

Second India Disaster Management Congress
Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi, 4-6 November 2009

Thematic Session on

Role of Media in Disaster Management

CONCEPT NOTE

Contexts

Reducing the losses of life and property caused by natural hazards is a compelling objective now receiving worldwide attention. It is now being increasingly believed that the knowledge and technology base potentially applicable to the mitigation of natural hazards has grown so dramatically that it would be possible, through a concerted cooperative international effort, to save many lives and reduce human suffering, dislocation, and economic losses simply by better information, communication and awareness. Timely mass media communication about impending disasters can lead to appropriate individual and community action, which is the key to implementing effective prevention strategies including evacuation and survival of people. Such communications can educate, warn, inform, and empower people to take practical steps to protect themselves from natural hazards.

The role of media, both print and electronic, in informing the people and the authorities during emergencies thus, becomes critical, especially the ways in which media can play a vital role in public awareness and preparedness through educating the public about disasters; warning of hazards; gathering and transmitting information about affected areas; alerting government officials, helping relief organizations and the public towards specific needs; and even in facilitating discussions about disaster preparedness and response. During any emergency, people seek up-to-date, reliable and detailed information.

The main principle of information provision, therefore, should be an ethical one: and so, during an emergency, the media should be sensitive to the needs of the public in affected areas and should avoid misinforming and broadcasting unconfirmed reports that may lead to despair and panic. Therefore, correct and reliable information disseminated through the media is an important instrument for balancing the possible effects of incorrect, misleading or even willfully distorted information. Reliable and timely information provided through the media can help people overcome any kind of fear and fatalism during and after an emergency. Indeed, the availability of reliable and timely information and knowledge about an event and the resulting needs help to improve solidarity and also creates an atmosphere conducive to collective response for sharing the humanitarian challenges created by disasters. Media today has arguably penetrated every household in the world, in one form or another. Journalists pride themselves in reporting objectively on global events and regard an independent media as one of the pillars of democratic society.

Objectives

In this context, the broad objectives of the Thematic Session on Role of Media in Disaster Management would be

- To discuss the role of media in public safety/ emergency management
- To discuss benefits of media in generating public awareness about disaster risk reduction
- To suggest measures to bridge gap between disaster managers' and media officials before, during and after disasters
- To discuss the ethical issues involved in media reporting
- To identify key issues in establishing good coordination and efficient flow of information from government sources for media during emergencies
- To recommend measures that can sustain media interests before and after disasters

Expected Outcome

The session will aim at initiating a dialogue among various stakeholders on various issues related to the role of media during disaster events and also, if possible, to generate ideas on a standard code of conduct for print and electronic media journalists covering such events. The session will further discuss the role of government agencies, civil society and other organizations in informing the media and clarifying various issues that come to the centre stage during, before and after disasters.

Further, the platform will also be used to discuss the responsibility of media in covering disaster events, recovery and mitigation initiatives and establishing effective interface between disaster management agencies and communities at risk and enrolling the media as a contributing sector in awareness raising, education and opinion building in order to increase recognition of the potential of disaster reduction to save human lives and protect property.

Session Plan

Date: 5 November 2009

Duration: 1 and half hours

Mode: Panel Discussion

Session Chair: Mr. Harish Khare, Media Advisor, PMO

Keynote Address: Mr. K.M.Singh, Member, NDMA

This particular session will be in the form of a panel discussion where media personnel's representing both print and electronic sector would join the discussion and will include the following members:

- 1) Mr. Waheed Qamar Naqvi- Aaj Tak
- 2) Mr. Shankarsan Thakur
- 3) Mr. Kartikeya Sharma- Headlines Today
- 4) Ms. Seema Chisti- Indian Express
- 5) Mr. Ravish Kumar- NDTV
- 6) Ms. Nandini Iyer

Mass media have certain characteristics that make them powerful instrument of disaster communication as they provide quick and easy access to large number of people located at different places; they highlight the problems and difficulties faced by the people affected by the disasters; they mobilize public opinion for humanitarian assistance. On the other hand, sources dealing with the media know that media can also prove to be difficult channels of communication. There is no direct control over the content and form of information transmitted and sometimes there are competing and even conflicting information which may always be very congenial for mobilizing support for concerted action. Contrary to popular perceptions journalists may not always be independent but may act as 'gate keepers, interpreters and commentators' representing larger business interests of the media owners. A closer examination of the global media illustrates that it is not one homogenous entity pursuing a uniform method in disseminating their views. On the contrary, there are a small number of large factions which compete with one another to increase their respective audiences and commercial gains. Media Ethics, therefore, becomes an important aspect of media reporting during any disaster event. It assists media workers in determining what is right and choosing the best from several alternatives. Ethics should set guidelines, rules, norms, codes and principles to lead journalists and other media workers to make moral decisions.

Further, discussion will be held on the role media plays and should play in disaster preparedness, emergency management and critical infrastructure protection long before a disaster actually strikes. There is a lot that media can do in these and related fields but the media is generally not interested in reporting events that would not make news or sensations which is particularly true of electronic media where a value of coverage is determined by the TRPs. It all corroborates the need to reexamine the role media plays in disaster management, the interdependencies among the various stakeholders and how relationships change during extreme circumstances. It also calls for the review of spoken and unspoken rules in dealing with the media, what works and doesn't work, and how best to manage the fragile balance between sharing information and protecting the public and corporate interests. This all will help in better understanding of what people, government and companies can expect from the media in an incident and the tools to plan most effectively to protect lives and critical infrastructure in partnership with them.