



CARE International

**Lessons learned from CARE's Communications
in the Afghanistan Crisis, Fall 2001**

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Summary

Once in motion, COMWG (CARE International's Communications Working Group) worked fairly well to keep CI Member offices informed of the situation in Afghanistan, and to keep Members informed about national-level media coverage in their respective countries.

However, the start was very slow, and a large difference in perspective emerged between CARE USA and the other CI Members. The slow start is attributed in part to the awkward and unprecedented position of CARE USA as Lead Country for Afghanistan, with the US government leading military action against the country. With time, and the rapidly changing situation in Afghanistan, messages became more timely and clear.

Several members have suggestions for improving efficiency of COMWG conference calls and inter-office communications in general.

The initial communications guidelines produced in October were not necessarily consistent with the views of the CI Members outside the USA. CARE USA did not provide the timely and clear leadership that the other CI Members were looking for from the Lead Country. The other offices recognized the unique circumstances, but were frustrated by missed coverage opportunities that required immediate response.

CARE USA's advocacy position papers were excellent, but were also affected by the office's slowed response.

CI media officers posted in Pakistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan were valuable for local updates of the situation. The media relations officers (MROs) posted to the field needed direction, 'pitches' and feedback for national media from the Members, but only a few of the Members were able to provide them. Both officers posted in the field, and in CI Member Countries, need a better understanding of the needs of the other in order to get the most from their mutual working relationship.

Smaller non-English-speaking CI Members were concerned about 'getting their money's worth' when sharing costs for media relations officers. So far the representatives sent have spoken only English, French and Spanish. The planned position for a multilingual media officer based in The Hague may alleviate this problem.

Sending an independent journalist to provide coverage from Tajikistan produced mixed results.

The issue of 'who pays' for MROs posted in emergencies remained confusing. The decision making process about 'who goes next' must be made clear and transparent.

CARE Members offered several suggestions for gauging coverage of CARE in the media. Such an evaluation requires a goal: counting 'hits' in the media provides a raw number, but does not indicate quality or purpose. The individual CARE Members are best placed to do such a review. CI should develop evaluation criteria to measure the success of media relations in emergencies.

CARE can build its capacity in several areas, with training for MROs in Member countries, as well as for those posted in the field; media training for Country Office staff; and training with equipment used in the field.

Introduction

This document is a brief summary report of the experiences of COMWG in CI Member countries, of media relations officers posted in the field officers and of others involved with communications at CARE offices during the Afghanistan crisis.

This was the methodology followed:

1. Review the documented electronic traffic: e-mails, minutes, policies and plans, press releases, and articles.
2. Develop a list of questions to address the main areas of concern: COMWG's function as a unit, media officers' performance in the field, consistency and effectiveness of CARE messages, suggestions for criteria for evaluating communications success, and issues related to capacity building within CARE.
3. Contact CARE media relations officers, Country Directors in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and CI staff for brief interviews (around ½ hour each). Attempts to reach CARE France by phone and e-mail were unfortunately unsuccessful.
4. Compile and categorize the notes from these calls and messages into this report. Include recommendations.

In interviews, many people were glad of the opportunity to speak about their experiences, and many spoke very frankly. At the same time, several people did not wish to be quoted directly. This concern about 'being on record' suggests that members can see difficulties that impede COMWG's smooth function, but do not wish to blame others, or be seen accusing other CI Member staff.

This report endeavours to convey people's impressions and critiques as clearly as possible. A lot of frustration was expressed about how the Afghanistan crisis was treated at CARE, but there was no malice. By voicing concerns clearly, hopefully CARE staff will discuss difficulties and misunderstandings openly, work to resolve them, and have more effective emergency communications in future.

COMWG Performance

Overall, the responses to interviews showed that COMWG performed well as a unit. COMWG members agreed to post media relations officers (MROs) to the field who would act on behalf of all Members, and to share the costs according to a funding formula. The posted MROs provided information and photos for several offices to use for their respective media relations.

The COMWG conference calls kept CI Members up to date about current events. The Country Director and media relations officers in the field provided valuable insight that was not available elsewhere.

Members used a joint communications plan, and endeavoured to keep messages about CARE consistent in their respective press releases, interviews and stories.

