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WHO event addressing public health priorities

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* Summary report of the regional technical meeting on strengthening risk communication and community engagement in the Eastern Mediterranean Region/Middle East and North Africa. https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/369570.

Introduction

Risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) is an integral and essential component of any successful public health emergency preparedness and response programme (1,2). Countries in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) and UNICEF Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region have successfully implemented RCCE activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and other disease outbreaks in recent years, although with challenges. There have been difficulties in integrating RCCE into the overall national preparedness and response plans, resources for RCCE activities are limited, and there are gaps and weaknesses in national RCCE plans and capacities.

In October 2022, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (WHO/EMRO) and UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office (MENARO) held the first ever joint regional technical meeting on RCCE. The meeting was to strengthen existing collaborations and partnerships on RCCE and leverage country experiences and learning to strengthen RCCE capacities and systems across the regions. Representatives of 23 countries/territories participated in the meeting.

Summary of discussions

One of the goals of RCCE is to foster trust among communities in the health system and the public health measures while simultaneously building community and health system resilience, especially during emergencies and disease outbreaks (3). To facilitate the achievement of this and other goals in the region, participants discussed the priority next steps and key recommendations, with a timeline for the proposed actions. Discussions in the meeting focused on the critical concepts and theories of practice relating to RCCE, infodemic management, social listening, community involvement and feedback, monitoring, evaluation, lessons learned, and good practices across the region. Participants shared and discussed posters and other RCCE materials from their countries to reinforce the exchange of information and knowledge.

Recommendations

For Member States

1. Conduct advocacy for the institutionalization and integration of RCCE into other health programmes, including joint planning and coordination with the ministries of health and relevant partners.
2. Develop and implement inclusive national RCCE strategies and action plans through a participatory process involving all relevant sectors and stakeholders.
3. Strengthen the generation and use of research evidence for RCCE at national and sub-national levels, including monitoring and evaluation for continuous programme improvements.
4. Strengthen RCCE capacity at country level, including resource mobilization for activities.
5. Systematically document RCCE success stories and lessons learned.

For WHO and UNICEF

1. Strengthen RCCE interagency collaboration and coordination to enhance capacity at regional level, including through joint activities and engagements with governments and other relevant partners.
2. Advocate for and secure high-level support and commitment to institutionalize RCCE as a crosscutting function across health programmes, including health emergency and humanitarian preparedness and response.
3. Provide technical support for capacity-building and the development or update of all-hazard national RCCE plans, including strengthening social and behavioural data collection, analysis and use.

4. Facilitate the development and sharing of RCCE-related research, experiences, innovations, good practices, lessons learned, tools, and guidelines, including self-assessment tools for RCCE capacities and regional simulations.

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