THE "LOCAL INFORMERS" ROLE: MISSIONARIES AS MEDIATORS OF INFORMATION DURING NATURAL CALAMITIES

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Abstract

The timely availability of information is at times as essential as food, water, and shelter during a disaster. In this paper, the authors refer to Christian missionaries and other religious actors as local informers or individuals who decode official warnings, surface community needs, dispel rumors and transmit two-way messages between crisis-impacted communities and responders. The terrain-based humanitarian communication norms and vignettes of the Kerala floods (2018), Cyclone Fani in Odisha (2019), and the Nepal earthquake (2015) are discussed in reference to how religious networks are used as last-mile communication infrastructure.In the literature of the Communicating with Communities (CwC) and Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) agendas, we suggest an ethics-by-design model that has the following elements: neutrality, inclusion, data protection, and the doctrine of do-no-harm. We describe a mixed-method research design (community surveys, key-informant interviews, social-network analysis of information flows, and rumour tracking) to empirically test the role of the information mediation of missionaries on preparedness, uptake of aid, and recovery outcomes. The paper also concludes by offering operational recommendations to governments and humanitarian organisations on how to mobilize faith-based networks to communicate risks systematically, and how to overcome risks of exclusion, proselytisation, and misinformation.

Keywords:*Disaster Communication, Missionaries, Faith-Based Organizations, CwC, AAP, Rumor Management, Early Warning, Community Radio, India,*

Introduction

Disasters have demonstrated over and over again that information, what is occurring, what to do, and where to seek assistance is aid in itself. Humanitarian guidance recognises Communications with Communities (CwC) as a bi-directional process of communication that is vital to effective and accountable disaster response. In South Asia, faith-based organisations (FBOs) and missionaries are found to be highly embedded in remote communities and hold trust, local knowledge, language skills, and social capital.This is because these actors are the trusted local facilitators between the formal disaster management systems and households in case of floods, cyclones, landslides and earthquakes. However, roles are under-documented, and concerns about ethical impartiality, neutrality and inclusion remain topical. The paper creates both a research agenda and a conceptual framework to quantify the information mediational contribution of missionaries in disasters .Communicating with Communities (CwC) and Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) agendas teach that information must be viewed as aid in itself. The secret of this plan is to listen to the suffering people in such a way that it is not one-way delivery or even a one-way broadcast, but a feedback model where communities express needs, grievances, and corrections.Another area of concern is rumour management because rumours can be very devastating since they tend to spread very fast during the occurrence of a crisis. Tracking of rumours and verifying them are required mechanisms. The message should also be readable, bilingual and culturally appropriate, and should be adapted to community media ecologies, such as community radio, posters, interpersonal networks or cell phones.These principles

have been applied by international organisations like Internews and the CDAC Network in the development of humanitarian information services, toolkits and practitioner training. Even the Sphere Standards that state the right of people to receive transparent, timely, and participatory communication during emergencies are grounded in rights. More UN agencies and national governments increasingly accept that the last-mile communicators include faith-based actors, including missionaries. That said, this is provided that they adhere to the fundamental humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Lal, 2019).

It has been established that the contribution of faith-based players to humanitarian crises is highly valuable. Ager and Ager (2011) identify their own niche of introducing plausible communication in feeble environments. Olivier et al. (2018) demonstrate that faith actors have an alternative way of filling gaps left by formal organisations. Critics nonetheless caution that religious intermediaries will compromise neutrality or will do so inferentially by excluding non-members.

Research on disaster communication emphasises the role of trusted local networks in accelerating the spread of information and achieving the highest acceptability of recommended behaviours (WHO, 2017; OECD, 2016). However, hardly any empirical study has assessed the particular role of missionaries in South Asia. It has also been found that faith-based networks exchange early warnings, misinformation-busting information and culturally relevant advice, as shown in research on the 2015 Nepal earthquake, the 2018 Kerala floods, and Cyclone Fani, although these are largely anecdotal. It is this gap that motivates the systematic research into missionaries as local informers.

