatives with the participation of the agency. The Handbook argues that it is important to identify which type to use when, where and how, suggesting that there is no relative value or hierarchy attached to them (ALNAP, 2003).

The first type of participation described in the typology is ‘passive participation’, which means simply informing the affected population about past and future developments. The Handbook highlights that “while this is a fundamental right to the people concerned, it is not always respected (2003, p. 22)”. Passive participation thus entails a one-way information flow, from agency to
beneficiaries. The second type of participation takes place is ‘through the supply of information’, in which “the affected population provides information in response to questions, but it has no influence over the process, since survey results are not shared and their accuracy is not verified.” (2006, p. 22) This type of participation involves, once again, a one-way information flow: from beneficiary to agency. The third type of participation, “participation by consultation”, spells out that affected population is asked for its views but has no decision-making power and their views will not necessarily be taken into account. Even though it suggests a two-way information flow, it implies that the information exchange is deprived of meaning, as there is no guarantee that the parties will listen to and learn from each other’s views and experiences. The fourth and fifth types concern material incentives or provision of cash or labour. The sixth type, “interactive participation”, is described as a situation in which beneficiaries participate in the analysis of needs and programme design and have decision-making powers.

Most of the types of participation proposed by the Handbook bear some relationship with communication processes, although sometimes limited exclusively to activities which could be described as “information-dumping” or “information-extracting”. Paradoxically, the Handbook recognises that communication is at the heart of any participation strategy, and emphasises that communication is a two-way process, where information is received and transmitted, and involves information sharing and listening. It also adds that “re-establishing the equilibrium between humanitarian aid organisations and affected populations is central to participation” (2003, p. 68)

In fact, whilst information flows tend to reflect power imbalance and may deepen inequalities, they can also be explored as an opportunity to correct these very same disparities. “The World Disasters Report” (IFRC, 2005) argues that information bestows power, and people affected by disasters have few opportunities to challenge the information supremacy of aid agencies. The report highlights that extracting information from beneficiaries – or potential beneficiaries – of humanitarian aid has taken precedent over providing
information, as aid flows from givers to receivers whilst information tends to flow from receivers to givers. It also adds that when information is appropriately gathered during assessments, there is no guarantee that beneficiaries will have the opportunity to actively engage or even receive information about the decisions taken by the agency and the course their actions are due to take (IFRC, 2005).

This trend is also identified by Anderson and Woodrow (1998), who draw attention to the overemphasis on information-extraction and lack of meaningful communication with beneficiaries, adding that such communication could be empowering to them. Anderson and Woodrow also claim that even the pure information-extracting activity is performed inadequately by humanitarian agencies, which treat information gathering as an end in itself and fail to use information to improve programming. “How can NGOs know, in advance, what they will need to know?” (1998, p. 45). Anderson and Woodrow summarise the power of holding information in programming: “Priorities, programming styles and project outcomes can be determined by who knows what” (1998, p. 47).

This view is corroborated by ALNAP, which claims that aid workers tend to focus their attention on gathering information, without imparting much to beneficiaries (ALNAP, 2003). The literature review produced by Groupe URD as part of ALNAP’s Global Study on Participation argues that agencies often only gather information they perceive as necessary to fit their pre-conceived purposes, but fail to share information with local people (Ntata, 2002).

These practises illustrate an “information-extraction” approach, in which information flow is a one-way process that overlooks opportunities to build knowledge and improve quality of relationships through meaningful communication. As IFRC concludes, “it is the dialogue rather than the data that is the challenge” (2005, p. 13).

Aware of the need to strengthen the commitment and ability of agencies to share information with beneficiaries, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
(HAP) has strongly incorporated such imperatives into its accountability principles and standards. The next section will discuss HAP’s views and the general relationship between communication with beneficiaries and humanitarian accountability.

**Communication with beneficiaries and humanitarian accountability**

In the past decade, accountability of humanitarian agencies to beneficiaries has been subject to ongoing debate. Humanitarian agencies must ensure accountability to multiple stakeholders, including donors, governments, general public, local authorities and beneficiaries. However, accountability links tend to be stronger with those stakeholders who have the decision-making power over the course of the humanitarian action and have thus means to exercise pressure over agencies (MANGO, 2007). At the receiving end of humanitarian aid, beneficiaries often have no power to demand accountability from agencies.

The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) was born in 2003 to be the first international self-regulatory body in the humanitarian sector, with the mandate to develop the concept and principles of accountability and push for agencies to comply, whilst also providing support as needed.

HAP’s principles of accountability strongly take into account communication with beneficiaries. Out of the seven principles proposed by HAP, one deals explicitly with communication, stating that “Members inform, and consult with, stakeholders, particularly beneficiaries and staff, about the standards adopted, programmes to be undertaken and mechanisms available for addressing concerns” (HAP International, 2007, p. 5). Besides the communication principle, at least five other principles require that communication processes between agencies and beneficiaries are in place: setting standards and building capacity, participation in programmes, monitoring and reporting on compliance and addressing complaints.
In order to enable certification of agencies compliant with the principles of accountability, HAP developed standards and benchmarks and defined means of verification. Benchmark 2, which deals with transparency, states that “The agency shall make the following information publicly available to intended beneficiaries, disaster-affected communities, agency staff and other specified stakeholders: organisational background; humanitarian accountability framework; humanitarian plan; progress reports; and complaints handling procedures” (HAP International, 2007, p. 11). According to HAP, the successful achievement of this benchmark would be determined by examination of quality and appropriateness of the content and means of dissemination of the information concerned. This principle concerns information flowing from agencies to beneficiaries. However, the recognition of the need to engage in communication as a two-way process is embedded in other benchmarks.

Benchmark 3 requires that agencies “enable beneficiaries and their representatives to participate in programme decisions and seek their informed consent” (HAP International, 2007, p. 11). This benchmark, directly related to participation, presupposes that meaningful communication processes between agencies and beneficiaries are in place. Likewise, Benchmark 4, which establishes that need for organisations to implement complaint-handling procedures, is rooted in two-way information flows and the potential power imbalance corrections that may derive from this process.

Although feasible, literature shows that being an accountable organisation is not an easy task. Humanitarian agencies face numerous challenges in the field in attempting to implement accountable programmes. MANGO’s report spells out some of the practical problems encountered by organisations, mentioning the multitude of stakeholders and the existing power imbalances between them as a hindrance to respectful dialogue with beneficiaries, as well as prevailing reporting systems, which do not allow for transparency or encourage learning in the way they are produced (MANGO, 2007)
By July 2008, HAP had certified five agencies (HAP-International, 2007)\(^\text{10}\). It remains to be seen if and how the sector will embrace HAP accreditation initiative and whether this will lead to changes in the way organisations communicate with beneficiaries in the field.

A staff member from HAP was interviewed for this research as a key informant and the findings from the interview, which will complement the literature review on accountability, will be presented in Chapter Three.

**Communication with beneficiaries and programme quality**

“The quality of an NGO’s work is primarily determined by the quality of its relationships with beneficiaries”

*(BOND, 2006, p. 43)*

Accountability and quality are two intrinsically related concepts in the humanitarian field. Different perspectives on programme quality have also considered participation as determinant of quality in humanitarian action. This chapter has already shown how communication with beneficiaries is a crucial element both in participation and accountability. This section will examine the relationships between communication with beneficiaries and programme quality.

Research carried out in the humanitarian and development sector by British Overseas NGOs for Development (BOND) offers various insights as to the importance of communication with beneficiaries in programme quality. Furthermore, by examining the challenges faced by organisations in implementing quality work, it also enables reflection on the obstacles to communication with beneficiaries.

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\(^{10}\) Danish Refugee Council, Danish Church Aid, MERCY Malaysia, Office Africain pour le Développement et la Coopération (OFADEC) and Tearfund. Available at HAP-International website: http://www.hapinternational.org/members.aspx
BOND’s research included an examination of existing approaches to quality, in-depth consultation with members and interviews with key informants. Compiled in the report “A BOND Approach to Quality in Non-Governmental Organisations: Putting Beneficiaries First” (2006), the results offer a fresh perspective on quality. According to the report, organisations deliver quality when their work is based on an understanding of beneficiaries’ realities, responds to priorities set by the beneficiaries and is considered useful by them. BOND members consulted also expressed the need for “continuous participation and two-way dialogue” in the relationship between organisations and their beneficiaries.

In answering the question about what organisations are looking for in determining quality, a striking emphasis has been placed on the relationship between agencies and beneficiaries. The survey report reveals that meaningful participation, including beneficiary voice, perspective and involvement, is a key element in quality. In addition, agencies must pay adequate attention to the quality of relationships, which entails continuous “learning and reflection, openness to discussing failures as well as successes and learning takes place with and by key stakeholders.” (BOND, 2006, p. 22)

In fact, the relationship between quality and “putting beneficiaries first” is not new. In 1983, Robert Chambers suggested that “putting people first” was both an ethical and a practical imperative in development work and a pre-requisite for good performance when working with local people (Chambers, 1983). However, the sector hasn’t yet adapted its practices to conform to this imperative. The BOND report argues that this definition of quality brings to the sector the challenge to develop new approaches to internal organisation and accountability that put relationships with beneficiaries first (BOND, 2006).

