

Initial needs assessment

Gaza Strip

**Access to information and perceived
accountability of aid services**

February 2009

Summary

At a time of crises, people need information as much as water, food, medicine or shelter. Information can, not only save lives, but also enable better accountability, more effective management of expectations and improved humanitarian response.

An initial needs assessment was carried out by the BBC World Service Trust on the access to information in the Gaza Strip during and after the Israeli military operation of January 2009, and on the perceived accountability of aid services delivered. This highlighted the critical needs for information for the residents of Gaza at the different stages of the current crisis.

During the bombardment, Gaza residents needed simple information. People typically wanted to know what was happening, the movement of Israeli tanks, accurate information on the number of people killed or injured, the type of weapons used by the Israeli army, where they could get food and health care, where their families and friends were.

During the bombardment, normal information channels became unavailable in the Gaza Strip and information was least accessible to those most affected. Information was scarce and often unreliable. 78% of the Gaza residents interviewed for this assessment declared receiving conflicting information, which according to them was mostly due to the media spreading inaccurate, biased, unverified information or rumours. Though television remains the most consumed media in the Gaza Strip, 42% of Gaza residents interviewed for this needs assessment said that radio was the most credible source of information during the Israeli military operation.

People staffing Palestinian media outlets and information centres were among those affected by the crisis. All Gaza-based Palestinian media outlets' managers expressed the need for better physical protection and psychological support for their staff. Half of the managers admitted that some of their staff now suffer from trauma-related psychological disorders that are affecting their work and interpersonal relationships.

Immediately after the unilateral cease-fires and withdrawal of Israeli troops, Gaza residents needed to know about the availability of medical and financial assistance (coupons, etc), sources of food and fresh water supplies, how to prevent diseases and information on reconstruction efforts.

An important component at the current stage of the crisis is expectation management. Ineffective communication can create false expectations and misunderstandings about what assistance is forthcoming, and about the role of the agency in question.

Furthermore, Gaza residents who have been strongly affected by the crisis need a sense of hope and purpose. Information and communication is essential for them to start claiming a sense of power and purpose over their own destiny. They cannot shape their own future and play an active role in the recovery process unless they can make sense of what help is available to them, and what it is designed to deliver.

When asked what kind of information they are now looking for now, interviewed Gaza residents said they were looking for information on protection of children (29%), how to deal with trauma (21%), livelihood (21%), waste management (including rubble removal) (15%), food security (7%), and unexploded ordnances (7%).

As highlighted through the data collected for this needs assessment, almost half of the media professionals interviewed have said they could not easily access information on humanitarian aid projects being implemented in the Gaza Strip. More importantly, 71% of interviewed Gaza residents have stressed that they do not have enough information on the type of aid available and recovery mechanisms in general. More precisely, 50% of the respondents said they did not have sufficient information regarding health care services and psychological support, and 64% said they did not have sufficient information regarding reconstruction assistance.

Regarding the role of local media in helping Gaza residents to ask and answer their questions, only 50% of the respondents said coverage and participatory programmes were tackling issues of interest to them and providing a space for them to raise issues of concern.

The information needs of Gaza residents in the aftermath of the bombardment remain largely unmet because the people, systems and resources that are required to meet them simply don't exist in a meaningful way.

Within the Palestinian media landscape there is little space for participatory communications and service-based information. Interviewed Palestinian media managers recognized the need for building the capacity of their teams to be able to address social and psychological issues of concern to Gaza residents in the early recovery period.

A number of steps can be taken to address these needs, but these can only be achieved if integrated strategically within the overall humanitarian response.

Introduction

When crisis or disaster strikes, people need help. They need shelter, food, water and safety; but also information.

Communications strategies for beneficiaries hold huge potential for aid organisations themselves. This is not just because they can save lives, but because they enable better accountability, more effective management of expectations and ultimately improved humanitarian response.

Following 22 days of bombardment during the Israeli *Cast Lead* operation, the BBC World Service Trust carried out an initial needs assessment on the access to information in Gaza during the bombardment and in the early humanitarian aid delivery period. The needs assessment also tackled issues related to information on and accountability of aid services delivered by Palestinian and International organisations in the Gaza Strip.

This report estimates the critical need to mainstream information and communication both across the media sector as a whole and within projects and agencies.

The first part of the report assesses how Gaza residents identify information needs during Operation *Cast Lead* and in the early recovery period that follows.

The second part explores how little demands are being met, why this is and what structures, systems and skills are missing.

