LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION COMMUNICATION WITH THE CITIZENS FOR PREVENTION AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Communication is important in any human activity but in crisis (emergency) situations it is essential. Communication plays a major role in preventing crisis (emergency) situations, prior to their appearance of crisis (emergency) situations. It prepares the population and all those who are responsible of managing these sorts of situations. During the occurrence and evolution of crisis (emergency) situations, communication coordinates the actions to remove their negative effects and transmits data on how the intervention teams act and on the condition of those affected by the crisis. Also, with the help of communication public institutions are informed, the media, as well as the population from the area in which the situation occurred. After the end of the crisis (emergency) situations, communication assesses the way in which the intervention took place, the damage proportion for the individuals, goods and the environment from the affected area. This article aims to present the most important aspects related to public administration communication with the population, the media, the state's institutions, governmental and nongovernmental organizations, during prevention and crisis (emergency) situations prevention as well as to come up with several possible improvement options when it comes to communication.

Keywords: *local administration, crisis, crisis communication, crisis prevention, crisis management.*

1.INTRODUCTION

The phrase crisis (emergency) situation refers to a wide range of natural events, produced by individuals, with negative effects for human communities, for the localities' critical infrastructure and for the environment.

At the national level and at the level of the international governments, structural entities are built, with the responsibilities of prevention and crisis (emergency) situation management and, at the level of the local communities, these responsibilities lie with both the local governments and the members of the human communities.

Central and local authorities have the duty to correctly and adequately inform the population, as well as to prepare it in order to adequately respond to crisis (emergency) situations, so that their negative effects are minimal for the people, local infrastructure and the environment.

The crisis (emergency) situation management is performed by applying the plans drawn up in advance, which are updated whenever necessary, so that the crisis situation is correctly dealt with. There are two approaches regarding the development of these plans: with the help of the first one, planners try to establish a frame-plan[i] for all sorts of crisis (emergency) situations that might occur within a local community. In both approaches, the viability of the frame-plans is preserved through permanent update and it is checked through simulations and exercises whenever necessary, and when a crisis (emergency) appears, it is updated with the data referring to the created situation.

Communication represents the binder that coordinates the actions of all the component structures of the prevention and crisis (emergency) situation management. Also, communication facilitates the correct and adequate information of all participants to this process, of public institutions, the media and of the population from the affected area.

2. THE WAY IN WHICH THE CRISIS AND CRISIS (EMERGENCY) COMMUNICATION WORK

The notion of crisis has many definitions and interpretations because, according to J. Burnett, "the current level of understanding for this term is a simple and incomplete one."

(BURNETT, 1998) If Laurence Barton defines crisis as "a major, unpredictable event, which may lead to negative effects" (BARTON, 1992), for Christophe Roux-Dufort crisis is "a process which, under the action of a trigger, highlights a series of dysfunctionalities" (ROUX-DUFORT, 2003).

The causes are defined in a different manner due to their manifestation manner – proportion, intensity, effects etc. – and the triggering causes depend on the filed in which they take place. On the other hand, "communication experts and theorists tend to develop very precise and narrow definitions for fields of communication" (CDC, 2014).

In general, a crisis is seen by Davenport as "any event or circumstance that negatively impacts an organization or individual's reputation, credibility, or brand." In this way Thierry Libaert, defines the crisis as "a rapid and involuntary change that can become favourable, but it is always difficult and almost unbearably painful". LIBAERT, 2008; PAGE CENTER TRAINING (n.d.) "the Chinese symbol for a crisis indicates, a crisis implies both danger and opportunity".

Although there is no success recipe for crisis management, because every crisis is different, (BARRY & NEWBY, 2012), the fulfilment of the goals of a crisis (emergency situation) management process depends on the way in which communication takes place within it and the measurements taken to prevent it.

Any competent manager of a local administration knows that preparation and planning represent compulsory stages in every efficient crisis management. Also, communication plays a crucial role in the success or failure a crisis management. MIAOUDAKIS et al, 2014 state that: "The history has shown that in disaster and/or crisis situations communication plays a crucial role"; AINSWORTH et al., 2020 urge us: "In Your Crisis Management Approach, Focus First on Communication."

