

Communicating and reporting in times of risk: the COVID-19 pandemic



Webinar

- Pandemic and Systemic risk
- Communication in times of risk

Thursday



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11:00 a.m.

(Panama time)

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COMMUNICATING AND REPORTING IN TIMES OF RISK: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Confusion and disinformation have been a feature of the COVID-19 pandemic. The press has tried to plough through an avalanche of information to illustrate the situation from various perspectives, but a focus on day-to-day coverage combined with a lack of access to diverse and reliable sources has complicated the task.

UNDRR organised the webinar to help raise awareness that the pandemic is more than just a health issue. It involves systemic risk and its cascading impact around the world.

The first part of the session addressed the link between the pandemic and systemic risk, providing the press, civil society and governments with a greater understanding of risk and its systemic nature.

Speakers also looked at the role disaster risk reduction plays in creating safer and more resilient societies which are better placed to confront both natural, human and health hazards.

The second part of the webinar looked at communication in times of risk and issues around press coverage.

It provided concrete recommendations on how to report on the pandemic from a systemic risk perspective. It also laid out ideas on how journalism could better address disaster risk reduction.

Speakers identified the main players in disaster risk reduction programmes and how they could be used as sources of information to help understand present and future risk.

There are no natural disasters, just natural phenomena, speakers explained in the webinar. They outlined the human impact of natural, technological or in this case, biological, disasters. Additionally, they explained the difference between hazards, exposure, disasters, vulnerability and preparedness, underscoring that “preparedness saves lives”.

PANELISTS:

- **Raúl Salazar:** Head of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), Regional Office - The Americas and the Caribbean.
- **Carlos Uribe:** Risk Awareness Officer of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), Regional Office - The Americas and the Caribbean.
- **Brigitte Leoni:** Senior Communications Officer of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), Headquarters - Geneva, Switzerland.
- **Saskia Carusi:** Communications and External Relations Officer of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), Regional Office - The Americas and the Caribbean.

Through the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, adopted in 2015, the member states of the United Nations committed to developing national and local strategies for disaster risk reduction through 2020.

The Sendai Framework considers a broader definition of risk, beyond natural hazards, and calls for the incorporation of biological hazard management and building resilient health systems.

The inclusion of biological hazards in the Sendai Framework for Action was the result of pressure by member states following their experience of previous outbreaks including Ebola, MERS, SARS and avian influenza.

COVID-19 has shown the need to take decisive action on biological hazards, and one of the main messages from the session was that the pandemic must be analysed from a systemic approach.

Multilateral responses should be based on solidarity and unity, as this health crisis may be a recurring phenomenon.

UNDRR focuses on a systemic approach which shows that all risks are connected and can produce cascading effects and potential systemic crises. This stresses the need for cooperation across multiple sectors to address complex threats.

A strong focus by journalists on the global health crisis provides an opportunity for the sector to promote its message of prevention in order to avoid similar future events, said panellists.

The press can and should raise awareness around the complexity of the hazards faced today, helping inform society about cascading events and the opportunities that may arise from systemic risk, they said.

Speakers highlighted the challenge faced by journalists to overcome pressure to report on day-to-day events and instead focus on the bigger picture. But as the pandemic has shown, this is an issue that stretches beyond journalism to society in general.

If there is one lesson to be drawn from the current crisis, it is the need to generate demand for public policies that guarantee resilience and minimise the impact of hazards.

MAIN SESSION RECOMMENDATIONS:

Prepare for surprises

Flexible and agile strategies and plans are needed to better anticipate and prepare for surprises or non-linear transformations such as pandemics. This includes developing the capacity to make real-time adjustments that anticipate and respond to changes in economic activities. These should also contribute towards sustainable development.

Greater risks in an increasingly smaller world

The era of hazard-by-hazard risk reduction is over. Addressing risk involves an understanding of its systemic nature. A better understanding of anthropogenic systems will help detect initial signs and correlations to better prepare, anticipate and adapt. COVID-19 has shown how a biological hazard can affect the global economy, transport, markets, social relations, trade and economic growth. The only way to combat systemic risk is through a prevention and response-focussed approach that considers systems as a whole.

Nothing harms development more than disasters

Development planning must take risks into account to bring about sustained change. For development to consider and address risk, initiatives must include comprehensive risk studies for each context. These should recognise the different hazards and the complexity of the risks involved.

Levelling the playing field

International pressure for a fairer, more sustainable and more equitable planet must translate into innovative financing approaches, growth-friendly fiscal policies and well-managed national resource mobilisations that respond to the interrelated and cascading nature of risk.

Risk is everyone's business

There must be a collective search for solutions. Everyone must commit to asking themselves questions about their future and that of their children. We need to admit that accumulated risk, both global and individual, derives from our decisions, choices or lack of action.

Facts first

While there is a great deal of information available, particularly online, about what to do and how, only some of that information is reliable. Much information is misguided, misinformed or even deliberately misleading. UNDRR urges the media to use reliable and verified sources of information.

Proposing solutions

Solutions journalism can focus on investigating responses to problems. It can explain why responses work or not, what different people do to solve the same problem and the methodologies used. Details are fundamental in this type of journalism which tries to provide the audience with useful insights. This type of journalism investigates figures, data and information to explain how and why a certain response to a problem works or not. Instead of taking a "good news" approach, it instead focuses on rigorous, evidence-based reporting.

Avoiding stigma through science

In times of high anxiety, people are understandably concerned, but fear and stigma worsen an already difficult situation. Not only can it unfairly impact healthy individuals, it can cause those who might have contracted the disease to avoid testing and treatment, risking further contagion. Stigmatisation is not only wrong, it is dangerous. Reports are emerging around the world of verbal and even physical abuse of vulnerable groups such as migrants, refugees and homeless children, even if they have not been in an affected area or had contact with a confirmed case. This new virus should not be a vehicle for racism or xenophobia. Social support underpinned by well-informed journalism is central to effective policy.

Build strong and established relationships with risk managers

Pre-established relationships with national risk management entities are essential. Knowledge of national systems will help address the pandemic in two ways. On the one hand, it will provide reliable information on progress and achievements made in tackling the crisis. On the other, it can help disseminate policies implemented by national and local governments to educate and inform.

Helpful links:

Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction:

https://www.unisdr.org/files/43291_sendaiframeworkfordrren.pdf

<https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/the-covid-19-sojo-exchange-f245509e280f?gj=a4a08598c227>

Full session link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VF5hDpSjgNQ>

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