One main challenge highlighted in BOND report is the need for agencies to overcome the “fundamental tension between the need to allow time and space for learning and improving as it faces multiple challenges and constraints, and the increasing need to be seen to be doing good work” (p. 27). This dilemma reflects
a “complex set of drivers and inhibitors for engaging with the quality agenda”, whereby agencies are confronted with multiple internal and external sources of pressure that push for more quality and accountability and, at the same time, seem to be an impediment to doing so (BOND, 2006).

On the external front, there is the pressure from the media, which is always eager to expose malpractice in humanitarian response. Despite aiming to act as a mechanism of checks and balances, the adverse effect of media scrutiny may be a consequent lack of willingness, from the part of agencies, to voluntarily expose mistakes and to publicly engage in learning. The BOND survey report argues that evaluations, which could be important tools for learning and accountability, are generally not in the public domain for fear that they will be misconstrued by the media. There is thus an element in the relationship between agencies and the media that hinders transparency: “they need the media to publicize their work […], whilst at the same time they are very defensive when there is negative media, which is reinforced by the media’s appetite for scandals. There does not seem to be any strategy in place to introduce in depth, complexity and realism into media coverage of NGO work” (p. 28).

In fact, in an interview to the International Review of the Red Cross, BBC’s special correspondent Fergal Keane talks about the relationship between media and NGOs, arguing that they often manipulate each other in order to get what they want. He sees this trend as one that might not be beneficial in the longer term. He also explains that media often accept information as truth from NGO’s and other actors:

“We take them as truth, run with the story and then discover later, ‘Well, maybe the figure they gave for the number of people killed was inflated.’ The tendency to accept any information is an old journalistic tendency, but it really worries me in this age of 24-hour news when you are told: ‘Three million people have been put to flight in such a place. Well, somebody else says it’s two. Well, let’s
go with the three”. People want to go with the highest, most
dramatic number and there isn’t enough scepticism about that.
(International Review of the Red Cross, 2005, p. 613)

The relationship between agencies and donors presents some contradictions in
terms of fostering and hindering approaches to quality. The survey reports a
widespread perception that donors’ requirements limit the possibilities of
connecting with beneficiaries in meaningful ways. Moreover, the report states that
there is very little funding available from donors to fund NGOs quality systems
and more participatory approaches. In contrast, 82% of the survey respondents
identified donors as the main driver for adopting quality standards. The report
concludes that, although it is difficult to be transparent when there is the pressure
for results in short timeframes and quantitative ways, donors are more open to
NGO’s sharing mistakes and failures. However, the report also reveals that
organisations’ fundraising and marketing departments seem resistant to share
mistakes.

If the quality of the relationships with beneficiaries is the main determinant of
NGO quality work, organisations need to develop ways of holding relationships as
the real organisational priority. Having organisational learning systems in place is
critical for quality to be improved and additional questions of “whom an
organisation learns from and how it learns emerges as a complementary issue in
consultations” (2006, p. 20). The report argues that bureaucratic or internally
focused systems tend to limit flexibility on the ground, which in turn limits the
relationship between agencies and beneficiaries. Therefore, beneficiaries,
according to the report, should be the priority in shaping organisational systems.
For example, promoting participation of beneficiaries in the assessment of
agencies’ performance could enhance programme quality.

Also, agencies must have the appropriate staff in charge of implementing
programmes, with the values and skills that will ensure the quality of
relationships. Human Resources departments will need to place emphasis on “soft
skills as listening, responsiveness and interpersonal accountability that are ultimately more determinative of quality” (2006, p. 28). Anderson also argues that relief and development workers have to be learners themselves, which implies the skill of respectful and careful listening (1996).

The need to foster a culture that puts the relationship with beneficiaries at the centre includes all departments and levels of an organisation. As one of BOND’s respondents points out, “a lot is driven by senior managers and by those involved in raising funds. Focus on pumping money, senior managers like to see their programmes grow, and quality is neglected. Reporting systems, at all levels, also need to be adapted in order to place relationships with beneficiaries at the centre. An international NGO at its headquarters in London reports to donors on the global work but its own accountability to partners/beneficiaries seldom makes a central theme in evaluation reports” (p. 29).

By arguing that programme quality is determined by the quality of relationships with beneficiaries, BOND elevates the issue of communication with beneficiaries to the centre stage of humanitarian and development works.

**Communication as a form of aid in itself**

The previous sections have shown the role of communication with beneficiaries in accountability and quality of humanitarian projects, but can communication ever be an end in itself?

This question triggers a reflection as to whether organisations should engage in communicating about issues that are external to their relationship with beneficiaries. Should organisations make an effort to improve beneficiaries’ access to information about the context surrounding them?

According to IFRC’s disaster report, information reduces suffering in the aftermath of a disaster. Information about the whereabouts of missing family
members, how much compensation they are entitled to, where they are going to live, or just understanding the causes of the disaster is valuable for survivors (IFRC, 2005). Who could help beneficiaries access such information? “Aid organizations must recognise that accurate, timely information is a form of disaster response in its own right. It may also be the only form of disaster preparedness that the most vulnerable can afford” (IFRC, 2005, p. 7).

Anderson and Woodrow also argue that one major drive of information gathering should be to enable beneficiaries to obtain information about their own circumstances, the causes for their problems and what they can do about them (1998).

2.4 Conclusion to Literature Review

This chapter has provided an analysis of the development communication thinking as well as the role of communication with beneficiaries in humanitarian action.

Different authors in the development field express diverging views as to the goal of communication in development programmes, ranging from a more utilitarian approach based on persuasion (Moemeka) to conscientisation via meaningful dialogue (Fraser & Restrepo-Estrada). Even though the goals may differ, the processes whereby these objectives can be attained are generally agreed as being necessarily two-way information flows and participatory approaches. “Information-dumping” is generally rejected as a successful communication process in the development sector. Even persuasion cannot be successfully achieved unless the agent engages in understanding the social systems of beneficiaries and uses this knowledge to impart information. However, effective communication techniques, which are mostly instrumental and detached from the moral imperative to use information to correct power imbalances, can have the adverse effect of perpetuating these imbalances and dangerously result in manipulation.
In the humanitarian field, communication with beneficiaries is not an isolated debate. Instead, it has been embedded in discussions around accountability, participation, quality and other initiatives ultimately aimed at improving performance and responsibility in the sector. Therefore, communication with beneficiaries in the humanitarian sector is seen as a means to contribute to these aims and is based both on an ethical and a practical imperative. However, there is some discrepancy in the analysis of ways in which communications should occur.

Different debates approach the issue of information and communication from different perspectives. Whilst some views on participation place too much emphasis on gathering information and overlook the need to impart information, the accountability approach establishes, in advance, what agencies need to inform beneficiaries of. Most of these approaches fail to recognise, at some point, that data is not dialogue, and that information only becomes knowledge and wisdom if it is part of a meaningful communication process. In fact, as mentioned before, the terms information and communication are often used interchangeably by non-experts, mainly in the literature related to the humanitarian field, which reveals a lack of understanding of the profound differences between the two.

The next chapter will illustrate some of the practical challenges faced by humanitarian organisations when communicating with beneficiaries of their relief programmes, providing further insights into the debate.
Chapter Three

Communication with beneficiaries in practice

This chapter illustrates the challenges faced by international humanitarian organisations in communicating with beneficiaries in emergencies. The chapter is divided in case studies and key informants interviews. No analysis will be done during the presentation of the case studies or interviews. Rather, it will be introduced in the conclusion section and will be further extended in the next chapter.

The first case study to be presented is Oxfam’s Tsunami Response Programme in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, in 2005. The Indian Ocean tsunami, triggered by an earthquake off the island of Sumatra, claimed 227,000 lives and left 1.7 million displaced. The tsunami was followed by a vast influx of relief agencies, from an extensive array of sectors and sizes, creating a humanitarian environment overcrowded with over-funded agencies (Telford et al., 2006).

Oxfam arrived in Aceh province in Indonesia in the early days of 2005 and rapidly scaled up its activities, which covered water and sanitation, public health promotion and livelihoods and food security.

Due to the magnitude of the crisis and the massive aid influx and public attention it triggered, extensive literature has been produced, covering different aspects of the relief response, with much emphasis on issues such as lack of coordination and poor information sharing amongst agencies. Specially relevant to this research is the comprehensive report produced by the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC)\(^\text{11}\), a committee that was formed to evaluate the aid provided in the aftermath of the tsunami.

