

# Lessons on communication, community engagement and accountability for the Pakistan floods response

September 2022



Pakistan has endured intense rainfall and severe monsoon weather since June 2022, causing catastrophic flooding and landslides across the country. As of 13 September 2022, an estimated **33 million people have been affected, with 6.4 million now requiring humanitarian assistance**. Sindh has been hardest hit by the floods, with the southern province **accounting for 88% of damaged or destroyed houses and the highest number of casualties**.

While the severity and magnitude of the current crisis is extraordinary, the disaster-prone country frequently experiences floods triggered by seasonal monsoon rains, with some of these events causing major humanitarian crises. **In 2010, floods submerged one-fifth of Pakistan's land mass, directly affecting 20 million people**.

The situation for people and families often worsens after a flood as survival forces unthinkable decisions such as selling remaining possessions, relocating and withdrawing children from education. Early information means people are able to make informed decisions about survival without compromising their recovery. Here are key lessons on communication, community engagement and accountability (CCEA) from past flood emergencies in Pakistan, along with recommendations for the current response. Please note that all recommendations must be adapted to the local context.

## 1 Pakistan has experienced and responded to floods for decades: support and build on existing systems, networks and experiences that are widely trusted

“It will be very difficult for someone from another region to be heard or believed. People here always comment about how foreigners come to their villages and collect information and leave without making any real difference. This shows that they do not have faith in them.”<sup>1</sup>

Over the past decades, various government-, community- and international agency-led initiatives have raised the profile of disaster risk reduction and flood preparedness at the federal, provincial, district and community levels (see guidance on [Pakistan disaster management structure](#)). This means that strong, prepositioned networks and community structures exist across the country, ready to respond when a disaster strikes. Local communities, as well as *madrassas* (religious seminaries), have already been on the frontlines of the current response, engaging in search and rescue, and providing food, shelter, clean water and other services. It will be crucial to work together.<sup>2</sup>

- ➔ A primary entry point for humanitarian actors may be Village Disaster Management Committees. Village committees have [established lines of communication with Provincial Disaster Management Authorities](#) (PDMAs), district governments, humanitarian actors and community members. They are a trusted source of life-saving information for affected people – during the pandemic, they were instrumental in sharing pictorial, voice or video messages using social media groups that had extensive reach within communities. Seek to understand community structures, experiences and solutions through village committees to develop more tailored engagement strategies. Keep in mind that remote villages are unlikely to have established village committees.
- ➔ Consider collaborating with the Heads of the Islamiat Departments or Masjid Imams (mosque teachers) to ensure content is relatable and also speaks to more religious community members. For instance, quotes from the *Quran* and *Hadiths* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) can be used to explain humanitarian concepts such as community protection and accountability.
- ➔ Consider workshops with religious leaders, including from minority groups, to jointly troubleshoot misinformation and complex concepts.

## 2 People need information now, to make critical decisions for themselves and their families and to protect what they still have

The situation worsens after a flood until a response is possible. The decisions people are able to make impact on their survival and their ability to recover. During the 2010 flood response, actionable information in relevant languages was a critical need among affected people and across sectors. With most people having lost their houses, livelihoods, livestock and crops, they required information on cross-cutting,

1 All case studies quoted in this paper were made available by the CEA and country teams of IFRC Pakistan and Pakistan Red Crescent Society

2 OCHA (2022) [Pakistan: 2022 monsoon floods – situation report no. 5 \(as of 9 September 2022\)](#)

multisectoral issues such as: how to access available aid, including cash assistance; support for reconstructing damaged houses; access to free seeds, diesel oil, fertilisers and pesticides; support to raise livestock; access to medicine for people and livestock; and how to find work.<sup>3</sup>

Information that worked well considered diverse information needs and clearly directed people to specific humanitarian services. However, the pandemic highlighted that misinformation can easily undermine trust in and uptake of humanitarian services. To build trust, three key factors must be taken into account: first, it will be crucial to continuously collect and respond to community feedback in order to understand and address distrust and misinformation early; second, humanitarian actors must be transparent about their activities; third, there must be opportunities for communities to take part in decision-making.

- ➔ Support mainstreaming CCEA approaches and tools among humanitarian actors across different sectors and other local stakeholders like the PDMA, village committees, local media and Pakistan Meteorological Department.
- ➔ Ensure close collaboration on CCEA, linking with existing groups such as the Pakistan [Accountability Learning Working Group](#) (ALWG), which has a focus on mainstreaming accountability standards and building sector capacity on CCEA.

