



Key SBCC Actions in a Rapid-Onset Emergency: Case Study From the 2015 Nepal Earthquakes

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Abstract

In case of an emergency, various social and behavior change communication (SBCC) instruments can play an important role in not only providing immediate access to lifesaving information to affected populations but also in resilience building and strengthening accountability of government and international and national civil society organizations.

This case study provides the readers with an overview of key challenges, needs, and SBCC strategies in case of a large-scale emergency that affects beneficiaries, service providers, and humanitarian actors at the same time. It suggests a step-by-step approach, starting with functional media channels for immediate dissemination of lifesaving messages and collection of feedback on the needs and concerns of affected population, and then slowly moving on to directly reaching out to communities through a variety of SBCC strategies

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including mobile ‘edutainment’ (Entertainment with the purpose of providing educational information to the target audience) shows and face-to-face community mobilization.

The chapter focuses on key elements of the SBCC strategy pursued by UNICEF: a strong coordination mechanism between the government and national and local partners both regarding communication efforts and accountability mechanisms, a rapid assessment and rehabilitation of communication channels and mechanisms to ensure meaningful participation, and opportunities for community members to provide feedback and receive mass-scale counselling.

2015 Earthquakes in Nepal: Impact and Needs

Due to Nepal’s complex geological formation, its position in an active seismic zone and heavy annual rainfall, the South Asian country is highly prone to rapid- as well as slow-onset natural disasters such as earthquakes, landslides, floods, or droughts. In the past, Nepal experienced major earthquakes every few generations (Government of Nepal, National Planning Commission (2015)) providing a historical pattern for an eventual earthquake return period of 40 till 80 years. Given such a context, two elements are key: emergency preparedness and a rapid response mechanism once an emergency hits.

The two devastating earthquakes that occurred in Nepal on the 25th of April and the 12th of May 2015 severely affected many regions within the country. Around 8,959 people lost their lives, and 22,302 people were injured, 2,661 of whom were children. In the worst affected areas, entire settlements were flattened or swept away by landslides. (Government of Nepal, National Reconstruction Authority (2016). According to the survey conducted by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA), 605,254 houses were fully damaged, and 288,255 houses were partially damaged.) With a majority of houses being damaged or fully destroyed, people were forced to leave their houses and move to safe spaces or live in makeshift shelters. Many health centers and much of the community infrastructure, including water systems and latrines, were damaged or destroyed.

The ensuing landslides blocked major roads and highways, and transportation was severely curtailed for authorities and relief agencies to reach affected districts and populations. All forms of communication and transportation were severely affected, and telecommunication networks were disrupted in all the affected districts. Public service television and radio broadcasts went off air, some of them for several days. A lot of equipment and buildings belonging to community radio stations were either damaged or destroyed. Government authorities, development agencies, and aid workers in Kathmandu and at the district headquarters faced difficulties in communicating with affected communities.

Providing critical response and early recovery is a core task of the first weeks after an emergency hits. In addition to the immediate survival and protection needs, people needed critical, lifesaving information and the means to communicate with their family members and the authorities (For a detailed timeline for an effective

response and a toolkit on behaviour change communication in emergencies, please see UNICEF (2017b), pp. 32–35 and UNICEF (2006)). Lack of electricity, mobile and telephone connectivity, and damaged physical infrastructure made it very difficult for communities and relief responders to communicate with each other. In addition, communication service providers such as design agencies, media-buying agencies, and printers had all been affected and were working at sub-optimal capacity.

There was an imminent need for communication channels to be re-established in order to communicate with the affected communities for rescue, aid, ensuring safety from constant aftershocks, prevention of disease outbreaks, providing key lifesaving messages and psychosocial support, and for providing affected populations platforms to voice their concerns and provide feedback on the response to duty bearers.

Social and Behavior Change Communication Response

In view of the above, social and behavior change communication (SBCC) was an intrinsic part of the UNICEF response to Nepal earthquake. (DARA (2016), p. 8) It was guided by the Core Commitments for Children (CCC) in Humanitarian Actions. (UNICEF (2010). The CCC is UNICEF’s central policy to uphold the rights of children affected by humanitarian crisis and are based on global standards and norms for humanitarian action.) The founding elements of the response included:

- Forging alliances with multiple stakeholders and strengthening their capacities to effectively communicate with affected populations. In order to better coordinate, plan, manage, and monitor communication initiatives and as such avoid duplication, misunderstanding, rumors, and misinformation, an inter-agency coordination group was established.
- Using various communication channels to promote dialogue with affected populations around key lifesaving messages and critical information in the areas of health, nutrition, water and sanitation, education, child protection, and relief and rehabilitation.
- To ensure participation of and accountability to affected populations, providing them with platforms and spaces to obtain relevant information, voice their concerns, provide feedback on the response to duty bearers, and receive psychosocial counselling to help deal with their situation, with a focus on women, children, and the most marginalized.

