

**Words into Action Guidelines:  
National Disaster Risk Assessment  
Special Topics**

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**A. Public Communication for Disaster  
Risk Reduction**

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**Key words:**

risk communication, information ecosystem, communication channel

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Advances in technology have improved scientific risk information dramatically in recent years. Yet this valuable information can too easily go to waste if it's not effectively communicated to people who need it to make decisions.

Effective communication helps technical experts develop and share data, it enables professional users to understand the data, and it influences how ordinary people take actions to reduce risk in their everyday lives.

Communication is a process and should be considered throughout every stage of risk assessments.

This section focuses on communication with the general public. It provides guidance on how government officials and other professionals can communicate with general audiences to reduce the risk of disasters.

## **Why communicate about risk with the general public?**

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Effective communication is critical for ordinary people to understand the different types of risk they face, discuss what can be done and take action to manage those risks. Community members can also be an important source of risk information for analysts and can provide innovative solutions for managing risk.

Governments have a responsibility to provide clear information to the public about hazards and what actions can be taken at the household, community and government levels to reduce the risk of disaster.

The media can play a crucial role by engaging people on key issues, disseminating information, creating a platform to share ideas, and hosting discussions around governance and accountability for risk reduction.

## **Who is "the public"?**

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The public comprises all people in society, spanning old, young, rich, poor, male, female, urban, rural, etc. Yet, if you target everyone, you target no one. People face different risks, access information differently and take action on different issues.

Separate communication initiatives for target groups are vital to ensure that you connect with people on issues that matter most to them, in a way that will resonate. When grouping these target audiences, think beyond demographics. Knowing someone's age, gender, location, income and education only gives you part of their story. Consider what people know and believe about risk, how they feel about it, who they trust and which channels of information they refer to most, who they talk to about it and when, and what they already do about risk.

### ***Practical questions***

How well do you understand the characteristics of different groups within the general public? How well do different groups understand risks and what factors influence their ability to take action? What challenges do they face in everyday life and what are their priorities? What scope do they have for long-term planning? Who do they feel is responsible for risk reduction?

## **What to communicate?**

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What you communicate will depend on the precise change you want to make among the target audience and how you think that change will happen. Prompting change will require more than information about what the risks are and what to do about them. People may require a shift in mindset, encouragement, discussion or support reaching a decision before they can take meaningful action. Thorough research and analysis is required to understand what action is required and why people are not currently taking that action.

### ***Practical questions***

What are the impacts of risks at household and local levels? (Don't assume you have a full picture of these without consultation.) What are the biggest barriers to change for your target audience at the household and community levels? What small changes can be made to facilitate bigger changes? How can communication support these changes?

## **How to communicate about risk?**

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Communication should be woven throughout disaster management strategies to increase the reach and impact of the overall effort. Communication strategies should consider the following approaches:

- **Rely on research**  
Throughout the initiative, audience research should inform every step of your communication plan to ensure that you understand different groups and their needs and that you connect in a way that appeals to them. Monitoring and evaluation research will confirm if your initiative is having the effect that you intended and can convey the results you've achieved.

### ***Practical questions***

Have you invested sufficient resources to understand your audiences, to inform them about all aspects of your communication plan and to measure the results? Is your monitoring and evaluation approach effectively assessing impacts for the most marginalized?

- **Select the right media and communication platforms**

Your choice of media and communication should be led by what your target audience uses and trusts and what you are trying to achieve. For example, social media may be an effective way to engage a younger, urban audience, whereas radio may be a good way to reach rural listeners with limited resources. Ideally, you will choose multiple methods to create a “360-degree” experience for your target audience, with an emphasis on enabling two-way flows of information.

Media and communication channels may include print, radio, television, online, phone and face-to-face communication. The formats of each of those channels may vary widely – from drama to discussion or text messages (SMS) to public-service announcements. Other visual and audio devices may be used in early warning systems, such as flags, flashing lights, bells, drums and loudspeakers.

Many of these channels and formats have the potential of offering two-way communication – from phone-in radio programmes to TV talk shows to social media. Discussion groups organized around media outputs offer additional possibilities for dialogue within communities.

