

Asia-Europe Foundation Public Health Network (ASEF PHN) Risk Communication for Public Health Emergencies: Working together during the COVID-19 pandemic 19-21 Oct 2021, Online

Scope & Purpose

Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) Public Health Network

The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)¹, founded in 1997, is an intergovernmental not-for-profit organisation representing the 53 Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)² Partners: 30 European and 21 Asian countries, plus the European Union and the ASEAN Secretariat. Following the 6th ASEM Summit (ASEM6; 2006; Helsinki, Finland) where the leaders expressed their determination to combat avian influenza and a possible human influenza pandemic, the “ASEM Initiative for the Rapid Containment of Pandemic Influenza”, financially supported by the Government of Japan, was launched at the 9th ASEM Foreign Ministers’ Meeting (ASEM FMM9; 2009; Hanoi, Viet Nam). Since then, the two components of the Initiative, ASEM stockpile of anti-viral drugs and personal protective equipment, as well as ASEF Public Health Network (ASEF PHN) have contributed to strengthening ASEM Partners’ capacity for managing Public Health Emergencies (PHEs).

ASEF PHN’s scope is not limited to pandemic influenza – it expands to Emerging Infectious Diseases (EIDs) as well as Pandemic Preparedness and Response. ASEF PHN has been working on Risk Communication for PHEs since 2013. Risk Communication is one of the 8 core capacities defined in the International Health Regulations (2005) (IHR)³ which all WHO Member States are required to comply⁴. Between 2017 to 2019, ASEF PHN implemented a series of High-level Meetings focusing on [Risk Communication & Leadership \(2017\)](#), [How Can We Include Migrants & Ethnic Minorities \(2018\)](#), and [Risk Communication Beyond the Country Borders \(2019\)](#) for effective Risk Communication during PHEs. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel-coronavirus disease (COVID-19) as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)⁵ under IHR. The outbreak caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) continued to spread across the continents, including Asia and Europe. On 11 March 2020, WHO announced COVID-19 as a pandemic⁶. This previously unknown virus with no effective treatment options has been posing significant challenges on public health and beyond with its uncertain nature and rapidly evolving information.

In 2021, ASEF PHN will continue to work on Risk Communication for PHEs with a focus on how we can work together during the COVID-19 pandemic by sharing best practices and lessons learnt across Asia and Europe. A pre-event survey was conducted in June 2021 among its alumni to identify relevant themes for the online conference – 3 topics were selected for each day as below.

¹ <http://www.ASEF.org>

² <https://www.ASEMinfoboard.org/about/partners>

³ https://www.who.int/health-topics/international-health-regulations#tab=tab_1

⁴ http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/190819/WHO_HSE_GCR_2015_13_eng.pdf;jsessionid=5B20508C33107F767464C601AAD99F62?sequence=1

⁵ https://extranet.who.int/sph/sites/default/files/document-library/document/FS15A_IHR_COVID19_EN_MAY_2020.pdf

⁶ <https://www.who.int/news/item/27-04-2020-who-timeline-covid-19>

[Day 1] How can we communicate about the pandemic during high uncertainty?

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted difficulties in communication due to its evolving nature and the scientific facts around it. Constant changes in the disease information made it arduous for the Health Ministries/Authorities to maintain trust with the population. The pandemic also demonstrated the impact of a disease outbreak beyond the health sector - a pandemic can be utilised for political agenda undermining public health importance, especially when a virus is not well-understood like SARS-CoV-2. Under such circumstances, communicating uncertainty, handling political interface, and engaging the community in doubt of the authority caused a significant challenge on Risk Communication. This session will look into ways to overcome difficulties in communicating while scientific evidence is evolving.



[Day 2] Combatting infodemic & effective use of social media

Risk Communication is characterised as “*the exchange of real-time information, advice and opinions between experts and people facing threats to their health, economic or social well-being*”, which functions to protect people by enabling them to make informed decisions against the risks⁷. In recent years, the internet, including various social media platforms, has made the exchange of information much faster and easier. However, it has also posed a challenge on Risk Communication. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations acknowledged “infodemic”, which spreads fake news fast and easy. According to WHO, infodemic is “*an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution*” that spreads misinformation, disinformation and rumours amid PHEs. It has a significant negative impact on public health response and a high risk of creating confusion and distrust among the public⁸. While social media is a useful tool for risk communication, it can also be a source of fake news. This session will look into the infodemic management and effective use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[Day 3] How can we increase “vaccine confidence”?

Vaccination plays a critical part in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. At the 73rd World Health Assembly (WHA) in May 2020, a resolution was issued recognizing “*the role of extensive immunization against COVID-19 as a global public good for health in preventing, containing and stopping transmission in order to bring the pandemic to an end, once safe, quality, efficacious, effective, accessible and affordable vaccines are available*”⁹. In 2019, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, WHO identified “*vaccine hesitancy*” as one of the ten global threats to global health¹⁰, and the COVID-19 vaccine is not exempt from this phenomenon. The COVID-19 vaccines are fast-tracked in their development due to a public health emergency, yet the standards of quality, safety and efficacy are not compromised¹¹. This session will look into how Risk Communication plays a role in promoting “*vaccine confidence*” amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁷ <https://openwho.org/courses/risk-communication>

⁸ <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19>

⁹ https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA73/A73_R1-en.pdf

¹⁰ “Vaccine hesitancy – the reluctance or refusal to vaccinate despite the availability of vaccines – threatens to reverse progress made in tackling vaccine-preventable diseases” <https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019>

¹¹ <https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/human-regulatory/overview/public-health-threats/coronavirus-disease-covid-19/treatments-vaccines/vaccines-covid-19/covid-19-vaccines-development-evaluation-approval-monitoring>

About the online conference

The overall aim of the online conference is to strengthen countries' capacity to support Risk Communication for PHEs. It provides a platform for bi-regional exchange on the best practices and lessons learnt related to Risk Communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a closed-door event via invitation only and goes online for approximately 1.5 hours each day for 3 days. The session themes of each day were selected through a survey disseminated among ASEF PHN alumni prior to the conference.

Specific objectives of the Conference are:

- To address the challenges in Risk Communication identified during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- To develop recommendations from the best Risk Communication practices and lessons learnt; and
- To determine the areas of inter-national/inter-sectoral collaboration to improve Risk Communication for the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as well as other EIDs in future

Target Audience

The online conference will aim to include the following audiences: i) Government officials in charge of health emergencies and emergency risk communication; ii) Government officials from sectors other than health that are involved in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; and iii) representatives from civil society, including Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), International Organisations (IOs) and academia. More specifically, the Conference would aim to reach:

- Senior-level officials, advisors and/or other decision-makers from ASEM Partners' Ministries of Health or equivalent
- Spokespersons/senior-level media personnel from ASEM Partners' Ministries of Health or equivalent
- Senior-level officials, advisors and/or other decision-makers from ASEM Partners' Ministries of Finance, Foreign Affairs, Tourism and other related Ministries
- Representatives of NGOs, IOs and academics whose work is related to Risk Communication and the COVID-19 pandemic

Expected Outcomes

The online conference will foster the exchange of good practices and lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic in establishing and improving Risk Communication processes in Asia and Europe. The outcome of the conference will be summarised as a short report containing the key recommendations.

Date and Location

This online conference will use Webex. This event is via invitation only – Participants are required to register prior to the conference.



ASEF's contribution is made possible with the financial support from the Government of Japan.