UNICEF worked with the Government of Nepal and other development partners to develop a comprehensive SBCC strategy for responding to the situation. Based on a rapid assessment of sectoral and crosscutting communication needs, key messages and content for dialogue were developed and channels identified to disseminate these in the most affected districts. Care was taken to ensure that it was not just a

one-way dissemination of messages but that there were appropriate mechanisms to ensure that community feedback and voices were heard in order to make the communication and response efforts need-based and also ensure accountability to affected populations.

Coordination Mechanism

To ensure a convergent and coherent SBCC response to the earthquake, UNICEF established a ‘*Communicating with Affected Communities*’ (CWC) working group. The group brought together several development partners including UN agencies, international and national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), media organizations, and community radio operators. It ensured that partners were informed about each other’s efforts, had a common vision and approach, and that there was no duplication of efforts. In collaboration with members of this group and the National Health Education Information and Communication Centre (NHEICC), which operated under the Ministry of Health and Population, a national communication response plan was developed. This was implemented through various partners.

After the first few weeks of the earthquake, the CWC was further subdivided into four subgroups in order to coordinate the work better. These included:

Subgroup	Responsibility
Messages and materials	Through this subgroup a common set of messages were developed so that all partners communicated the same messages to communities and that there was no confusion among communities over these messages. The group would also periodically update and refresh messages based on evolving needs. Action-oriented communication materials that were developed by partners were uploaded onto a drop box site, which was accessible to all members of the CWC. Members could download, view, and print these materials as per their needs, helping in avoiding duplication in terms of different partners developing similar types of materials for the same audience
Community mobilization	The subgroup on community mobilization was responsible for coordinating direct, community-based outreach work. This helped in ensuring that partners could spread themselves and cover areas in an organized manner and avoid duplication
Radio	This group comprised of representatives of community radio operators and media-based organizations. The group managed work related to assessing the status of damaged community radio stations and preparing a roadmap for their rehabilitation. They also worked with various community radio stations to ensure uniform and correct transmission of key messages
Monitoring and evaluation	Understanding the criticality of evidence-based and data-driven work, the subgroup was responsible for carrying out communication assessments, monitoring, and evaluation

Rapid Appraisal of Communication Channels and Resources

If an emergency strikes, it is crucial to immediately disseminate key messages to affected families and communities through a variety of communication channels. In the aftermath of the earthquakes, however, most telecommunication networks were badly damaged, and services were disrupted. National and local television and radio stations went off air because of structural damage to their buildings, damage to equipment, and the absence of human resources to run news programs.

In Nepal community radio stations (270 radios were registered as community radios in 2015.) serve as one of the most important sources of information for communities, especially in remote areas, and was the preferred channel to receive information during the aftermath of the earthquakes. (Inter-Agency Common Feedback Project (2016), p. 12. 55% of the 2100 respondents indicated to have used radio and 31% television immediately following the earthquake.) Many of these radio stations were partially or fully damaged, and many were not in a position to communicate with communities in the geographies that they serve due to breakdown in the supply of electricity.

Through the radio subgroup of the CWC, discussions were held to identify effective ways of resuming community radio services in the districts that had suffered most. In collaboration with the Asia Pacific regional office of AMARC and the ‘*Association of Community Radio Broadcasters*’ (ACORAB), an assessment of the extent of damage suffered by community radio stations was conducted. (The Humanitarian Data Exchange (online platform), <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/radio-stations-in-earthquake-affected-areas>. Accessed June 2018) Based on the assessment findings, a short-term and a long-term rehabilitation plan was developed and implemented.