The third part suggests a number of clear steps that can be taken to resolve these issues.

Methodology

This needs assessment is based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection approaches during the period from 11 to 17 February 2009:

1. Data collection on Palestinian media outlets available in the Gaza Strip
2. Data collection on the impact of Operation *Cast Lead* on Palestinian media outlets in the Gaza Strip
3. Qualitative feedback from Palestinian media outlets managers in the Gaza Strip
4. Qualitative feedback from 14 Gaza residents chosen to represent geographical distribution in all Gaza districts, refugee and non-refugee families, and chosen according to gender and age.

The assessment was designed to estimate the extent of the damage inflicted on media facilities - suspension of broadcast/distribution, access to information for Gaza residents during and after the bombardment, changes in information demands for Gaza residents, and the ability for Palestinian media outlets to provide service-based information and participatory information to Gaza residents during the crisis and early recovery period.

The recommendations at the end of this report take into account the above mentioned sources as well as a policy briefing published by the BBC World Service Trust in October 2008 on the “Unmet Need for Information in Humanitarian Responses”, freedom of press monitoring reports from the Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (Mada) .

Limitations to this assessment included: (1) the unavailability of certain baseline data, (2) time constraints, (3) pressure on participating facilities and Gaza residents to respond to multiple assessment requests.

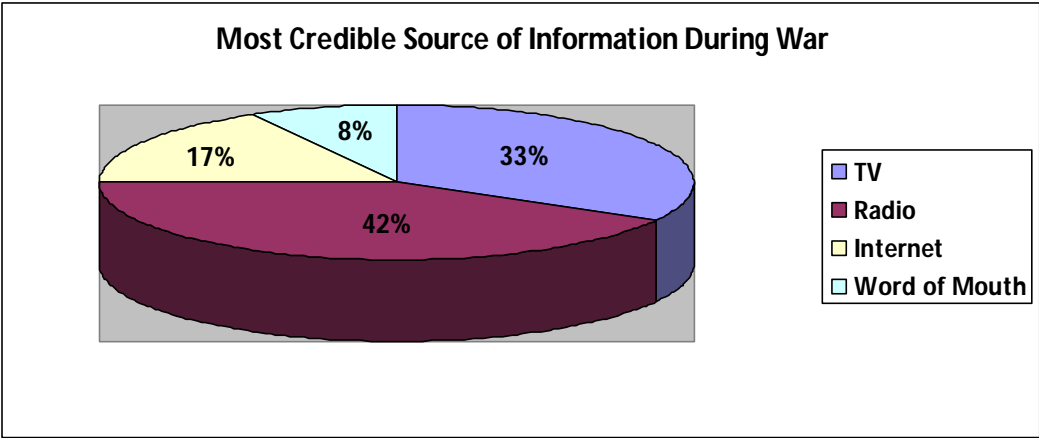
The demand for information during the military operation

Disaster victims need information about their options in order to make any meaningful choices about their future. Like anyone else, they make decisions based on the best possible information available to them at the time. They need information at all stages of the crisis and the kind of information they need differs at different stages.

During the bombardment, Gaza residents needed simple information. People typically wanted to know what was happening, the movement of Israeli tanks, accurate information on the number of people killed or injured, the type of weapons used by the Israeli army, where they could get food and health care, where their families and friends were. They also wished to ask questions, such as which hospitals and clinics were open in their area or how to access services.

During the initial stages of most emergencies, information is scarce and often unreliable. This was certainly the case in the Gaza Strip. 78% of the Gaza residents interviewed for this assessment declared receiving conflicting information during Operation *Cast Lead*, which according to them was mostly due to the media spreading inaccurate, biased, unverified information or rumours.

Though television remains the most consumed media in the Gaza Strip, 42% of Gaza residents interviewed for this needs assessment said that radio was the most credible source of information during the Israeli military operation.



However, during the bombardment, normal information channels became unavailable in the Gaza Strip and information was least accessible to those most affected.

From the second day of Israel's Operation *Cast Lead*, all of the 9 Gaza-based radio stations that were broadcasting before the Israeli operation¹ had their broadcast severely disrupted. Three of them totally stopped broadcasting during the whole period of the bombardment. Four had interrupted their broadcast for a few days and then resumed partial broadcast (12 hours a day). Only two stations, the Hamas-affiliated Al-Aqsa Radio and Salah-Eddin Brigades' Al-Buraq Radio, did not interrupt their broadcast significantly because they were transmitting from alternative locations.

