
International Early Warning Programme

Advisory Group Meeting

First session

Bonn, 26 – 27 March 2007

Item 7(a) Report on streamlining work related to PPEW communications and public outreach

Streamlining External Communications at ISDR's Platform for the Promotion of Early Warning

Areas for Action to Enhance Visibility of the International Early Warning Programme – IEWP

Abstract

This project document presents an evaluation report as to how to better target clients in the public and private sectors through making external communications more effective at ISDR's Platform for the Promotion of Early Warning (PPEW) and, thus, to enhance visibility of the International Early Warning Programme (IEWP).

PPEW will be briefly analyzed as to the impact of its current public outreach and advocacy approach. The paper provides a SWOT analysis, evaluating the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats PPEW is facing with its communications design. The steps proposed for action cover immediate, strategic requirements, not recurrent initiatives like campaign or event activities, and should gradually be applied to all ISDR offices.

The document suggests to implement a full makeover of PPEW's visual identity and to reposition its website. Its online presence is to become the centre-stage of all coordination work undertaken by this ISDR office. The recommendation takes into consideration PPEW's overall business strategy to direct its advocacy focus to potential private sector partners in key markets such as Germany, Switzerland, Japan, Canada and the United States.

Making the website a key component of PPEW's advocacy efforts is in line with the general guidance given by the General Assembly Committee on Information in its report of its 28th session (A/61/21) and will be instrumental in spreading knowledge about the IEWP.

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Introduction

1. ISDR’s reputation is based on its expertise and widely accepted knowledge in natural risk analysis and coordination. As experts on hazard assessment, the inter-agency Secretariat adds value to its stakeholders and clients by coordinating and communicating both technical and non-technical information on disaster reduction. ISDR is an ideal platform to share knowledge, views and ideas and to generate awareness about disaster reduction and early warning strategies amongst the various international stakeholders.

2. Its Bonn-based Platform for the Promotion of Early Warning (PPEW) is mandated to advocate – at a global level – for better early warning systems, to collect and disseminate information on best practices, and to stimulate cooperation among early warning actors. Despite the strong outreach and advocacy component in PPEW’s mandate, the office does not have any effective and professional communications plan in place. This assessment appears to be the same for all four regional offices ISDR is maintaining, as well as for its headquarters office in Geneva.

3. There is much more to communications than press or media relations if PPEW seeks to reach a global audience and make a measurable impact on its stakeholders. PPEW would be more effective in reaching its goals if ISDR had a full communications infrastructure established at headquarters that could be tapped at the Bonn office level. As a management function, ISDR communications management should conceptually design, develop and structure the entire communications process for all of its organizational offices. To bridge this internal service gap, PPEW should attach a temporary communications unit to its office that would implement the actions specified in this document within a given timeframe. The project unit will be dissolved thereafter.

[In this document, the term communications refers to public communications addressed to all stakeholder audiences.]

I. Analyzing PPEW's communications: Lack of profile

4. Given the rapid growth of the office unit, the complexities of its operational activities and the relationships with outside bodies and other UN agencies, achieving effective communications is a significant challenge for PPEW. The following four assessments describe the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) that broadly characterize the communications performance of the Bonn-based ISDR office:

5. **Strengths:** PPEW owns a valid business model that is self-explanatory. The office has a clear mission statement and mandate that can be easily explained to stakeholders.

6. **Weaknesses:** PPEW's target audience does not seem to be clearly defined. Information provided on its website – its most visible shop-window – is poorly structured. Navigation is not user-friendly. The office is lacking a coherent branding approach.

7. **Opportunities:** Looking at its current website format, PPEW provides sufficient quality content to establish a website that offers a full news service on its frontpage. Main PPEW databases like TEWIS and the Early Warning Project Portfolio can be revamped and presented as primary assets of the office. Additional services like a global early warning agenda, an automated news retriever as well as email mailing list can be integrated into the frontpage and help increase user traffic to the PPEW website.

8. Given private sector interest in disaster reduction and Early Warning Systems, PPEW should integrate a commercial advertisement space into the frontpage of its website. This will enable the office to establish sustained business relations with donors from the private sector that have previously demonstrated interest in supporting global early warning activities. This business opportunity is particularly valid for donors in the financial services and risk assessment market, like globally-active insurance companies based in Switzerland, Germany, Japan and the United States. Executing a contribution should be made possible online with an instant feedback mechanism, which in turn will increase donor visibility on the PPEW website.