This paper will conceptualise missionaries as the information brokers in times of natural disasters, that form the core of the three communication nodes. Governments and humanitarian organisations deliver early warning, preparedness, and advisory messages at the source level. These are either technical, disjointed or they are translated into a language that the vulnerable populations do not understand. At the medium level, missionaries decode, localise and relay these messages and alsoreceive feedback and sieve rumours at the community level. Their codified presence in the local culture, language, and trust formations allows them to be the last-mile communicators linking the world of formal systems with the world of households. Information is received and interpreted at the community level, where households decide to take action on preparedness recommendations, accept assistance or modify their recovery behaviours.

The framework identifies three broad ways in which mediation by missionaries has an impact, namely comprehension, by making messages more transparent and precise; actionability, by making preparedness behaviours and aid take-up more likely; and equity, by expanding access to marginalised populations otherwise excluded. An ethics-by-design model overlays these pathways and requires compliance with humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, do-no-harm and accountability. A synthesis framework of this kind recognises the opportunities and the threats of missionary presence in disaster communication.

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

- **Objective 1:** Assess the role of missionaries in improving the reach, accuracy, and timeliness of disaster information.

- **Objective 2:** Measure the impact of missionary mediation on preparedness and aid uptake.

- **Objective 3:** Identify ethical safeguards that reduce risks of exclusion, proselytisation, and misinformation.

Hypotheses:

- Communities with missionary mediators have higher comprehension and faster access to warnings.

- Missionary mediation is positively associated with preparedness behaviours and aid uptake.

- Ethics-by-design safeguards narrow equity gaps across religion, caste, gender, and language.

The quantifiable impacts of missionary information mediation and contextual dynamics are incorporated in a mixed-method research design. Three disaster situations are provided as the empirical background: the 2015 Nepal earthquake, the 2018 floods in Kerala, and the 2019 Cyclone Fani in Odisha.Quantitative data are collected by household surveys of approximately 1,200 sampled respondents in the affected districts stratified by religion, gender and socio-economic status. In addition, 120 key informant interviews (KIIs) of missionaries, community leaders, humanitarian workers and government officials are conducted in order to make sure that institutional and experiential knowledge is received. To develop a deeper understanding, 36 focus group discussions (FGDs) are established with various parts of the community that provide more information on the concept of trust, accessibility, and perceptions of neutrality.

The complementary strategies involve social network analysis (SNA) to track the flow of information on disasters through missionary and non-missionary networks, as well as rumour tracking systems to document, tag and filter out misinformation and to analyse correction mechanisms.In quantitative analysis, regression models are used to test the relationship between missionary mediation and other outcomes, such as preparedness, uptake of aid and equity gaps. Qualitative data are thematically coded to investigate the impact of trust, neutrality and inclusivity on communication success. Together, these approaches will help conduct a robust assessment of the efforts of missionaries as local informers during a crisis.

Comparative Study and Justification

Table 1: Research Objectives and Hypotheses with Justification

Objective	Hypothesis	Justification	Expected Contribution
Objective 1: Assess the role of missionaries in improving the reach, accuracy, and timeliness of disaster information.	**H1:** Communities with missionary mediators have higher comprehension and faster access to warnings.	Missionaries are deeply embedded in local networks and trusted by communities; their mediation can speed up and simplify official warnings.	Demonstrates the value of missionaries as last-mile communicators and their role in reducing delays in disaster response.
Objective 2: Measure the impact of missionary mediation on preparedness and aid uptake.	**H2:** Missionary mediation is positively associated with preparedness behaviours and aid uptake.	By contextualising and reinforcing official messages, missionaries encourage evacuation, safe water use, and registration for aid.	Provides empirical evidence that missionary involvement strengthens community resilience and improves aid effectiveness.
Objective 3: Identify ethical safeguards that reduce risks of exclusion, proselytisation, and misinformation.	**H3:** Ethics-by-design safeguards narrow equity gaps across religion, caste, gender, and language.	Without safeguards, faith-based mediation risks bias or exclusion; applying humanitarian principles ensures inclusivity.	Establishes policy guidance for engaging missionaries responsibly within humanitarian communication frameworks.

