

PRINCIPLES OF DISASTER REPORTING: GUIDELINES

The A-F and S of reporting across the disaster cycle

Sub-deliverable of Deliverable 14

Preparing Long Term Training and Capacity Building Strategy for
Disaster Risk Reduction in India, under NCRMP



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Submitted to



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USING THIS GUIDELINE

This guideline is structured around understanding disasters and seven vital principles that influence a disaster story. Each core principle offers a key action point, core issues and a checklist of actions that will help

This guideline is meant only as a quick reference and is not exhaustive, though it seeks to provide a core foundation. More detailed information on each principle is available in the Principles of Disaster Reporting Handbook.

UNDERSTANDING DISASTERS AND MEDIA'S ROLE

Develop a solid understanding of disasters and the critical role that media plays across each stage of the disaster cycle

ISSUES

Terminology

The disaster field has specific vocabulary of its own and each hazard has specific measurements tools. Familiarity with these is necessary in order to be able to effectively communicate to the larger public.

Concepts

Disaster concepts including the phases of the disaster cycle, resilience and vulnerability form a foundation for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) reporting.

Policies and systems

Several policies and systems already technically exist at the national and state levels. However, these are yet to be fully implemented.

Critical role of the media

The media plays a critical role across each stage of the disaster cycle: preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation. This includes the dissemination of early warning and larger public awareness.

CHECKLIST

- Are reporters familiar with common disaster terminology and specific measurement tools for different hazards?
- Is there an awareness of basic disaster concepts such as vulnerability and resilience?
- Is there an understanding of existing policies and system?
- Is there an inherent awareness of the critical role that media plays across each stage of the disaster cycle? Preparation to:
 - Disseminate early warnings
 - Report in the immediate aftermath
 - Report on recovery activity
 - Play a larger role in creating public awareness on disaster issues (spreading mitigation and preparedness messages)

IMPLICATIONS

For the general public, the single largest source of information is the media. A sound understanding of disaster issues is therefore critical. The media can play a role not just in early warning and reporting disaster events, but as vehicles to disseminate public awareness and actually change behaviour. They can help communities build greater resilience over the longer term.

ACCURACY

Ensure accuracy in every aspect of the reporting process

ISSUES

Background information

Background information on geographic areas and affected communities (especially more remote areas) must go beyond boilerplate descriptions and include nuances.

Facts and figures

Figures change dramatically in the first month after a disaster. This must be conveyed clearly.

Word choice

Terms such as 'natural disaster' are factually incorrect. Other terms are used interchangeably; yet have very different connotations and convey different messages. This includes the use of survivor and victim; or change and progress.

Staying in context

Areas that are hard to reach are portrayed through canned footage or represented by other areas. One story is generalised to represent the entire affected area without widespread study.

CHECKLIST

- Is the background information on the geographic area and the affected community up-to-date and nuanced?
- Have critical words been double checked and vetted to ensure the correct message is being portrayed?
- Are all facts and figures confirmed? Where there is ambiguity, has this been clarified to the audience? Have all sources of data been clearly stated?
- Are pictures, footage, stories and quotes being used in context? Is any representative footage clearly labelled?

IMPLICATIONS

The advent of smartphones and social media means that information can spread like wildfire. Inaccuracy of any type threatens to skew perspectives on the magnitude of the problem and can lead to more confusion. In the long-term, it can actually influence the way people think and act, both from a policy and individual perspective. Misreporting can also turn into a legal issue.

BALANCE

Strike a balance on the types of voices, positive stories, areas or regions covered and the tone of reporting

ISSUES

Types of voices

The voices that are being reported changes the entire story. Actively bringing out the voices of those who are most vulnerable can change the discourse and types of issues being addressed.

Positive stories

Coverage of local innovations and positive actions is encouraging and builds hope. It also serves as good examples that can be replicated elsewhere and as validation of efforts.

