Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) Public Health Network
Accurate Scenarios Active Preparedness (ASAP) Project

Effective Risk Communication for Public Health Emergencies
and the Role of Social Media

Concept Paper

BACKGROUND

Risk communication for public health emergencies is of vital importance for effective risk management. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “while it is not possible to prevent health emergencies, their adverse direct and indirect impacts can be mitigated through effective risk communications.” However, recent events, such as the E. coli incident in Germany and the so-called “Triple Disaster” — earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown — in Japan, showed that trust is a key element that needs to be addressed to make risk communication a more effective tool in risk management.

Trust plays an important role in three different stages of the communication process. First, effective information sharing in the internal decision-making process encourages positive working partnerships. Second, when informing the public during and after a public health threat, having an existing reporting relationship with the public ensures trust, public compliance and necessary behaviour change. In situations where there remain uncertainties, communication based on trust allows public health authorities to be open about their assumptions and uncertainties, explain how decisions were made and by whom, and build on existing, understandable communication techniques. Finally, trust is important in managing relations with the media, whose role is critical in disseminating information, especially communicating authorities’ advice and guidance.

The ASEF Public Health Network will study the two abovementioned public health emergencies to explore these aspects of risk communication. Analysing the E. coli case will help us understand how internal risk communication strategies, between the public institutions, and external strategies, with the general public, can be improved. It will also illustrate the different roles that social media can play, e.g. as a quick carrier of (sometimes unverified) information and as a research tool for early detection and online collaboration. The case of the Great Eastern Japan Disaster will provide an opportunity to discuss what communication strategies national authorities can use to maintain the trust of the general public under extremely stressful and complicated circumstances. It will also shed some light on how social media can engage the public during and after a public health emergency. In addition, both cases illustrate the necessity for public authorities to establish an online presence even before such an emergency occurs in order to build trust. With these selected case studies from Asia and Europe, this workshop will be an avenue for professionals in related fields to conduct a comparative analysis and identify valuable lessons for both regions.

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The ASEF Public Health Network has taken a future-oriented scenario approach since 2010. The Network used a set of scenarios to develop strategic options, contributing to multi-sector pandemic preparedness and response. Recognising that many of the lessons learned from these exercises are also applicable to other public health emergencies, the Network aims to address the issue of trust as well as the role of social media in risk communication for public health emergencies.

OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of this workshop is to increase the effectiveness of internal communications among public health stakeholders and external communications with the general public before, during, and after public health emergencies.

Specifically, the workshop aims to enable mid to senior level officials at public health authorities in Asia and Europe, who are in charge of communication, to better prepare for public health emergencies.

ASEF will bring together 25–30 stakeholders in risk communication from different sectors, ranging from communication experts at government agencies and international organisations to private sector representatives, health correspondents and online opinion leaders to discuss and address these issues.

PROGRAMME

Part I
Analysis of existing risk communication plans at different levels and in different sectors in order to identify gaps and challenges:
- Case studies – the E. coli incident in Germany and Japan’s Triple Disaster
- Participants’ presentations on the risk communication plans of their respective organisations

Part II
- Workgroup discussions to develop recommendations on how to improve risk communication strategies through cross-level and multi-sector cooperation

Part III
- Testing applicability of these recommendations in different future settings, by using the ASEF-ASAP scenarios

DATE AND VENUE

3–4 June 2013 / Indonesia (Bali)

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POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- Coordinating Ministry for People's Welfare of Indonesia
- World Health Organization – Western Pacific Regional Office (WHO-WPRO)
- World Food Programme (WFP) (TBC)

POTENTIAL STAKEHOLDERS

- Risk communication experts from:
  - International organisations involved in disaster risk reduction, e.g. UN System Influenza Coordination (UNSIC), United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
  - Regional organisations in disaster risk reduction, e.g. ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre), ASEAN Risk Communication Resource Centre, ASEAN Expert Group on Food Safety (AEGFS), Directorate General for Health & Consumers (DG SANCO), European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), European Environment Agency (EEA)
  - Ministries of Health, e.g. Germany, Spain, Japan
  - National organisations, e.g. Bundesinstitut fur Risikobewertung (Federal Institute of Risk Assessment, Germany), Robert Koch Institute (National Disease Center, Germany)

- Academy: London School of Economics and Political Science; Hong Kong University; Griffith University; University of Birmingham; Keio University, Japan; University of Malaysia; Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

- Health/disaster experts from media, e.g. Deutsch Presse Agentur, Agence France Presse, Reuters

- Civil Society Organisations: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC); Non-profit foundation: Institut Pasteur

- Online opinion leaders

- Advertising/public relations industry

CONTACT INFORMATION

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