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Fighting the COVID-19 pandemic with enhanced risk communication

Messages, compliance and vulnerability during the COVID-19 outbreak

Recommendations

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Project findings

1. Civil contingencies were crucial to pandemic crisis management
2. Contingency capacities appear to be linked to pre-pandemic situation
3. Perceptions of good message quality led to more protective behaviour
4. People were worried about much more than getting sick
5. People's risk perception reflected the social and societal dimensions of the crisis far beyond risk messages from national authorities

Project findings cont.

6. People will act according to their perception of risk, and this perception is only partly informed by information from authorities. Actions are also informed by people's sense of safety and vulnerability, as well as the ability to choose (one's own level of protection)
7. Surprises included high level of trust, lower risk perception and possibly less attention to protective measures among elderly men (who were the most vulnerable to the virus)

1+2) Prepare for the next crisis now

Recommendations:

1. Crisis reactions are the children of SOPs. Boost the operationalization of the principle of responsibility
2. Map social inequalities that were exacerbated during the pandemic and address them between now and the next crisis
3. Analyse vulnerabilities created by protective measures. Address in concrete terms whether or how they can be avoided next time
4. Map civil capacities that were 'activated' in the pandemic and systematically acknowledge and strengthen these as part of lessons learned processes and public contingency planning

3) Clarity of risk information

Recommendations:

1. Revise crisis management systems so that they ensure well-functioning communication channels between professionals and decision-makers, for instance by making 'the drafting of clear messages' part of drills and exercises pertaining different crisis scenarios
2. Emphasise and rehearse the importance of clear and consistent messages in situations marred by uncertainty and unpredictability (also known as crises)

4+5) The many facets and levels of a crisis

Recommendations:

1. Improve contingency plans by acknowledging the many facets of large crises – they are likely to grow in magnitude and frequency in the years to come
2. Contingency planning should include mapping of how various crisis scenarios may affect different groups of the population, also indirectly
3. Make it part of contingency planning to identify ways to support civil contingency capacities among different population groups, and how to mitigate new vulnerabilities

6) Risk perception informs behaviour

Recommendations:

1. Establish or activate two-way communication channels with different parts of the population (check usage patterns)
2. Find ways to learn about risk perception among different parts of the population
3. Do not assume that your message and situation assessment is the only factor informing people's risk perception
4. Pay attention to social factors that may affect people's ability to adhere to protective/mitigating measures, both verbally and with practical support

7) The significance of trust

Recommendations:

1. Be aware that high levels of trust may weaken the motivation to adopt protective/mitigating measures. This could mean that those 'closest to you' relax because they feel safe.
2. Examine the level of 'ontological trust'. Social discipline could be your little helper.
3. Use the trust you have not just to alert people but also to build hope. Describe a believable and doable way out of the crisis!

” Thank you!