***Practical questions***

What media and communication methods do specific target audiences use? For what purposes? When? With whom? Which people or channels do they trust the most? On what issues? How does that vary among different groups? What change are you trying to make? How can a combination of different media and communication activities support ongoing dialogue with the target audience and contribute to positive change? The communication infrastructure itself must be resilient. Can it withstand physical shocks and stresses and continue functioning during severe events?

- **Make it clear, relevant, engaging and practical**

Too often, communication falls flat, contributing to the perception that risk reduction is either too scary to think about or too boring to deal with. Effective communication takes complex technical issues and conveys them in a clear and simple manner that is immediately relevant to the target audience. Effective initiatives will also be engaging and motivating; with practical, doable actions people can take to reduce their own risk.

***Practical questions***

What capacity exists to communicate about risk in a truly engaging way that appeals to target audiences? Are risk experts able to express themselves clearly and convincingly to the general public? Are local media outlets able to create engaging, accurate programming around risk that supports people to make informed decisions and take action?

- **Get people talking**

People directly affected by risks have extremely valuable understanding about the potential impacts and how the risks could be addressed. From the outset, it is vital to communicate with the groups at risk to ensure a joint understanding of the risks and how they can best be addressed at all levels.

Media can encourage “on-air” discussion among populations to amplify conversations, including discussion with officials to help ensure the actions being taken by the public and the government complement and reinforce each other to reduce disaster risk. It goes without saying that that scientists, decision makers and other risk professionals should engage in these conversations and respond to input from the general public.

Media and communication initiatives can also encourage “off-air” conversations among people about risk and what they can do at home and within their communities to reduce it.

Risk information from those at risk and from experts and decision makers is generated and shared in a complex and dynamic environment. Consider how information is produced, distributed, understood and influenced. When information flows through dynamic systems, it is often transformed by those who can either validate and amplify it or, if it comes from certain actors and sources, disqualify it.

### **Practical questions**

To what extent do people talk about risk in an informed way? Who is engaged in those conversations? How could that dialogue be expanded to include more information and to reach more people? What resources are needed to support people to make decisions based on these conversations?

Are information flows two-way? Are there channels for the development of risk information (scientific and technical) to be regularly informed by the concerns, impacts and understanding of those directly impacted? What skills do risk experts, officials and media professionals have to communicate effectively with the general public? How does the information ecosystem work during “normal” times? To what extent can reliable information flow through trusted channels effectively?

- **Work with others**

Collaborating with multiple stakeholders more systematically can strengthen risk communication. Building relationships among professionals from media, science, government, the private sector and civil society can result in more effective communication and more sustainable platforms. Collaboration between national and local governments is always important to ensure that the information flows from officials to the public are consistent.

### **Practical questions**

Which other actors could improve the effectiveness of your risk communication? Who understands the interests and priorities of the audience and communicates in a way they will understand and trust? Who needs to listen to the public's perception and information about risks – including scientists, leaders, decision makers and members of other communities? How can you work with them systematically?

## Box 1

### Examples of government portals communicating risk with the general public

**Armenia** - Emergency Channel [www.emergency.am/en/index](http://www.emergency.am/en/index)

**Australia (Queensland)** - Get Ready <https://getready.qld.gov.au/>

Practical advice on how to reduce risk with the option of receiving localised information, with a focus on connecting local communities.

**Canada** - Get prepared [www.getprepared.gc.ca/index-eng.aspx](http://www.getprepared.gc.ca/index-eng.aspx)

Information on how to reduce risk.

**Fiji** - National Disaster Management Office [www.ndmo.gov.fj/](http://www.ndmo.gov.fj/)

Information on how to reduce risk and updates on current emergencies.

**New Zealand** - Get Thru [www.getthru.govt.nz/](http://www.getthru.govt.nz/)

Information on how to reduce risk and what do to during an emergency, including a list of radio stations to listen to.

**United Kingdom** - Preparing for Emergencies

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/preparing-for-emergencies/preparing-for-emergencies](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preparing-for-emergencies/preparing-for-emergencies)

Information on how to prepare for emergencies, including guidelines for community groups.

**United States** - Ready [www.ready.gov/](http://www.ready.gov/)

Information on how to reduce risk, tailored to local hazards for residents in different parts of the country.

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## Resources for further information

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