\(^{11}\) In this research, the report will be mentioned as “The TEC report” and referenced as (Telford et al., 2006).
The second case study is *Médecins Sans Frontières’* (MSF) response to an outbreak of Marburg fever in the province of Uige, Angola, also in 2005. Marburg is a lethal and highly contagious hemorrhagic fever, which requires swift medical intervention in order to contain dissemination. The 2005 outbreak in Angola claimed 323 lives, from the 368 patients originally infected (WHO, 2005). Although the death toll was limited if compared with the number of lives claimed by the tsunami or other great humanitarian crises, the imminent threat to life and the risk of escalation made this a highly challenging intervention for the staff in the field.

Literature about the Marburg Fever epidemic in Uige is limited. The context information will be mostly drawn from situation reports and articles produced by organisations involved in the intervention, such as WHO and MSF.

Both case studies will be presented following the same structure: firstly, an overview of the context and the examination of reports and evaluations of the humanitarian response, with particular attention to those aspects that refer to communication between agencies and beneficiaries; secondly, a closer look at the particular agency’s intervention and the related challenges, based on interviews with staff involved in the programme, which will provide an insider’s view to the debate.12

As the emergencies examined are considerably different in scale, scope and nature and the agencies have different mandates and expertise, the main objectives of the case studies will not be a comparison between them.

Finally, key informants interviews will present views of experts in the field of quality and accountability as to what challenges organisations face in trying to better communicate with beneficiaries. This will be based on their experiences

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12 See Appendix 1 for full list of interviewees.
and not related to one single context. The key informants interviews will complement the literature review and enhance the analysis in this research.

3.1 Oxfam’s tsunami response programme, Aceh, Indonesia

Pic. 1: Village leader and his daughter make a speech at the event to mark launch of Oxfam’s shelter work in Lampaya Village, Aceh province. Photo: Alessandra Vilas Boas

Context

The tsunami that hit South East Asia in December 2004 was a disaster of gigantic proportions, which attracted an enormous amount of aid and public support. A few months after the tsunami, there were as many as 150 international agencies and 430 local NGOs registered in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. In addition, an estimated 200 small agencies were present only for a few weeks following the disaster (Telford et al, 2006).
In this overcrowded aid environment, the availability and circulation of information was poor and communication at times non-existent. “The result was a messy relief operation, in which information circulated badly and coordination at times appeared non-existent”, concludes IFRC’s World Disasters Report (2005, p. 81).

Initially, organisations drew largely on media reports to organise their responses (Telford et al, 2006). Aid was at times provided regardless of needs, as adequate assessments were overlooked and agencies’ response was mostly based on guesswork and experience (IFRC, 2005; Telford et al, 2006). When assessments were done, they were limited in geographic and sectoral terms and were considered to serve the interest or mandate of the agencies rather than those of the potential beneficiaries (Telford et al, 2006). According to the TEC report, “the most glaring deficiency in assessments was the non-involvement of affected communities in either collection or validation of assessment data” (2006, p. 48).

However, even when communities were involved in assessments via consultation processes, this did not necessarily mean that a meaningful dialogue took place between agencies and beneficiaries. In fact, the TEC report reveals instances of misunderstandings between agencies and the affected population, where communities felt that agencies had made promises, without agencies considering they had made such promises (Telford et al, 2006). “It is becoming clear that community consultations, while extremely helpful, are not enough as a method of keeping communities informed” (Telford et al, 2006, p. 72). Surveys amongst affected populations show that access to information was considered a high priority in the aftermath of the disaster, as it would enable affected population to make informed choices and initiate recovery as swiftly as possible:

“If not aid, they at least wanted – and deserved – reliable information about recovery plans, resources and methods to allow them to make their own decisions. But evidence of misunderstandings, poor communication and false hopes emerge
According to the TEC report, this failure to inform communities has a negative impact on future development and undermine trust toward aid providers and government (2006, p53). “Lack of access to information is causing discontent within communities, spilling over into anger and resentment against implementing agencies who are late in fulfilling promised infrastructure, livelihood and other programmes (Telford et al, 2006, p. 39).

Amongst the many challenges faced by international organisations in their post-tsunami work, the TEC report suggests that institutional imperatives, such as the urgency to spend the money visibly, worked against making the best use of local and national capacities. Also, the myth of “any kind of assistance is needed, and now”, triggered by the lack of understanding from the media and donor public, contributed to the proliferation of inadequate aid (Telford et al, 2006, p. 112)

Such were the gaps in information flows from and to the affected population during the tsunami response, that the Lessons and Recommendations of the TEC report place great emphasis on the need for agencies to improve their communication with beneficiaries. According to the TEC: “information is the most powerful tool not just for accountability, but also for coping and recovery strategies. There is a need to develop an aid principle based on the right to seek, receive and impart information” (Telford et al, 2006, p. 111). The TEC also suggests that “Policies, standards and indicators regarding transparency and accountability should be developed to support the over-arching principle of the “right to know and the responsibility to inform” (Telford et al, 2006, p. 112). These should include not only the proportion of relevant information made available, but also the timing, effectiveness, frequency and quality of methods used to disseminate information (Telford et al, 2006). In terms of content, the TEC suggests that agencies have the responsibility to inform beneficiaries about all relevant aspects of programming, including performance standards, beneficiary
entitlements and lists, key partners, budgets and sources of funding, complaints mechanisms and mid and long-term plans, when they exist. To do so, it is necessary to have “appropriate assessment, planning, intervention and communication methods, tools and skills” (Telford et al, 2006, p. 111).

**Findings from Interviews**

Phoeuk Sok was deployed to Aceh in early February to work as Humanitarian Accountability Partnership Advisor, in order to improve accountability in the agency’s response to the disaster. At that time, Oxfam was working in four different areas in the province: Banda Aceh, Meulaboh, Lamno and Loksemawe.

To Sok, the level of communication with beneficiaries within the programme was overall satisfactory. He explains: “staff conducted meetings at commune and village level with villagers, seeking information from communities and sharing information with them, about the project and about Oxfam, allowing them to participate and get involved in decision-making process”.

Striving to improve communication with beneficiaries, Oxfam created village information boards, where different agencies were requested to display information about themselves and their relief plans. Sok also identified and trained information/accountability officers, who were community members acting as information focal points between communities and agencies. To help fill in the gap in access to information in a context where families had lost all their means to access news, Oxfam also distributed radios and newspapers. In addition, a radio journalist was hired to produce a radio programme with content related to public health that was broadcast throughout Aceh Province.

Despite the initiatives aimed at improving communication with beneficiaries, Sok believes that there was more information flowing from Oxfam to beneficiaries than information coming from beneficiaries to the agency. “If staff and managers
understand people’s right to information and right to be heard, then communication can be improved.”

To Sok, managers could play an important role in improving communications with beneficiaries. “What I have learnt so far, not only from Aceh, is that it would be very helpful if the top managers agreed and understood the importance of communication and accountability and were willing to support the advisors or experts working towards a good quality programme.”

Chris Leather had been working at Oxfam GB’s headquarters for two years when he was deployed to Banda Aceh in mid-January 2005. His role, as Livelihoods Coordinator, was to support Oxfam’s programmes in Aceh province to assess the situation, design and implement livelihoods programmes.

Chris believes that communication with beneficiaries during his time in Aceh was generally limited and not well coordinated between the different teams\(^{13}\). In his view, it would have been appropriate to take time to engage in better communication with beneficiaries, as the situation was not life-threatening. Opportunities to establish a dialog with beneficiaries were missed. He summarises:

“There were big debates as to what extent there had to be consultation with the beneficiaries. We were under a lot of pressure to get projects up and running quickly and on quite a large scale. That pressure was reducing the opportunity to have the kind of dialogue with beneficiaries that I thought was appropriate. I think there were opportunities from the very beginning to be developing that dialogue which weren’t really taken partly because many people saw the situation as being more life-threatening than it was; because there is the desire for agencies to be visible; because a lot of money had been

\(^{13}\) Oxfam’s programme in Aceh entailed public health, livelihoods and shelter, each programmatic area with its own team. The teams would work together in each of the four geographic areas under one project manager, who would report to a programme manager based in Banda Aceh.
donated so there were concerns of criticism of slow pace; and also
because I think there was jostling for territory between agencies.”

In this particular case, Chris reveals that the pressure came from the senior managers at headquarters level, down to the regional centre and through the senior managers within the programme.

In his opinion, part of communications work would have been to recognise where people were themselves and what they were ready for even if they were not articulating that. Also, as the tsunami affected different areas to different extent, and as different areas had different livelihoods prior to the tsunami, the response could not be standardised. “There was a need to discuss with people in different areas in order to understand what the situation was like before and how the tsunami had affected them, so that the right type of programme could be implemented”. Chris also believes that programmes should provide communities with information that helps them make informed choices, at the same time gathering information about their situation, their needs and capacities.

