POLICY BRIEF
Risk Communication for Public Health Emergencies (PHEs): Working Together during the COVID-19 Pandemic
Communicating PHEs with high uncertainties
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Executive statement
The high level of uncertainty is one of the unique characteristics of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. With such a pandemic, one of the health sector’s missions is to share timely and accurate information with the public. Risk Communication has undoubtedly a vital role to play, and how well we can inform our population of the changing situations with emerging new evidence is a key to getting them on our side fighting against the pandemic. There is no ready-to-use simple manual, yet there are some tips and lessons learnt that can be adapted to each country’s context. This paper aims to provide key messages and a set of recommendations to ASEM Partners to implement effective Risk Communication amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and future pandemics, especially in relation to communicating uncertainty.

Key messages and recommendations
- **Avoid “declarative” statements**: Think about when the situation changes and how you will deal with that. A declarative statement during uncertain times will risk you losing the population’s trust.
- **Acknowledge uncertainty & build trust**: It is a new virus, so there are many unknowns. “This is what we have learnt so far, but this can change”. To build trust, be transparent, timely and easy to understand.
- **Enlist your audience to work with you**: Your audiences can be a strong force in fighting against a pandemic. Effective Risk Communication can make them protect each other.
- **Political Interface**: Unfortunately, politics is inherent in Public Health, and the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that politicising a pandemic will negatively affect the fight against pandemics.

Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted difficulties in communication due to its evolving nature on the scientific facts around it. There have been several occasions that evidence kept changing. Constant changes in the disease information made it arduous for the Health Ministries/Public Health 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, Risk Communication practitioners face significant challenges in communicating uncertainty, engaging the community in doubt of the authority, and handling political interface.
“We are not going to beat it unless we work together. For working against each other, that’s where we’ve been seeing huge problems where there have been bipartisan politics. Where the virus has been politicised, that’s where we’re seeing the huge outbreaks and that’s where we’re seeing the deaths, so really, **politicising the virus kills people**.”

Dr Margaret HARRIS, Spokesperson, World Health Organization

[19 Oct 2021] ASEP PHN Annual Risk Communication Conference: Day 1
“How can we communicate about the pandemic during high uncertainty?”

ASEF PHN hosted its annual Risk Communication conference online, looking into the ways to overcome difficulties in communicating during high uncertainty. To facilitate a much-needed dialogue in implementing effective Risk Communication under the changing circumstances, a journalist reporting health crisis and a spokesperson from an international health organization shared their lessons learnt and practical tips for handling uncertainty while implementing timely and effective Risk Communication.

The videos featuring the highlight of the online conference is available via [video 1] & [video 2].

More information on the online conference can be found here.
Recommendations from the online conference day 1

The online conference has highlighted the key areas essential to consider when communicating high uncertainty during Public Health Emergencies (PHEs).

**Recommendation 1:**
Be ultra-cautious on “declarative statement” – sharing of a “journey of discovery” is the way to go when handling a novel virus

With a novel respiratory pathogen, there can be a lot of questions, yet no one has clear answers as scientific information is constantly evolving from one day to the other. Under such a circumstance, we are all learning together, and no one has a monopoly on the facts. In the long run, avoiding declarative statements will benefit Risk Communication, refraining your population from potential confusion in the future.

**Recommendation 2:**
Acknowledging uncertainty will help to build the trust needed

It is a “must” to acknowledge uncertainty when communicating about a new virus. Although it is not easy, being consistent and not contradictory are also important. It is a new situation, and the evidence is getting developed. For instance, “We are doing the work to understand, and it is evolving” could be a good way to describe such a situation. Sometimes, an attempt to be certain in scientific information can lead to uncertainty – it is crucial to think about how to communicate the fact, which is “information as it stands”, that may change.

**Recommendation 3:**
Use Risk Communication to enlist the public in the fight against a pandemic; “We are all in this together, we will work together to understand and beat this”

Avoid giving information to only scare people – messages should contain specific actions that people can realistically take. Risk Communication has the power to unite us fighting against the pandemic. Necessary behaviour changes to combat the ongoing pandemic through effective Risk Communication functions to protect each other. Listening is key to finding the best suitable message to the audience, leading to positive behaviour change.

**Recommendation 4:**
Be aware of the fact that politicising a pandemic will kill people.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that politicising PHEs would kill people. We need to think critically about any information, no matter where it comes from. As PHEs involve matters not limited to the health sector and include people and the economy, we cannot avoid politics. While it is unavoidable, understanding how politics may be obscuring the facts may help journalists reveal true situations. We should all be fighting against the virus collectively.
Are the media and public health authorities natural/automatic collaborators?

“As far as the media and the public health are all trying to fight the virus, it makes sense that we collaborate to fight the virus. I think the media can be a powerful ally of public health in that regard. But I think the pandemic has made me acutely aware that public health and the science and the truth are not mutually exhaustive. Politics, personal convictions and biases get in the way to mess things up and obscure the facts.” Mr Jason GALE, Scientific Biosecurity Correspondent, Bloomberg News

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References/more information


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