

Module: Public Health Disaster Planning for Districts

Organization: East Africa HEALTH Alliance, 2009 - 2012

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Resource Title: Session 2.2: Communication in Disaster Situations

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Communication in Disaster Situations



 DFID - UK Department for International Development, flickr

Compiled By The Eastern Africa Disaster Management Training Task Force
Narrated by Dr. Roy William Mayega

Background

- Communication is a process in which messages are passed from a sender to a receiver with constant feedback
- Communication is very important in disaster situations:
 - Coordination of response
 - Reduction of risk
 - Prevention of panic

Story 2: Communication Failure

- Let a volunteer read for us Story 2 in the introductory part of this session
- **Challenge:**
 - *What is the moral of this story?*

How to communicate better in Disasters

- Follow the incident command hierarchy
- In disasters, the press is always looking for information and papers sell when adverse events are quoted
- Only the Incident command officer or his appointee is allowed to give press releases
- The communications officer should search for facts and be ready with evidence

The Do's in Disaster Communication

- Establish pre-planned press releases where all media houses are informed in advance and invited
- Questions are allowed to clarify events
- The ICS Officer should be brief, to the point and where there is information lacking, that should be admitted
- The Incident Command System (ICS) officer consults the relevant section heads before meeting the press and should allow their presence

The DO'S

- Do not tell lies; it is better to say you don't know and you will investigate an issue than to tell a lie
- There should be a Public Relations (PR) desk/ information desk with list of victims if possible
- Such a desk is managed by PR personnel, counsellors etc
- There should be constant consultation with the Incident Command System, Search and Rescue, Pre-hospital care teams, Hospital teams etc.

Scenario 1: Post Election Violence in Country X

- Country X experienced one of the worst complex emergencies since independence. During a commission established to find the effects, the police force put the number dead as 1100, the Permanent Secretary for Health put them at 1102 and the International organisations put them at 1500. The press concluded all were confused.
- What is your verdict and where do you think things went wrong?

Information Needed

- Site of disaster
- Type
- Time of disaster, and time information received.
- No. of casualties and their flow/progress
- VIPs visiting
- Relevant ministry
- Assistance required/appeal for blood etc
- Response efforts-successes, limitations etc.

5 Communication Failures that Kill Operational Success

- Mixed messages from multiple experts
- Information released late
- Paternalistic attitudes
- Not countering rumors and myths in real-time
- Public power struggles and confusion

Scenario 2: A Flood

- In a recent flooding in one of the countries, a pressman asked How many people were in need of blankets. The medical officer of Health answered, 'none'. Later, it was found that all the 3000 flood victims needed non-food items blankets included.
- Whose responsibility was it to give the right figure?

Five Communication Steps that Boost Operational Success

- Execute a solid communication plan
- Be the first source for information
- Express empathy early
- Show competence and expertise
- Remain honest and open

Additional Source Information

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