Indonesian Red Cross and beneficiary communications: the Sumatra earthquake

Background
In April 2012, an earthquake measuring 8.7 on the Richter scale struck near the island of Sumatra, Indonesia, triggering an Indian Ocean-wide tsunami alert. Within hours, the earthquake was followed by an after-shock of 8.2 magnitude, causing widespread panic amongst communities in the region of Aceh and the greater Pacific Rim.

Right information at the right time
With damages to mobile phone networks making communication difficult, the Indonesian Red Cross radio programme, "Rumoh PMI", served as a key resource for information to local communities. Indonesian Red Cross staff contacted numerous sources to piece together crucial information, which was then broadcast through various channels (radio, Twitter and Facebook).

The Indonesian Red Cross worked in collaboration with a number of key sources for information including:

› Head of Aceh Geophysics Station - to collect critical information on the threat of aftershocks and a potential tsunami.
› Governor of Aceh – for information on damage caused and causalities.
› Local Red Cross branches – to gather critical data about damage and ‘real time’ signs of oncoming waves/tsunamis from these areas.
› Badan Penanggulangan Bencana Aceh (BPBA) representatives - on damage to infrastructure and the threat of after-shocks and a potential tsunami.

The following case study highlights the important role that communications plays in supporting the needs of communities after a disaster, illustrated through the experience of the Indonesian Red Cross (Palang Merah Indonesia) with the 2012 earthquake.
Lessons learned

The Indonesian Red Cross found that providing information to communities in the aftermath of the earthquake was extremely valuable. The radio broadcast clarified critical information during a time of high-stress and confusion, and it served as a reliable source of information throughout the region. Specific lessons learned include the following:

› The Indonesian Red Cross radio station was one of two functioning radio stations in Banda Aceh after the earthquake. Consequently, the role of the Indonesian Red Cross as a key actor for disaster response was reinforced among local and regional partners.

› Live streaming of the broadcasts via the Internet increased coverage outside the immediate local area. This was particularly important for those on standby, waiting to provide assistance to the people of Aceh.

› Due to a backup generator, the Red Cross radio station functioned effectively across the Sumatra province. With power outages common during and after disasters, a second generator is critical.

› The Indonesian Red Cross has an SMS and phone line available to the public. When there was no response several hours after the earthquake due to the disruption of phone networks, it was found that social media channels are a critical method for reaching wider audiences.

› Social media channels are also useful for receiving critical data, which can be re-broadcast through radio, thus increasing penetration and dissemination of real-time data. Yet while this data can be very valuable, verification through multiple sources is needed to ensure that information is correct.

› It is useful for communities if broadcasts continue with important information such as damage, potential affects of the disaster, number of casualties, and locations for Red Cross or Red Crescent assistance.

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