

Special Topics

14 - Public Communication for Disaster Risk Reduction

Key words: risk communication, information ecosystem, communication channel

Advances in technology have improved scientific risk information dramatically over the past several years. Yet this valuable data can too easily go to waste if effective communication isn't established among scientists, decision-makers, other professionals and the people who are directly at risk.

Effective communication influences how experts develop and share data, how professional users understand the data and make decisions based on it, and how ordinary people take actions to reduce risk in their everyday lives.

Communication is a process, not a product. It should be considered throughout the risk assessment process, to increase effectiveness at every stage.

This particular section focuses specifically on communication with the general public. It provides guidance on how government officials and other professionals can communicate about risk with general audiences to reduce the risk of disasters.

Why communicate about risk with the general public?

Effective communication is critical for helping ordinary people to understand different types of risk they face, discuss what can be done, and to prompt people to take action. Community members can also be an important source of risk information for analysts and can provide innovative solutions for managing risk.

Governments have a responsibility to provide clear information to the public about hazards and what actions can be taken at the household, community, and government levels to reduce the risk of disaster. Political dimensions may influence this, but should not override a community's right to information.

The media can play a crucial role by engaging people on issues of risk reduction, creating a platform to share practical ideas, and hosting discussions around governance and accountability for risk reduction.

Who is "the public"?

The public comprises all people in society, spanning old, young, rich, poor, male, female, urban, rural and more. Yet if you target 'everyone', you target no one. Therefore, you will need to consider separate communication initiatives for different groups to ensure that you connect with people on issues that matter most to them. And when grouping these 'target audiences', think beyond demographics. Knowing someone's age, gender, location, income, and education only gives you part of their story. Consider what people know and believe about risk, how they feel about it, who they trust and which channels of information they refer to most, who they talk to about it and when, and what they already do about risk.

Risk assessment considerations

How well do you understand the characteristics of different groups within the general public? How well do different groups understand risks and what factors influence their ability to take action? What challenges do they face in everyday life and what are their priorities? What scope do they have for long-term planning? Who do they feel is responsible for risk reduction?

What to communicate

What you communicate will depend on the precise change you want to make among the target audience and how you think that change will happen. Many media initiatives about risk reduction focus on providing information only. Yet prompting people to take action often requires more than telling them what the risks are and what to do about them. It may require a shift in mind-set, or encouragement, support, discussion and problem-solving before they can take meaningful action. Thorough research and analysis will help you identify what needs to change. Communication with people at risk should be two-way and take an all-hazards approach, reflecting the real life barriers and motivators that will help people make decisions about positive changes. People directly impacted by risks have extremely valuable understanding about the potential impacts and how the risks could be addressed. From the outset, it is vital to communicate with the groups at risk to ensure a joint understanding of the risks and how they can best be addressed at all levels.

Risk assessment considerations

What are the impacts of risks at household and local levels? (Don't assume you have a full picture of these without consultation.) What are the biggest barriers to change for your target audience at the household and community levels? What small changes can be made to facilitate bigger changes? How can communication support these changes?

How to communicate about risk

Communication should be woven through disaster management strategies to increase the reach and impact of the overall effort. Communication strategies should consider the following approaches:

- **Assess the 'information ecosystem':** Risk information from those at risk and from technical experts is generated and shared in a complex and dynamic environment. Consider how information is produced, distributed, understood, and influenced. When information flows through dynamic systems, it is often transformed by those who can either validate and amplify it or, if it comes from certain actors and sources, disqualify it.

Risk assessment considerations

How does the information ecosystem work during 'normal' times? To what extent can reliable information flow through trusted channels effectively? What skills do risk experts, officials, and media professionals have to communicate effectively with the general public? Are information flows two-way: are there channels for the development of (scientific and technical) risk information to be regularly informed by the concerns, impacts and understanding of those directly impacted? The communication

infrastructure itself must be resilient: Can it withstand physical shocks and stresses and continue functioning during severe events?

- **Select communication channels and formats:** Your choice of media and communication should be led by what your target audience uses and trusts and what you are trying to achieve. For example, social media may be an effective way to engage a younger, urban audience, while radio may be a good way to reach rural, illiterate communities. Ideally, you will choose multiple methods to create a “360-degree” experience for your target audience, with an emphasis on enabling two-way flows of information.