Planning leads to the development of the framework plans for crisis management, the strategy and the communication plan. The crisis management process is laborious and it includes many responsibilities for both those who plan and manage it and for the ones who implement the measures taken to prevent the appearance of crisis (emergency situations), and in case prevention was not possible, to stop the crisis from expanding, to reduce its amplitude and, in the end, to eliminate its negative causes.

The goals of the management plan are as following:

Fig.1. From COVID-19 to Hurricane Season: Disaster Preparedness for Small Business (BROOKS, 2021)

The crisis management process has, from the point of view of its structure, various options, some more detailed and others more synthetic. The most synthetical variant of this process is made out of three phases: (1) pre-crisis, (2) crisis response, and (3) post-crisis (COOMBS, 2014)

The phrase crisis (emergency) communication refers to the collection, processing, transmission and reception of messages by and between the management of the crisis management process, the teams that implement the measures provided in the Crisis Management Plan, the population, state institutions with responsibilities in the field and media (SEMA, 2008).

Fig. 2. Nine Steps in Crisis Communication Implementation (CDC, 2017)

3. COMMUNICATION IN THE CRISIS PREVENTION STAGE

The crisis prevention stage is a laborious and continuous process which is comprised of the analysis activities of the situation of the local administration and of the population in its area of responsibility. Also, at this stage, training activities are carried out in the cognitive, behavioural and mental plans of both the local administration staff and the population in its area of responsibility.

Fig. 3. A Census communication team deals with a crisis simulation, ensuring messaging is consistent to key stakeholders (HARRISON, 2020)

The cognitive training of the staff from the communication structure of the local administration refers to activities of acquiring**:**

- the responsibilities from the job descriptions;
- the communication principles and rules of crisis (emergency) situations;
- the theoretical aspects of working with the technology of the local administration, used for communication
- the theoretical aspects of the way in which the local administration website is updated;
- relevant data about the local administration where they are employed (personal data of the management and of the persons who have decision-making positions on certain areas of responsibility, resources available for crisis management and for the development of an efficient communication in these types of situations, etc.)

- the lessons learned from crisis communication management following the crisis which previously existed in the local community;
- possible types and characteristics of crises that could occur in the area of responsibility of the local administration;
- The psychological and behavioural characteristics of the population within the responsibility area of the local administration

Communication principles in crisis (emergency) situations

Communication specialists state that crisis management does not usually achieve its goals because it does not respect the specific principles and rules of this kind of situation. In order for them to be respected it is necessary for these principles and rules to be well-known. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, 2014, p. 2) the rules are the following:

- a quick and correct informing of the population regarding the crisis situation because the population wants to know as quickly as possible WHAT, WHY and HOW it occurred (the type of crisis, the causes and effects for the population, its development perspective, the measures that have to be taken in order to eliminate the causes, as well as the effects);
- initiating actions to stop the chaos and anxiety of the population, thus contributing to the restoration of calm and order, in close correlation with the actions of law enforcement and to instill the confidence of the population in those who lead the crisis management process;
- repeating some important messages regarding the crisis on various communication channels so that they are known by the whole population or by an important part of it.
- public information must be accurate and credible (data must come from reliable and authorized sources, be verified and be verifiable in order not to fuel rumors and speculation);
- the members of the communication structure (the spokesperson) have to be honest and sincere in order to gain the trust of the population, otherwise it will turn to alternative sources which may generate distortions

regarding communication and crisis (emergency) management
- the content of the messages transmitted by the members of the communication structures (the spokesperson) have to generate empathy towards those who have suffered from the crisis, thus contributing to the increase of the population's trust and its sympathy for the local administration;
- addressing communication with respect to the population and to those directly affected by the crisis (emergency situation), which will contribute to stimulating its cooperation for the implementation of the measures in the Crisis Management Plan (emergency situation) and to the establishment of calm and order.

