1. Strengthening communication during public health events

Timely and transparent communication between countries and WHO is critical during public health events, guiding collective action against the spread of diseases and other health hazards.

National IHR Focal Points (NFPs) play a key role in information-sharing and risk assessment during public health events. The WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific therefore conducts an annual simulation exercise to test and strengthen the functioning of NFPs and WHO IHR contact points. Known as the IHR Exercise Crystal, the simulation has been held almost every year since 2008. (Resources were directed to the global response to the influenza A(H1N1) pandemic in 2009.)

The number of participants reached an all-time high in December 2017, with 30 countries and areas taking part. Countries demonstrated increased understanding and comfort regarding IHR communication. In 2011, for example, only five countries and areas notified WHO of the simulated public health event within the expected time frame. That figure rose to 26 in 2017.

The value of regular IHR communication exercises has been recognized by annual reviews of the implementation of APSED III.

Participants also extolled the benefits of the exercise: “This was a really good exercise that we learnt a lot from, including how to access the WHO electronic systems, and it forced us to work through and consider the application of the IHR,” said a 2017 participant.

Another remarked that the simulation generated “the feeling of concern and urgency that would be occurring were it a real-life scenario”. Others suggested it was a “good opportunity to train new and inexperienced staff in [IHR] communications”.

The IHR Exercise Crystal is an invaluable investment in health security to prepare for real-life emergencies. The exercise requires minimal resources but can significantly strengthen health security systems.

As a key element of monitoring and evaluation under the APSED III framework, the exercise has been invaluable in identifying issues for continuous learning and improvement. Perhaps most importantly, it strengthens trust between NFPs and WHO, which bolsters effective IHR communication during actual emergencies.