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Charities face dilemma: food parcels or press releases

By MARK JONES

LONDON (AlertNet) - Getting good press coverage is hard enough for any organisation. For cash-starved charities covering faraway crises and facing growing scepticism over their activities, it's a huge challenge, according to a new study sponsored by Fritz Institute and Reuters Foundation.

One of the report's main findings is that officials working on the emergency frontline often have little or no training in how to handle the media. As such, they run the risk that their work with journalists will backfire.

One senior charity manager in Africa set up a journalist's visit only to find that a colleague handling part of the tour had spent much of his time attempting to convert the journalist to his belief in witchcraft. The manager was able to intervene and prevent this from colouring the reporting of the group's work.

A second charity operating in a Muslim country was not so lucky. Its local, non-Muslim press minder looking after a visiting journalist was overheard by soldiers making anti-Muslim comments in a café and was arrested, along with the reporter. The journalist

agreed not to write up the incident, but the story surfaced elsewhere.

In a third case, a charity assigned one of its best handlers to escort a New York journalist. Two weeks were spent setting up the visit. But the handler was used to dealing with sponsors. The reporter was treated to the kind of lengthy, detailed tour suited to a visiting dignitary but came away with no angle for a story.

These examples come from a study by Steve Ross of the Columbia School of Journalism into the views and experiences of more than 50 relief charity media officers and nearly 300 journalists.

It is thought to be the most detailed assessment yet of relationships between relief charities and the media.

MEDIA DILEMMA

Charities need journalists to cover emergencies in general, and their own activities in particular, to attract donors. Only one charity surveyed saw good press relations as anything less than "very important" -- the highest possible ranking.

"Media drives private donations as well as increases our visibility with major donor agencies and governments ...and is what allows us to run our missions," one media officer said.

But the study suggested a deep reluctance to devote resources to press relations, particularly from donors worried about charities' expense ratios. The impression was that donors were keen on publicity but did not want to pay for it, at least not as an identifiable budget item.

"Everyone knows the more we raise visibility the more we can solicit money," a North American media officer said. "But the programs themselves don't budget [press relations] in their proposals."

This, coupled with sensitivity to the possibility of media criticism of well-intentioned work, may explain why relatively few resources are devoted to media operations in all but the biggest charities.

Typical was this comment: "We spend very little money on PR. There's no field-based staff for media relations or external affairs. Rarely, we have scraped

together money for crisis settings in Pakistan, briefly in Liberia and Iraq. We're responsive to queries but do not stimulate coverage."

There also appears to be a widespread feeling that field workers are too busy dealing with a crisis to handle press relations.

"[We] keep international staffs small and hire mostly nationals so there is no one on the ground to take this role," one respondent said. "They don't have the time to say to reporters, 'Why don't you come along with me and I'll show you the clinics we set up today.'"

The situation is reflected in the qualifications and training of staff. Few respondents reported training budgets beyond a few hundred dollars. Field staff freely admitted they dealt with the press without the benefit of formal training.

WHAT GETS A CRISIS NOTICED?

Journalists said an emergency stands the best chance of coverage if it has a high death toll; involves a population from the same background as the audience; has created suffering among children; can provide compelling visuals or eyewitness accounts; and has foreign policy implications for the journalist's country.

"A crisis story is compelling for the press when it involves mass migration of people, ongoing violence, or significant death. It is compelling when there are visuals: refugee camps etc.," one respondent said.

"It is less compelling when it is a story of chronic deprivation, or when the story is far from our comfort zone, i.e. Rwanda, Congo."

That's a tall order, ruling out many current emergencies for journalists in most countries.

This may explain the high level of "forgotten emergencies" identified by relief charities -- why there has been relatively plentiful coverage of Afghanistan and Iraq and relatively little of the huge loss of life in the Democratic Republic of Congo or the scourge of malaria in Africa.

Whether or not it is possible to shift permanently the media's appetite for humanitarian emergency coverage is a vexed issue. The Fritz/Reuters study tackled a less demanding question: Are there information barriers that are hindering coverage by journalists already interested in the subject?

The following emerged as key hurdles: the cost of getting reporters into the field; the lack of timely response from groups at the scene; the inability to link up with groups doing crisis intervention work at the scene; and inadequate information on charity websites to support "story pitches".

BRIDGING THE INFORMATION GAP

Charity press officers were near unanimous in saying journalist organisations jump on disaster coverage but are less willing to cover chronic issues such as disease and famine. Journalists dis-

pute this and by a four-to-one margin report that scepticism and criticism of charities is on the increase.

There is clearly suspicion on both sides. But there is also some room for optimism given clear indications from the study of what would improve relations.

In addition to better media training for relief charity media staff, the study identified two other priorities: better information and support services for journalists and improved use of the Internet by relief charities.

When asked what would help them cover humanitarian emergencies better, journalists' favourite choice outside North America was independently financed trips into the field. This finding begs the question of whether it is possible to find a genuinely independent sponsor for such visits.

Less controversial were a series of simple ideas aimed at streamlining journalists' search for information.

Top was the provision of "crisis profiles" giving up-to-date background on humanitarian emergencies. Next came the creation of an online directory showing which charities were at the scene of a crisis to help journalists track down interviewees. Third was a regular e-mail update on the latest emergencies and early warning of future crises.

Half of reporters handling emergency reporting use search engines to find contacts and background. Yet of 32 charity

websites analysed, three failed to give contacts details, only 11 included links to groups doing similar work and two-thirds failed to provide an archive of past press releases.

Worse still, few sites had internal search engines and not one charity respondent could say whether their site had been optimised for the major search engines. Advice on best use of the Web is sorely needed by many relief charities, the study suggests.

MEDIA 'ARMS RACE'

Donors, individuals or government, are heavily influenced by broadcast and press coverage. That presents relief charities with

a difficult choice – how much to spend on media relations rather than meeting immediate humanitarian requirements.

“The natural tendency is that money should go for food,” said a media officer at a large U.S.-based relief charity that has adopted a more active publicity strategy. “There used to be a natural culture of modesty, and we felt good about it, that there should be little advocacy for the group, that everyone just wanted to do the work.”

Times have changed and the need to influence opinion has persuaded governments and the corporate sector to embrace professional media relations as a

necessity. Many relief charities appear to have fallen behind in this “arms race” for media exposure.

The Fritz/Reuters study shows that the choice not to invest much in media relations carries risks for many relief charities. Relatively straightforward changes could improve coverage of emergencies, and without huge cost.

But since the money has to come from somewhere, perhaps the strongest finding is that little will change unless donors can be convinced of the value of good media relations.