Alongside this successful performance were the following critiques:

The primary complaint from most sources was the slow reaction and initial response by CARE to this crisis. Almost every respondent recognized that CARE USA was in a unique and awkward position as Lead Member for Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, because of the slowed response CARE USA did not provide the timely leadership the other CI Members were expecting and looking for. This situation left several offices unsure of how to approach any media contacts, or even how to support fundraising appeals.

The delayed reaction affected both media relations and advocacy. Several staff members expressed frustration about missing opportunities to send timely press releases, or respond to public comments. More than one person complained of 'losing' a story to Medecins Sans Frontieres, or Oxfam. Other media relations officers went ahead with time-sensitive pieces, at the risk of being rebuked by the Lead Member.

The advocacy statements and talking points were excellent, and several staff had high praise for the work of Kevin Henry and Paul O'Brien, but these too were made less effective by being late. These talking points were needed, not just by media officers at home writing press releases and OpEd articles, but also for Country Directors, speaking on issues of programming as well.

A second serious critique was regarding the initial CI communications guidelines. These guidelines were perceived as very conservative, not consistent with the views of CI Members outside the USA. The guidelines demonstrated a large gap between the perceptions of the CARE USA media team, that did not want to give any information at all to the media about CARE's work in Afghanistan ("even to the point of denying we were there") and the other CI Members who needed factual information about CARE's work in Afghanistan for their media.

Many CARE offices initially had little information about Afghanistan. CARE USA's unwillingness to discuss Afghanistan's existing precarious conditions and programs was frustrating for other CI Members.

However, as the crisis progressed, the sense of uncertainty lessened, and the immediate threat to CARE field staff eased, most CI Members felt freer to speak about existing

conditions, to speak about the urgent needs of ordinary Afghans, and about the continuing humanitarian crisis.

The third critique was related to logistics. Many officers felt that the COMWG conference calls could have been shorter and more effective, and they found cancelling and rescheduling on short notice frustrating and inconvenient. Scheduling problems were worse in countries with significant time differences, like Australia. Organizing and chairing the calls was especially time consuming, though the effort smoothed out over time. The circulation of SITREPS from the Lead Member to the other CI Members was uneven at times.

Media officer performance in the field

COMWG members agreed to send media relations officers to the field, to support Sally Austin and Genny Abel in Pakistan and Tajikistan respectively, to provide information for other CI media officers, to liaise with ‘target media’, and provide media training for field staff where possible.

These officers were Andrew Chadwick (CARE USA), Andrew Graham (CARE Canada), Martin Zint (CARE Deutschland) and Alina Labrada (CARE USA).

COMWG and CARE offices agreed to share costs for supporting these members in the field.

CI Members were largely satisfied with contacts and output produced by the officers posted in Tajikistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Their input on COMWG calls was very valuable, for keeping CI Member staff up to date.

Several respondents stated that “the Andrews” and Alina did excellent work in difficult circumstances. Andrew Graham in Tajikistan was creative in engaging the journalists to provide coverage of the local situation, while the journalists were waiting for the ‘real story’ across the border. The media training they provided made a big difference for both the skills and the confidence of the Country Office staff.

The English-speaking CI Members were most satisfied with the work of the officers in the field. The non-English-speaking CI Members expressed concerns about getting value for their investment, if the media relations officer posted to the field does not speak their language fluently. Even when lists of contacts for non-English media contacts were available, few interviews or quotes emerged outside of the English mainstream media.

Martin Zint, a non-CARE journalist sent by CARE Deutschland, produced mixed results, and a lot of confusion remains about his work. One staff person described him as “a walking liability, misrepresenting CARE activities to the press. His intentions and audience were questioned [and we] never saw the results of his interviews...” On the other hand, CARE Deutschland was satisfied with his work, and felt he provided good information.

Several concerns emerged from questions about the officers posted to the field.

Interview responses showed that media relations officers in CI Member countries and those posted to the field had very different expectations of each other. On one side were staff members in the field, who had access to a lot of information, but did not know the

communications needs of the CI Members. Country Directors are necessarily ‘program-oriented’ and sometimes isolation from Western media can mean that they do not always know ‘what is news’.

