

Various Channels Used by Humanitarian Partners for Mass Communication

Channel	Pros/ Strengths	Cons/ Weaknesses	Useful refugee/IDP contexts
Noticeboards	Works for both simple and complex messages.	Limited geographic coverage.	Camps of displaced people requiring specific information, or areas frequented by displaced persons in urban areas.
Posters and flyers	Simple to produce. Appropriate to communicate both practical and more complex information.	Physical access to the target community is needed and there can be limited impact on low literacy populations unless the message is conveyed in pictures or cartoons.	Can be distributed intensively in targeted locations both camp and non-camp.
Public address (PA) systems/sound trucks:	Simple means of reaching broad audience in multiple languages, and overcoming illiteracy issues.		Good for targeting high density population groups concentrated in large villages, urban areas or camps.
Hotlines	Good for feedback systems given high phone ownership in many contexts.	Most vulnerable may not have access to a phone. Cost of placing a call can be a deterrent.	Applicable for both camp and non-camp settings. Particularly useful in urban areas where humanitarian staff may not have regular contact with PoCs.
Comment/complaint boxes	Good for anonymous feedback from communities. Requires writing skills or someone to compose the message on behalf of another.	Requires someone to reply to all complaints/ comments and can be high maintenance.	Usually placed in humanitarian office areas or central gathering areas in camps.
SMS¹	Mass reach given high mobile phone ownership in most contexts. Cost effective if partnerships exist with local telecommunications providers.	Can only communicate short messages - still need to direct people to more detailed sources of information or meetings. Hard to validate that communities understood and spread the message.	Initially to reach a mass audience facing similar issues: e.g. camps of displaced people. Can also be implemented to targeted audiences in urban areas (requires subscription).
Radio²	Well-known resource, usually low cost, has a potential wide coverage, and time can be taken to explore issues in depth. Provides a forum for participation and feedback, with a talk back segment or SMS feedback.	Requires access to a radio and electricity or batteries.	For information dissemination or call-in in both urban and rural settings. Radio distributions or can be set up by humanitarian partners, or established at the initiative of PoCs as a livelihood activity.
Television	Has a large reach and can function as a tool for feedback via programme call ins/SMS feedback.	Access not as widespread as radio.	Viewers tend to be more urban than rural.
Social media³	Increasingly useful tool for sharing and gathering information from affected populations. Useful for PoCs to reach diaspora.	Requires internet access/functioning telecoms structure. The most vulnerable often to not have access to social media.	Mass reach but mostly used by urban, educated populations. In some contexts internet tents/centres are used (generally not in early emergency phase).
Crisis Mapping⁴	Allows “crowdsourcing” – collecting information from SMS, news and the web (including social media) – aggregate the information into a single platform, and visualize it on a map and timeline.	Time intensive. Requires dedicated capacity (though in large-scale emergencies, online volunteer groups can get involved).	Can be used to identify and map protection risks in camp settings, or develop a clearer overview of refugee/IDP locations in urban settings.

From “Strengthening UNHCR Capacity for Mass Communication with Refugees in Field Operations,” March 2013.

¹ SMS or “text messaging” systems enable instantaneous two-way communication on a large scale – humanitarian actors can send, receive and manage SMS messages over a mobile network. There is a variety of open-source (free) software available for this. The main costs involved are the messaging rates/network fees, which in some cases can be provided for free or reduced rates through agreements with service providers and/or government regulators. In some cases, humanitarian actors distribute mobile phones and/or solar mobile phone chargers as NFIs to enable these SMS messaging systems.

² Advances have been made in deploying radio capacity in emergencies. Initiative such as “Radio in a Suitcase” offer complete FM radio stations packed into 2 suitcases weighing 20kg each that can broadcast as far as 20km. It allows broadcasters to put a station on the air within 72 hours. In this context, humanitarian partners have distributed radios (hand-crank, solar-powered) to affected populations at community or household level with positive results.

³ Displaced and disaster-affected populations are increasingly connected via social media such as Twitter and Facebook. “Social media” refers to the means of interactions among people in which they create, share, exchange and comment on contents among themselves in virtual communities and networks.

⁴ An example is [Crowdmap](#), a hosted (web-based) version of the [Ushahidi](#) platform.