All 3 Gaza-based newspapers and magazines, as well as the 3 West-Bank based newspapers were unavailable in the Gaza Strip during the Israeli military operation, with the exception of one issue of the Islamic Jihad-affiliated weekly magazine "The Independence" published on 1 January 2009. The three West-Bank and Jerusalem-based newspapers were prevented from distribution in the Gaza Strip even before Operation *Cast Lead*, either because of a ban issued by the Hamas government in Gaza or because issues were blocked at Israeli-controlled crossings. Al-Haya Al-Jadeeda daily and Al-Ayyam newspaper were both banned from distribution in the Gaza Strip following a decision by the Hamas government on 28 July 2008. The ban on Al-Ayyam newspaper was lifted after Operation *Cast Lead* on 12 February 2009. Since then, however, all issues of Al-Ayyam newspaper have been blocked by the Israeli authorities at Erez crossing. Al-Quds newspaper is also forbidden from entering the Gaza Strip by the Israeli authorities at Erez crossing since the first week of November 2008.

There are two Gaza-based television channels affiliated with Hamas: the Mari'yet Al-Aqsa terrestrial channel and the Al-Aqsa satellite channel. Though Al-Aqsa satellite channel's 5-floor central office was totally destroyed by Israeli air force bombing, the channel had evacuated its staff and some equipment to a subsidiary broadcasting location and their broadcast was not significantly affected during Operation *Cast Lead*. Hamas' terrestrial channel did not evacuate their office before Operation *Cast Lead* but had to do so on the first day of the bombardment. Their broadcast was severely interrupted during the first few days of the bombardment and totally interrupted from 2nd January until the day the Israeli troops withdrew from the Gaza Strip.

Mobile networks and satellite and terrestrial television reception was also severely disrupted in all areas of the Gaza Strip, in addition to recurrent electricity cuts.

Non-media channels of information were also greatly affected: community leaders did not venture out of their house, and phone lines and internet connections were down most of the time.

People staffing Palestinian media outlets and information centres were among those affected by the crisis. All Gaza-based Palestinian media outlets' managers expressed the need for better physical

¹ There is a total of 14 radio stations based in the Gaza Strip, but 5 of them have been closed down following Hamas' takeover in July 2007.

protection and psychological support for their staff. According to MADA², four Palestinian journalists were killed in Gaza and about a dozen injured. Half of the managers admitted that some of their staff now suffer from trauma-related psychological disorders that are affecting their work and inter-personal relationships.

During the bombardment, Palestinian media outlets also became primary targets for control and destruction at the hands of the Israeli army and Palestinian security forces. Hamas-affiliated Al-Aqsa radio and television channels saw their headquarters being totally destroyed by Israeli bombing and shelling. Transmitters and antennas of 3 out of the 6 independent and non-religious radio stations in the Gaza Strip were also damaged either by Israeli military bombing or frequent power cuts. Al-Manar radio was the target of Hamas' security forces which forced the radio to close down on 3 January 2009. The station has not yet been allowed to resume activities.

All Palestinian TV and radio stations that were broadcasting during the bombardment received phone calls from the Israeli army threatening to bomb the station if they did not interrupt their broadcast. Most of the managers of these stations declared that their frequencies were being regularly jammed by the Israeli army or that their broadcasts were replaced by Israeli military warnings to civilians to evacuate certain areas of the Gaza Strip or propaganda against the Palestinian factions.

