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Title of the Session: Four risk communications models: the role of each social actor

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Summary

In many countries, risk communication, one of the tools of disaster risk reduction (DRR), is still confused as mere transmission of data and information by the press and social media. Risk communication is a social process that demands the effective interaction between the interlocutors, preventing the emergence of phenomena that extend socially the risks, such as rumors, panic, confusion and mistrust. Given that, my suggestion is to make communication an effective tool of DRR, prioritizing the understanding, the trust and the interaction between the interlocutors, I designed four models of risk communication in the context of DRR: Intra-institutional; Inter-institutional; Media and Community.

Context

Disaster risk communication has not been legitimized in many countries as a disaster risk reduction tool. It is through it that the decision-making processes about a particular risk are becoming more democratic, allowing the participation of all social actors directly or indirectly involved, especially the communities exposed to risks.

Risk communication is responsible for the transparency of the actions and DRR programs, avoiding manipulation and the omission of information and data. The difficulty, if not resistance, to recognize the risk communication as an important tool for RRD may help explain why it is reduced only to the transmission of information. And it is by confusing risk communication with dissemination of risk information that many authorities might have the feeling of accomplishment: one sends random information but does not promote communication - social process based on negotiations, exchange of views, impressions and elected decisions.

Given the frequency and intensity of disasters, it is urgent to discuss the role of communication, not only the dissemination of information, in order to reduce risks and build more resilient communities. Although risk communication does not belong to any particular institution, it must be officially legitimized as DRR tool to ensure for the communities, especially those exposed to risk, the right to participate in decision-making processes relevant to their own lives.

Risk communication does not occur in a single process. It is the sum of various processes. To find out what went wrong in a risk communication process, we suggest dividing it into four parts, each of them specific to certain interlocutors, situations, contexts and goals.

More than dividing to understand the dynamic of the communication and find mistakes during the process, the objective is to show to each actor what it is its role in risk communication processes.

Why should we divide a risk communication model in four parts and then sum them again?

It is necessary because risk communication is a combination of the minimum four different processes. Each of these four models is targeted to specific audience and takes place in specific contexts, in specific times, asking for specific messages, languages, media and, the most important thing, specific interests and objectives.

After being divided, they need to be summed to reach an effective risk communication process to show how interconnected they are. When we divide this process in parts, it is possible to understand, for example, what went wrong and what could be done to repair it and, specially to answer this question: what is the role of each one in the risk communication?

Only to explain these four models, I will take the example of communication in the context of Protection and Civil Defense Agency, but I could have used it in the context of community, media and other institutions.

Knowing the four models

Intra-institutional Model: risk communication takes places inside the Protection and Civil Defense Agency structures. Regardless of the interests and latent political differences at the municipal, state and federal levels, this model considers the Agency a single institution. Thus, everyone within its structures, from the field agent to the leaders, must be aligned about the message and how to proceed in case of disaster.

The constant and effective communication between member helps to standardize the messages to inhibit the spread of rumors and bring transparency to the process that will foster the decision making of the communities located in risk areas.

Inter-institutional Model: it includes the participation of all institutions linked directly or indirectly to the DRR programs and actions. In this model, the interlocutors that dialogue with Protection and Civil Defense Agency are allocated in the executive and legislative powers, in technical, scientific, educational, religious, health and safety institutions. This model is used even when disaster risk is restricted to the limit of a municipality. In other words, it must be put into practice even if we face just a local incident, that involves just local alignment.

This effective communication between the various institutions reduces the uncertainties of the people most exposed at risks.

Media Model: the Protection and Civil Defense Agency must take advantage of power, speed and credibility of the mass media to disseminate information to a broader, heterogeneous public. The reverse process also occurs, i.e., the media should turn to Civil Defense to collect information and clarify the risks to the population. In this model, the information gaps tend to favor the spread of rumors - misinformation or unchecked information that affect the decision making of the most affected communities.

With the phenomenon of social media, the life cycle of information initially disseminated by the mainstream media (TV, radio, newspapers and magazines) becomes a major challenge to the competent institutions, especially when distorted or transmitted outside the initial context.

Community Model: it is the one in which the Protection and Civil Defense should be responsible for the spread of information for to those who are directed affected by the risks. It usually happens in restricted and local scale. In this model, communication is a primary form, through direct contact between those involved – Civil Defense Agency, the community and its leaders.

It is in this model, that the physical contact is more common, like in the most basic models of communication. Eye to eye contact, breath, body, linguistic, ideology and intellectual tensions will interfere and influence the results of a process intended to preserve life.

The dialogue and comprehension among those involved are primary conditions for the success of effective risk communication. More than responsibilities of media, risk communication is an obligation of the State and the right of all communities, specially the most vulnerable.