Chris mentions, however, some scattered initiatives to improve communication with beneficiaries in Aceh. The development of community action plans through which the communities would identify their priority needs and how they would manage projects to address them, and the establishment of community information centres, which where focal points for exchange of information between Oxfam and the communities are some examples. However, he believes there was not much coordination or consistency between the different programme (geographic) areas.

“There was no clear pre-existing policy, guidelines or approach”, he explained. He adds that as concerns with accountability to beneficiaries grow within the organisation, there are attempts to clarify what Oxfam’s approach should be prior to an emergency and make sure everybody understands it before the next big emergency. Chris believes that there needs to be greater clarity as to what Oxfam
does in humanitarian programmes in all aspects of work, including communications. “There needs to be clear programme policy and ways of working about communications and accountability to beneficiaries. And then we would know what systems we need in place in order to implement the programme in that way.”

Chris clarifies that the approach would depend on the context and the level of risk: “if there is a real life-threatening situation then the appropriateness of lengthy communication with people is less.”
3.2 MSF’s response to Marburg Fever outbreak in Uige, Angola

Pic 2: MSF team arrives at a house in Uíge, Angola to start the disinfection process fully dressed in protective clothes. Photo: MSF

**Context**

In March 2005, an outbreak of Marburg hemorrhagic fever was identified in the Angolan province of Uige. Marburg is a rare and highly lethal viral disease, for which there is no vaccine or curative treatment available. When the disease occurs, it has epidemic potential, as it can spread between persons by contact with bodily fluids of infected people, which puts health care personnel at particular risk. A response to Marburg outbreak requires strict measures for infection control during management of cases, including the rapid tracing and isolation of contacts (WHO, 2005). Tackling an outbreak of Marburg also requires health

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14 Marburg Haemorrhagic Fever in Angola – update (23 March 2005)
education to inform communities, for example, of the risks associated with traditional burial practices.

The 2005 outbreak in Uige was the largest and deadliest outbreak of Marburg hemorrhagic fever on record, according to WHO reports (WHO, 2005)\textsuperscript{15}. The international response, coordinated by WHO and Médecins Sans Frontières, focused on supporting the Ministry of Health in implementing strict infection control measures to avoid the spread of the virus in health clinics and hospitals; early identification and isolation of patients, and follow-up of those they have been in contact with. An important component of the work was the training of teachers and health workers (WHO, 2005)\textsuperscript{16}.

Although community awareness is a key factor in controlling the dissemination of the disease, communicating with beneficiaries in such fast-changing environment was a challenge at the very beginning of MSF’s work in Uige. According to Patrick Depienne, who arrived in Uige a few weeks into the intervention to work on raising awareness of the local community about the disease and MSF actions, “Sensitising the population is a priority. But of course it takes time and resources, and usually the first people to get to the scene of a disaster focus on the medical action” (Gaignaire, 2005). For Dr. Armand Sprecher, a public health specialist working for MSF in the field at the beginning of the Marburg epidemic, communication and sensitisation are “the most crucial, yet most neglected, elements”. He adds: “If you don't do that right, everything else falls apart, because Marburg is transmitted and amplified by certain human behaviours” (Gaignaire, 2005).

\textsuperscript{15} Marburg Haemorrhagic Fever in Angola – update 26 (7 November 2005)
\textsuperscript{16} Controlling the Marburg outbreak in Angola
Findings from Interviews

According to the three MSF workers interviewed for this research, the response to Marburg Fever in Uige was a considerable challenge to the team. They also agree that at the beginning of the intervention communication with beneficiaries was poor at all levels.

The workers in charge of disinfecting houses after the identification of cases needed to wear a full protective suit that looked, according to the interviewees, like a “space suit” or made them look like “E.T.s”. They would leave the hospital and arrive at the houses wearing the full gear, which would prevent the families from seeing their faces. The disinfection consisted of collecting the patients’ belonging, including the mattress the clothes and other objects, put them outside the house and set fire to them. At the beginning, all of this was done without explanation to, or negotiation with, the family or neighbours.

The burials were also a key moment where safety procedures needed to be respected. Traditional burial practices were considered too risky and had to be avoided. However, the reasons were not explained to the families, who were unaware of how their late relatives would be buried and were not allowed to be present at the burial.

At the community level, the mystery surrounding the deaths and burials led to the spread of rumours within the community. One interviewee explains that the local population believed that the MSF team was taking people to the hospital, killing them and filling a big cauldron with their blood. The fact that most patients would not come back from the hospital reinforced such believe.

According to interviewees’ accounts, all these factors contributed to an upsurge of violence against the team and the hospital two weeks after the start of the project. One interviewee mentions that the population would receive the MSF team throwing stones.
Alois Hug, emergency press officer at MSF-Spain, was part of the first team that arrived in Uige to tackle the Marburg epidemics. He says: “We had to stop the activities during one or two days and that was when we realised we really had to do something to communicate better with the local community, to explain what we were doing”.

Alois’s original role was to keep the communications teams at MSF headquarters informed of the MSF response to the epidemics and to act as a focal point of information for media, providing updates, organising interviews and responding to demands. However, once in the field, the team realised that there was a gap in communication with beneficiaries that needed to be addressed urgently. Alois’s role was therefore expanded to include some aspects of communication with beneficiaries as well.

Alois explains that the first challenge in improving communication with beneficiaries was to understand how people communicated. What were the channels? Is it better to communicate locally or nationally, radio or newspaper? “If you want to communicate about the disease, you have to know what their understanding is already, the information they have, the perception. If you want to tackle that, you’d better understand what they know and adapt your communication to that.” Alois also highlights the risk of information being manipulated as the response to the epidemic became a politicised issue in a country recently emerged from a 30-year-long civil war. He explains that the government tried to push for a military intervention and there was also some tension between the local and national government.

In order to communicate with the general public in the area affected by the epidemics, radio proved to be the best tool. The MSF team organised a radio interview with a doctor and a debate with representatives from MSF, WHO and the Angolan government. Later in the intervention, an interview with the first patient who left the hospital alive, after being cured from Marburg, proved to be
an effective way of clarifying myths and encouraging people to go to the hospital should they be sick. As a communications specialist, Alois was involved in all these activities, although they were not originally his responsibility. “But someone had to do it. It was a kind of improvisation”.

Improvisation was present throughout the intervention. A common finding in all interviews performed for this research was that the team was learning on the spot and adapting to the changes in the context on a daily basis. Alois explains: “The intervention evolved according to what MSF identified as the perceptions of the people – this was the work of the psychologists. They would change the way they performed the activities within the programme according to what they heard as complaints from beneficiaries. The team would see what was possible to adapt and then do it.”

In fact, as the imperative to improve communication with beneficiaries was identified, MSF did not take long to react. From the headquarters in Barcelona, Zohra Abaakouk, MSF’s Psychosocial Health Technician, coordinated the emotional support to the team in the field and also supervised the work of the psychologists, who joined the project a few weeks into the intervention to improve communication with communities, families and patients.

Zohra explains: “As we speak now, we see that it was very important to have done the work since the beginning. But at the beginning all the team’s energy was directed to controlling the epidemic: collecting bodies, disinfecting houses, establishing an isolation ward in the hospital and building capacity of local staff to support the response to the epidemic. Communicating with beneficiaries would be a second step. Even though it was planned, it was not prioritised.”

Zohra also explains that the fear was an important element impacting on the reaction of the teams, on the definition of the project and on the strategies chosen. “Everybody was very scared, not only the community, but also the team”. In her input to the new MSF guidelines of intervention in hemorrhagic fever, Zohra
writes about communication as a way of tackling the fear in the community: “To counter or prevent this fear, targeted information should be given out within the community, amongst MSF staff and other counterparts in order to improve understanding of the disease and to encourage acceptance of the activities (Abaakouk, 2006).

As another important obstacle to engaging in communication with beneficiaries, Zohra mentions the lack of human resources capacity. It was difficult to find staff willing to work in such a difficult and risky environment, therefore the capacity on the ground was limited and the need to prioritise activities led to the poor communication with beneficiaries.

With the addition of psychologists to the team and also of an expert in IEC (Information, Education, Communication), the strategies started to change in response to what was identified as the demands and needs of the community.

“The disinfection was a very violent activity – they would go to the patient’s house, get all the belongings, put them outside and set fire to them. It was obvious that the population would react negatively. They were very scared, watching the team walking around with those protective suits, collecting the bodies, not doing any participatory work with the families, not explaining why we cannot respect all the cultural rituals around burials.