The demand for information in the early recovery period

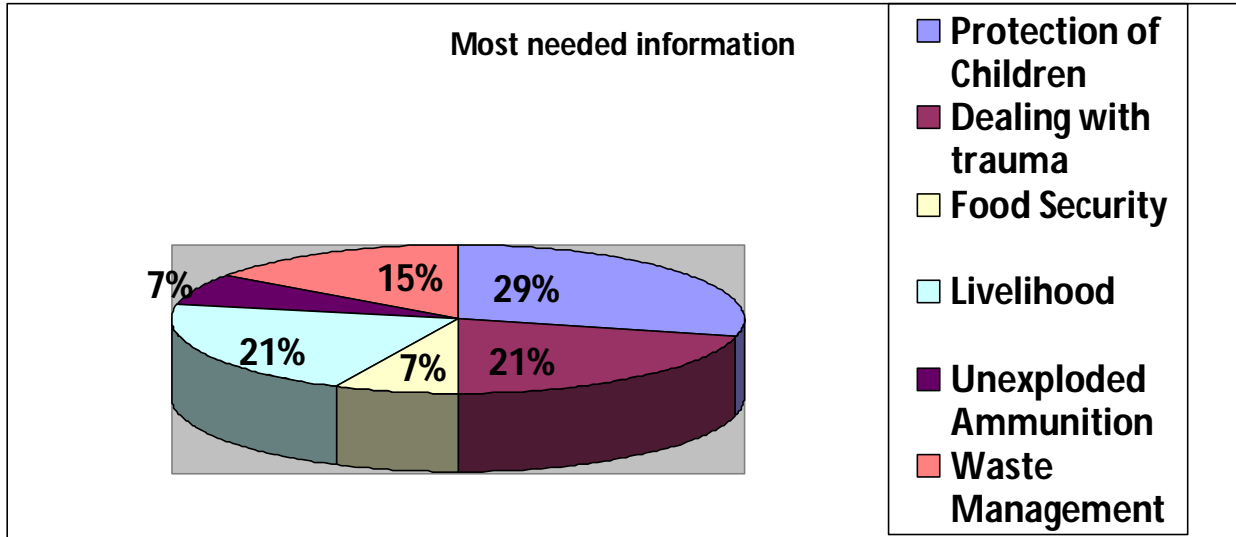
Following the unilateral cease-fire declarations and the withdrawal of Israeli troops, other equally critical information needs emerged. Gaza residents wanted to know the availability of medical and financial assistance (coupons, etc), sources of food and fresh water supplies, how to prevent diseases and information on reconstruction efforts.

An important component in this is expectation management – desperate populations are very prone to hearing what they want to hear. Ineffective communication at this stage can create false expectations and misunderstandings about what assistance is forthcoming, and about the role of the agency in question.

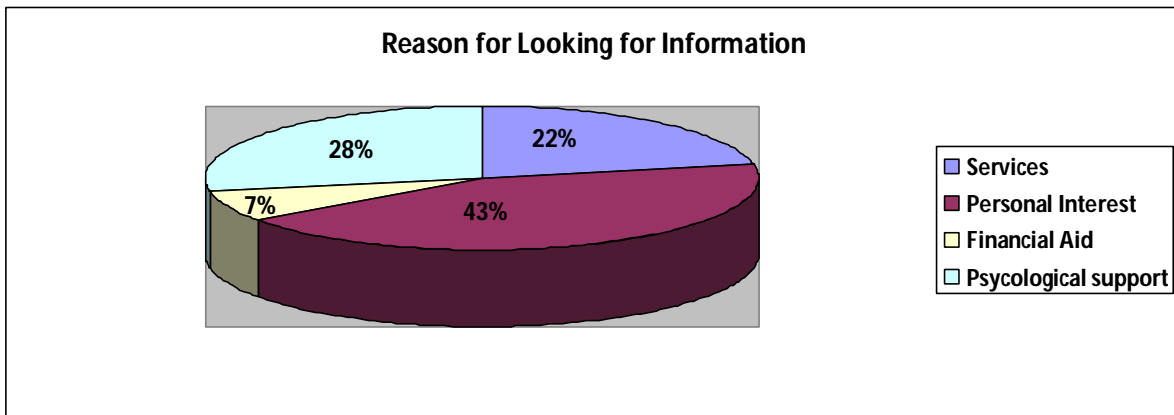
As some humanitarian aid has been able to reach the Gaza Strip and the humanitarian crisis is starting to stabilise, Gaza residents begin to think about the future. They want to have accurate information on violations committed by the Israeli army, on the negotiations between Hamas and Fatah and with the Israelis, and if crossings will be opened. But they also want to know what they are entitled to and how they can start understanding what relief and services are available to them. Also, as policies by local authorities are being implemented, they need to be shared and explained with affected people so that they know how to access and demand what they are entitled to.

² The Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedom

When asked what kind of information they are now looking for now, interviewed Gaza residents said they were looking for information on protection of children (29%), how to deal with trauma (21%), livelihood (21%), waste management (including rubble removal) (15%), food security (7%), and unexploded ordnances (7%).



In the current period, questions about who is responsible for aid delivery and how Gaza residents can ask questions are coming to the forefront, either for personal interest (47% of the Gaza residents interviewed for this needs assessment), or because they are looking for psychological support (28%), for services (22%), or for financial assistance (7%).



