

POLICY BRIEF



Targeting Communication in Disasters

Populations in disasters are often assumed to be homogenous. However, targeting communication for different groups of citizens based on their individual needs and capacities allow for efficient disaster risk management. Targeted communication is also important in the context of increased use of digital technologies such as social media and crowdsourcing to manage disasters. In order to be effective, communication should be inclusive and consider specifically vulnerable populations.

Context

The primary goal of communication with citizens before, during and after a disaster is to provide information and advice that potentially reduces disaster impacts and ensures citizen safety. This serves a dual purpose: first, it helps to prepare and protect citizens from harmful impacts of disasters and second, it facilitates efficient operations for the organisations working with disaster risk management by encouraging cooperation with their advice. It is crucial to acknowledge that citizens possess valuable skills, resources, and they are more likely to act on advice from the organisations working with disaster risk management when they are sufficiently targeted and informed. Communication is a two way street and citizens can play an active role in this process. However, citizen's skills are ignored and it is commonly assumed that large populations at risk of disasters have uniform information needs. This assumption fails to take into consideration the inherent diversity and vulnerability of large populations and in turn their differential needs, capacity, and resources. This exacerbates peoples' vulnerabilities during different disasters. Therefore, effective communication requires targeting different groups who are most susceptible to a specific hazard followed by targeted messaging that meets the varying needs of different groups.

Targeted communication meets the dual purpose of citizen's needs and the goals of organisations working with disaster risk management.



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Why to target disaster communication?

Maintain Credibility

Citizen trust in different organisations working with disasters is vital for successful disaster risk management. Citizens expect that communication from these organisations meets their needs and addresses their concerns. Meeting these expectations increases citizen trust and gives credibility to information and advice provided by various organisations. Considering this, it is important to identify those needs and provide consistent and specific information to citizens. Further, in order for communication to be successful, various organisations working with disaster risk management must invest in information collaboration and coordination for volunteers before, during and after disasters.

Increase Citizen Engagement

Targeting different groups of people within a population makes crucial disaster information accessible to everyone. Access to information not only allows people to grasp the urgency of information provided but also encourages their participation. Citizen engagement and participation such as volunteerism with their valuable skills and capacities allows for gathering citizen insights and experiences which can be helpful in decision-making that are rooted in local realities and contexts. This can only be achieved when citizen's skills are recognised and utilized in disaster risk communication.

Efficient use of resources

It is of immense benefit to plan for targeted communication during preparedness activities due to availability of time and other resources to analyze the needs of different groups. This is often not possible when disasters occur as the focus is on urgency of decision making.

Targeting citizen's needs matters in disaster communication to not only establish trust between citizens and organisations working with disaster risk management organisations but also to improve citizen engagement during disasters.

Targeting communication in policy and Practice

Recognise diverse needs for information and media use

In addition to having differential information needs, it is also important to consider that people hold varying media

preferences and therefore need to be reached through different channels and media outlets.

Therefore, it is essential for organisations working with disasters to map out the media choices of their target audiences in the current diverse media landscape, including social media platforms and digital solutions, to effectively communicate important messages. However, it is equally important to recognize the limitations of digital media, as not all citizens approve of its use, and power failures or other technical issues may hinder communication. Therefore, backup channels of information dissemination and communication must be planned for in such situations.

Identify the diverse needs of different groups of citizens

Socio-demographic characteristics such as age, nationality, language, type of housing, characterization of household members, social networks, religion, ethnicity, economic resources, disabilities, and other vulnerabilities can often define, and influence individual needs for information. Further, hazard-specific situational conditions are crucial in defining their needs as people can be directly or indirectly affected by disasters.

Targeted communication during disaster preparedness and response

Targeted communication during disaster preparedness allows for an iterative process with room for testing, feedback, change and follow-up activities. Building trust with citizens is a gradual process and various organizations working with disaster risk management can benefit from nuanced understandings of targeted communication in planning which also strengthens operations when disasters occur.

This can be achieved by implementing a targeted communication strategy into the organization's existing planning and training documents. Continuous monitoring, evaluation and follow-up during disaster response is crucial to address the concerns and needs of citizens at risk.

More recently, it has become apparent that digital technologies have become indispensable tools for communication in disaster risk management. However, it is important that we must focus on communication strategies that are efficient and inclusive. We propose targeted communication as an overarching strategy under given situations of vulnerabilities, high risks and uncertainties.

Action points

- ✓ Disaster management organisations can map out and identify different target groups, their information needs, actions to take, advice to provide, and preferred media using the parameters listed above. This must be done in a manner to suit the local context.
- ✓ It is also the responsibility of these organizations to determine which activities related to a certain disaster could be handled by each target group independently and when they may require support or assistance.

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Targeted communication is an effective strategy to meet diverse information needs for efficient and inclusive disaster risk management.
- ✓ Targeting communication helps in building citizen trust and encourages citizen engagement in disaster risk management.
- ✓ Use of digital media must be inclusive and ensure that the most vulnerable citizens have access and know how to use different forms of media.
- ✓ Understanding population diversity, vulnerability, the local context and incorporating this into existing disaster risk management actions is key.

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Sources and further reading

Nielsen, A.B & Raju, E. (2020). DMP Knowledge Base – A Consolidated Understanding of Disaster Management Processes. Deliverable 3.1 of LINKS: Strengthening links between technologies and society for European disaster resilience, funded by the European Research and Innovation Programme (No 883490).

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