Mix of areas and regions

Often, reporting of a disaster gets confined to the supposedly worst-affected area. The other regions and surrounding places get left out.

Activist vs. neutral reporting

Particularly in post-disaster situations, the media tends to take on a more activist role. There is a rush to assign blame, to politicise and to miss the other angles. This sometimes takes away the focus from the actual event and affected communities. Reporters also need to be careful of their own tone and pitch. A very fast, really loud report sends a very different message.

Reporters must also strike a balance between telling the story and getting involved in physically helping the community.

CHECKLIST

- Are reports looking at different perspectives, including voices of:
 - Women
 - Children
 - People with Disabilities
 - Elderly
 - Socially excluded / marginalised groups
- Are there reports on positive actions and innovative local efforts?
- Are reports covering a mix of affected areas?
- Are the tone, pitch and content of reporting balanced?
- Are there some company guidelines on where to get involved and where to step back?

IMPLICATIONS

Striking the right balance impacts the type of aid disseminated and the issues that are addressed. It affects where the help goes and who gets helped. It can also affect longer-term views of the entire event.

CONSISTENCY AND COLLABORATION

Work collaboratively with other media, government officials and NGOs

ISSUES

Who needs to collaborate

Along with different media units, government officials at the national and local levels (especially PIOs/PROs) and NGOs on the ground all play a vital role in disseminating information.

Consistency of reports

Building consistency on the way of reporting within the varied team members in different areas strengthens the overall report.

At the same time, extremely conflicting reports from within one company, as well as across different media can create massive confusion. This is especially true of life-saving information such as safe routes or aid distribution.

Common goals

In the larger context and as part of media's public service prerogative, journalists play a key role in building public awareness. Public awareness campaigns are often scattered and done in silos. Collaboration between these three key stakeholders can bring consistency and greater weight to a nationwide campaign.

CHECKLIST

- Have relationships been built with local disaster management authorities and NGOs?
- Is there a consistent strategy within the team for disaster reporting?
- Is there a general consensus among media companies on reporting life-saving information?
- Is there an informal agreement in place with other media units on priority issues?
- Is there a strategy with the government and other media units to accomplish common goals?

IMPLICATIONS

A collaborative rather than antagonistic model between different media organisations, the government and NGOs can improve the quality of disaster reporting and can help build the resilience of communities across the country. This is particularly true when considering the dual role of media in a disaster context. It is the key channel for both disseminating key information down to the general public and affected communities; as well as a spark for humanitarian action and government response.

DIGNITY

Treat all affected communities with the utmost respect and compassion

ISSUES

Interviewing

The manner in which disaster survivors are interviewed can badly affect their psychological state. Clearly, reporters are in a position of power. Taking care never to exploit this is vital.

Visuals

The imagery of a disaster situation is often gory and filled with unimaginable destruction and suffering. Photojournalists and reporters must walk a fine line between telling the story to the public and keeping the dignity of the people intact. Where, how and in what size the visual is used may also make a difference. There may be some shots that are just vetoed altogether.

Overall reporting

In putting together the whole story, including the anchoring/ editorial/ layout, ensure that it reflects a sense of dignity for the community.

CHECKLIST

- Have reporters been trained on the way to approach disaster survivors?
- Does the interviewee clearly understand why you are there?
- Are questions framed in a manner that is sensitive to the situation? Do they allow people to answer honestly without leading them?
- Have you asked for permission to photograph/film/record/ quote them?
- Are you respecting local customs?
- Are there clear company benchmarks of what kinds of visuals should be avoided?
- In live reports, is a delay time built in to allow senior editors to make a last-minute decision on questionable content?
- Is the overall report portraying the person/community/area with dignity?

IMPLICATIONS

Restoring the dignity of an affected community can play a vital role in the speed and success of their recovery. Insensitive reporting can have deep psycho-social impacts on an already grieving community. It can also affect the way they are perceived nationally and how they perceive themselves.

ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

Go beyond major disaster events alone to look at climate change, environment, development and disaster risk reduction issues

ISSUES

Climate change and small-scale disasters

Climate change is expected to increase the number of large-scale unprecedented hydro-met events such as flash floods. At the same time, small-scale climate-induced stresses such as water shortages that are leading to disasters of their own.

'Development'

What role is 'development' playing as a trigger for these disasters? Conversely, how much are hazard and vulnerability issues taken into consideration during construction planning.

Disaster risk reduction

DRR can be built into almost every aspect of life; including housing, livelihoods, civic infrastructure, education and environment.

Silent disasters

The Red Cross stated in 2012 that 91% of disasters worldwide are silent. This silence can be attributed to a number of reasons including media interest.

Linking stories

'Disaster' stories are not disaster stories alone. They are linked to many mainstream issues including health, education, women's rights and the economy. They are also linked to each stage of the disaster cycle.

CHECKLIST

- Are larger climate change issues being explored?
- Are small-scale or recurrent disasters given attention?
- Are 'development' aspects of a disaster being explored?
- In 'development' reports, is there analysis of likely natural hazard impacts and greater vulnerabilities?
- Are intimations on silent disasters being investigated and reported?
- Are disaster stories being linked to mainstream issues? Is reporting being done across the stages of the disaster cycle?

IMPLICATIONS

These perspectives help adopt a more holistic approach. It brings disaster issues into the mainstream, makes them accessible and relevant to everyday life and helps cover stories from across the disaster cycle.

FOLLOW-UP

Do follow-up stories in the months and years following a calamity

ISSUES

Use of or delivery of aid

In larger disasters, there is a giant influx of aid money and government sanctioned relief funds in the initial days. Follow-up on the usage of this aid can help promote accountability. In cases where relief is not sanctioned at all, the ongoing media scrutiny can help the delivery of aid.

Long-term recovery

The reconstruction activity and recovery programmes should incorporate disaster risk reduction features, helping the community become more resilient.

Lessons and good practices

Often there is a reinvention of the wheel after every disaster; from a communications perspective, an aid perspective and a reconstruction/recovery perspective. Reporting over the longer-term on the lessons and good practices (perhaps even small local ones) can make a difference for the next one.

CHECKLIST

- Are follow-up stories a standard practice?
- Are you reporting on the use of aid / delivery of aid?
- Is there analysis of the long-term recovery and incorporation of DRR elements?
- Are there any good practices or lessons that can be widely disseminated?

IMPLICATIONS

Follow-up stories are important to keep the issue alive. In the days after a disaster event when interest wanes off and the media withdraws, the community is left to recover alone. Yet some of the greatest challenges come in the medium and long-term. Follow-up stories can also result in insightful lessons and replicable good practices.

SAFETY

Always prioritise your safety and that of the affected communities!

ISSUES

Precautionary measures

Media teams which go into disaster situations unprepared only amplify the problems. Often resources and help intended for the locals get diverted to helping the journalists. Teams on the ground must be trained and have appropriate equipment.

Dealing with stress

Even those with disaster reporting experience can sometimes be overwhelmed by the situation. It is essential to have measures in place to deal with stress.

Safety of the community

When dealing with sensitive topics, always ensure that people's safety is not compromised.

CHECKLIST

- Are reporters sent out to disaster situation prepped on safety and
- Is there clarity on what to do or not to do for safety in each situation?
- Are emergency kits always ready?
- Are protocols in place for all reporters in disaster situations to periodically check in with the office?
- Are there provisions for counselling of reporters in extreme cases?
- Is every story vetted to ensure that it will not negatively impact the safety of the particular person, family or community?
- Are you practicing 'do no harm'?

IMPLICATIONS

Putting safety first literally saves lives – your own and the community from which you are reporting. In conflict zones, humanitarian organisations use a concept of 'do no harm'. This refers to not leaving the community worse off than you found them. It is very important for journalists to respect the same principle in disaster situations, which can easily turn into conflict ones.