

Public Health Emergencies: The Risk to Communities

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Synopsis

Pandemics such as Ebola can become serious public health crises, as was seen recently in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. But they can also become serious security issues as well, both in terms of the authorities' ability to keep order, but also for business operations. This problem can become even more acute in remote locations, where a company site may have the only functioning health clinic for miles around, and companies that may be in a state of lock-down might be confronted by local communities desperate for help. This Roundtable will examine how public health crises can represent a serious security risk for companies and communities, with an emphasis on the need for robust emergency preparedness.

Public Health emergencies are one of the most important topics of interest for businesses operating in fragile environments. With the Ebola outbreak of 2014 and the recent Zika virus threat, the need for the business community to come together is greater than ever. Analyzing the ways in which businesses are affected by such emergencies — and can respond positively and effectively — are integral questions in for not only business continuity, but also for the safety and security of affected populations.

With businesses frequently operating in risky environments, the probability that they will be affected by health emergencies has increased significantly. This issue was brought to the Roundtable after companies

faced a public health crisis during the Ebola outbreak. For industrial operations that possessed the only operational medical facilities for miles around, these companies became the focus of an ethical debate surrounding the nexus of access community access to health services and the security and integrity of business operations.

Preparedness in Public Health

The first presentation stressed the importance of preparedness when dealing with public health crises. It examined the role Ebola played in terms of both the public and the wider business community. As such disease outbreaks strike countries with extremely weak infrastructures, the impact

is felt not only by the public but also by the businesses operating in these environments. It is not just health that is affected — such outbreaks have a grave economic impact with losses that can potentially amount to trillions of dollars.

An uncontained, widespread disease outbreak such as Ebola is fundamentally a failure of preparedness and the inability to respond appropriately. In public health matters, preparedness is critical. However, such preparations are frequently neglected. In periods of time with no such emergencies, there can be little impetus for investment in preparing for such an outbreak. The business community plays a central role in public health crises by providing elements of protection and

preparedness. Though business operations can be affected negatively by such emergencies, certain measures taken by businesses can potentially do more harm than good. The key is to mobilize businesses to harness capacity and capability in taking a leadership role in such outbreaks, both in preparing for them, and then in dealing with them when they arise. The leadership role played by the business community can have a huge impact on preparing the public to effectively counter such outbreaks.

Before, During and After the Emergency

The second presentation looked more holistically at public health emergencies as three phases encompassing the period before the emergency, during the outbreak and lessons learned afterwards. Before a public health outbreak like Ebola, it is important to examine the ways in which both governments and the public view the crisis. In the case of Ebola, the governments were initially in denial and the entire situation was downplayed to an alarming degree. The governments lacked confidence to provide concrete answers to the Ebola crisis. This was one of the reasons the crisis rose to the magnitude that it did. The 'eye of the storm' phase of the outbreak is defined in the ways in which multiple actors react to the event. Here, companies play an important role in providing leadership and confidence to the communities around them.

The Role of Fear

The third presentation looked at fear as a key factor of instability during public health outbreaks. The fear during the Ebola crisis of 2014 sparked a negative response in the public. And it was fear among the population that led to hate and anger. Such attitudes by the public make the communities unsafe for businesses to operate. This is

because — in lieu of any other outlet to project anger — many companies become the targets of the public's frustration. Therefore the two main ways in which companies can play a role in their communities is first by fostering communication. By communicating effectively and efficiently with the public, companies are well-equipped to handle the fear that public health emergencies generate. Also, by providing communities with the opportunity to get involved in company response operations, the communities become empowered. One of the biggest failures during the Ebola crisis was the non-empowerment of communities and locals. Businesses must therefore play a vital role in empowering local communities by communicating with them and involving them in any counter measures to be taken.

A second important aspect of community empowerment is the way in which businesses provide the public an opportunity to control the crisis. For example, if paid leave is denied to members of the local community, they will not be willing to give up their livelihood even for a day. During a health outbreak this becomes a situation with great risk as those exposed to the disease may not take time off work in order to not forego wages. Therefore systems must be in place to provide paid leave in cases of public health emergencies so that those at risk can seek appropriate help. This works to contain situations of disease outbreaks and prevents the mass spread of these viruses.

Private Sector Efficiency in Response

The efficiency of the private sector is a result of its effective distribution channels and logistical operations even in fragile states. This efficiency can be utilized to respond to public health emergencies which is what many companies did in 2014 during the Ebola outbreak. Many companies

already had experience in the region and people working on the ground. No NGO had the infrastructure that these private companies had in terms of financial resources, logistics and distribution channels. Once the public health emergency arose, these resources were mobilized by the private sector to create an efficient response to the outbreak. The Ebola outbreak and the role of businesses and the wider private sector were a concrete example of the ways in which these actors are equipped to provide appropriate response. Where many NGOs failed to meet expectations of the international community, it was businesses that provided support during the emergency.

Looking In From the Outside

The last presentation looked at public health emergencies as they are viewed by outside actors, such as foreign governments and international NGOs. The response by international governments and agencies to public health emergencies is in many cases slow and delayed. Coordination between international and local actors is lacking in many ways and this contributes to the crisis. In public health emergencies a lack of coordination means that the crisis is dispersed more rapidly. Therefore what is required is that international governments and aid agencies work with locals to prepare a rapid response. Business communities play a huge role in bringing about such coordination because they are at many times the meeting point between national and international agencies. They can thus take on the role of coordination of activities and serve to provide information to elicit a rapid response from the international community.

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