The short-term plan comprised of providing rehabilitation supplies to the damaged stations such as tents, zoom recorders, power generators, telephone hybrids, power backups, batteries, stabilizers, laptops, and radio receivers for distribution in communities and also providing training to local technicians on repairing damaged radio sets. As soon as these community radio stations were equipped with the minimum requirements for airing, they started to intensively broadcast critical information related to staying safe, relief efforts, and messages around health, nutrition, water and sanitation, education, and child protection. Over 100,000 min of messages were broadcasted through 191 community radio stations. Rapid assessment findings collected in July and August 2015 indicated that around 87% people could recollect key messages that were aired through radio. (Inter-Agency Common Feedback Project (2016), p. 40. The rapid assessment was done based on 222 key informant surveys across 10 earthquake-affected districts.)

The long-term plan comprised of providing training to community radio stations on strengthening disaster risk reduction and increasing emergency preparedness and developing programs to help communities better prepare and respond to future emergencies.

Community Consultation and Participation

Immediately after the earthquake, most of the relief and response activities focused on rescue, treatment of injuries, and provision of essential relief supplies to affected communities. While these were extremely important, there was also a need to provide opportunities for affected populations to voice their needs and concerns and to provide psychosocial counselling to people to get over the emotional trauma that the earthquake had caused. (Plan International, Save the Children, UNICEF, World Vision in collaboration with the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development and the Central Child Welfare Board (2016), p. 5) People including children were demonstrating common signs and symptoms of mental stress such as palpitation, sleeplessness, headache, dizziness, anxiety, fear, and inability to focus on day-to-day activities. A consultation among 1,838 girls and boys done in May and June 2015 by development agencies, in coordination with the Government of Nepal, revealed that major concerns regarding the “well-being were grief and sadness at deaths of family members, friends, and acquaintances and a strong feeling of loss, fear, and other psychosocial impacts of the damage and destruction.” (Idem, p. 22)

In order to reach out to communities at scale with psychosocial counselling support and entertainment-education, the radio program ‘*Bhandai Sundai*’ (Talking-Listening) was initiated. While many of the community FM stations, which are an important source of information for communities in rural Nepal, were unable to broadcast because they had been damaged by the earthquake, the national broadcaster ‘*Radio Nepal*’ was still broadcasting round-the-clock. It was the only means of information for people in remote areas of the country. People were constantly tuned into Radio Nepal to get more information on the situation as well as relief and response efforts. (Inter-Agency Common Feedback Project (2015), p. 18. 94% out of the 222 respondents of the rapid assessment done in July and August 2015 indicated to listen to radio.) As such, the station provided a unique opportunity to reach out to people at scale, within a week of the earthquake.

The programs quickly gained great popularity, and many calls could not be taken due to time constraints. Listeners across the earthquake-affected districts and beyond greatly benefitted from listening to the advice given by counsellors on the show as most of them were facing similar issues (Fig. 1). Thus, gradually the program turned into psychosocial counselling on a mass scale. Considering the inherent private and personal nature of counselling, the identities of all callers were kept confidential unless they wanted to identify themselves on-air. By targeting different audiences (Table 1), the program was successfully able to address the psychosocial concerns of children, women, and families who were otherwise outside the immediate reach of direct counselling services due to the devastating impact the earthquake had had on the physical infrastructure of the country. A survey conducted 1 year after the earthquake highlighted that the psychosocial benefit was ranking just behind information to relief assistance and knowledge around earthquakes, resulting in an overall recommendation to strengthen the role of communicating with communities in addressing trauma and psychosocial needs. (CDAC Network (2016), pp. 8 and 10).

Table 1 Format and audience of *Bhandai Sundai* program

Time	Duration	Audience	Content
Morning	30 min	All audiences	Situation updates and information on relief and response efforts of the government and development partners. An opportunity for people to call in and share their needs and concerns with concerned government authorities who would periodically participate in the show was provided
Afternoon	55 min	Women	Psychosocial support: Calls on the show were answered by trained counsellors who would provide counselling to callers to help them deal with their problems and trauma
Early evening	20 min	Children and adolescents	Psychosocial support and entertainment: During the show, children were encouraged to call and share their feelings with a trained adult, who would give them practical tips on how to deal with the situation. They were invited to sing songs, recite poems, share jokes, or simply talk to help them get a few lighter moments and get over the trauma. Occasionally popular celebrities and comedians would also be invited on the show to increase the entertainment quotient of the show
Evening	45 min	All audiences	Psychosocial support to everybody who wanted to talk to a trained counsellor to discuss the emotional issues that they were going through and find options to deal with their condition

Source: Author

Radio Nepal, being a credible government body, also helped ensure accountability to affected populations by directly calling concerned government authorities on getting grievances from affected communities in order to address them at the local level. The program also helped disseminate information and critical lifesaving messages and content on health, nutrition, water and sanitation, education, and child protection. Around 13,300 min of on-air psychosocial counselling, key lifesaving messages and information were provided to listeners through the ‘*Bhandai Sundai*’ radio program.

