Policy challenges briefing

Emergency behaviours

3.
Design
for delivery

1.
Understand
behaviours
under stress

Act &
learn

2.
Plan what
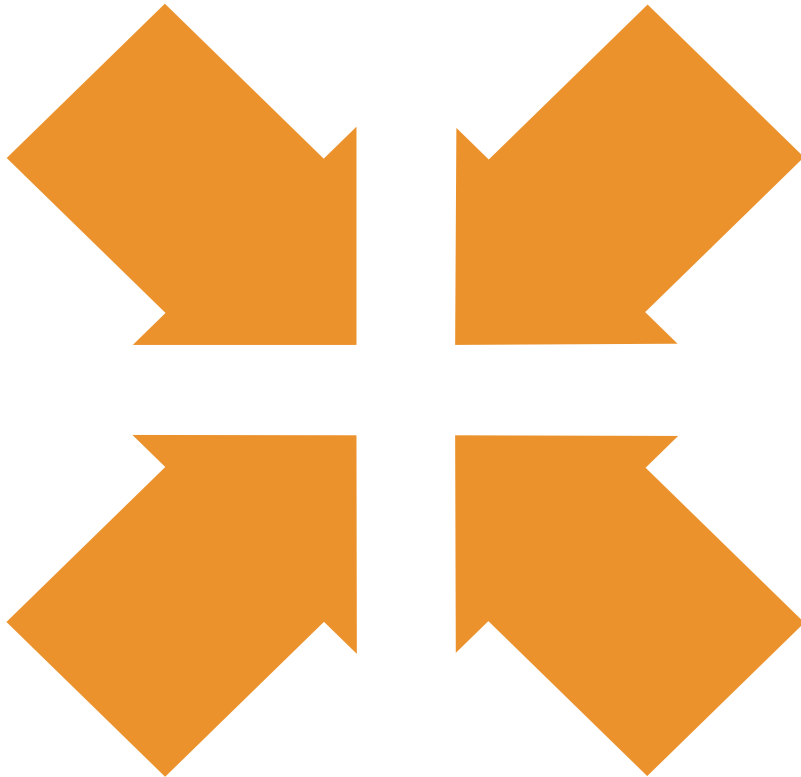you can

Specific emergency

Local context

In order to plan and respond effectively to emergencies, it is critical to understand the behaviours of diverse publics, response teams, different government departments, and a variety of information sources. Government and emergency services should respond to events as they unfold with plans that are structured yet agile. Response teams and government need to design delivery systems that identify and appropriately target different publics; identify and support trusted messengers; and use and monitor a variety of communication channels.

Behaviours under stress

At all stages of emergencies, diverse publics and response teams respond not only to the emergency but also to each other; different government departments; and a variety of information sources. It is critical to understand all the different types of behaviour we could expect in order to plan and respond effectively.

Most people tend not to plan for stressful situations such as emergencies; the majority do not read leaflets about what to do in an emergency or participate in emergency preparedness activities, such as drills. In an emergency, people usually seek information; who they turn to depends on who they trust and who they can reach. Often, they seek to corroborate official information, usually through their social networks (actual and virtual).

Response teams may have a mental model of people's behaviours, which will affect their responses. This in turn affects people's responses to them. For example, if a response team assumes that people will panic, they may behave in ways that produce that response, even if it was not there to begin with. In emergencies where two or more emergency services need to interact, each will default to its own professional and communication norms unless shared protocols are developed.

Both publics and response teams will interpret and respond to emergencies and each other in a variety of ways, depending on a series of factors including fatigue, fear, empathy, and loss aversion. People may under or over-estimate the risks or anticipate positive or negative outcomes. Their emotional attachment to other people or things is critical: parents are likely to attempt to ensure their children's safety first. Where more than one of these factors arises, more stress is generated which further negatively affects people's decision-making processes.

Research is required, first into what drives behavioural responses. Second, interventions should be undertaken that addresses cognitive and emotional processes as well as learned and automatic responses (the dual processing model). Third, lessons should be learned from existing work on promoting social resilience and ways of predicting behaviours under stress.

Plan what you can

Government and emergency services should respond to events as they unfold with plans that are structured yet agile. Some planning is possible, by building emergency preparedness into everyday occasions; designing protocols for response in emergency situations; and enhancing response team training.

Build emergency planning into everyday life experiences in order to help diverse publics to face the possibility of an emergency

- Supermarkets promote emergency 'Grab Bags'.
- Schools engage teachers, pupils and parents with local emergency planners.
- Communities hold emergency preparedness days adapted from those held in other countries.
- Life course experiences include emergency planning and response, for example driving tests or Scouts and Guides badges.
- Give real-time information through existing information infrastructure: use electronic bus stops or improve sign-posting of evacuation routes.

Prepare protocols before an emergency, and tailor the message on the day

- Develop pre-tested messages that address common concerns and information needs.
- Prime the desired response. For example, identify and use key words such as 'sewerage' instead of 'flood water'.
- Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of messaging and procedures, and rapidly modify channels and messages as informed by this monitoring.

Use the 'situational awareness' model as a way of understanding the process that people go through in an emergency. Individuals and organisations first seek and share information (perception), before becoming emotionally engaged with the situation (comprehension), and finally they reflect on their situation and share opinions (projection). Each stage requires a different response from government and response teams.

Enhance response teams' training to enable effective responses to the emergency, and also to diverse publics and other emergency professionals

- Train professionals in stress awareness and positive responses under emergency conditions.
- Teach emotional intelligence: how to read and empathise with diverse publics.
- Design universal communication protocols to mitigate miscommunication between emergency services.

Ensure effective knowledge management in order to ensure that lessons are learned and shared between different emergency response services and government departments.

Design for delivery

Government and response teams need to develop systems that identify and appropriately target different publics; identify and support trusted messengers; and use and monitor a variety of communication channels.

Target specific stakeholders
- Use target audience analysis (TAA) to ensure specific audiences' communication needs are met.
- Identify key stakeholders that could potentially improve or worsen an emergency, and set up a system of communication with them.
- Identify and address different stakeholders' roles and motivations to respond.

Identify and work with trusted intermediaries.
Lack of trust increases the likelihood of messages being ignored or negative intentions being read into messages (tacit intentionality). In contrast, trusted sources elicit more cooperative responses. The most trustworthy sources of communications are local intermediaries. They interact in more personal and relevant ways that are tailored to regional circumstances; communicate in ways that are better understood; and personify a shared vested interest in a community and its future.

Two types of local intermediary are critical: those who are interested in emergency preparedness and those who are well-connected. The effectiveness of both groups of intermediaries can be increased, by helping those who are already interested in community resilience to become better connected into their local communities, and introducing individuals that are already well connected in their communities to emergency planning and response.

Rapidly identify, monitor and respond to sources of mass information, and the ways in which people are responding to them. During an emergency, information flows in all directions with diverse publics, the media, response teams and officials all providing and seeking information from each other. Old and new media should be used to transmit messages. In addition, they need to be monitored to improve government departments' and emergency services' understanding of the emergency, as well as how publics are responding to the emergency, and how the emergency is being communicated more widely. Monitoring and analysis of old and new media should rapidly inform future communications.

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