

# Checklist for planning a national risk communication strategy



## I. Preparedness stage

### Tasks for the internal organization of the risk communications team

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- Review laws and international agreements (e.g., International Health Regulations) and public policies relating to the dissemination of public information.
- In consultation with the managers and/or authorities in charge, formulate a transparency management policy that establishes the criteria for dissemination of information to the public.
- Define the functions of each member (institution) of the risk communications team in a crisis (inter-institutional flow of information).
- Define the functions of the communications team within your institution during a crisis (internal flow of information).
- Designate official spokespersons.
- Designate at least one member of the communications team to form part of the national group responsible for planning the response to disasters and public health emergencies.
- Identify the institution that will take the lead in communications, depending on the type of emergency, and designate a focal point for information clearance.
- Review the communications plan periodically to ensure that it remains current.

## Tasks to address the needs of special populations



- ❑ Identify mechanisms for communicating with vulnerable groups (older persons, persons with disabilities, children, indigenous populations) and with people who are isolated in order to ensure that will have access to assistance. Define the communication channels to be used to reach vulnerable groups; prepare messages and communication materials in all the languages and dialects spoken by the target population.

## Links with stakeholders and partners



- ❑ Identify and prepare databases of stakeholders – such as youth groups, schools, mayors, unions, churches, associations, and others – and involve them in preparedness activities.
- ❑ Enlist the support of primary care physicians, nurses, midwives, and health promoters in transmitting and receiving information.
- ❑ Work with and involve celebrities and prominent personalities who have assisted in previous communications campaigns; enlist the support of additional celebrities.

## Organization of announcing a crisis



- ❑ Identify the target audiences for each partner institution and establish general objectives for dealing with public health emergencies that may occur in the country.
- ❑ Prepare an internal list that describes how information will be communicated, who will communicate it, and what will be said (chain of command).
- ❑ Prepare reporting protocols with specific indications of what each party will do with respect to both internal and external reporting, taking into account the recommendations of the International Health Regulations.

## Training and simulations



- ❑ Train spokespersons in the rules and principles of risk and outbreak communication and in how to communicate effectively with the mass media.

- Train national risk communications team in “training of trainers.”
- Train other senior officials in risk and outbreak communication.
- Train risk communications teams at the local level; if possible (and appropriate), include other strategic actors such as community leaders, groups of women and young people, religious leaders, municipal authorities, health workers, and others.
- Plan training sessions for the media that include simulations to help journalists to understand scientific complexities.
- Carry out internal simulations and exercises for dealing with contingencies that may arise in order to keep the public prepared, the government operating, and basic services for the public available.
- Carry out simulations to test crisis plans in order to detect possible weaknesses or gaps that need to be corrected before an emergency.



## Development of messages and distribution channels

- Prepare a set of key messages for the various types of public health emergencies that may arise (message map).
- Identify alternative communication channels for emergencies.
- Prepare key messages on prevention based on the findings of research on knowledge and attitudes with regard to emergencies.
- Prepare press releases and question-and-answer sheets with information on some of the diseases that could cause a public health emergency and how they can be prevented.
- Develop messages for the mass media aimed at educating the public and promoting prevention.
- Prepare public service announcements for publication in the press and broadcast via television and radio that convey messages concerning prevention and education, both now and in event that a public health emergency is declared.

- Select communication channels that will be used to distribute messages: e-mail, radio, Internet, television, posters, billboards, direct mail, public address systems, and other ways of reaching large numbers of people.

## Communication monitoring

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- Evaluate mechanisms for monitoring the effectiveness of communications during an outbreak or public health emergency and methods for understanding the attitudes and motivations of the public.
- Research public perceptions of situations that can spark a crisis, such as avian or pandemic influenza, yellow fever, dengue, poisoning, etc. and levels of trust in various sources of information, including government ministries.
- Talk with the community in order to keep tabs on what its members need and want and to inform people about what the government can (or cannot) do for them.
- Establish a media monitoring team.



## Relations with the media

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- Establish or update databases of the media and contact information with a view to identifying the best communication channels.
- Work with editors and reporters to provide information and guidance to journalists.
- Define the logistics for collaborating with the media and supplying materials and updates.
- Assess the current state of preparedness, including human, financial, and equipment resources.



## II. Onset of the emergency

### Verification and confirmation of information at the internal level



- Determine whether information is consistent and obtain any needed clarification from specialists. Determine the severity of the situation.
- Alert the leadership of the institution about the emergency.
- Initiate the phase of communications for control with the goal of maintaining trust and transmitting realistic expectations.
  - Team begins to function and address the public's questions.
  - Spokespersons report to their assigned posts.
  - Pre-prepared messages are disseminated to the public; personnel are informed of established command and control mechanisms.