The rules of crisis (emergency) communication

Not knowing and not respecting the rules of crisis communication may seriously influence the image and the reputation of the local administration. According to LANDRY, 2018; CHICIUDEAN & DAVID, 2011; PHE, 2020; DAVENPORT, n.d. the most important rules of crisis communication are the following:
- the members of the communication structure (the spokesperson) have to inform the population regarding the data that it wants to find out (WHAT, WHY and HOW it occurred: (the type of crisis, the causes and effects for the population, its development perspective, the measures that have to be taken in order to eliminate the causes, as well as the effects), and not what the local administration wants to convey;
- the spokesperson has to manifest transparency in communication, to be calm and to avoid presenting any discrepancy between the verbal and nonverbal language (facial and attitudinal expressions which might generate fear or even panic among the population of the local community);
- the data transmitted to the population have to be true, reliable and verified (before their transmission), verifiable and broadcasted at exactly the right moment.
- the media has to treated as a partner and not as an enemy and that is why one should avoid antagonizing and disregarding it;

- the language used by the members of the communication structure (the spokesperson) has to be decent and not to offer too many technical details regarding the crisis, which do not contribute to a better information and cannot be remembered by the population or may generate confusion and disorientation;
- not too many details have to be offered about the wounds of those affected by the crisis because this communication component belongs to doctors;
- the lists of deceased and wounded people should not be communicated prior to informing their families;
- no speculations have to be done regarding the evolution of the crisis (honesty and sincerity obliges communicators to say when they do not know some of the information requested by the media or by the population). Not respecting this rule will amplify suspicions and the mistrust of the population because the truth will come out when the spokesperson makes some rectifications and apologises for the untruths transmitted in his prior information;
- no states should be made regarding the guilty people, unless the data is certain;
- lamentation for the financial losses suffered will be avoided, but measures will be announced to help those affected by the crisis (emergency situation), which should stimulate the compassion and sympathy of the population for public administration.

The preparation of the population in the cognitive plan (The 2021 National Preparation Platform for emergency situations; The 2015 Prahova Inspectorate for Emergency situations refers to informing it about:
- the rules that have to be respected during the different types of crisis;
- the visual and audio signals which announce the occurrence of the different types of crisis;
- the localisation of shelters and of the area where people and goods can be evacuated during crises (disasters);
- the individual and collective responsibilities which stem from the Crisis management plan

The preparation of the staff from the local administration structure in the behavioural plan refers to the training of the skills to:
- permanently analyse the situation of the local public administration and of the population and to update the website of the local administration and the Communication plan;
- collect, process, verify and transmit at the right moment messages to the population, the media and the state's institutions responsible in the area of crisis management (emergency situations);
- develop predefined messages[ii], standard forms for the declarations and press releases included in the press file and in the Communicational framework plans;
- hold press conferences and interviews on crisis-related topics
- establish and update the Communicational framework plans (which contain the list of the employees' personal information, the list of contact people from the media, state institutions and other relevant types of public, the stages of the communication cycle, the press folder etc.);
- work with the technology of the public administration aimed at communication (updating the website of the local administration, the conception and transmission of messages: sms, mms, photo and video);
- take part in the situation analysis of the local administration and population in order to identify the clues which foresee the appearance or even the initiation of a crisis and the drafting of the scenarios for simulations and communication management exercises in these types of situations;
- to fulfil the responsibilities that belong to them in the simulations and authentic exercises aimed at testing the capacity of the local administration to achieve an efficient management of every type of crisis (emergency situation) which may take place within the institution and/or the community from his area of responsibility.
- take part in drafting and updating the Crisis management communicational framework plans.

The preparation of the population in the behavioural plan has the goal to train skills in order to fulfil the responsibilities which stem from the Crisis management plans. This goal has is fulfilled by taking part in simulated or real exercises of implementing the Crisis management plans carried out by the local administration.