Afterwards, we changed the strategy. Instead of arriving with the suit, the team would negotiate with the family, inviting a member of the family to follow them. The family member would then put on the suit as well, together with the staff, would go into the house and see what MSF was doing. This helped the team acquire the trust of the community. At
the same time, the psychologist and a socio-cultural mediator\textsuperscript{17} would do a meeting with the community explaining what Marburg was, how contamination happened, what we were doing at that moment. This helped reduce the level of stigmatisation that the family could suffer. The psychologist wouldn’t wear any special clothes, she would be at the same level as the family and would explain to them why the others in the team had to wear those clothes.”

The psychologist would also work closely with the families before and after the death of a patient. “She would inform of the death of the patient, explain how the burial would be done and also negotiate with them what they could do in order to say goodbye to a member of the family, respecting their wishes in a way that it would not affect their health.”

Despite the predominant role of the psychologist and IEC experts, Zohra believes that communications is a responsibility of the whole team. She also highlights the need to learn on the spot: “There was a lot to learn in a very difficult environment. We had to adapt everyday and be very flexible. The first three weeks were very difficult, but afterwards it became more stable.”

Xavier Tislair was one of the psychologists working in the project. He followed-up patients and their families, accompanied disinfection and burials, which would always be done with a national staff member so as to ensure the message would be understood. He explains that there were psychologists at all stages of the process of dealing with the patient and the disease. He says that information about the disease was limited and due to the many rumours circulating, people would try to avoid going into hospitals.

The challenges and learning from Uige’s Marburg intervention led MSF to update their guidelines for work in context of hemorrhagic fever.

\textsuperscript{17} Zohra explains that a socio-cultural mediator was somebody from the community who would help the relationship between the MSF team and the community. It can be a teacher, a nurse, or anybody with potential within the community.
“We had guidelines for interventions in hemorrhagic fever, but during the intervention we saw that many things didn’t work. We had to improvise a lot. We made changes at the medical and watsan level, in terms of procedures. At the psychological level, we had to add, because there was nothing. Also on the anthropologic part of it, there were just two sentences in the guidelines. So we had to explain how to do it, what the procedure should be.”

As this dissertation is being written, the new MSF guidelines for intervention in hemorrhagic fever are being finalised.

3.3 Communication with beneficiaries in the view of key informants

Zia Choudhury, Membership Services Coordinator of HAP (Humanitarian Accountability Partnership) observes that usually the need to act quickly is a common reason for people not to apply the accountability principles and the pressure for speed comes from managers and head office. “We recognise that there are times when it is extremely difficult to follow all your commitments. But we always argue that there is never a time when you are allowed not to try to be accountable. There would be occasional situations where the need for speed and scale may require that you bypass those (accountability) benchmarks. We are very careful to remind people that there are very few cases like that.”

To Zia, the biggest barrier in the implementation of accountable programmes is the lack of political will. “Agencies are in a very comfortable space. They write their own proposals, get the money fairly easily, implement the programme, report on their own progress and then hire their own evaluator. That cycle is very inward looking, very controlled by the agency.”
Zia considers management space a pre-requisite for the implementation of accountable programmes: “We piloted it [the accountability standards] in several countries to make sure it could be done. It is the product of discussion with hundreds of field workers. They said they could do it. The problem is: do the managers support them to do it?”

Another blockage his team finds at the field level is the lack of knowledge of the organisation’s values and commitments. “It is very common for us to find out that field staff don’t know what the values are, they don’t know the commitments”. Zia also believes that sometimes the accountability principles are not applied simply because people don’t believe in the core concept of dignity beyond a theoretical level. “It is very easy to say well, they don’t really understand, they are uneducated, they are stressed, they are not interested. It favours staff to maintain that imbalance. It is easier to work with people who are compliant, don’t challenge you. The less information you give people, the less they can argue with you.”

HAP insists that organisations have an accountability framework, which is the group of policies, procedures and codes that they follow, and that their management procedures they have enable the framework to be realised.

In terms of content of communication, Zia explains that what agencies should communicate to beneficiaries is defined under the benchmark. “This is the minimum required for agencies to be accountable in their work, to have good quality work. Preferably more. It is a combination of what people want to know and what agencies can give. Beyond that, the agency can decide based on resources, on the context. Of course if you are running a health promotion campaign, you may have far more information needs.”

When asked about the relevance and meaning of communication taking place between agencies and beneficiaries, Zia replies:
“In the last three years, one thing that has fascinated and challenged me is how we measure whether beneficiaries are using the information. We give this minimum information. As an auditor, I would check if people understand. Or has the agency written it in such a complicated way that they don’t understand it? Second thing, how much do they value it, once they have understood it. The other big thing I come across is that people are starting to enjoy dumping information. There is a long way to go in listening to what people say. People are getting better at providing information but still need to improve the way they listen.”

As to who would be in charge of improving communication with beneficiaries, Zia believes that information and accountability is the responsibility of every staff member. “Everybody can develop the basic skills for communication. And the basic responsibility belongs to everybody. We saw it in many programmes that people were relying on information officers. We need to have one person in charge, but this needs to be embedded into the corporate strategy.”

To Yo Winder, Accountability Lead in Oxfam GB’s humanitarian department, organisations must have the right systems in place in order to be accountable to beneficiaries. And this takes organisational change. “But where could the pressure to change come from?”, she asks. Yo also says that organisations are not open to criticism. They are reluctant to implement feedback mechanisms, but she believes that a complaint mechanism policy could trigger a shift.

Yo believes that it would be useful, for the debate, to know what an accountable project feels like, from a beneficiary’s point of view. “One useful thing to do would be to ask questions to beneficiaries that could indicate that. But finding the right questions is a difficult thing. For example one could ask: Did you feel respected? Did you know where to go?”
3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided two examples in which humanitarian organisations were faced with challenges in communication with beneficiaries in the field.

In MSF’s Marburg project, the teams were faced with the fear of dealing with a deadly, highly contagious and little known disease. As the MSF interviews show, communication with beneficiaries was overlooked at the early stages of the intervention - despite the fact that communications could have contributed to controlling the disease.

Nevertheless, the team was alert and reactive to the needs arising, constantly adapting the projects. As better communication was identified as one of these needs, it was also integrated at different levels in the project later in the intervention. According to the interviewees, the impact of engaging in two-way culturally relevant communication with patients, families and community was clear: the team gained the trust of the community, which helped stabilise the project.

To the MSF team on the ground, improving communication was a matter of making the project possible and improving the quality of the intervention. In the interviews, there was never any mention of external visibility or pressure from managers driving speed. The pressure was perceived to be internal to the operations. And the limitations were intrinsic to the project.

It is not possible to predict what the intervention would have been like if Marburg was not such a deadly disease and if the fear had not been one aspect of the intervention; or if there had not been such a strong cultural element involved in the interactions between the organisation and the beneficiaries. Therefore, this is not an analysis of MSF’s overall approach to communication with beneficiaries.
The fact that the guidelines for intervention in hemorrhagic fevers were updated after the Marburg intervention shows willingness to learn from mistakes. It remains to be seen how much the learning will be incorporated into new interventions and whether communication with beneficiaries will be prioritised from the early stages of the intervention.

In the case of tsunami, the need to spend the money quickly and visibly was an important aspect leading agencies to overlook quality and, as a consequence, communication with beneficiaries. Though it is possible to identify some examples of initiatives of communication with beneficiaries in Oxfam’s programme, these were not observed across the programme. Interviewees mention lack of support from managers and lack of clear policy as hindrances to better communications with emergencies.

These challenges resonate with Zia’s analysis, who mentions that the lack of support from managers is a major hindrance to the implementation of accountable projects where proper communication with beneficiaries takes place.

Both case studies also show the potential impact of overlooking communications with beneficiaries. In MSF’s case, the team had to interrupt the intervention after being welcomed with stones by the local population. And in the tsunami case, the TEC report reveals that “lack of access to information is causing discontent within communities, spilling over into anger and resentment”.

The next chapter will bring the data from the case studies and key informants interviews and analyse it in the light of the literature review.
Chapter Four
Analysis: Challenges of communicating with beneficiaries

The previous chapters have shown how communication with beneficiaries of aid is understood in both development and humanitarian literature and given some practical examples of challenges faced by international organisations in implementing it. This chapter is an analysis of the literature and the findings from interviews in order to answer the main questions of this research: What are the challenges faced by international organisations in improving communication with beneficiaries? And how can these challenges be overcome?

4.1 The long road to communication

This research has consistently worked with a definition of communication borrowed from the development field, according to which communication is a “method by which human beings pass on information to one another, and is generally recognised as the process of successful transfer of meaningful information” (Gandelsonas, 2002) By contrast, the way communication is understood by different authors and interviewees presented in this research varies greatly, and few of them bear resemblance to the definition proposed and defended within this study.