Addressing information needs

“A helpful step in coping is having access to appropriate information related to the emergency, relief efforts and legal rights and about positive coping methods.”³

One reason for information and communication being vital commodities and tools in humanitarian response is that their absence intensifies suffering. In particular, psychosocial studies increasingly note that information deprivation actually causes stress and exacerbates trauma⁴.

Communication with affected populations can be a more complex and challenging area than is commonly thought, and the implications for mainstreaming these ideas throughout the humanitarian community represents a real challenge for donors, UN agencies and international and Palestinian NGOs alike.

Few organizations have put in place the necessary resources – expertise and infrastructure. There is still confusion about how and what to think about information and communication. Public information is too often understood as public relations – dealing with international media, promoting the work of the organisation and channelling information upwards and outwards. This work is in itself extremely important and valuable, not least in its advocacy work. Nevertheless, communications to and with affected populations is often an entirely different challenge requiring a different skill set.

As highlighted through the data collected for this needs assessment, almost half of the media professionals interviewed have said they could not easily access information on humanitarian aid projects being implemented in the Gaza Strip. More importantly, 71% of interviewed Gaza residents have stressed that they do not have enough information on the type of aid available and recovery mechanisms. More precisely, 50% of the respondents said they did not have sufficient information regarding health care services and psychological support, and 64% said they did not have sufficient information regarding reconstruction assistance.

Regarding the role of local media in helping Gaza residents to ask and answer their questions, only 50% of the respondents said coverage and participatory programmes were tackling issues of interest to them and providing a space for them to raise issues of concern.

The information needs of Gaza residents in the aftermath of the bombardment remain largely unmet because the people, systems and resources that are required to meet them simply don't exist in a meaningful way.

³ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2007). IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings. Pp. 88.

[www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/products/docs/Guidelines%20IASC%20Mental%20Health%20Psychosocial%20\(with%20index\).pdf](http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/products/docs/Guidelines%20IASC%20Mental%20Health%20Psychosocial%20(with%20index).pdf)

⁴ See policy briefing published by the BBC World Service Trust in October 2008 on the “Unmet Need for Information in Humanitarian Responses”.

The humanitarian system as it stands is not equipped with either the capacity or the resources to begin tackling the challenge of providing information to those affected by crises. There is very little dedicated public communications capacity within major humanitarian organisations.

Within the Palestinian media landscape there is little space for participatory communications and service-based information. Out of the six Gaza-based radio stations that broadcast phone-in programmes, only three are broadcasting service-based, participatory programmes.

Interviewed Palestinian media managers recognized the need for building the capacity of their teams to be able to address social and psychological issues of concern to Gaza residents in the early recovery period. Most have expressed a strong commitment to journalistic values of credibility, impartiality and objectivity and insisted on the need for specialized training to be able to diversify the range of topics they cover. Some radio station managers have also highlighted that they did not have the necessary equipment, such as recording devices, to be able to add people's voices and concerns to their broadcast. Gaza-based newspaper managers have also pointed out the problems linked to shortages of printing paper and ink inside the Gaza Strip. Regarding financial concerns, some managers expressed concerns regarding not being able to pay salaries to their current staff as advertising revenues have become scarce in the Gaza Strip and managers have to invest in repairing damaged equipment.

Empowerment and Accountability

"People need information as much as water, food, medicine or shelter. Information can save lives, livelihoods and resources. Information bestows power."⁵

Gaza residents who have been strongly affected by the crisis need a sense of hope and purpose. Information and communication is essential for them to start claiming a sense of power and purpose over their own destiny. They cannot shape their own future unless they can make sense of what help is available to them, and what it is designed to deliver.

In recent years, recognition that the provision of information to affected populations comprises an important form of aid has become widespread. From the Red Cross World Disasters Report 2005 to work by humanitarian learning networks such as ALNAP (Active Learning Network on Accountability and Performance), the benefits of effective and properly resourced communications strategies, as a key part of humanitarian work, have become evident through field research.

While it will never be practical to share all information with communities, and the timeframes and demands of the early stages of an emergency response mean that derailed information sharing is neither practical nor desirable, in the later stages of a response it is ideal to make this become common practice.

⁵ International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) and Red Crescent Societies, World Disasters Report, 2005.

Affected Gaza residents are increasingly seen by development agencies as partners in a response and not merely recipients of assistance. Information is critically important in this context.

