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Engage Society for
Risk Awareness and Resilience

POLICY BRIEF

Communicating with Citizens in a Crisis

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"To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world"

Tony Robbins

The future of emergency communications requires a new ecosystem that enhances capacity and capability by creating an environment that is accessible, equitable, and anticipates change as a constant state.

This is the main and overarching recommendation from the ENGAGE project in relation to communications. The world has significantly changed and the rate at which it does so is increasing. ENGAGE has identified that there is a tension between the legacy model of emergency communications and future requirements, creating a gap between what is required and what is provided. If not addressed, this gap will grow ever larger.

Recognising this, the recommendation proposes a new direction that will create a new communications environment- one that reflects the reality that rapid and partially unstructured or uncontrollable change will be a constant state. An ecosystem optimised for this will also increase communications capacity and capability by creating a means to ensure the requirements of all stakeholders are recognised and supported.

In doing so, it will enhance the resilience of societies overall, aid effective integration, and build in incentives to continuously improve and drive more effective multi-directional communications.

It is important to state that this recommendation is not in any way a criticism of the sector or current arrangements. The expertise, dedication, and achievements of those that have, and continue to, work to help others is unconditionally and gratefully recognised. It is, in fact, their legacy that provides the foundation and ability to be bold and aspirational in our recommendation. It is our hope that this recommendation represents a continuance of the spirit of innovation and enterprise that has long existed within the sector. But it is one that must now adjust to recognise the very different set of requirements that the future poses.

The main recommendation is accompanied by further recommendations that relate to specific areas of emergency communication. Each of them can be considered and progressed individually, although it was their cumulative impact that suggested the need for our primary recommendation.

Scene Setter

Even in its simplest forms, consistently effective communication can be very difficult to achieve. It is made even more so when it is being undertaken within the complex and dynamic environment of the crisis and disaster sector and against a wider backdrop of escalating risks, shifting societal expectations, international targets, and rapid advances in communication technologies. Each of these individually present both new challenges and opportunities. However, in combination, they also start to expose the limitations of the existing capability and question its suitability for the future.

Despite the need for innovation, it can be difficult for new ideas and suppliers to engage the sector. There are increasing examples where, rather than be deterred, spontaneous solution providers in particular bypass the usual gatekeepers and go straight to the end user.

The extensive ownership of mobile devices has greatly enabled this, in turn equipping citizens with an enhanced ability to determine their preferences rather than being limited to formal or approved solutions.

The world of communications outside of authorities is often messier and more unstructured, although that can be viewed as an asset that enhances resilience. Without action, there is a risk of parallel and disconnected marketplaces undermining the common good.

These and other findings strongly suggest the need to move towards a new vision and ecosystem for emergency communications. One that is equitable, open, and capable of inspiring constant outcome-focused innovation.

In doing so, it will go a long way to supporting ambitious targets such as those set out in the United Nations Sustainable Developments Goals (SDG) and SENDAI Framework for Disaster and Risk Reduction. Without the development of a new environment, emergency communications risks creating avoidable inequalities, losing the confidence of citizens, and becoming ever more fragmented- leading to sum of the parts outcomes, rather than those that are optimal by design.

Fortunately, this challenge is not unique to the emergency or emergency communication sector. Many others have faced, or are facing, the same issues.





Bridge the communication gaps between professionals and citizens. For example, in relation to language (terminology), content, risk tolerance, stereotypes, desired outcomes/priorities, and assumptions.

With such a diverse and large sector, it is no surprise that even amongst professionals, communication is not always easy and requires a lot of effort to create common understanding and consensus. To mitigate the risks associated with this, formal and informal means are in place to facilitate ongoing improvements and mutual understanding.

But the greatest systemic weakness in pursuing enhanced resilience and integration is at the point of interaction between professionals and citizens and vice versa. And yet this has perhaps had the least investment and remains poorly understood. There are many reasons for this including:

a) Historically, most communication has been transmitted from professionals to citizens, with the latter's needs often assumed more than known. It is increasingly clear that this is insufficient and there needs to be much greater investment in understanding our citizens and communities on their terms. The needs and contribution of citizens must be accepted as legitimate in their own right and not assessed purely in terms of their usefulness or otherwise to authorities.

b) Existing communication infrastructure has been designed primarily for one way broadcast from authorities to citizens. The future requires a more equitable capability that is designed to provide for the contributions and use of all without unreasonable barriers. This again provides new requirements (e.g. the ability to manage unstructured data) and opportunities (e.g. the potential to use collective intelligence).



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Recognise that communication is a continuous activity that is reliant on creating the right conditions for it to be effective.

Communication serves different purposes at different stages of the crisis cycle. From conveying urgent risk information through to routine engagement designed to enhance mutual understanding. However, current arrangements do not sufficiently reflect this variety of purpose or see them as equal and necessary parts of the same integrated cycle. As such, investment and resourcing tend to be unequal across the different phases or function, often reflecting the interests or budgets of specific organisations rather than the evidence of need based on a more diverse and all stakeholder perspective. For example, what governance and mechanisms exist for establishing the independent communication needs of citizens where authorities are not involved, and what engagement should take place between citizens and authorities in non-emergency periods?