The literature review has shown that, in the development field, different authors agree on the means by which effective communication is achieved. For example, the notion of “information-dumping” is widely rejected as an effective way to communicate. In the humanitarian field, by contrast, communication is often seen as a key element of participation and accountability, leading to programme quality, as suggested by HAP, BOND and ALNAP.
However, these studies lack a common and clear understanding of what communication in humanitarian crises entails. As it has already been observed, the words communication and information are used interchangeably in the humanitarian field. More than a semantic misunderstanding, the lack of clarity in the terms illustrates unfamiliarity with the communications process and its implications.

Amongst the different types of participation suggested by ALNAP’s typology, one type includes information flowing exclusively from the agency to beneficiaries (passive participation), and another one includes information flowing from beneficiaries to agencies (participation through supply of information). The Handbook, on the other hand, acknowledges that communication is at the heart of any participation strategy and considers it to be a two-way process. If that is the case, then why are the abovementioned processes, which do not entail an effective communications process, considered as types of participation? This is one of the many examples shown in this research of the conceptual misunderstandings around communications in the aid sector.

ALNAP (2003) claims that agencies tend to focus their attention on gathering information without imparting much, a view that is corroborated by IFRC (2005). Anderson and Woodrow, likewise, draw attention to this common practice and challenge it, asking “How can agencies know, in advance, what they need to know?”

Information-extraction is not, however, the only practice misunderstood by communication in the field. One of the Humanitarian Accountability principles requires that organisations make information available to communities, and suggest what this information should be. Whilst it seems important to define a baseline for communication with beneficiaries, it would be reasonable to turn Anderson and Woodrow’s question around and ask: How can agencies know, in advance, what beneficiaries need to know?
The case studies and key informants provide further insights into the information-dumping and information-extracting processes that tend to be confused with communication, indicating that they tend to happen at different moments. Information-extraction is used as a tool for assessments and beneficiaries are many times left without information about the purposes or the results of such assessments (TEC, 2006; ALNAP, 2003). HAP interviewee, on the other hand, observes that agencies have started to enjoy dumping information on beneficiaries, adding that it is not clear whether the information they provide is understood and valued by beneficiaries. Sok, from Oxfam, mentions that, in Aceh, there was more information flowing from Oxfam to beneficiaries, than the contrary. This may be a reaction of the imperatives of accountability, which emphasise the need for agencies to provide information to beneficiaries. The challenge is therefore to join these two flows and turn them into an ongoing, meaningful cycle.

These examples show that failing to acknowledge the particularities of a communication process and its possible nuances may mislead organisations into using inadequate tools and methods to perform communication with beneficiaries. This lack of clarity may also lead organisations to believe that they communicate with beneficiaries when in fact they are engaging in mere information-dumping or information-extracting activities.

Communications does not need to be, however, a formal process. Nor is it the responsibility of one person alone. The Marburg case study shows, for example, that communication goes beyond verbal exchange. In that case, as the interviewees explained, the way the team dressed and behaved communicated values to the population and triggered reactions. Exchange of message and production of meaning may happen without words, therefore communications can likewise happen in silence. Psychologist Zohra, from MSF, and Zia, from HAP, argues that communication is the responsibility of everyone.
Having established an essential gap in the debate around communications with beneficiaries in the humanitarian field, it is important to ask another question: Is understanding communications enough to make it a reality in the field?

4.2 Why communicate? The function of communication

Understanding what communications entails may be the first step towards implementing projects where communication with beneficiaries is effective. However, this does not mean that there is a one-size-fits-all approach to communication in emergencies. Communication with beneficiaries may have different functions in different contexts and each function has its risks and benefits, which must be taken into account.

An application of Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada’s communication functions to the humanitarian field helps identify different potential purposes of communications with beneficiaries of aid and therefore provide insights about where the main gaps reside. According to the authors, Institutional Communication is the information flow between all those involved in promoting and implementing change, helping to create common understanding and organise implementation. Educational Communication would help people acquire the knowledge and skills they need to be able to implement changes agreed and decisions made within a development framework. Social communication is the process of mobilising people in a way that they can develop insights and confidence to tackle their problems (2002).

Both the literature review and the case studies have shown that, in the humanitarian sector, the type of communication often referred to could be identified as Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada’s institutional communication, i.e. communication directed at fulfilling projects’ aims. The Sphere Project suggests, for example, that agencies should engage disaster-affected people in assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the assistance programme. As an indicator, it recommends that beneficiaries receive information about the assistance and are given the opportunity to comment on it during all stages of the
project cycle. Similarities can also be found between Restrepo-Estrada’s institutional communication and ALNAP’s “instrumental approach” to participation, in which participation is a means to achieve projects goals. According to ALNAP’s study, the instrumental approach may lead to manipulation of beneficiaries by the agency. It is also possible to argue that it has little impact beyond the implementation of the particular programme, as communication within this function tends to be restricted to the programme itself. This will be discussed in the next section, when the analysis will concentrate on the predominant content within each communication function.

Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada’s concept of educational communication also finds parallel in the humanitarian field. However, it is not as commonly acknowledged as the notion of institutional communication. This communication function can be found in IEC initiatives and behaviour change communications. It helps organisations understand how cultural attitudes and behaviour impact upon the risk beneficiaries are under. For beneficiaries, it means learning to reduce the risks associated with the emergency and to possibly reduce vulnerability to a new one.

The Marburg case study is an example of how educational communication can be integrated into programme. There is a risk, however, that educational communication is seen as a re-invention of the concept of knowledge transfer. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge that, as any other legitimate communication process, education communication must be based on on-going dialogue, therefore taking into account local knowledge and culture.

The notion of social communication, as proposed by Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada has rarely appeared in the humanitarian literature and case studies presented in this research. The process of mobilising people in a way that they can develop insights and confidence to tackle their problems is generally foreign to the humanitarian field. In ALNAP’s participation study, the “supportive approach” has similarities to Restrepo-Estrada’s social communications. It could be argued that the Community Action Plans mentioned by Chris, from Oxfam, is an example
of social communication activity. The notion of communication as a form of aid in itself, presented in Chapter Two of this study, could be a step towards social communication. Enabling beneficiaries to access information about the context and other issues, external to the relationship between them and aid agencies, could trigger a process in which beneficiaries can mobilise themselves and propose solutions to their own problems. It could also be a way of making the impact of the humanitarian interventions last beyond the relief phase of the intervention and maybe even after an agency’s presence. As the TEC report suggests, information is a powerful tool for coping and recovery strategies.

These three communications functions, in the humanitarian field, do not necessarily exist in isolation nor are there absolutely clear boundaries between them. During the Marburg emergency, for example, communication about the patterns of the disease was crucial to contain dissemination. However, MSF recognised the need to communicate about the purpose of its presence and the reasons for the project and their activities so as to build trust between teams and the population in the field. This shows that a certain humanitarian context may require emphasis on one or another function, but different functions can co-exist and even reinforce each other. However, being aware of the predominant function will help field workers define the content of communication and the tools and methods necessary to implement them.

Having suggested possible functions for communications in the humanitarian field, the following question needs answering: to communicate about what?

4.3 Communicate about what? The content of communication

The previous section provided some insights about the functions of communication between agencies and beneficiaries in aid projects. This section will suggest the possible content of such communications and propose an association between functions and content.
This research has shown that the humanitarian literature tends to be prescriptive in terms of what agencies and beneficiaries must communicate about. There is always a variety of elements that can be part of the communication exchanges between these two groups in the field and pre-defining such elements may lead agencies to overlook context specificities and purpose of communications in such contexts. Whereas in the tsunami response, in an environment crowded with humanitarian agencies with substantial funding, it might have been important to inform beneficiaries of budgets and sources of funding, it is arguable whether in the Marburg case study it would have been appropriate to focus on such topics.

Communications between agencies and beneficiaries may include information about the organisation’s background and experience. Likewise, in order to know how the emergency has affected the lives of beneficiaries, field staff needs to be aware of the previous conditions in a certain environment. The type of communications that enables the parties to know each other, help build trust between agencies and beneficiaries and create legitimacy around the agency’s intervention will be called, in this research, background communication. The attitude of staff is also part of background communication, as this, according to the Marburg case study, may have an effect in the way the agency is perceived in the field and undermine trust. The content of communication suggested in HAP’s benchmark can also be considered as background communication.

On another level, communications between agencies and beneficiaries must tackle issues that are mostly intrinsic to programme. In this research, this will be called operational communication. The Sphere Project says that beneficiaries must participate, receive information about the assistance programme and be given a chance to comment. Based on the tsunami experience, the TEC recommends that agencies should inform beneficiaries of “all relevant aspects of programming, including performance standards, beneficiary entitlements and lists, key partners, budgets and sources of funding, complaints mechanisms and mid and long-term plans.
Communication may also focus on aspects related to behaviour. In life-threatening emergencies, where people are still at risk at the time of the intervention, communication exchanges between agencies and communities may concentrate on reducing risk behaviour. This type of communication will be called behaviour communication. In Marburg example, behaviour communication was essential to the successful implementation of the project, as dealing with this deadly disease touched many cultural and social aspects of the community.