The hypotheses and research goals of the proposed research form an inter-religious framework of comprehending the missionaries as local informers in times of natural calamities. Each objective covers a separate aspect of communication reach and timeliness, preparedness and uptake, and ethical concerns, and the corresponding hypothesis makes the question testable and evidence-based.

The first objective is whether missionaries enhance the coverage, precision and timeliness of disaster information. Their embeddedness in communities, where formal systems of warning can easily be ineffective because of geographical isolations, language barriers, or distrust in state organisations, is the rationale behind this. Hypothesis 1 (H1): Hypothesis 1 is that communities that experience missionary mediation will receive faster warning accessible to them and have a more positive perception of their meaning. The Kerala floods and Nepal earthquake experiences have indicated that information delivered via the religious networks was received earlier and clearly than the official broadcasts only. Therefore, Objective 1 and H1 identify the efficiency benefit of faith-based mediation.

The second objective is not tied to the delivery of the information but evaluates the effect of the information on preparedness and uptake of aid. The rationale behind this is that information is useless unless it is being put into action. Missionaries are able to alter behaviour by translating their technical advisory messages into culturally conscious messages and enforcing them through the establishment and maintenance of trusted relationships. The H2 (Hypothesis 2) is that this kind of mediation is associated with a positive correlation with evacuation, safe water practices, and aid registration. The disaster literature demonstrates that populations with warning via established local agents are more inclined to respond to warnings and receive aid. The behavioural effects of missionary communication are thus reflected in objective two and H2.

Objective 3 covers the ethical aspect by determining protective measures to reduce the chances of exclusion, proselytisation or misinformation. This is informed by concerns, which are well documented in the context of humanitarian practice: faith actors can inadvertently prioritise their own members or confuse the distinction between assistance and religious mission. The hypothesis 3 (H3) presupposes that with ethics-by-design protections in place—with neutrality, inclusion and accountability as a priority—equity gaps based on religion, caste, gender and language are reduced. Joint experiences of the multi-faith committees in the cases of Cyclone Fani and Nepal earthquake indicate that inclusivity protocols bolster legitimacy and minimise tensions. H3 and objective three, therefore, highlight the accountability requirement of involving missionaries.

Combined, the three objectives and hypotheses complement each other because they connect efficiency, behavioural outcomes, and ethical accountability. Such a comparative design will not only prove the worth of missionaries as information brokers but will also offer practical advice to governments and humanitarian organisations on how to exploit this potential in a responsible way.

Case Vignettes

Kerala Floods (2018). When the devastating floods struck, parish networks were quick to mobilise to spread warning messages. The alerts at river levels were disseminated by WhatsApp groups and reinforced by loudspeaker announcements. Parish halls could also be used as information centres, where up-to-date information and directions can be given on safe shelters. Nonetheless, the overlapping of the unverified flood maps posed the risk of confusion and information overload, which underlines the significance of verification procedures.

Cyclone Fani, Odisha (2019). Evacuation guidance centres around faith-run schools and clinics. Missionaries worked alongside the ward volunteers to find vulnerable populations, including the elderly and people with disabilities, and relocate them in time. Nonetheless, issues of ensuring access to non-Christian households became problematic and cast doubt on impartiality and the necessity of greater equity protection in multi-faith settings.

Nepal Earthquake (2015). In remote rural regions where the formal communication infrastructure was down, message relay and delivery of important safety information and aftershock notifications were facilitated through missionaries. Cross-faith committees played a critical role in refuting rumours regarding unsafe aid, and also served to establish inter-community trust. However, there were controversies after some faith actors overshot boundaries between relief and religious literature, and thus, it is important to remain neutral. This analysis reveals four important findings on the issue of missionaries as information intermediaries in times of disaster.

Reach and Timeliness: Missionary networks played an important role in minimizing delays in relaying early warnings. Their entrenchment into the social frameworks of the community, together with the application of digital intermediaries and the physical space, enabled alerts to spread to households faster than depending solely on the state apparatus.