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It is important to also recognise that communication always occurs within a specific context and, as part of any strategy, there must be activity that creates the appropriate conditions for effective communication to occur for all parties. For example, the role of trust has been widely recognised for its influence on the willingness to accept and act upon information. And yet, there is still much to learn about it at a practical level, especially within an emergency communications context. There is a need to ensure enabling factors such as trust are recognised for their importance and receive appropriate investment as part of any communications strategy.



Design consistent messaging and communication that is inclusive and adaptable to specific needs.

One of the challenges identified through ENGAGE is for the need to provide citizens with consistent core messaging and advice from all professional sources. A failure to do so creates confusion and erodes confidence in the message with the intended audience. In turn, it creates opportunities for incorrect or misinformation to thrive - the latter of which is a particular and growing risk due to its intentional nature. Resolving this issue requires a collaborative approach and commitment between all advice-giving agencies to ensure that their individual messaging is consistent with the collective intent and information.

It can be anticipated that by greater engagement with citizens and communities new communication requirements and nuances will emerge. This will require work to understand how they influence communication design and delivery to retain consistency, whilst ensuring the ability to tailor communication to specific needs or contexts. However, the very act of engaging citizens and communities has the additional benefit that they will be able to identify solutions as well as the issues. But the act of working together will itself underpin the ability to make communication more inclusive by design.

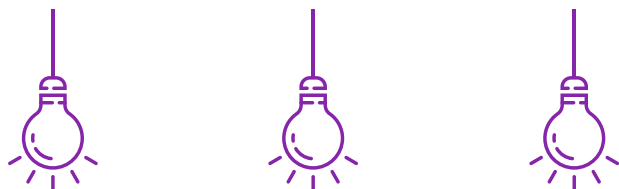


Photo credits: Trondheim Red Cross

Recognise communication as a learning opportunity and actively design in opportunities to exploit this throughout the cycle.

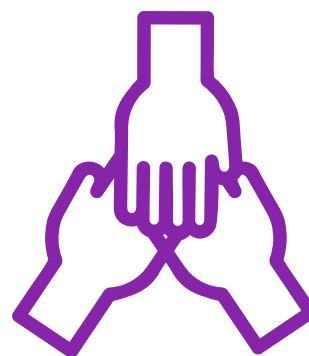
It can be readily appreciated that effective communication requires a robust monitoring and evaluation process to directly test their effectiveness. This has obvious importance for the ongoing development of expertise at an individual or team level. It is also valuable in terms of organisational capability from long term strategy development to underpinning short term activity such as agile or iterative communications during rapidly changing conditions.

Moreover, there is also an opportunity to take a broader view of how communications can inform general learning (for all stakeholders) from emergencies with the aim of enhancing resilience and integration. This should aim to ensure that learning from every event (regardless of size) in some ways informs future events. Currently, the potential for cumulative learning is under-exploited and suffers from a lack of an overarching strategy and mechanisms.



Communication strategies should recognise and positively support the opportunities that emergencies provide for citizens, communities, and formal agencies to enhance integration and resilience.

The contribution of citizens and communities in relation to emergencies is poorly recognised and understood. In fact, there is a bias within the current system that tends to ignore or downplay their positive role and achievements. Even where acknowledged, their activities are often judged through the lens of whether they aid or impede formal authorities. The result of this is to undermine the ability to achieve fully integrated approaches to emergencies. There is a clear role for communication in addressing the current imbalance and perceptions.



Beyond that, an aim for every phase of emergency should be to proactively seek opportunities for citizens and communities to carry out tasks that will develop their inherent resilience in anticipation of future events. With appropriate safeguards, there is an opportunity to use communication in a positive way in support of this.

This provides a vast resource pool to draw upon which could accelerate adoption and implementation whilst reducing potential costs and risk. For example, conceptually, the visionary approach taken to creating protocols that underpinned the internet's ability to grow organically in an unstructured and constantly changing environment. By self-limiting the desire for prescriptive control and ownership, the pioneers instead created an open space, that facilitated creativity and innovation from a variety of different sources. In recognising that hardware, software, and knowledge of communications at a human level will be constantly changing, there are clearly transferable principles for the emergency communication sector.

Given the nature of the recommendations, it would be unrealistic to propose exact timescales and it is anticipated that they may be further shaped by scrutiny from different perspectives. But an evolutionary approach would be feasible to limit any risk whilst transitioning. There is much within existing communications that would remain important and part of future requirements. For example, the EU model for early warning systems which could be promoted as a global blueprint. ENGAGE also advocates for further exploration of technologies such as Chatbots and believe their use could bridge both current and future states. In the longer term, as new networks and links to communities are created, the initial investment in creating a different ecosystem is likely to be repaid many times over through enhanced capacity and capability.

Policy Implications

If the main recommendation is accepted, even in principle, it will clearly have significant implications for existing and future policies. It would impact their purpose, tone, and content. It would also require accompanying changes to policy drivers- for example, research and funding proposals, to be aligned with them. It is further appreciated that communications exists within the wider emergency sector and a significant change of direction would require some degree of consensus. In relation to the sub recommendations, their individual impact on policy will be more limited in scope in line with their specific focus.

Conclusions

The recommendations reflect that there are multiple external forces changing the emergency communications landscape. The sector itself is also becoming more multi-faceted and, to some extent, messier. Authorities and professionals will continue to be at the very heart of the new system but will have to change their historical role to one that is more system custodian than controller.