Indeed, people who have knowledge of issues such as when and where food will be distributed, the amount allocated rations per person, and how to cook the rations to maximise nutritional value, for example, can help manage logistics, reduce corruption, and improve health and mental wellbeing. They are also far better equipped to make critical decisions about their future, and to participate in the development of aid delivery systems that actually meet their needs.

Empowering people through media and communications can educate and lift spirits, both crucial to galvanising people to help themselves. Hearing others share similar experiences of hardships and recovery can play a critical role in improving the psychosocial wellbeing of affected Gaza residents. Discussing loss, and exploring practical steps to recovery can encourage those affected to move forward after the crisis.

In the early recovery period, issues of accountability become increasingly important – to report cases of suspected misuse or diversion of aid, to highlight ongoing needs and where they haven't been met. Information and communication needs become more complex and shift from simply wanting to know to needing to communicate.

As the humanitarian situation improves, Gaza residents can become more proactive in collecting data regarding impact and needs, and, for example, set up websites detailing who in their communities has been affected and what their needs are.

In other humanitarian crises, affected people have regularly cited the need for entertainment and distraction. Airing a regular radio programme around topics of interest can break monotony, build solidarity, and help people explore answers to common problems.

Recommendations

Perhaps the single best response that agencies can make to meet information needs is to make someone responsible and accountable for meeting them as part of the overall agency response. Having a clear locus of responsibility for understanding the information needs of beneficiaries in emergencies, devising strategic responses to meeting them, and providing the focal point for implementing them needs to be integrated within the overall humanitarian response in order for the steps outlined below to happen.

1. Building the capacity of Palestinian media

Local media can enable Gaza residents to participate in discussions about methods to reduce risk at the community level, explore practical steps to recovery and move forward after the crisis.

However, as expressed by all media outlets' managers in the Gaza Strip, there is a need for building the capacity of their team and providing basic equipment assistance in order for these media outlets to be able to provide service-based information programmes that can help people recover from the crisis and later on develop.

Risk reduction programmes should ensure that local media professionals in crisis-prone areas have continuity plans to mobilise or resume their work quickly, equipment to get back on air, and skills to deliver humanitarian or educational material under crisis conditions.

When local capacity is insufficient to respond to immediate information needs, a number of quickfix solutions can be applied, such as having experts on location assisting with the production of programmes during the initial stages.

2. [Treat communication equipment as a lifesaver](#)

If information for affected populations is a vital element of the aid process then equipment to produce, disseminate and receive information needs to be readily available in emergencies. Radio receivers can be distributed to affected populations along with other basic provisions.

Rebuilding the local media infrastructure for sustained operations must be prioritized as aid efforts continue. This may be as simple as providing a generator to a radio station that has lost its electricity supply.

3. [Getting information from people, not just to them](#)

The traditional conceptualization of public information as a one-way distribution of information is inadequate from the perspective of those on the receiving end. Participatory communication, which recognises varied responses from audiences and allows people to ask questions and to express their viewpoint, has the added benefit of providing a vital source of data concerning needs, fears, rumours and perceptions. Often, questions, especially in the early days, are basic and easily answered, and communities provided with channels for communication do not just provide constructive and nuanced feedback but are very appreciative of such efforts and have a high regard for the organisations providing them.

Understanding not only what Gaza residents need, but also what they need and want to know is crucial for a successful response, from both the affected person and aid agency point of view. Humanitarian agencies can benefit from strategies that allow affected populations to communicate directly with them, passing on information about needs, concerns and feeding back on aid including reporting cases of suspected misuse of aid.

4. [Preparing for potential following crisis](#)

Crisis reduction plans should include updated media landscape studies which map out a population's regular media access and usage under normal circumstances. If organisations know how individuals typically seek trustworthy information – be it through radio, bulletin boards, or

word of mouth – rapid response mechanisms can be much more appropriate, targeted and effective.

5. Understanding and exploiting the impact of new technologies

One of the most profound shifts in this sector is coming not from aid agencies or the development world but from the rapid commercial development of communications on a global level. The speed with which people in the Gaza Strip are adopting mobile phone and internet technology and finding innovative uses for new communications is far outstripping the levels of understanding of these new trends in the aid world – and the sector is still growing fast.

6. The importance of donor commitment

Donors tend to be reluctant to dedicate funds exclusively for information and communications, giving priority to more traditional humanitarian items and activities. More donor attention to the role of communications strategies within projects that they are funding – i.e. asking what they are, if they are properly planned for and resourced – would also greatly help in ensuring that communications becomes a key requirement of project design.