Media and communication channels may include print, radio, television, online, phone and face-to-face communication. The formats of each of those channels may vary widely – from drama to discussion or SMS text messages to public service announcements. Other visual and audio devices may be used in early warning systems, such as flags, flashing lights, bells, drums and loudspeakers.

Many of these channels and formats have the potential of offering two-way communication – from phone-in radio programmes to TV talk shows to social media. Discussion groups organised around media outputs offer additional possibilities for dialogue.

[Risk assessment considerations](#)

What media and communication methods do specific target audiences use? For what purposes? When? With whom? Which people or channels do they trust the most? On what issues? How does that vary among different groups? What change are you trying to make? How can a combination of different media and communication activities support ongoing dialogue with the target audience and contribute to positive change?

- **Make it clear, relevant, engaging, and practical:** Too often communication falls flat, contributing to the perception that risk reduction is either too scary to think about or too boring to deal with. Effective communication takes complex technical issues and conveys them in a clear and simple manner that is immediately relevant to the target audience. Effective initiatives will also be engaging and motivating, with practical, doable ideas of how people can take steps to reduce their own risk.

[Risk assessment considerations](#)

What capacity exists to communicate about risk in a truly engaging way that appeals to target audiences? Are risk experts able to express themselves clearly and convincingly to the general public? Are local media outlets able to create engaging, accurate, high-quality programming around risk?

- **Get people talking:** Dialogue is a precursor to action. Media and communication initiatives can encourage ‘off-air’ conversations among people about risk and what they can do at home and within their communities to reduce it. It can also, encourage ‘on air’ discussion among populations to amplify conversations, including discussion with officials to encourage public participation in government decision-making. It goes without saying that

that scientists, decision-makers, and other risk professionals should engage in these conversations and respond to input from the general public.

Risk assessment considerations

To what extent do people talk about risk in an informed way? Who is engaged in those conversations? How could that dialogue be expanded to include more information and to reach more people? What resources do people need to support people to make decisions based on these conversations?

- **Rely on research:** Throughout the initiative, audience research should inform your communication plan to ensure that you understand different groups and their needs and that you connect in a way that resonates with them. Monitoring and evaluation research will confirm if your initiative is having the effect that you intended and can convey the results you've achieved.

Risk assessment considerations

Have you invested sufficient resources to understand your audiences, to inform all aspects of your communication plan and to measure the results? Is your monitoring and evaluation approach effectively assessing impacts for the most marginalised?

Work with others

Collaborating with multiple stakeholders more systematically, especially the private sector, can strengthen risk communication. Building relationships between media professionals, technical experts, government officials and other decision-makers can result in more effective communication and more sustainable platforms. Collaboration between national and local governments is always important to ensure that information flows from officials to the public are consistent.

Risk assessment considerations

Which other actors could improve the effectiveness of your risk communication? Who understands the audience interests and priorities and communicates in a way they will understand and trust? Who needs to listen to the public's perception and information about risks – including scientists, leaders, decision-makers and members of other communities? How can you work with them systematically?

BOX 1 - Examples of government portals communicating risk with the general public

Armenia - Emergency Channel <http://www.emergency.am/en/index>

Australia (Queensland) - Get Ready <https://getready.qld.gov.au/>.

Practical advice on how to reduce risk with the option of receiving localised information, with a focus on connecting local communities.

Canada - Get prepared <https://www.getprepared.gc.ca/index-eng.aspx>

Information on how to reduce risk.

Fiji - National Disaster Management Office <http://www.ndmo.gov.fj/>

Information on how to reduce risk and updates on current emergencies.

New Zealand – Get Thru <http://www.getthru.govt.nz/>

Information on how to reduce risk and what to do during an emergency, including a list of radio stations to listen to.

United Kingdom – Preparing for Emergencies

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preparing-for-emergencies/preparing-for-emergencies>

Information on how to prepare for emergencies, including guidelines for community groups.

United States - Ready <https://www.ready.gov/>

Information on how to reduce risk, tailored to local hazards for residents in different parts of the country.

Resources for further information

- Twigg, John. Disaster Risk Reduction (revised 2015 edition). Chapter 10: [Communications, information, education](#). Humanitarian Practice Network. Overseas Development Institute.
- [Trends in risk communication policies and practices](#). OECD Publishing.
- [Through a different lens: Behind every effect, there is a cause](#). A guide for journalists covering disaster risk reduction.
- BBC Media Action (2014) Resilience and humanitarian response. Helping people deal with risk, respond to change and cope with emergencies. http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/resilience_and_humanitarian_response_2014.pdf