### 3 **Cash is likely to be the primary response to the floods: invest early in communication and community engagement to increase its impact**

The government-led response to the current flood crisis is expected to prioritise cash interventions, as it has in [past flood emergency responses](#). During the 2010 flood response, the Government of Pakistan, in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), UK Department for International Development (DFID) and World Bank, launched the Citizen Damage Compensation Programme (CDCP), otherwise known as the ‘Watan card’. From the early stages of the programme, it was evident that people lacked access to accurate information on eligibility, application process and card activation. Widespread misinformation caused overcrowding, ineligible people showing up at Watan card centres and people bringing inadequate documentation.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM), through the Humanitarian Communications Team, worked to fill these critical CCEA gaps. They established a referral mechanism, organised orientation workshops at the community level and disseminated information via radio broadcasts, text messages and newspaper ads containing critical information on how to access the cash programme. The results of this initiative were clear: over three months, the number of people assisted at Watan card centres increased more than twofold, while the number of people turned away decreased.<sup>4</sup>

- ➔ Collaborate with cash colleagues and the cash working group to ensure CCEA is integrated and prioritised. This should include strong complaints and feedback mechanisms using multiple channels and preferred languages; transparent and tailored communication; and consideration of safeguarding concerns and participatory approaches.

3 CDAC Network (2010) [Providing humanitarian information to flood-affected people in Pakistan](#)

4 IOM (2014) [Communicating with communities: a case study and guide from Pakistan and elsewhere](#)

#### → Resources by CDAC members:

- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA): [Country cash profile Pakistan](#)
- IOM: [Communicating with communities: a case study and guide from Pakistan and elsewhere](#)
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC): [Cash and CEA: community engagement hub](#)

## 4 Diversifying languages will be key

“Did you know that people in this region are sensitive to accents as well? You may speak the same language as them but if you pronounce a word differently, they will classify you as an alien and your message will not have the same impact as it would coming from a person they consider to be one of them.”

According to CLEAR Global/Translators without Borders, there are **between 70 and 80 languages spoken in Pakistan**. While Urdu is the national language, it is the first language of only 7.5% of the population; Punjabi is the first language of 39% of the population. However in Sindh, the province most affected by the floods, Sindhi is the most spoken language (62%); 18% of people speak Urdu and only 5% speak Punjabi.<sup>5</sup> Urdu is also spoken by more men than women, and there is huge diversity of language preference within provinces. Additionally, marginalised people and population groups with less access to education are less likely to be multilingual. It is crucial to ensure you adapt activities and resources into the right languages. Specific provision is needed to reach women and girls, people with disabilities, older people and other marginalised groups. See more in CDAC’s [Pakistan media landscape guide](#).

- Include CLEAR Global’s [standardised questions](#) on language and communication preferences in assessments and surveys. Disaggregate other data by language to see where language marginalisation might be causing gaps in access to services.
- Ensure information and feedback mechanisms are available and accessible in relevant languages and formats. Ensure people can report protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) concerns in preferred languages and through preferred, trusted channels, and be understood.
- Pay special attention to ensure equal access for marginalised-language speakers (e.g. refugees near the Afghanistan border), as well as people with disabilities who require different formats (e.g. sign language, subtitled visual content).
- Regularly communicate which services will be available when and how people can access them, in relevant languages and without using jargon or technical terms.
- **Resources by CDAC members:**
  - IFRC: [CEA toolkit](#) – questions to integrate into assessments (tool 13)
  - CLEAR Global: [language questions for surveys](#) and [language map of Pakistan](#)

## 5 Understand how information flows to, from and within communities: no two individuals are the same, so be sure to explore different ways to reach people

“People are not trusting in these regions. If the villagers don’t know you by face (at least), it is very unlikely that they will even be interested in speaking to you, let alone allow you into their homes.”

Efficient and effective information flows involve ensuring that messages are conveyed using affected people’s preferred channels. During the 2010 flood emergency, the humanitarian community relied heavily on radio as the primary channel to communicate directly with affected communities, prioritising solutions like the ‘suitcase radio’ and rebuilding radio broadcast infrastructure.<sup>6</sup> However, a CDAC study found that only one-fifth of respondents in Punjab and Sindh had access to a functioning radio, despite the high reliance on the medium by humanitarian actors.<sup>7</sup> Access to functioning radios is likely to be heavily impacted by the floods.

