

# **Broadcast Media Treatment of Disasters**

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I would first like to thank the organizers of the conference for having given me the opportunity to share with you our views on broadcast media treatment of disasters.

As the major disaster in my country relates to drought-triggered famine, I will limit my presentation to the experience and reaction of relief organizations to media coverage of famine disasters. Based on this summary I will finally try to point out what we feel should be undertaken to rectify some of the problems encountered in this sphere.

It might be difficult to find a better example than Ethiopia and its drought disasters of the 80s, to show the tremendous effect which the media can bring about on disaster relief operations.

If we take the 1974 drought disaster, for instance, the effects of a large-scale drought-triggered famine were first brought to the attention of both the Ethiopian and the international community following the film entitled "The Hidden Hunger" by Jonathan Dimbleby. In Ethiopia, the public uproar which the film incited contributed to the ouster of the Haile Selassie government.

This was followed by an unprecedented national fund-raising effort which included the promulgation of a regulation which required all Ethiopians earning a salary to contribute one month's salary to the relief effort. On the international level, the film also led to large-scale fund raising which was able to avert worse consequences.

Exactly ten years later in 1984, the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission established in 1974, and now equipped with an early-warning system, issued forecasts of an impending famine disaster, followed by a series of appeals reported at different fora. There was no response to these appeals. The coverage of the situation by a group of 26 international journalists, mainly from the print media, also did not make any improvement in the response to the appeals. In September 1984, exactly one year after the first appeal and after the situation had significantly deteriorated, a TV team led by Mohammed Amin and Michael Burke filmed a 7-minute programme on the horrors of the disaster which literally turned everything upside down. Governments and organizations which were evasive about the existence and extent of the disaster were forced to reconsider their positions in light of the findings of the film reportage, and the largest outpouring of international assistance ever recorded in the history of the country started. Aid was mobilized by organizations representing almost all religious groups around the world, labour organizations, artists' and other professional groups. An average of 60-70 journalists also visited the disaster-affected areas daily and the relief operation underway for the victims. Although the death toll was enormous, the assistance received and the unprecedented

cooperation between governments and relief organizations in coordinating logistics support and the delivery of relief aid was able to save many lives.

In 1987-88, when another famine disaster struck, all parties involved in relief operations were organized to avoid the repetition of the 1984-85 incident and the impending disaster was successfully averted through the launching of an early or preventive relief programme, which was able to avert not only death, but mass dislocations too.

In November 1990 the early-warning system of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission issued an appeal to assist 4.3 million people affected by drought and conflicts and repeated its appeal again in January 1991, with an update which put the figure of affected people at 5.6 million. To complicate the situation, over 1 million refugees and returnees from Somalia and the Sudan arrived in Ethiopia and again appeals for assistance were made on their behalf.

The response to both appeals, it has been reported, has been unsatisfactory. Of the requested assistance only 25% of the pledges made have been realized to date. In Ogaden, where the Somali refugees are currently located, aid agencies report of the existence of only a two week stock on site for the hundreds of thousands of refugees. To avoid problems of replenishment which can be created as a result of transportation problems, rain or other factors, the minimum level any relief agency usually works with is a reserve of a 3 months' supply.

As the situation enters a critical phase, journalists have again now started to come and to schedule visits to Ethiopia. Previous efforts by relief organizations to get media coverage of the impending disaster had not been successful, as the journalists who had come left disappointed at having not seen emaciated children and shelters which unfortunately some editors feel are necessary and "newsworthy" in their countries.

What can be noted from the experience of the four major disasters I have talked about is the huge potential which the media holds in the mobilization of assistance on the one hand and its shortcomings with regard to timing when it comes to effectiveness. By the time the media, usually the electronic media, can bring about effect, many victims are beyond assistance and the rest are brought back from the brink of death after much suffering and extremely high costs.

The challenge in my view is to break the "reported" need to shock people before assistance can be mobilized. This "reported" need becomes particularly unnecessary when we note that the major part of all international aid comes not from public contributions, but from government sources. And governments usually receive adequate information via UN agencies, NGOs and their diplomatic representatives long before the deterioration of drought incidents into famine situations.

What perhaps can be done by the media in this case is to bring to attention the needs identified in appeals, the follow-up given to their realization and the need for adequate and viable preparedness strategies such as the installment of food security reserves in risk areas. This would go a long way in serving as a mid-term solution to the problem.

In addition and more importantly, the media can play a significant role in awareness creation concerning the root cause of the vulnerability of disaster victims, which can then lead to the identification of areas of assistance and cooperation which can bring about lasting solutions, through both human and environmental rehabilitation and development programmes. The world could perhaps be talking less about donor fatigue today if levels of development assistance can be increased which could then lead to improvements in the coping capacity of the disaster victims themselves and the need for recurrent international relief assistance can be averted.

A change in approach in the publicity given to recurrent disasters, we feel, is also needed. Current coverages tend to undermine the image of the disaster-stricken communities and discredit or ignore efforts undertaken by the communities themselves to avert disasters. This is due to the present lack of interest on the part of the media in rehabilitation and disaster prevention activities undertaken by disaster-prone countries. As a result, and because of the absence of any coverage of developmental activities in between the disaster periods/or the gap period, the image which the media projects of disaster-prone communities is that of helpless groups awaiting any international assistance. Donor fatigue, which is referred to among relief and media agencies nowadays, and which is mentioned earlier, we feel is partly a result of the image thus portrayed.

Up to now, I have mainly discussed what can be done by external media concerning disaster situations. What should not be forgotten is the important role which the national media can play in their own countries. Apart from the mobilization of assistance nationally, the media has a huge potential for the dissemination of information on disaster prevention methods.

Although this is undertaken by the media in all developing countries in varying degrees, a lot remains to be done yet and these countries can benefit from external technical assistance and resource allocation in this sphere. The importance of radio programmes in increasing agricultural productivity, for instance, has now been known for quite some time. Nevertheless, capacity to implement such programmes still falls short of desired objectives. If we take Ethiopia, as an example, there are only 3 million radio sets in the country for a population of 50 million people of which 93% forms the farming community.

A related area where an important change can be introduced is the launching of training programmes, orientation sessions and other forms of technical assistance to media personnel of developing countries. This, we believe, can contribute to the establishment of a professional partnership between media personnel in developing and developed countries, thus guaranteeing accurate and continuous reporting on events in developing countries.

Once we recognize the important role of the media, which should not be either overestimated or underestimated in light of the various points which I have tried to point out, it is possible in my view, to create better and even more constructive links between the media and disaster relief organizations.

Thank you