9. **Threats:** Other IGO and NGO actors in the disaster reduction community are well positioned to establish similar platforms that will help promote public-private partnerships. Potential future competitors in the market are, for instance: ProVention (www.proventionconsortium.org/) and the University of Colorado, Natural Hazards Center (www.colorado.edu/hazards/).

II. Refining the target audience: Technical specialists

10. Audience analysis is a key variable to the success of the disaster reduction and early warning process. PPEW's audience can be divided into primary and secondary constituents. Primary constituents consist of PPEW's main clients, i.e. its donors and partners, as well as its employees. This group is characterized by a high degree of inside expertise and awareness about scientific research and sensitivity to hazard events in the field. The group represents an estimated 80% of PPEW's target audience and has a potential to increasingly tap into audiences from the private sector.

11. The secondary constituents consist of disaster affected communities, the global 'public sphere' in general, and intermediaries like media and non-specialized NGOs. This group, estimated at broadly 20% of ISDR's target audience, receives its background knowledge about Early Warning Systems mostly through multipliers in the media and local communities. Though PPEW can only have indirect interest in these intermediaries, their individual power is significant.

12. Despite its impact on the well-being of local communities, PPEW should only focus its communications activities onto its primary constituents. In doing so, the office can choose the most appropriate language and psychology of communications when speaking to an expert audience, without risk of losing interested insiders due to an inappropriate level of communication. Addressing UN clients alone is not enough to increase private sector sponsorship.

III. Building on main assets: Risk knowledge and expertise

13. When overhauling its communications approach, PPEW should not depend on the public media to circulate its information, but invest in developing its own advocacy and outreach platform. It can better reach its primary target audience by repositioning its voice of authority and trust, which should be more visible and visually more appealing. The Internet provides an inexpensive format with a global reach that can direct key PPEW information to its core supporters and donors. Simultaneously, it can bring secondary constituents in from the periphery to PPEW core activities. In business terminology, this 'pull factor' can work only if the communications platform chosen is, indeed, speaking to PPEW's identified target audience, which appears unlikely with the current content, structure and feel of the ISDR's website.

14. The expert communities that PPEW should be targeting are gatekeepers and agenda setters as well as opinion leaders. Expert communities are cash rich and time poor. To get their attention, PPEW will need to frame its issues in a straightforward and appealing way. The office should therefore streamline its communications design by providing high quality contents within the framework of a strong brand culture that better underlines the closeness of PPEW services to a multinational initiative.

15. Existing data like the PPEW Early Warning Project Portfolio and TEWIS constitute an asset that can be better harvested by making it more user-friendly. Potential donors interested in risk knowledge and expertise are more likely to reference PPEW as a source of authority if the information presented is easily accessible and presented as a business-like scorecard, similar to risk indices in the financial markets.

16. To increase its level of authority on a short-term basis, PPEW has to focus its communications plan on only two actions that will directly affect its standing: introducing a corporate branding and re-launching its website platform. Only when fully implemented should the office extend its communications plan and introduce additional products, e.g. a quality newsletter and professional media relations. Eventually, all ISDR offices should harmonize under one visual and structural umbrella that conveys the same image of authority to all ISDR clients.

17. While sharing information with top international press agencies and NGOs will remain crucial, this 'push factor' can be applied more effectively when PPEW manages to better outline what it has to offer. Developing professional media

relationships should therefore be put on hold until the office has established itself as a serious UN brand that the news media would judge worthwhile to cover.

IV. Investing into professional design: Corporate branding

18. Branding is an intangible ISDR asset. It plays a crucial role in ISDR's successful organizational strategy. Ongoing and focused brand management and continuous investment in the establishment of a strong brand pay off. As a strong, recognizable brand, ISDR can make itself more visible within the disaster reduction community and provide a competitive advantage in that it is already anchored in the minds of prospective clients. It serves as the basis for long-term client loyalty to ISDR.

19. PPEW as well as ISDR are lacking a distinct brand personality. The logo used is not easily recognizable. The lines interfering with the letters "I-S-D-R", representing the name of the house, do not evoke a concrete value or characteristic the name might stand for. The reference made to the United Nations, by using its emblem, remains vague. It is also lacking an emotional bond between the service provider and its stakeholders. If placed next to the labels of private sector corporations, and even next to the logo of other UN agencies, the look and feel of ISDR appears deceptive and weak.

20. ISDR (and PPEW) should give its Secretariat an individual brand personality and fill it with the assets identified above, thus making it tangible for its target group. Else, the organization will come across as a personality lacking clear goals. If repositioned properly, the ISDR brand will have a strong and unmistakable identity that is visually easy to recognize. Its content tone needs to be geared to its primary target audience, be more straightforward and intelligent, with an injection of warmth and emotion.

