Everyone is ready to delve into a simulation exercise (SIMEX) on risk communications response in an emergency. The SIMEX includes a real-life scenario that crams into hours, a series of emergencies and crises in an imaginary country over 100 days...

Risk communications:
Plan and prepare before it is too late!

It is a rainy, autumn day in Belgrade… 45 public health experts from eight countries in South East Europe gather nervously in a conference room, together with WHO experts from Geneva and Copenhagen.

Success is measured by what each workshop participant can take back to their country and put into practice. With this practical take-away in hand, one participant from Serbia offered that she, “is now fully motivated to facilitate communications activities with partners at the government level – so we can be prepared when disaster strikes”.

This intensive exercise is designed to help officials and experts learn how to plan and prepare for communicating risks in a natural disaster or a disease outbreak including a pandemic or another public health emergency. Many of the participants, government officials who would normally lead emergency response in their own countries, are particularly interested in how to deal with Ebola, should the disease reach their countries.
Building capacity is about enabling people to practice

The World Health Organization’s (WHO) Department of Communications developed this interactive approach towards risk communications with the goal of preparing experts from Member States institutions and WHO country offices for dealing with multiple hazards.

The SIMEX concept requires experts from various sectors and disciplines to construct local responses to disasters of the crisis scenario. They also have to practice how to do this when dealing with multiple cultures, in different languages, working under pressure and very intense social and institutional environments.

Back in the training room, the atmosphere gets more intense by the hour, as new events and incomplete information add to the pressure. There are conflicting demands on the response team and the media is relentless in its appetite for new information. Participants are now totally immersed in their roles and are busy churning out talking points, briefing the Minister of Health, doing media interviews, talking to key stakeholders and taking the tough decisions on how and when information should be released to the public. The simulation helps experts apply the theory of risk communications and technical information into practice. For some of the participants, this may be the only practice they get before facing a real emergency. For others, it is an opportunity to improve on what they have done before in emergency risk communications.

The workshop in Belgrade was just one of many activities offered by the Department of Communications’ efforts to help countries strengthen risk communications capacity. The Communications Capacity Building team at the Department of Communications will take the SIMEX model to 120 government officials and experts from 30 countries in the Caribbean region together, to practice risk communication preparedness in natural disasters, Chikungunya outbreaks and the possibility of an imported case of Ebola. Then the team is off to AFRO to deliver an urgently needed Ebola SIMEX workshop to the 15 high-risk countries in West Africa where coordinated, efficient and planned communications are crucial for the Ebola response.