The program steadily turned into a very strong platform to promote initiatives such as the *Back to School Campaign*, *Nutrition Week*, and the *Cash transfer scheme* (For more information, please see: https://www.unicef.org/media/media_82139.html, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(15\)00184-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(15)00184-9/fulltext), https://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_100594.html.) for earthquake-affected families belonging to certain disadvantaged groups. For instance, as part of the Back to School Campaign, ‘mock classes’ were organized on the show to help teachers and administrators understand the facilities and services that needed to be provided in schools and how they should carry out classes in the first few days after reopening of the school so that children could overcome their fears and slowly settle down in a child-friendly environment. Several telephone conversations and interviews were also carried out with district

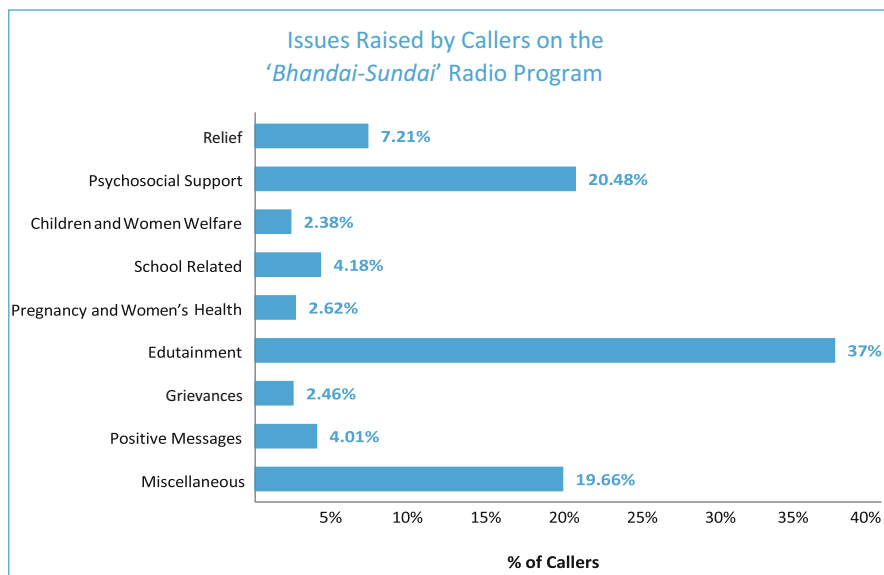


Fig. 1 Issues raised by radio audience. (Out of the 1200 callers, 68% were male and 32% were female. Although the number of female callers was lower than the male callers, an analysis of the calls revealed that many men were calling to discuss problems or issues related to their children or female members of their family. 61% of the callers were adults, whereas 39% were children. Miscellaneous included, among others, questions on rumors, other earthquakes or after-shocks, related to day-to-day life or support from government. Source: Author)

education officers, principals, teachers, parents, and students to discuss issues around reopening of schools including psychosocial and safety concerns.

Starting at a time when people were desperate for information and psychosocial support, the program was able to successfully reach out to people to satisfy both their information needs and requirements for emotional support. Further, it also created a conduit for community needs to reach duty bearers for taking necessary actions.

Mobile Edutainment Shows with Celebrities

Based on the positive response to the radio program and building on the popular brand name, '*Bhandai Sundai*,' a travelling 'edutainment' show titled '*Bhandai Sundai Gaon Gaon Ma*' '*Talking – Listening in villages*' was created.

Popular Nepali celebrities – comedians, magicians, singers and other performing artists (These included UNICEF goodwill ambassador Ani Choying Drolma, and other celebrities such as Jeetu Nepal, Kaliprasad Baskota, Komal Oli, Deepak Raj Giri, Deepashree Niraula and others.) – reached out to communities in remote areas with entertainment coupled with messaging on critical issues. The celebrities along with the messages that they carried were warmly received by people in much need

of entertainment to help them forget the traumatic experiences that they had been through. The celebrities reached out to the communities and camps in severely affected districts (Rasuwa, Nuwakot, Dhading, Gorkha, Ramechhap, Dolakha, Sindhupalchowk, Kavre, Sindhuli, Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur) and provided them entertainment along with lifesaving messages on health, nutrition, sanitation, hygiene, and child protection – through music, comedy shows, and other entertainment-based programs. The program received tremendous response from the people, drawing in huge crowds wherever it was organized.

