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# Beneficiary Communications Guide

for the Shelter Cluster

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The SCT is a flexible team, deployed by the IFRC to coordinate the Shelter Cluster in response to natural disasters during the emergency phase. Its composition varies upon the size and needs of a disaster, ranging from a 2 to 20 person team. The key roles of the SCT include the following:

- Cluster coordinator
- Information manager
- Technical coordinator
- Recovery advisor

Additional roles can be deployed as required.

## Background

Communicating with beneficiaries is as vital as aid itself for a population affected by a disaster. A cross-cutting function, beneficiary communications is a participatory approach that empowers affected populations by providing life-saving information. It is classic community engagement – with its roots in community outreach, local media, public health and emerging technologies.

Beneficiary communications fosters a two-way communication flow that is as much about listening as disseminating. As a result, it can help reduce tension and frustrations; beneficiary communications enhances the understanding between programme managers and their clients, and facilitates greater quality and accountability of humanitarian assistance.

Case in point: During the Haiti earthquake operation of 2010, shelter agencies discovered that beneficiaries were selling donated shelters to local community members. It created confusion for beneficiaries and misrepresented the work objectives of shelter agencies. In order to clarify the issue, the shelter coordination team's (SCT) media and communications advisor created key messages with the support of the SCT, shelter agencies and local camp residents. The messages outlined general information on the shelter response and reduced confusion in the community.

The following document serves as a basic guidance document on beneficiary communications to the Shelter Cluster, with a specific focus on thematic messaging related to shelter.

## Preparation and dissemination

The method of preparation and dissemination of messaging for beneficiaries will determine the effectiveness and success of your efforts. During the process, it is essential to consider the following:

- Address key concerns of beneficiaries and shelter agencies
- Translate the information into relevant local language(s)
- Adapt to the local culture and context
- Test relevance and comprehension with a 'focus group'
- Consider contact numbers or a location where beneficiaries can go for additional information

Methods for dissemination depend on the context and the resources available. While some techniques may succeed in one country or one type of disaster response, it may not be relevant in another. The chosen method should be based upon the most relevant and effective way people communicate in the community where you are present. Below is a list of suggested options:

## Radio

Using a simple recording device, you can begin by recording messages based on a certain theme (i.e., distribution, transitional shelters, safety and security, etc.) and burn the recording onto CDs. For dissemination, refer to one of the key beneficiary communications non-governmental organizations, Infoasaid or Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) <sup>1</sup>, for a list of key local media. You should expect to pay a small fee for the radio spot. You can then deliver the CDs to local radio stations, or call to assess their interest and deliver it in person.

Radio programmes with other humanitarian organisations such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) or the United Nations can be another option for dissemination. You can deliver the messages during a live radio show, followed by a “Question and Answer” session.



## Print

Contact local newspapers to inquire about the publication of your messaging. Refer to Infoasaid or Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) for a list of key local media. You should expect to pay a small fee for the print services.

Another option is to contact other organizations such as IOM, the IFRC, etc., and inquire about any newspapers or pamphlets they are disseminating, and discuss how you could work together. They may also have bulletin boards set up in camps where you can simply print out and post your messaging, or alternatively, you can create an ‘information centre’ for beneficiaries.

## Volunteers and staff

Depending on the context, you can work with volunteers or staff from various shelter agencies and provide first-hand information to beneficiaries. It can be the most effective and personal way to communicate, particularly if radio and print options are limited.

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<sup>1</sup> Visit the website for more information on Infoasaid and CDAC: <http://infoasaid.org/>



### Shelter agencies

Messaging for beneficiaries can be a resource for shelter agencies to use at their discretion. The fact the information is consolidated by the SCT reinforces the clarity and consistency for both shelter agencies and beneficiaries, thereby improving the response and preventing mixed messaging.

### Be creative...

Effective methods of communication with beneficiaries largely depend on the local context where you are working, and the resources at your disposal. Whether it is hiring a truck with a loud speaker, using Twitter, or joining resources with other humanitarian organizations to run an SMS campaign, the options depend on your initiative and your creativity.

### Complaint mechanisms

When communicating with beneficiaries, it is important to consider using complaint mechanisms for the affected population to provide feedback. However, shelter agencies must be prepared to receive and respond to inquiries and demands.

Examples of complaint mechanisms include a 'hotline' for beneficiaries to call and receive direct answers to questions, or an 'information centre' including a mailbox for written inquiries, and a board for information and responses.

## Examples of messaging for beneficiaries

Below are a few mixed examples of generic messages for beneficiaries, provided with the support of Infoasaid. These messages must be adapted to the local context of a disaster response and the country where you are working.

### Organisations are doing their best to help you.

One house at a time, one family at a time, emergency shelter materials are being distributed by humanitarian organizations to help those who lost their home in the (x disaster). Providing rapid, appropriate, and safe shelter solutions is our goal.

### Who will receive shelter assistance?

Shelter assistance is given strictly to those who were affected by (x disaster). This means families that cannot return to their original home because of the disaster. Each shelter organization has their own method for distribution. Please speak with the organisation in your area to see if qualify for shelter assistance.

### Where can I find shelter materials?

(Name of organisation) is distributing materials to help build transitional shelters. You can pick up supplies at (xxx). Transitional shelters are free.

### Is my house safe to live in?

After the (xxx) disaster, your house may not be safe. (Name of organisation) will come and visit you and your family as soon as they can to see how safe your house is.

## Available resources

For further information on beneficiary communications, there are several reliable resources available at your disposal. Please consult the list below:

- *Sphere Handbook 2011* (Core Standard 1 and Shelter and Settlement Standard 1), available [here](#)
- Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP), resource centre, available [here](#)
- *The Good Enough Guide*, Emergency Capacity Building Project, available [here](#)
- Emergency Capacity Building Project, communications materials, available [here](#)
- *Left in the dark: The unmet need for information in humanitarian responses*, BBC World Service Trust, Policy Briefing #2, October 2008, available [here](#)
- *The Right to Know: The Challenge of Public Information and Accountability in Aceh and Sri Lanka*, by Imogen Wall, October 2006, available [here](#)
- *Where's my house? Improving communication with beneficiaries: an analysis of information flow to tsunami affected populations in Aceh Province*, by Imogen Wall, PI Officer, UNDP, based on research by the UN-OCHA Public Information working Group, August 2005, available [here](#)



For further information,  
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For more on the Humanitarian Reform, the role of the IFRC as convener of the Shelter Cluster and the SCT, please visit [www.sheltercluster.org](http://www.sheltercluster.org)