The mental preparation of the staff from the communication structure refers to:
- increasing faith in the ability of the local management to achieve an efficient management of every type of crisis (emergency situation), a goal which is fulfilled within the preparation activity in the cognitive and behavioural plans (the training and development of skills for fulfilling the responsibilities in the job descriptions and in the Communication Plan);
- actions aimed at eliminating fear, obtaining full cooperation in implementing the Crisis management plan and the Communication plan which are achieved through self-assessment, psychological assessment and taking part in a personal development programme (increasing self-confidence, developing team spirit and eliminating weaknesses).

4. COMMUNICATION IN THE CRISIS (EMERGENCY SITUATION) MANAGEMENT STAGE

After the outbreak of a crisis its management plan and the communication plan have to be applied as quickly as possible, but not before updating them with information regarding that type of crisis.

Some members of the communication structure draft the first press release, the spokesperson presents it to the manager of the local administration for information and approval, and afterwards it broadcasts it through the media to the population and to the states' institutions with responsibilities in the field. The other members of the communication structure collect and process the data regarding the evolution of the crisis, maintain a connection with the members of the teams which implement the measures aimed at stopping the spread,

eliminating the effects of the crisis and informing the population, the state's institutions and the media through press releases and statements about the significant events of the crisis management process.

At the request of the media or from its own initiative, the management of the local administration or the spokesperson holds press conferences and interviews, respecting the principles and rules of crisis communication.

At the moment when the crisis ends, usually, the local administration management or the spokesperson holds a press conference in which he or she makes a preliminary assessment of the situation regarding the administration of the local community.

5. COMMUNICATION IN THE POST-CRISIS STAGE (EMERGENCY SITUATION)

After the end of the crisis (emergency situation) the local administration management and the communicational structure carries out a multidisciplinary and multicriteria process in order to assess the state of the institution and the population. In this process:

- the way in which the Crisis management plan is applied: positive and negative aspects referring to the management, coordination and implementation of the measures established; the viability of the measures and of the Management plan in relationship to the generated crisis situations; the causes of the errors and the improper application of the Management Plan and the possible culprits are established.;
- the short, medium, long-term effects of the crisis are determined on the image and reputation of the local administration in relationship to the state's population and institutions;
- the human, material, financial and technological losses are assessed;
- From a communicational point of view, both the profile structure and the management of the local administration assess the positive and negative aspects of applying the Communicational plan:

- the content, frequency, fairness and opportunity of the information transmitted to the population, media and to the state's institutions;
- the effects triggered by communication on the population, respectively in the image and reputation of the local administration;
- the relationship with the media.

At the end of the post-crisis assessment, the local administration management and its communication structure establish the measures that have to be taken in order to:

- improve the Crisis management framework plan and the Communicational plan, in order to increase their viability;

- resize the training program for its own staff and for the population

- re-technologize – replace the technical means used for communication which were destroyed or loss during the crisis.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The art of crisis (emergency) communication is not easy to master because it presupposes, in addition to native qualities of rapid analysis of information and transmission of useful information to relevant audiences, a very good practical training that communication experts can accumulate only by participating in the management of real crises.

On the other side, "The art of communication is difficult. And communicating in the midst of a crisis is even more difficult than everyday interaction" (SEMA, 2008).

The significance of crisis communication stems from its binder quality and "vehicle" for transmitting and receiving coordination and information messages between all components of the crisis management process, respectively between local public administration, population, state institutions and media.

The communicators involved in the crisis (emergency) management process have to know the situation very well, to broadcast relevant information to those who need it at the right moment, to be honest and to show compassion when it comes to the direct or collateral victims of the crisis.

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Endnotes

i Framework plan: working tool that is developed in the pre-crisis period based on data resulting from the analysis of the situation of the local administration and the population in its area of responsibility. This plan is updated whenever necessary during the pre-crisis period (when novelty elements appear) and when the local administration is facing a crisis (emergency situation).

ii Messages whose content must have a common part to all types of special situations and a variable that must be completed before transmission to the population and other relevant audiences. Messages must be simple, contain the elements that the population expects and be transmitted on several communication channels because in crisis (emergency) situations events happen quickly and can generate physical and mental problems among the population.