On the other side were the CI Members, who were looking for information, but were not being specific. Thus, MROs posted in the field provided what they thought was useful, but needed feedback and direction from CI Members. One CI Member staff person felt that the field officers should be ‘looking for news’ around them, even if it was not ‘news’ to them.

Generally, officers posted to the field needed ‘pitches’ and more feedback about what they were sending out. Both sides must be clearer in expressing their needs, and stating plainly what would be most helpful to them.

With the Country Office short staffed, one media relations officer posted to the field was required to gather information and write SITREPs, though this time-consuming task was not part of the officer’s ToR.

The cost sharing arrangement was good in principle, but was confusing in practice. Several members are still not sure of the outcome of cost sharing.

Similarly, the process of deciding who goes, or who goes next, still appears vague, and is currently based largely on availability. CARE USA will always be in a strong position to field MROs, as the Member with the largest external relations staff.

The last concern was regarding the sensitivity to Country Directors’ assessment of risks. Some tension inevitably exists between Country Directors, who are focused on the safety of their staff and programs, and the Member offices looking for needed coverage. However, this tension can be made worse, particularly by questioning the judgement of the staff in the field, who are most aware of immediate risks.

In one instance, a Country Director was criticized for stating that any media officer must not be American. Anti-American sentiment and fears of ‘spies’ were high at the time, and she felt the presence of an American could endanger local staff.

In another instance, a media officer asked the CI Emergency Response Director in Brussels to overrule the decision of a Country Director about entering Afghanistan, despite significant security risks.

Thus, ToRs for short-term field staff must be reviewed to ensure they are very clear, including the MRO’s role, the reporting structure, and the authority of the Country Director.

Messages conveyed by CARE

Respondents felt that CARE successfully maintained certain themes in both media relations and advocacy. The prominent and consistent themes were about CARE’s long-term role as a development agency, its active participation in the emergency relief, and its credibility as well-known agency.

Consistently, CI Members outside the USA felt that the communications plan was very conservative, and did not meet their needs, but was driven by US domestic concerns.

Evaluating 'success' of CARE communications

Several respondents mentioned that CARE's media relations work should be evaluated against agreed-upon goals. CI Members must be clear in their objectives for media relations during emergencies, and ensure that their activities will achieve those objectives.

Capacity issues

Responses showed that CARE has some excellent staff on call, willing to step forward and do high- quality work on short notice. The smaller CI Members have the biggest challenge, frequently having one or two staff members with overlapping responsibilities in media relations, marketing, fundraising, etc.

Recommendations

For improving COMWG performance, the main recommendations were

- Send an agenda well in advance for every conference call. The agenda should include any issues and prior discussion, so that the time on the call can be used solely for decision-making.
- Use the call time for reports rather than brainstorming for ideas.
- Provide minutes or a call record as follow-up – this is particularly important for non-English CI Members, to catch all the important discussion.
- Make sure that all relevant staff are included in e-mail distributions, and are kept informed. Several staff mentioned being 'left out' at one time or another; keep working to minimize any 'losses'.
- Identify one person responsible for receiving the SITREPs for each CI Member, and for circulating the report internally.

While e-mail is significantly cheaper than phone calls, the volume of messages was high during this time. Several respondents pointed out that a CARE intranet is a cost-effective tool to keep in touch, especially for sharing documents and photos.

For improving media relations officers' performance in the field, the recommendations were

- Review ToRs for media relations officers for clarity, and make sure the officer, COMWG and the Country Office staff all understand them.
- Define and standardise the content of SITREPs. Take communications needs into consideration when defining required content.

For assessing success of CARE communications, the recommendations were

- Set goals through COMWG for media relations activities during emergencies, and evaluate the outcomes against those goals.
- Measure output by CI Members against the media coverage, taking the type and quality of coverage into account. Counting page views of the local website, or

polling for public opinion, could be useful to measure the effectiveness of CI Member communications.

For improving staff capacity, the recommendations were

- Provide more training for media relations officers in CI Member countries, particularly in developing ‘pitches’ for their own markets. Media officers must ‘know what they need’. Time and experience in the field could help CI Member staff grasp the complexity of the role of the officer posted in the field.
- Continue media training for Country Office staff, so that the spokesperson can be a CO staff member.
- Offer training for MROs posted to the field, to use technical equipment, such as the SAT phone and the digital camera.