

WORK PACKAGE 3: PANDEMIC COMMUNICATIONS

Research summary

Authors

Emily Loud, researcher, and Iain Simpson, editor and research supervisor, both at IGS Strategic Communications.

Work overview

This research project consisted of one deliverable broken down into several systematic parts, capturing peer reviewed evidence, expert counsel and some previous “grey” literature through a systematic literature review, expert interviews on four case studies, and an overview of findings from other EU-funded research projects.

Summary of findings

This study reviewed the academic literature on the role of communications within pandemic preparedness and response, with the aim of compiling best practice and outlining research gaps. We achieved this by firstly conducting a systematic literature review using broad search terms and date ranges. Themes from a series of workshops and expert interviews were added to these conclusions, to ensure we had a more up-to-date view of current practice and needs than may have been present in the literature.

Overall, evidence for what works to make communications interventions effective during a pandemic or epidemic was weak. Most studies were conducted during a pandemic or epidemic situation (H1N1 being the most common) and many interventions lack the baselines or contextual information to help understand how or why specific actions may have been effective, or not.

A major area for improvement is skills; in practice, communications theories were found not to be as well understood or consistently applied as they could be. The urgent need for monitoring and evaluation tools was articulated from all quarters, covering the ability to measure risk perception, trust and other variables as well as to test the link between communications and behavioural outcomes. The literature also indicated a strong need to adapt communications

according to a wide range of variables, including specific national and sub-national populations and points of time during the outbreak.

Social media and digital platforms were highlighted as significant for their novelty, the skills gaps that still exist among communicators and the failure of most examples to use this channel with risk communications principles. The importance of selecting the right channels for specific audiences was also stressed, meaning care needs to be taken not to assign social and digital platforms too much significance at the expense of a reasoned, targeted communications strategy that uses context specific information.

Expert sources generally backed up the literature, stressing the importance of evidence and evaluation, monitoring and feedback loops, and significant, pre-allocated resources for pandemic and epidemic communications.