Youth Engagement

To reach out directly to communities in most affected and media-dark areas with critical, lifesaving messages, UNICEF partnered with a youth organization – ‘Yuwalaya’ – with strong district-based networks. Hundreds of youth volunteers went door to door, community to community, and also to camp sites to talk to people and provide information to keep them safe from disease outbreaks and other effects of the earthquake such as trafficking of women and children which dramatically increased after the earthquake. These face-to-face activities were valued especially for information exchanges and discussion. Further, young volunteers also demonstrated the use of essential rehabilitation supplies and distributed communication materials.

Involving young people from local communities in the outreach activities not only ensures appropriateness and acceptance of messages but also increases identification and creates a sense of ownership. Furthermore, engaging children and youth in the design and implementation of disaster risk reduction and preparedness plans will provide them with lifesaving messages before a disaster strikes and will support them in protecting themselves and their families. (Plan International, Save the Children, UNICEF, World Vision (2016), pp. 5 and 42ff.)

Recovery and Preparedness

From a long-term perspective, the SBCC goals in the recovery phase were to help families and communities better prepare for and respond to natural disasters with a focus on women’s and children’s issues and to positively impact knowledge, attitudes and practices.

Given the destruction of livelihoods as well as reduction in the protection and security provided by the family and community, children and young people were at an increased risk of sexual violence, gender-based abuses, human trafficking and unsafe migration. To empower young people and their communities to make informed choices that enable them to become more resilient during and after natural disasters, a SBCC program for ‘*Promoting Recovery and Resilience among Earthquake-affected Communities*’ was designed based on the Socio-Ecological Model and implemented in select earthquake-affected districts. The capacities of civil society organizations, community-based groups and networks and young people

were built to disseminate critical information; track community perceptions and needs; develop community actions plans to address unsafe migration and human trafficking; create mechanisms for feedback generation and action by duty bearers and prepare communities for future disasters, reaching over 57,000 people.

With the aim to increase family and community preparedness for natural hazards, UNICEF designed and implemented an *edutainment* radio drama series '*Milan Chowk*' covering child survival and well-being and including episodes on health, nutrition, sanitation, education and protection. These were complemented with disaster risk reduction (DRR) messages around recurring types of natural disasters in the country. The drama, located in the imaginary village '*Milan Chowk*', was developed and broadcasted in Nepali and four widely spoken languages. It was supplemented by local content in local languages produced by 16 community radio stations from priority districts who benefited from mentoring and training. The local program capsules created community participation and ownership of the drama series and increased the effectiveness of the content. Audience feedback was generated through interviews with people from the community, so-called voxpops, group discussions held during the recap episodes, and focus group discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews (KII) held during the field and mentoring visits and fed back into the radio drama series.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The Common Feedback Project (CFP), (For further information, please see <http://cfp.org.np/>.) which was a member of the CWC and housed under the UN Resident Coordinator's office carried out communication assessments in collaboration with the CWC member organizations. These were carried out to understand communication needs that communities had, as well as preferences, barriers, and challenges that they were facing in accessing information. These assessments provided valuable information to UNICEF and partners to fine-tune the communication response as well as provided insights into the effectiveness of ongoing communication interventions.

The CFP also carried out community feedback and perception surveys as well as weekly rumor tracking surveys (In the initial phase, a lot of rumors were spread, including misinformation on other earthquakes, and related to government response and relief material. Reports are available on <http://citizenhelpdesk.org/nepal-archive/> (previously: <http://quakehelpdesk.org/>.) in collaboration with Internews, Local Interventions Group, and Accountability Lab. Data from these feedback mechanisms helped inform communication efforts.

A third-party end-user monitoring system to monitor the effectiveness of the humanitarian response was established, which provided periodic reports on the performance of UNICEF emergency programs, including the SBCC initiatives. The feedback from the monitoring system helped understand program performance as well as implementation bottlenecks and course correct as required.