### Notification of the team and stakeholders



- Determine who should it be notified (the entire committee or only some members?).
- Activate the risk communications committee and implement the activities described in the communications plan.
- Identify who else should be informed based on the hierarchical reporting chain and the severity of the situation.
- Alert spokespersons and update the information to be disseminated through them.
- Determine who should lead the risk communications team based on the nature of the emergency that has occurred.
- Activate the team responsible for monitoring external and internal information.
- Ascertain what the organization is doing to address the situation.
- Determine who is affected by the crisis and what their perceptions of it are.
- Determine what action should be taken by the target population; disseminate pre-prepared messages to the public.

- Inform spokespersons about the situation, background, and key messages for this point in time.
  - Obtain up-to-date information from technical personnel, including information for both key messages and recommendations.
  - Establish clearance procedures to be applied as planned.
- Support the organizational aspects of preparing the first announcement and decide, based on the nature of the situation, on the best channel to use.
  - The media communications team is activated.
  - The key channel for making the first announcement is identified.
  - The press room is put into operation.
- Issue the first announcement: respond frankly and rapidly to initial questions.
  - Information is disseminated before harmful rumors begin to circulate.
  - The spokesperson makes the first announcement, applying the principles of risk and outbreak communication and following WHO guidelines.
  - The spokesperson gives the population some basic recommendations for responding to the crisis.
  - The spokesperson informs the population of actions it can take.
- Inform the media of when and where information updates will be delivered.
- Alert stakeholders and international organizations and seek assistance if necessary.
- Use various channels to maintain ongoing communication with the public.

### Provision of technical advice to the authorities and the risk management team



- Advise the authorities about the emergency from the perspective of the media.
- Establish lines of contact with subject-area specialists (on dengue, yellow fever, influenza, etc.).
- Establish the internal flow of communication for operationalizing information.
- Set priorities in consultation with specialists (update key messages).

- ❑ Supply material and human resources.
  - Human resources needed for the crisis plan are added to the team.
  - Financial resources are available.
  - Logistical resources for mobilization, communication, and other purposes are identified.
- ❑ Ask opinion leaders and stakeholders to help explain the situation.
- ❑ Collaborate with technical experts in explaining measures and highlighting the importance and consequences of following them.
  - Messages updated and distributed on plans for possible social distancing, school closures, quarantines, and cancellation of large gatherings.
- ❑ Communicate with the media following WHO outbreak communication guidelines.



## Communication surveillance

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- ❑ Activate monitoring of communications with the communications personnel from the government and others channels designated to listen to rumors, worries, concerns, and attitudes of the population.
  - Activate call centers and monitor calls from the public.
  - Hold meetings with community and opinion leaders.
  - Monitor the media.



## Control phase

- Implement a schedule rotation plan to encompass all the functions included in the plan.
- Prepare spokespersons and high-level officials to address the public and provide information on the background and additional information on the event.
- Maintain two-way communication between the public and the authorities so that they can share views on the situation.
  - Calls centers, telephone hotlines, and live radio and TV interview and call-in programs working as expected.
  - Web pages and blogs updated.
- Collaborate with private physicians in developing messages to be communicated to the public through health workers.
- Ensure that mechanisms for communicating with vulnerable populations are established.
- Correct erroneous information such as rumors. Explain the recommendations for dealing with the emergency.
- Maintain good communication with the media and ensure that they receive current information from the official source.
  - Distribute additional information on the situation, including background information.
  - Ensure that the key messages and recommendations are delivered correctly through the communications media and others channels.
- Keep a variety of communication channels open in order to disseminate key messages and recommendations.
  - Messages prepared in advance are transmitted and printed messages are distributed.
  - The communication team collaborates with educational and faithbased institutions to transmit recommendations and reduce concerns.
  - Information on websites, blogs, electronic bulletin boards, and oth media is kept up to date.





## IV. Recovery phase

- ❑ Alert the public as needed on how to deal with dead bodies, based on guidelines developed for emergency situations.
- ❑ Encourage the public and the communications media to continue supporting the response.
- ❑ Establish ways of informing the public that the crisis has passed and that public services will resume.
- ❑ Evaluate problems and errors in order to strengthen best practices during the recovery period.



## V. Evaluation



### Post-crisis: prepare for the next crisis

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When the crisis has ended, performances can be evaluated, lessons learned can be documented, and best practices can be identified.

- ❑ Evaluate lessons learned in order to strengthen appropriate public responses to similar emergencies in the future.
  - Assess the effectiveness of the communications team in each phase and area of work.
  - Assess the effectiveness of meetings.
  - Assess the effectiveness of the internal flow of communications.
  - Assess the monitoring of communications and of the media.
  - Assess the response of the communications media.