

In Pursuit of Effective and Successful Risk Communication - as an Integral Part of Disaster Risk Management -

Background

As the potential for natural disasters has increased significantly, there is a considerable growing international awareness of the importance of risk management. However, the necessity of effective risk communication has thus far been neglected. Risk communication is an integral part of risk management, which also includes risk identification, assessment, and treatment. Effective risk communication is an interactive process involving the exchange of information and perspectives about disaster risks between the government and its people (i.e., it is defined as information sharing on risks between the decision makers and other stakeholders).

Why is risk communication necessary for effective disaster risk management? Historically, disaster risk management has been conducted mainly by relying on risk assessments performed by experts, with little communication with the population at large. However, practice has demonstrated that traditional methods of risk management that do not involve the public are not always effective. The public's correct understanding of disaster risks and active participation in disaster risk management are imperative for reducing the negative impacts of natural disasters.

Objectives of the sessions

(1) Understanding the views and roles of all stakeholders to achieve effective risk communication

The stakeholders of risk communication are divided into three groups: (1) the governments and experts who serve primarily as a source of information on risks, (2) residents who mainly receive that information, and (3) the mass media and community-based organizations that serve as intermediaries for communication between governments and residents. The fundamental form of risk communication is a mutual dialogue between the governments/experts and residents, but other forms of communication also exist.

The following are two examples of risk communication through the mass media. (1) The following is an example of successful risk communication. An early warning on a potential typhoon risk issued by the government was broadcast by the mass media. The information was received and understood by those who were at risk. The actions that people took based on the information they had received

minimized the amount of serious damage caused by the typhoon. (2) Alternatively, the following rather passive case is also considered a kind of risk communication. In this case, the public's misunderstanding of the official information on risks (e.g. evacuation order) led to terrible disaster damage. The media then reported the residents' complaints about problems with the communication of official information. As a result of the media coverage, the government improved its procedures for issuing information and made it more user friendly. As shown in the above cases, the mass media can play a catalytic role in promoting risk communication by providing a venue for discussing social issues.

This session will provide an opportunity for participants to exchange views and ideas on ways to enhance disaster risk communication from a variety of standpoints, with special focus on the views of the abovementioned three groups.

(2) Identifying the fundamental requirements of successful risk communication

Effective risk communication requires (1) a proper understanding of one's counterparts, (2) the establishment of relationships of mutual trust based on transparency, source credibility, trustworthy risk assessment and management, reliability of information delivery, and the assurance of direct communication among stakeholders, and (3) training in the skills needed for successful communication.

This session will feature practical and pragmatic discussions of these points (participants will be asked to abstain from theoretical and academic arguments in this session).

(3) Reviewing practical methods of and approaches to risk communication

Successful risk communication is achieved through (1) the provision of a platform for ensuring daily communication between the government and the people, (2) the effective utilization of the mass media, (3) collaboration among all stakeholders in daily community activities, (4) the promotion of a favorable environment for public participation in risk management, (5) the establishment of a risk communication system utilizing risk communicators, facilitators, and interpreters, and (6) the consideration of the vital role of local leaders (including respected community elders and religious leaders) in effectively communicating risk information to community members. By focusing on some of these issues, risk communication can be successfully conducted through unique methods that reflect local conditions. These can generally be categorized as a media utilization approaches, work-study approaches, or discussion-based approaches.

In this session, various practical tools for effective risk communication will be introduced and

reviewed. The discussion will cover the challenges involved in further promoting these approaches.

(4) Promoting effective risk communication for facilitating consensus building among stakeholders

Indicators of successful risk communication include (1) an improvement in the stakeholders' awareness of disaster risks and the actions that need to be taken, and (2) effective information sharing that leads to agreed-upon approaches to the issues and a common influence on decisions of risk management.

This session aims to examine the current situation and discuss the future development of risk communication for facilitating a common understanding among stakeholders. The discussion is expected to broaden the participants' understanding of the importance of effective risk communication, and to promote disaster risk management through active public participation.

Subjects to be addressed

The major constraints to promoting risk communication are as follows:

- ◆ Government perceptions that risk information should only be disclosed after making concrete risk management decisions.
- ◆ The assumption of governments and experts that complicated scientific information is beyond public comprehension.
- ◆ Risk recognition bias between experts and the public. Experts judge risk based on objective criteria, while the public judges risk subjectively.
- ◆ Mutual understanding through communication requires an immense amount of time and effort.
- ◆ Overestimation by governments of the effectiveness of manuals.

The points to be addressed for the future development of risk communication are as follows:

- ◆ The roles of experts
 - Experts are not always correct.
 - Need to avoid decision making based on information from experts with narrow, specialized fields of expertise.
 - Need for experts with the skills necessary for successful communication.
- ◆ Decision making by groups
 - Careful considerations of the negative aspects of group thought. A decision made by a group is not always superior to one made by a capable person.
 - Need for information sharing on the responses taken by groups, as well as the impact of risks.

- ◆ Growing anxiety
 - Concealment of information due to fear of creating public panic can end up amplifying public anxiety. Efficient risk communication prevents panic.
- ◆ Living with risk
 - Promotion of mutual communication. In particular, governments should make a concerted effort to understand public concerns.
 - Importance of education. Importance of (1) understanding that there is no situation that is risk free, (2) considering both risks and benefits (Risk-Benefit Analysis), and (3) recognizing the uncertainty of risks.
 - Enhance public decision making capabilities regarding risks. Decisions that affect the public should not be made solely by experts. The public should also have a full understanding of the risks involved. People should ask the government to meet their needs (i.e. for information) and should ask for clarification when they are given information that they cannot understand.