An independent evaluation of the UNICEF response which highlighted that the response succeeded in achieving the Humanitarian Performance Monitoring (HPM) target of reaching 1 million affected people. “The C4D (Communication for Development / SBCC) section was able as well through the CWC working group to harmonize and coordinate the messaging of different partners and different sectors. This resulted in raising the profile of communication with communities to a specific area of activity, with its own funding and objectives. Effectiveness and coverage have been outstanding.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

The mega-earthquakes that struck Nepal in April and May 2015 were the biggest disasters to hit the country in a very long time. With the aim of better coordinating communication efforts among relief providers, UN agencies, international and national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), media organizations, and community radio operators collaborated under a newly established ‘*Communication with affected Communities Working Group*’ (CWC) in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. The latter in collaboration with the government took a key role in providing situation updates and disseminating critical and timely lifesaving messages right from the onset of the emergency and help communities stay safe from aftershocks, clarify rumors, and recover from the effects of the earthquake.

A partnership with the main national broadcaster helped ensure accountability to affected populations by providing communities with a channel to give feedback to humanitarian responders on their concerns and needs. Intensive messaging through Nepal’s widespread network of community radio stations coupled with community mobilization through youth volunteers and edutainment activities – especially in media-dark areas – ensured that affected populations had access to critical and lifesaving information. As highlighted by an external evaluation (DARA, 2016), this approach achieved significant results especially taking into account the inaccessibility of most areas. Given the increasingly high rate of mobile ownership and usage, sharing and collecting real-time information via an SMS-based technology is currently being looked into (Inter-Agency Common Feedback Project (2016), p. 12. 70% of the 2100 respondents indicated to have used the mobile phone immediately following the earthquakes. Sharecast (2017), p. 19. 67% of the respondents were listening to the radio on their mobile phones. However, special attention needs to be paid to reach women as across generations, significantly less women own phones than their male peers (22% difference for the 15–19-year-olds and 15% for the 20–24 year-olds), Government of Nepal, Ministry of Health (2017) pp. 322 and 323.).

Building capacities of community radio stations and CSOs on disaster preparedness and response can be a valuable investment so that they can prepare communities as well as immediately start local programs after a disaster. In the case of Nepal, two pilot projects were launched shortly after the

earthquake, strengthening the capacity of selected community radios and CSOs in hazard-prone areas in producing programs and conducting social mobilization activities on disaster risk reduction.

Much required, on-air psychosocial counselling helped people cope with their trauma. As consequences for children and women in emergencies are likely to be more severe, special programs were created addressing their needs and concerns. A strong focus should also be put on actively involving children living with disabilities in such programs. (UNICEF 2017a)

This interactive radio program as well as community perception surveys that were carried out through the CWC provided valuable feedback on the information and rehabilitation needs of communities. However, in the absence of a SBCC cluster, this feedback could not often reach clusters in a systematic manner. Further, information on the timeframe of response efforts such as supplies, equipment, or shelter could not be fed back to communities to the extent desired as information on these were not systematically available to the CWC partners. The CWC was activated after the emergency. Given the importance of having such a group as a preparedness measure and hence to push the preparedness and prepositioning agenda, the CWC was maintained. (Renamed into the '*Community Engagement Working Group*' (CEWG), the group got reactivated during the 2017 floods in the Terai region and acted as an important coordination mechanism for all humanitarian actors in Nepal regarding community engagement and SBCC.). As an external evaluation (DARA, 2016) summarizes the SBCC response, the "creation of the CWC working group, set up of feedback mechanisms, design of communication activities, harmonization of materials, and use of radio programmes for mass psychosocial counselling were all appropriate initiatives, some of them with an innovative approach that should be highlighted as elements of good practice."

The CCC underscores the critical role of preparedness for a rapid and efficient emergency response. (UNICEF (2010), p. 5) Having a contingency plan including specific agreements with partners for community mobilization and long-term agreements for needs assessments, monitoring and evaluation, material development, and media buying greatly helps in expediting the response during a disaster.

Concurrent monitoring, evaluation, and documentation help course correct as well as establish the added value of SBCC interventions for ensuring greater investments in SBCC human resources and program budgets.

In disaster-prone countries like Nepal, it is crucial that government and developing and implementing a comprehensive SBCC strategy to reach people with critical information for disaster risk reduction and emergency preparedness, at the same time as ensure accountability to affected populations by collecting feedback and inputs from at risk and affected people, providing platforms through which children, women, youth, and populations as a whole can communicate with duty bearers on their needs and concerns. Building resilience and capacities of communities by actively involving children, adolescents, and youth will help the society as general to help them better prepare and respond to future emergencies and protect the most vulnerable.

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