21. A professional ISDR brand management using efficient brand management tools will place the complete spectrum of PPEW communications within the context of the ISDR brand. The typical profile of an ISDR brand will emerge through systematic use of its organizational logo, colors, typeface, layout, and images, leading to a characteristic ISDR 'look'.

V. Becoming an authority: Central role of the website

22. The ISDR / PPEW website is its most useful information product. It is serving as a central role in information exchange. Like all UN entities, PPEW is facing the challenge to improve information quality published online, and to enable its staff to manage the expanding body of information more efficiently. Presently, the PPEW website demonstrates several weaknesses, including navigation difficulties, inconsistent link treatment and – most importantly – a lack of information priorities. The current website structure receives little information tailoring. Visually, the different ISDR sites look heterogeneously, because they appear to be developed by different offices.

23. Technically, PPEW should integrate a variety of content management systems (CMS) when re-launching the site. Instead of integrating content directly hard-coded to HTML, it should rather be entered into CMS databases which offer the advantage to separate content from design. CMS technologies require little technical knowledge and can transfer content responsibility to editors in all ISDR offices.

24. A new website information architecture should offer fewer levels of hierarchy and be flexible enough to accommodate changing demands. PPEW information could be presented more user-friendly if structured around the four elements of effective Early Warning Systems: (1) Risk knowledge, (2) Monitoring and warning, (3) Dissemination and communication, (4) Response capability. Overall, the website must ‘swing’ and provide on its frontpage at least one substantial update per week, pegged to ongoing negotiations in the early warning community, or to a relevant hazard event. In addition to an automated retrieval for current news and events in the early warning community, the PPEW frontpage should provide information space on fundraising opportunities, online donations, as well as direct access to country disaster risk profiles (TEWIS and Inventory Portfolio of Early Warning Systems).

VI. Inviting insiders to speak: “Revi EWS” (magazine)

25. In addition to a new PPEW website, the office should plan, for a second phase, on launching a specialized publication on Early Warning Systems, entitled e.g. “ReviEWS – UN dialogue on risk and disaster reduction” (working title). All content of the publication is simultaneously published on the PPEW website.

26. With a re-shaped magazine, PPEW would aim to promote interdisciplinary discussion on the challenges facing communities affected by natural disasters. The content should be arranged for by a PPEW editor and provide actors in the disaster reduction community with the possibility to publish their contributions. The leading article in each edition should be reserved for eminent personalities from the world of politics, insurance industry, science and culture. Such ‘thought leaders’ should be personalities whose ideas and actions are instrumental in shaping an effective Early Warning System in the 21st century.

27. The magazine is to become a printed platform for exchanging views on thought and action concerning early warning strategies. It should be published in a glossy magazine style. Issued four times per year, it is rather to be offered on a commercial basis, at approximately EUR 10.00 per issue. Putting a price tag to a publication will increase quality in its production, heighten interest among those who seek to publish their contribution as well as among those who are willing to pay for quality content. While this policy appears to be a novel approach in the United Nations system, where publications are randomly given out without focus to targeted audiences, the rationale would merit a trial. (UNAIDS, UNDP and WHO are exceptions within the UN system, as they charge nominal fees for some of its flagship publications, which, subsequently, has generated a ‘must-have’ sentiment for those interested in the information presented.)

VII. Centralizing competence: Project implementation

28. While professional communications should play a central role in ISDR’s overall organizational strategy, in the present situation the secretariat does not appear to have such a policy in place. The agency may therefore well use its PPEW office as a vehicle to initiate an overhaul of its communications approach that would first be applied to that particular office and, in a second phase, be extended to all ISDR offices.

29. For the period of PPEW’s repositioning, all communications activities should therefore be combined into a single sphere and be merged into one office. In addition,

a clear management process will be required to assure timely implementation of the changes. Reporting lines of those responsible to implement PPEW's communications plan should be running to the director of the PPEW office who, in turn, will assure internal ISDR coordination. A multiple reporting matrix should be avoided.

30. In this first phase, PPEW should seek ISDR support to initiate a professional communications process for a time horizon of approximately eight months. The office should clearly limit its activities to the two value drivers described above: the introduction of a corporate branding template and the makeover of its website.

31. Once the first phase is fully implemented, ISDR could step-up its overall communications plan to a second phase and establish a more permanent communications unit which would transfer and apply changes in PPEW communications to all ISDR offices. In this second phase, ISDR would need to build communications staff capacity that will enable the Secretariat to penetrate and maintain a network of journalists, private sector analysts and lobbyists interested in all ISDR issues.