

Mark Edwards Still Pictures/Internews



## News you can use

In the immediate wake of a disaster, reliable information can be thin on the ground, which is where an organisation like Internews needs to be heard.

Report by **Louise Tickle.**

**R**umours can kill. Just a few weeks after the devastating Pakistan earthquake in October last year, and with tens of thousands sleeping in tent cities, aid workers were becoming increasingly bewildered and disturbed by the occurrence of sudden, fierce conflagrations that would consume the flimsy canvas shelters, dreadfully burning the people inside.

At least a dozen deaths occurred before the root of the problem was uncovered. It emerged that people who had fled their villages were now terrified of malarial mosquitoes spreading disease. Tales had multiplied through the camps that daubing kerosene on the inside of your tent would act as an effective insect repellent.

For families already distraught in the aftermath of a natural disaster, the terrible effects of the fires meant a double heartbreak. The rumours themselves, however, were only finally identified and scotched by local radio journalists working with Internews, a communications NGO that brings humanitarian reporting to post-disaster and post-conflict situations.

The nightly fires have now stopped, but as soon as one story dies down another springs up. When bottled water was distributed by UN agencies, rural villagers had never seen such a thing and suspected it wasn't fit for human consumption. Instead, they used it to wash with, and drank polluted river water, with predictable results. Another rumour that spread fast was that plague had

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infected the camps. Both issues were investigated by Internews radio reporters who broadcast interviews with agency workers and medical staff to debunk the myths behind the growing panic.

Ivan Sigal, Internews regional director for south and central Asia, says that the value of this type of practical reporting is only just starting to enjoy wider acceptance among relief workers in the field.

Access to ‘news you can use’ – via broadcasts to populations disempowered first of all by disaster and then by a lack of knowledge of what is happening on the aid front – is, he believes, not only a right, but should also to be structured into the very fabric of how an emergency response is planned and executed.

This is particularly important in situations where access to accurate information can be literally a matter of survival. In remote parts of quake-hit Pakistan, many villagers waited and waited for relief to arrive. By the time they finally realised it wasn’t coming, days and weeks had passed, winter was well underway and some of those who had been badly injured were dead.

### **No easy task**

Sigal points out the difference it would have made had there been a mass airdrop of cheap transistor radios within the first 48 hours – together with co-ordinated broadcasts telling people honestly what they could expect in terms of aid. Then local populations would have made their own decisions about whether to wait for help, or embark on the arduous trek down the mountains to where the relief effort was in full swing.

Addressing this information vacuum is what Internews exists to do. But it’s no easy task. Radio and TV broadcast facilities are often destroyed, and receiving equipment is swept away or left behind as people flee. This is the challenging situation that Internews must deal with on arriving in the field, as Parisa Sadaatmand, the organisation’s humanitarian information adviser in Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province explains.

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“It requires a lot of sympathy and compassion from a local reporter, who may initially be very inexperienced and need training, which we provide. It also means they must quickly familiarise themselves with the hundreds of international agencies all working here,” she says.

Her role since the earthquake has been to recruit and train local university graduates in the nuts and bolts of humanitarian reporting. She has also helped to produce Internews’ hour-long programme, Jazba-e-tameer, which made it onto the airwaves within three weeks of the quake. It now goes out daily on seven emergency FM frequencies that cover much of the affected region.

Sadaatmand is clear that this type of programming is not the same as conventional journalism. It has a single clear purpose, which is to empower local people by informing them of any matters relevant to their survival and eventual rehabilitation in the post-disaster zone. “We are the only team in the country that is going into the field, digging out what is going on and reporting on it,” she says.

Feedback from listeners comes in through the weekly live phone-in programme, and the message is that the broadcasts are helping.

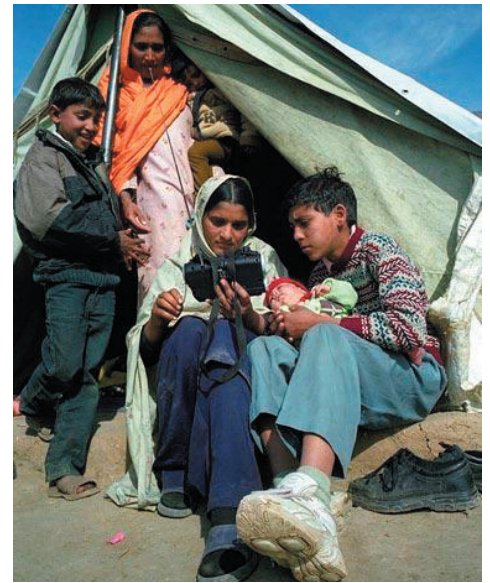
This is the reason why Ed Girardet, a journalist with National Geographic and the Christian Science Monitor who has reported from disaster zones for 25 years, says he is so frustrated. To date, he insists, the big agencies and donors have done little to support the work of NGOs like Internews, while victims of crisis remain hungry for news that could hugely affect their future.

“In Kosovo,” he recalls, “I would see people coming over the border to Albania in their cars, and then there would be groups of 20 to 30 men standing around a car radio listening intently to what was happening”.

As co-founder of Media Action International, an NGO that used to work with international journalists, Internews and the Institute of War Reporting on needs-based information for victims of disaster, Girardet believes that aid agencies can be reluctant to let people on the ground know what is really going on.

“This is linked to accountability. Aid is often delivered with a neo-colonial approach – they’ll say, ‘we know what’s good for you so just shut up and we’ll get on and do our job.’

“What we were saying was that people have a need and a right to know what’s going on and a right to survive.



### **Cap-in-hand**

With no rolling funds, Internews has never been able to invest in a stock of mobile radio stations-in-a-suitcase, booster transmitters, minidisks or cheap transistors for immediate use in a crisis. This means that every time a disaster strikes, its directors have to go cap-in-hand to the donors while precious time is lost.

Meanwhile, the aid agencies have hit the ground running, and when organizations like Internews arrive, they say it can be that much harder to dovetail in with the work already started.

Agencies’ attitudes to what his organisation can offer vary enormously, Ivan Sigal acknowledges wryly. “In Aceh, we had a lot of success in getting the aid agencies to buy into it. We had already been there for six years so we had those relationships. In Sri Lanka it was much more difficult. Neither Internews nor any other media organisation was operational. When I arrived in January 2005 I had to build up relationships on the media side, and on the donor side and agency side. It took a level of convincing”.

If damaged, isolated communities in disaster zones are to get the information he believes they deserve, Sigal says that it must be planned for at policy level with the funding to match. This way, humanitarian agencies can be encouraged to embed communications into their planning for the initial emergency response.

“It has to be people like DFID who ask the questions of agencies; ‘How are you going to be telling and asking people about what they need?’” he states firmly.

“Telecomms Sans Frontiers goes in to set up information systems for the international aid agencies – someone should be there doing this for the local communities.”

**For information on DFID’s response to the Pakistan earthquake see [www.dfid.gov.uk](http://www.dfid.gov.uk)**