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Connecting and communicating after Typhoon Haiyan

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In the first month of the Typhoon Haiyan response, one of the priorities facing the international community was to re-establish internet connectivity in order to facilitate information sharing and the provision of assistance.

“The main challenges we face in these kinds of situations, especially with the typhoons and the tidal surge that they had here, is the damage to the infrastructure,” says Neil Murphy-Dewar, Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) Team Leader in Tacloban. “In Tacloban the electricity infrastructure was totally destroyed, the mobile phone networks were brought down, and the landline telephone networks and the internet service providers were all severely damaged.”

The ETC is a global network of organisations that work together to provide information technology and telecommunications to the humanitarian community. Through a pre-existing partnership, the Luxembourg Directorate for Development Cooperation’s ‘emergency.lu’ telecommunications platform was deployed alongside technologies from Ericsson Response and the World

Food Programme to support the ETC by providing essential communications to the relief community within days.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 14.1 million people across the Visayas region of the Philippines were affected by Typhoon Haiyan. Over one million houses were destroyed, 6,109 people were reported dead and 4.1 million were displaced. Due to the scale of devastation, all the humanitarian response Clusters were activated.

The town of Guiuan, in the province of Eastern Samar, was Typhoon Haiyan’s first point of impact in the Philippines. Even before the disaster, internet connectivity was very limited. After some initial technical issues due to high humidity and difficulty in identifying a suitable location among widespread rubble, the ETC was able to establish Wi-Fi internet



Some 8,000 displaced persons have been living in the Tacloban Astrodome, the city’s largest sports complex.

connectivity services for the humanitarian community using the emergency.lu Regular Deployment Kit. The Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Cluster has been distributing blankets, hygiene kits and water purifiers, educating Guiuan's residents on good hygiene and working with local government to strengthen long-term WASH capacity. "At first, communicating was very difficult," says Prem Chand, WASH Cluster Coordinator from UNICEF. "Phones were useless. We had daily meetings but when the ETC started providing internet, frankly, it was the only communication with the outside world we had."

In Tacloban City, hardest-hit by the typhoon, the priority was to provide connectivity to the Town Hall and the Tacloban stadium (evacuation centre and focus for coordination of relief efforts). A second emergency.lu Rapid Deployment Kit was installed in Ormoc City, on the roof of the City Hall, to

provide free internet and voice services to the humanitarian community there, with a small internet café at the City Hall.

"Today the ability to be on the internet and be able to share information with headquarters is essential," says Jesper Lund, Head of OCHA in Leyte and Samar. "Everything we produce here is immediately uploaded to the internet so it is available to the wider community. We cannot imagine a situation any more where we don't have internet access."

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1. within the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs

"This is 98.7 FM, First Response Radio broadcasting live in Tacloban city."

All of Tacloban's 15 radio stations were knocked off the air when Typhoon Haiyan devastated the Philippine city with 220,000 inhabitants. A response within 72 hours by volunteers managed to get an emergency station on the air, the only local mass medium for survivors to get reliable information.

Launched on 14 November 2013, First Response Radio (FRR) broadcast daily programmes that could be heard up to 10km from Tacloban. The first day's programming focused on updating listeners on where to get help, the location of evacuation centres and water points, and which authorities were organising aid. FRR initially distributed solar-powered and wind-up radios to evacuation centres and local government offices, where broadcasts were amplified by loudspeakers to reach a larger audience, followed later by wider distribution of radios to the affected areas.

In the immediate aftermath of the typhoon, survivors had urgent need for information about available services and aid, and support in finding ways to communicate with each other. A dearth of information in emergencies contributes to "[creating] confusion and insecurity", notes the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings¹.

"People's levels of anxiety and stress can be significantly affected by not having information or by having misinformation," said Krista Senden, a psychosocial counsellor who provides therapy for displaced persons in emergency situations. Information is central to coping with a disaster and allowing people to regain a sense of control over their lives – key to both understanding chaotic situations and being able to cope with displacement and loss.

The international humanitarian system has made specific commitments to improve accountability to affected populations, particularly since the Haiti earthquake, through greater transparency, adequate information provision and two-way communication, and the facilitation of feedback and complaints. It is now one of the five priority focus areas for the Inter-Agency Standing Committee at the global level.

Information drawn from IRIN News <http://tinyurl.com/IRIN-99132> and 'Response to Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) 17 December 2013', Communications with Communities (CwC) Working Group <https://philippines.humanitarianresponse.info>

1. <http://tinyurl.com/IASC-MHPs-guidelines>