Communications may also be extrinsic to programme, focusing on the context surrounding agencies and beneficiaries. Context communication enables beneficiaries to access information about their own situation. As Anderson and Woodrow point out, one major drive for information gathering should be to enable beneficiaries to obtain information about their own circumstances, the causes for their problems and what they can do about them. The TEC report also highlights that, in post-tsunami Aceh, the affected population wanted reliable information about recovery plans to allow them to make their own decisions. As opposed to operational communication, context communication may not have a direct immediate impact on the project and go beyond the relationship between agencies and beneficiaries.

In the tsunami case, Oxfam’s community information centres are an example of tool used to facilitate context communication, as the content of the information exchange went beyond the relationship between Oxfam and the communities. With community information officers trained by the organisation, communities would be better equipped to access information they needed from different sources. Also, the distribution of radios and newspapers could be seen as a tool to improve context communication. In that case, Oxfam did not play an active role as a messenger, spreading information about issues that were outside the scope of the agency. Rather, in an environment where means to access information had been lost and beneficiaries needed more than ever information about what was happening around them, Oxfam facilitated their access to this type of information.
All these different examples of the content of communication between organisations and beneficiaries were found in the research. With so many possibilities, how do agencies know what they should communicate about? The content of communication will depend on the desired function, which will in turn be determined by the context and the mandate of the agency. Following the analysis of Restrepo-Estrada’s communications functions and the different potential contents of communications suggested above, it is possible to propose the following relationship:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions</th>
<th>Content</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social communication</td>
<td>Background communication</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Operational communication</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Behaviour communication</td>
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<td>Context communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational communication</td>
<td>Background communication</td>
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<td>Operational communication</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Behaviour communication</td>
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<td>Institutional communication</td>
<td>Background communication</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Operational communication</td>
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Fig 2: Suggested typology of field communications

The chart shows that in order to fulfill each communication function, a certain combination of content must be part of the exchanges between beneficiaries and agencies. This relationship between function and content is proposed as a way to facilitate the understanding of the topic. There is no hierarchy or suggested value attributed to each combination of function and content. The ascending arrow aims to show that, the closer an organisation moves towards social communication, the more varied the content of communications must be. It also indicates the increasing control over the communication and decision-making process by beneficiaries.
Effective institutional communication, for example, requires that agencies and beneficiaries communicate about background, which enables the establishment of trust. Moreover, it requires operational communications, which focus on the programme itself and enables beneficiaries’ participation and involvement in decisions. If a certain context requires that organisations engage in educational communication, they will need to communicate about behaviour. However, they cannot overlook background communication, which will help create a relationship of trust, or operational communication, as beneficiaries must still understand the programme and be able to contribute to it. The Marburg case study is an example in which education communication was the predominant communication function and the team communicated about behaviour, background and operations.

The table may also help answer Anderson and Woodrow’s question: how do agencies know, in advance, what they need to know? What organisations need to know depends on which communication functions they are engaging in. This, in turn, will be determined by the organisation’s mandate and the reality in the field.

Because of their specificities, each communication function requires a particular set of tools and methods, as well as human resources. In the Marburg case, behaviour communication was the domain of psychologists, socio-cultural mediators and anthropologists, who communicated with patients, families and communities. At the same time, the press officer helped the achievement of institutional communication, via, for example, the organisation of radio programmes. With Oxfam, community information officers were trained to facilitate context information and meetings at commune and village levels were conducted to improve communication with them.

If the possible functions of communications are understood and agreed upon, and if agencies know what to communicate about in order to achieve each function, does it mean that it can be applicable in the field?
4.4 What gets in the way? Obstacles to optimal communication with beneficiaries

Having established the concept, as well as the possible functions and content of communications with beneficiaries in humanitarian crises, it is now important to undertake an analysis of the practical obstacles hindering communication with beneficiaries in the field.

Both the literature review and the case studies have shown that field workers and managers are constantly under a set of external and internal pressures that undermine participation and communication with beneficiaries. This section will focus on these pressures, thus enabling reflection on possible ways of neutralising them.

Donors and Media

The multiplicity of stakeholders is a key feature of the work of any aid agency. Organisations must report and be accountable to donors, the general public, the media, decision-makers and, of course, beneficiaries. Naturally, as MANGO highlights, the stakeholders who are able to exercise the strongest pressure over agencies are those towards which accountability is the most respected, and hence generally where the strongest communications exchanges happen. Because the basic aid relation with beneficiaries (regardless of its quality) does not depend on good communication to occur, and because beneficiaries do not normally demand better communication from agencies as do donors and the media, this tends to be the most overlooked group in terms of good communication.

Communicating with the media and with the general public, on the other hand, is a pre-requisite for attracting support and therefore funds. Adequate communication with donors is a condition for continuing funding – and there is no doubt that the relationship with donors is based on a two-way information flow,
whereby the agency must listen to the donors’ requirements and donors demand regular reporting from agencies.

The BOND study reports a widespread perception that donors’ requirements limit the possibilities of connecting with beneficiaries in meaningful ways, adding that there is little funding available for NGO’s quality systems and more participatory approaches. Yet, the study shows that there is more openness from donors than from the media to agencies’ mistakes. It draws attention to the fact that there is an element in the relationship between agencies and the media that hinders transparency, as media scrutiny makes organisations reluctant to publicise evaluations and share mistakes.

Also according to the report, agencies today need not only do good work, but also show they are doing good work. In the tsunami case study, this pressure is obvious, as both the TEC report and one of the interviewees highlight. According to the TEC, the myth of “any kind of assistance is needed, and now”, triggered by the lack of understanding from the media and donor public, contributed to the proliferation of inadequate aid. This view shows that the pressure for visibility has a negative impact on the way agencies communicate with beneficiaries, if it means that they will opt for quicker, larger and more visible projects to the detriment of projects with quality. As Chris from Oxfam mentions, opportunities to establish dialogue with beneficiaries were lost due to the pressure to be visible and spend money quickly.

In this entangled web of relationships, stakeholders who are in a stronger position to put pressure on agencies should ensure that they implement quality programmes that put communication with beneficiaries at the centre.
Agencies’ internal media and marketing departments

The external pressure from media and donors is internalised and channelled down aid agencies in different ways. As the BOND report suggests, fundraising and marketing departments of NGOs seem to be resistant to sharing mistakes and failures and evaluations are generally not in public domain due to fear that they will be misconstrued by the media. Besides, the need to show programmes growing as a response to money flowing places the focus on the quantitative aspects of programming, often overlooking issues like quality, accountability and communication with beneficiaries.

Media departments, likewise, tend to feed the media with sensationally large numbers of beneficiaries of relief or victims and contributing to a coverage that may appeal to the general public but lack in depth and realism.

Human Resources

The case studies and interviews with key informants have both drawn attention to the role of senior management in ensuring communications with beneficiaries happens in the field. Either driven by their own perception of priorities or by the external pressures they are also subjected to, senior managers in aid organisations have been said to be, at times, a hindrance to effective communication with beneficiaries in the field. Zia considers management space a pre-requisite for the implementation of accountable programmes. Sok and Chris, interviewed within Oxfam case study, also mention pressure from managers as an obstacle to implementing programmes that would communicate better with beneficiaries. This point of view is also expressed both in TEC and BOND reports.

It is possible to argue that senior managers are driven by external and internal pressures, for example those coming from media and fundraising departments. If
results are measured mostly by speed and scale of intervention, even in a context that is not life-threatening, and performance indicators match these expectations, it is unlikely that senior managers will focus on communication with beneficiaries.

The staff in place in the field are in fact another element that can determine how organisations communicate with beneficiaries. Both Zia, from HAP, and Zohra, from MSF, mention that communication is a responsibility of everyone. The Marburg case study shows the importance of personal attitude in good communication with beneficiaries. In line with Anderson, the BOND report suggests that agencies must have the appropriate staff in charge of implementing programmes, with skills such as listening, responsiveness and interpersonal accountability, that are conducive to quality of relationships.

Policies

According to the TEC, “Policies, standards and indicators regarding transparency and accountability should be developed to support the over-arching principle of the ‘right to know and the responsibility to inform’.

In the Marburg case study, Xavier explains that the existing guidelines for dealing with hemorrhagic fever did not include communication with patients and communities. Chris Leather believes that, in Oxfam, there needs to be clear programme policies that include the organisation’s approach to communication with beneficiaries and accountability. These approaches will define which systems need to be in place.

Clear guidelines and policies that encompass communication with beneficiaries as a measure of quality are an important step, but having those in place is not enough to guarantee that field workers are aware of them. As Zia highlights, the lack of knowledge of the organisation’s values and commitments is a blockage to
accountable programmes and communication with beneficiaries. Principles and mandates, as well as policies and guidelines, need to be well communicated throughout the organisation.