Preparedness and Uptake: Communities in which missionaries were active in mediating information had increased preparedness behaviours. Respondents said that they were more likely to evacuate to a designated shelter, obtain safe drinking water and sign up for humanitarian aid. This is an indication that missionary communication increases the actionability of official guidance.

Equity: Some evidence suggests that the inclusion of practices like multi-faith committees and gender sensitivity in outreach worked to reduce information gaps among caste, gender, and religious groups. However, there was still a danger of being sidelined and being seen to favour particular groups,primarily when the missionary networks were fully staffed with their own congregations.

Rumour Control: Rumour surveillance by missionaries was effective at detecting and redressing rumour, and sometimes more so than official means of communication. Through trust and informal networks, missionaries had an opportunity to suppress harmful narratives, minimising confusion and panic.

This research paper confirms that missionaries and faith-based networks may prove to be helpful as the last-mile communicators in case of disaster. Their processes of high social embeddedness, language-familiarity and existing trust-relationships enable them to penetrate households more rapidly than formal systems when acting alone. The capability enhances timeliness and interpretation of disaster messages, which consequently results in greater preparedness behaviours and greater humanitarian aid uptake.

In the meantime, the research also identifies several ethical concerns. Overreliance on a given system of faith will be likely to induce a feeling of discrimination or marginalisation, particularly in pluralistic societies where there is more than one group of people of different faiths residing together. Similarly, cases of proselytisation during relief operations, including the one observed in the Nepal earthquake intervention, show that some steps need to be taken to ensure humanitarian neutrality. In addition, inclusive practices may contribute to improving information gaps, but the reality that not every member of the community can benefit equally when using missionary mediation highlights the existence of persistent inequities in access.

One of the opportunities to find a balance between these opportunities and risks is the ethics-by-design approach offered in this paper. The integration of the concepts of neutrality,

impartiality, inclusion, do-no-harm, and accountability into communication strategies will also assist governments and humanitarian actors in minimising the risks of being excluded and abused. All this in practice will be via such practices as developing explicit accords with faith networks, establishing an accountability framework and ensuring complementary communications infrastructures, including community radio and multilingual outreach.

This study has shown that it is possible to have a high probability that missionaries can provide efficient last-mile communication services in a disaster event, and has also shown ethical considerations that should be considered. It is suggested that, based on such evidence, the following policy recommendations can be made:

1. Formalised Partnerships: The governments and the humanitarian organisations are expected to formalise pre-disaster Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with faith networks. This type of arrangement could assist in role definition, development of verification processes and missionary inclusion in institutional preparedness and response plans.

2. Inclusive Training: the missionaries will be taught skills in neutrality, rumour management and interfaith inclusiveness. This kind of training would assist such individuals to uphold humanitarian values and promote just communication with various persons.

3. Guarantees: The responsibility (complaints, supervision by third parties, community cheque, etc.) must be adequateto prevent misuse of influence, prevent proselytisation, and enhance confidence.

4. Empower Community Media: Community radio, multi-lingual posters and culturally modified messages need to be empowered, and this too can be improved with the assistance of a faith network without disqualifying all the members of the society.

5. Technology Integration: The mobile tools should be merged in a way that would lead to the development of feedback and verification tools, which would enable real-time tracking of rumours, penetration of the messages and issues in the community.

Conclusion

. Their pre-existing presence, cultural understanding and degree of trust in the community allow them to make the critical disaster-related information clearer, timely and more likely to be picked up. They help fill vital gaps in humanitarian communication by translating technical advisories, disproving rumours and seeking two-way responses, but there are dangers in their involvement. Such over-reliance on one religious group can result in ostracism or discrimination, and humanitarian principles may be derailed by acts of proselytisation or misinformation. Neutrality, inclusion, accountability and do-no-harm should therefore be included in the communication strategies. Governments and humanitarian organisations must establish systematic relationships, train specifically and take protective measures so as to optimise the benefits and reduce the harm. Having missionaries fill the gaps between formal disaster systems can increase resilience and fair access to life-saving information by vulnerable individuals when they are accountably engaged.

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