

March 2021

# Communications for More Effective Disaster Management

## The Communications Landscape in 2021

Human beings are social beings. Language enables us to communicate with each other in incredibly sophisticated ways. Without language, whether spoken or written, our ability to express ourselves is seriously curtailed. The advent of the telephone, radio and television started a communications revolution that has fundamentally reshaped how the more than seven billion people on the planet engage with each other; what they see, what they hear, and how their behaviour is influenced.

Latterly the rapid change in communications practice brought about by the invention of the internet and the social media platforms that are hosted by it have enabled each of us to become our own mini-broadcast channel – uploading original content but also amplifying the content of others. This is having transformative effects on how societies function, how authority is held to account, and how we collectively understand and congregate around campaigns, causes and rights issues.

We have also come to rely ever more on our social media applications to give us news. Mobile phone connections in Indonesia stood at 125 percent of population in 2020 and 74 percent of the population claims to use the internet (an increase of 15 percent on 2019), with slightly less than that (62 percent) being regular users of some form of social media (an increase of six percent on 2019).<sup>1</sup> Close to 100 percent of the working age population (16-64 years of age) claims to own a phone, with the overwhelming majority owning a smartphone and thus able to access the internet, where data shows that 96 percent of the population access the internet in this way. An average eight hours is spent per day interacting online.

In December 2020 out of the top 20 websites visited seven were news websites<sup>2</sup> and four were social media platforms.<sup>3</sup> The majority of internet related interactions were with online videos (98 percent), Videologs (74.3 percent), with listening to radio online at 58 percent.

And so we are more aware, more connected, and have access to amounts of data, information, analysis and opinion than our forebears would not even be able to imagine. But a less positive consequence of the ubiquity of information is that we often feel overwhelmed, confused, unable to separate fact from opinion, or fact from fiction.

The advent and manipulation of the expression “fake news” drives us ever deeper into the safety of our individualized social media bubbles, where the platforms that we use constantly feed us content that aligns with our own interests, friends and belief systems. Social media apps take what we browse or post about and feed us back our own thoughts gathered from other social media followers making us feel as though we have hundreds and thousands of friends feeling the same way. This is affecting how we react to information that we receive and what we believe.

## Disaster Management Communications Challenge

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected the role of strategic communications is to help organizations, including governments and their multi-stakeholder partners, understand how to effectively deliver their message to key audiences.

The National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB) provides high quality information to the media and daily briefings during response operations, but disaster risk management is a multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder issue. To manage and communicate key information across the disaster management cycle requires cross-government and cross-society engagement and strategy. Findings from studies in 2020 note that improvements are needed (i) in how the various and diverse elements of the disaster risk management ecosystem communicate with each other (government, non-government, private sector, communities etc.) and (ii) in the quality, reliability and timeliness of disaster-related information that is shared.

Once these issues are addressed there is also a need to ensure that the sharing of this information considers the preferences and unconscious biases of the diverse audiences identified earlier in this brief and finds a way to transcend the bubble effect that social media perpetuates. And so ensuring that information is perceived as being from a trustworthy source is at the heart of effective disaster management communications.

For consumers of information during times of disaster, the ability to provide feedback in a way that is useful to disaster managers and influences their ongoing relief programming requires further urgent and coordinated consideration. Revisiting the work done after the 2018 Sulawesi earthquake by the Community Engagement Working Group may be a good place to start. Suara Komunitas<sup>4</sup> was a real

<sup>1</sup> <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-indonesia>

<sup>2</sup> Detik.com, Kompas.com, Tribunnews.com, CNBCIndonesia.com, Suara.com, Liputan6.com, CNNIndonesia.com

<sup>3</sup> Youtube.com, Facebook.com, Instagram.com, Twitter.com

<sup>4</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/indonesia/indonesia-central-sulawesi-earthquake-response-suara-komunitas-community-voices-1>

time feedback publication which drew information from affected people and presented it to humanitarian decision-makers. Three editions were published, highlighting to assistance providers disaggregated community concerns related to temporary housing, accuracy of needs assessments and access to relief items. Mainstreaming feedback mechanisms into all response operations is an essential element of effective disaster management communications.

### Disaster Management Communications Strategy Development

Strategic communications need to find a way to marry the following variables:

- (i) Ensuring that people are provided with a trusted, reliable, well-coordinated and authoritative source of information upon which to base decisions which will reduce their exposure to disaster risk outside times of disaster or maximise their ability to survive during times of crisis.
- (ii) A mechanism to ensure that recipients of disaster risk management information and messaging can feed back their views on its effectiveness as well as be provided with the ability to articulate their needs in real time.
- (iii) The changing way people consume information and use it to enhance their own safety from disasters (risk reduction) and/or to know what is happening when they are in a disaster situation.
- (iv) A media landscape which is hugely variable – from tailored and targeted social media to TV, radio and print media, which focus on events that will increase their audience, and which provide only general information.
- (v) Shifting levels of trust in the various forms of media available to people.

As noted above, navigating communications in the digital age is tremendously challenging – and the difficulties in marrying of these five points simply reconfirms the complexity. But one thing is clear: disaster risk management communications strategy development needs to be led by Government and supported by the broad range of partners engaged in disaster risk reduction and response. The rich tapestry of Indonesia's disaster management partners needs to be provided with the platform and opportunity to be "on message".

The methodology for the development of an effective DM communications strategy hinges on being able to answer five key questions, with the answers forming the basis for the elaboration of an information campaign. The five questions are:

- (i) Why does the Government and its partners want to communicate to their audience? (What's the purpose?)
- (ii) To whom does the Government, and its partners want to communicate it? (Who's the audience?)
- (iii) What do the Government and its partners want to communicate? (What's the message?)
- (iv) How do the Government and its partners want to communicate it? (What communication channels are to be used?)

- (v) Who needs to be involved in communicating the message and what needs to be done to use those channels? (How will the messages be distributed?)

Developing and crafting answers to these questions will help to provide the building blocks for the strategy - but underpinning strategy development and roll out must be a communications coordination platform which engages involved actors in all aspects of that process.

Coordination in disaster management is essential. It ensures that the various entities involved in all aspects of the disaster management cycle understand their roles, responsibilities, and relationships. Effective coordination saves lives. The same is true for coordinated disaster communications – the right messages delivered in the right way to the right audiences at the right time enable people at risk to take steps to protect themselves. But information must originate from one trusted, and thus well-coordinated, source.

Consistency and clarity in how such a platform will work is essential to effective, joined up communications, and forms the basis for development of trust between disaster management actors and between those actors and the people they are aiming to serve.

### About SIAP SIAGA

SIAP SIAGA is a five-year partnership program between the Governments of Indonesia and Australia. The program aims to improve the management of disasters and increase community resilience in Indonesia and in the Indo-Pacific Region. Our approach is measured, reflective and forward-leaning which helps us to deliver the best results for DFAT and Indonesia's communities.