Organisational systems

The case studies as well as key informants also offer some examples of how systems in place may not be conducive to better communications with beneficiaries in the field. BOND argues that systems that are bureaucratic or internally focused tend to limit flexibility on the ground, which in turn limits the relationship between agencies and beneficiaries. It suggests, for example, that promoting participation of beneficiaries in the assessment of agencies’ performance could be a way of enhancing programme quality. For MANGO, prevailing reporting systems do not allow for transparency or encourage learning in the way they are produced. To Yo Winder, from Oxfam, organisations must have the right systems in place in order to be accountable to beneficiaries, and this takes organisational change.

The BOND study also suggests that adequate learning systems are crucial to ensure programme quality is improved and learning should take place with and by stakeholders.

MSF interviewees mention the need to “learn on the spot” whilst they were facing the challenge of dealing with the Marburg epidemics. At an organisational level, the agency shows some commitment to learning as it invested efforts in adapting the guidelines for intervention in hemorrhagic fever.

Operational constraints

The Marburg case study is an example of how communication with beneficiaries can be hindered by elements that are mostly intrinsic to the programme. In that case, the real need for speed made communication with beneficiaries less of a
priority at the beginning. As Zohra mentions, communication was planned, but was not prioritised. She also explains that fear was an important factor shaping the decisions in the field and that it was difficult to find staff willing to work in such a difficult and risky environment.

Zia, from HAP, acknowledges that there are times when the need for speed and scale may require that organisations bypass the accountability benchmarks, but emphasises that there are very few cases like that. In fact, one could argue that the Marburg case, in which lives were at risk and speed was crucial to the success of the intervention, is one of these cases. In contrast, it is also an example of how communication – especially educational communication - could boost the projects efforts, helping to contain dissemination of the disease.

Field-based obstacles to engaging in communication with beneficiaries may be the most difficult to overcome. The MSF team mention the constant need to improvise and to adapt the project to the situation in the field as the challenges arose. The reactivity and improvisation made them introduce communication with beneficiaries in the project, at different levels.
Conclusion and Ways Forward

As accountability and quality in humanitarian programmes receive increased attention, so does communication with beneficiaries. Differently from the development field, communication with beneficiaries in emergencies has not become a specific field of study. Nonetheless, it has integrated many recent debates in the humanitarian sector.

In the development field, the notion of development communications was shaped as early as the 1960’s. From this field came the definition of communication that has been used throughout this research: “the process of successful transfer of meaningful information through dialogue.”

As communication between aid givers and receivers has been extensively researched in the development field, there are well-established theories about what effective communications in development entails. The authors examined in this research agree that communication is a process involving dialogue and mutual understanding; and that it strictly differs from information-dumping. In terms of the potential functions of communications in development, the authors Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada suggest that communication can be institutional, educational and social.

In the humanitarian field, theories around communication with beneficiaries of aid are embedded in other debates, such as accountability, participation and quality. However, there is a striking lack of clarity about communication functions and processes. Firstly, communication, both in theory and in practice, is often mistaken by information-extraction or information-dumping. Secondly, the reflection about what needs to be communicated is often inadequate, as different reports are prescriptive about potential subjects of communication without the
necessary consideration of their functions. Despite these limits, communication is generally acknowledged as a crucial element in accountability, participation and quality, whilst its effective implementation in the field remains a challenge for humanitarian organisations.

The case studies and key informants corroborate this view and provide insights into specific challenges faced by humanitarian workers in implementing programmes where communication with beneficiaries is effective. In the tsunami case, the lack of communications between agencies and beneficiaries received important attention in one of the most influential evaluation reports (TEC). In that, the TEC goes as far as suggesting that there should be a humanitarian principle based on the right to know and the responsibility to inform. Oxfam gives insights as to the difficulties of establishing dialogue with beneficiaries in a rapidly growing programme where there are pressures for visibility, speed and scale. It also provides some examples of instances when communication with beneficiaries did occur. The Marburg case study, where saving lives was the priority as acting swiftly could represent the difference between life and death, illustrates challenges of a different nature to those experienced by Oxfam during the tsunami.

The literature review and case studies suggest that the challenges faced by humanitarian organisations in implementing effective communication begin with the lack of clarity of what communication can achieve in programmes and what agencies and beneficiaries should communicate about. In order to clarify these misunderstandings, this research proposes a typology of field communications. Based upon Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada’s development communication functions, the typology finds a parallel between those and the potential functions of communication in the humanitarian field, suggesting the overall content of communication exchanges for each desired function. For example, agencies engaging in institutional communication must communicate about background and the project itself. But, if an agency engages in social communication, the scope of its communication with beneficiaries must be much more varied and
include communications not only about the background and the project, but also about behaviour and context.

The chart does not curtail flexibility, as it does not provide a recipe for communication in the field. Instead, it shows that what agencies communicate about depends on the function of communication they engage in, which in turn is determined by their mandates and the context of operation. The typology can help agencies develop policies related to communication with beneficiaries and adapt their approaches to different contexts. It can also help agencies identify what tools and methods are needed to achieve each desired function. Such tools and methods are not discussed in detail in this paper. Further research is needed to identify in the existing literature and agencies’ experience, the adequate techniques to implement the suggested functions.

Understanding why agencies communicate with beneficiaries and what they must communicate about, however, is not enough to ensure effective implementation in the field. Agencies are under multiple pressures that, combined, hinder communication with beneficiaries. The different types of pressure described in Chapter Four can be grouped according to three different main sources:

- external to the organisation: from media and donors;
- internal to the organisation (but external to project): human resources, including senior managers and field staff, policies and organisational systems;
- internal to project: operational constraints, such as real need for speed in life-threatening emergencies.

It is clear from the literature review and case studies examined in this research that most of the obstacles hindering communication with beneficiaries do not come from the field, but from within the organisation. Although this study has not looked into organisations in enough detail to provide comprehensive
recommendations for overcoming the organisational obstacles to optimal communication with beneficiaries, some ways forward emerge from the analysis:

- Aid organisations must develop clear **policies and guidelines** that express their commitment to communication with beneficiaries, including the functions it is willing to engage in, according to context. This is an essential step to create common understanding, internally, and to support other changes that need to be made in order to foster communication with beneficiaries. It will also enable the choice of adequate tools and methods to implement such communications.

- In order to develop a policy, agencies must understand the functions and content of communication in the field. The **typology of field communication** presented in this research is a basic tool to help agencies develop organisational policy in terms of communication with beneficiaries in emergencies.

- **Internal communications** provides an essential bridge between organisation’s policies and practices. Organisations must ensure that the staff in charge of implementing programmes are aware of the organisation’s approach to communication with beneficiaries.

- **Human Resources** must ensure that the appropriate staff are in place. Emphasis on soft skills and the ability and willingness to communicate with beneficiaries even under pressure and in culturally diverse settings must be an important part of recruitment and staff development plans.

- In order to ensure management space, **senior managers** must foster projects where effective communication with beneficiaries takes place. Adequate performance review systems must be established so as to support such practice.
• **Organisational systems**, at all levels, must foster communication with beneficiaries in the field. In addition to the ones mentioned above, internal learning and reporting systems must reflect a dialogue with beneficiaries and include their views.

• To deal with **operational constraints** to communication with beneficiaries, agencies must promote a culture of **flexibility** and **innovation** in field work, where “learning on the spot” is stimulated.

• **Media departments** in aid organisations have an important role to play in educating the media about the complexities of humanitarian work and must strive to introduce new angles that represent the real issues faced in the field.

• **Fundraising departments** also have a key role to play in influencing donors, both private and institutional. By developing transparent relationships with all donors and influencing reporting requirements from institutional donors, fundraising departments must attempt to neutralise the pressures coming from the external environment that hinder communication with beneficiaries, rather than pass it on the operational departments.

• Given that **donors** are in a strong position to influence programming, they must demand from agencies that activities involving communication with beneficiaries are implemented and reported. Including indicators that assess the level and quality of communication with beneficiaries in reporting systems may also help the shift in agencies’ mindset that is needed.

• The **media** can also play a key role in ensuring communications with beneficiaries is regarded as more of a priority in emergencies, by
Appendix 1: List of interviewees\textsuperscript{18}

Case Studies:

- Alois Hug, Emergency Press Officer, MSF Spain
- Chris Leather, Livelihoods Coordinator, Oxfam GB
- Phoeuk Sok, Humanitarian Accountability Partnership Advisor, Oxfam GB
- Xavier Tislair, Field Psychologist, MSF Belgium
- Zohra Abaakouk, Psychosocial Health Technician, MSF Spain

Key Informants:

- Zia Choudhury, Membership Services Coordinator, HAP International
- Yo Winder, Accountability Lead, Oxfam GB

\textsuperscript{18} The titles of the interviewees related to the case studies are those of the time of the intervention.
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88