CDAC’s 2022 [Pakistan media landscape guide](#) indicates that, while radio may be important – particularly in rural and remote areas and for women who don’t have or aren’t allowed access to the internet – its popularity is declining and radio is evolving into online formats such as live podcasts. It is therefore important to consider traditionally prioritised channels while looking at emerging trends in media access. The popularity of social media is growing despite stringent government regulations: 21% of the population are social media users as of January 2021. Mobile cellular coverage was 89% of the population in 2020, with mobile phones being the main form of digital connection. Access to the internet, social media and digital technology usage differ significantly between rural and urban areas and between men and women.<sup>8</sup>

During the 2010 floods, 82% of households in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) reported that word of mouth was the primary source of information.<sup>9</sup> People affected by the floods turned to friends and family, armed forces, community health workers, religious and community leaders, aid workers, district government, police and shop keepers (barbers, tea stalls) for information.<sup>10</sup>

- ➔ Ensure face-to-face engagement is utilised, as well as other trusted channels, when designing CCEA strategies.
- ➔ Consider ways to tap into community information ecosystems to engage communities. For instance, explore working with the *Sadar* (head) of the Bhatta Workers Union (Brick Kiln Workers Union).
- ➔ Find community gathering points such as tea stalls to create engagement points where people can share feedback and receive answers, and actionable content in local languages can be shared in collaboration with authorities and telecommunications companies.

6 IOM (2014) [Communicating with communities: a case study and guide from pakistan and elsewhere](#)

7 CDAC Network (2010) [Providing humanitarian information to flood-affected people in Pakistan](#)

8 CDAC Network (2022) [Pakistan media landscape guide](#)

9 Interfaith League Against Poverty (2010) [Pakistan: participatory rapid humanitarian need assessment \(PRHNA\) report](#)

10 IOM (2014) [Communicating with communities: a case study and guide from pakistan and elsewhere](#)

## 6 Remember that it is easy to exclude people from communication: pay special attention to the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups

“People won’t even look your way [unless] you smell like them. People in these areas are wary of outsiders, they won’t speak to you or allow you into their homes and definitely won’t allow you to speak to their women unless they know you.”

“The transgender woman started crying at the session. She said that they are never invited to such events and their community is severely neglected. They are shunned and treated like outsiders. There were individuals in their community that were unwell but did not know what was going on or how they could seek help.”

There are significant gender disparities in Pakistan that require special consideration in the design of CCEA strategies. Women are likely to be illiterate, particularly in rural and remote areas, with only 13% of young women enrolled in school by grade nine.<sup>11</sup> During the 2010 flood response, a CDAC study found that 85.5% of women in Sindh and Punjab reported having no access to digital media. Only 3% had access to radio and 3% access to mobile phones. When women have less access to information, they often have to rely on male relatives as gatekeepers. Consider face-to-face communication through female **health workers**, community workers, local civil society organisations and media to disseminate information. Priority information needs identified by women and girls during the 2010 flood response included sanitation; washing and cleaning; information related to feeding newborns; needs of pregnant women; and safety at relief camps.<sup>12</sup> However, we should not assume that information needs are the same as 12 years ago. It will be key to assess which topics vulnerable groups most need to understand now and which channels they trust.

- ➔ Collect gender- and diversity-disaggregated data and use this to ensure there are active efforts to reach women and marginalised community groups such as transgender people (*khawaja-sara*) and travellers (*khana-badosh*).
- ➔ Read more about lessons on reaching women, girls and other vulnerable groups from the 2010 flood response: CDAC Network (2010) [Providing humanitarian information to flood-affected people in Pakistan](#).

### Acknowledgements

This document was co-authored by Viviane Fluck, PhD (IFRC Asia Pacific), Alyssa Thurston (CDAC Network Secretariat) and Palwashay Arbab (Community World Service Asia), with technical input from Ali Atif (Pakistan Red Crescent Society (PRCS)) and Alice Castillejo (CLEAR Global). The quoted case studies were generously made available and supported through the CEA and country teams of IFRC Pakistan and PRCS.

Cover photo: A flooded residential area in Nowshera district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan in August 2022. Credit: UNICEF/Zaidi.

11 Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance (2021) [Disaster management reference handbook: Pakistan](#)

12 CDAC Network (2010) [Providing humanitarian information to flood-affected people in Pakistan](#)



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