

Who's ready for a flu pandemic?

Two influenza pandemic preparedness testing exercises were conducted in the South Pacific in the last quarter of 2007 – one in Niue and the other in Fiji. While both exercises were aimed at improving preparedness for an influenza pandemic, they had different formats and objectives. In Niue a functional exercise with field activities was conducted, focusing on testing the field and hospital services needed in an influenza pandemic. In Fiji, a tabletop exercise, which included a number of hypothetical scenarios, was conducted with the aim of testing Fiji's national influenza pandemic plan. Both exercises were organised collaboratively with the Ministry of Health in each country, with assistance from the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) under the Pacific Regional Influenza Pandemic Preparedness project (PRIPPP) and other partners.



Why test plans?

Experience has shown that plan testing exercises are a practical, efficient and cost-effective way for governments (and other stakeholders) to evaluate emergency preparedness, response and recovery arrangements. Failing to test plans invites unexpected and potentially disastrous consequences should an emergency event occur.

Emergency planning is a process of continuous improvement and an emergency plan is a 'living' document that **must** be subject to regular review and updating to optimise its effectiveness as an emergency response tool.

Different exercises for different purposes

Emergency plans can be tested using different formats with different purposes, e.g. testing exercises can be used to:

- familiarise people with an emergency plan (and sub-plans);
- assess the completeness of plans (identify gaps);
- evaluate subplans and sector-specific preparedness; and
- assess the adequacy of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for specific responses (particularly relevant where untrained personnel are expected to have an emergency response role).

Five types of exercises have been defined by WHO for validating influenza pandemic preparedness plans: orientation, drill, tabletop (see Fiji Islands example), functional (see Niue example) and full-scale.

Types of Emergency Exercises

(from 'Exercise Development Guide for Validating Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Plans', WHO/WPRO)

1. Orientation

An orientation exercise takes the form of informal discussions designed to familiarise participants with plans, roles and procedures, with a focus on questions of coordination and assignment of responsibilities. Typically, the orientation is conducted by the author(s) of the plan with the assistance of a capable note-taker who keeps track of the discussions, identified plan weaknesses and suggestions for improvement. Of the five types of exercises, an orientation is the simplest and least costly. It is currently used for helping to develop a plan or validating one under development.

2. Drill

A drill is used to develop and maintain skills in a single response procedure, such as alerting and notification, transfer of critical information, activation of emergency resources or practice of specialised emergency skills, that constitutes one or more components of an emergency plan and procedure. Drills are limited in scope and focus on procedures for training and supporting specific skills and interactions as part of a larger organisational response.

3. Tabletop

A tabletop exercise is a process in which officials and/or key staff with emergency management responsibilities gather together informally, without tight time constraints, to examine and discuss simulated emergency situations and attempt to resolve problems based on their emergency plans. Often, the simulation contains elements of ambiguity to encourage creativity in the application of the emergency plan. The success of the exercise is largely determined by group participation in the identification of problem areas. Of the five types of exercises, the tabletop is the workhorse, ranging in scope from the simplicity of the orientation to almost the same complexity as a functional exercise. Table-top exercises can be conducted over periods ranging from a few hours to a few days, but usually require only a few hours or up to one day. Equipment and resources are not deployed and time pressures are not a factor. The exercise is guided by a simulated series of events that require some subject matter expertise to prepare. While many table-top exercises require relatively little planning and coordination, a large-scale and rigorous table-top exercise requires dedicated planning resources, skilled facilitation and trained evaluators to be most effective.

4. Functional

A functional exercise differs from a table-top exercise in three ways. First, it is interactive, requiring participants to respond to each other in the roles designated for them in the plan. Secondly, it is conducted under time constraints that are designed to be similar to, or often more challenging than those of a real event. Finally, it is usually conducted in the facility designated for coordination/management of a real event, so the available tools and technologies can be used and evaluated. Functional exercises are fully simulated at significant levels of detail, usually covering multiple functions, and are designed to validate policies, roles and responsibilities, capabilities and procedures of single or multiple emergency management functions or agencies. The design, conduct and evaluation of a functional exercise require considerable resources to ensure maximum benefit.

5. Full-scale

Where a functional exercise concentrates on the policy and interactive elements of the management of an emergency, a full-scale exercise focuses on the operational capability of emergency response and management systems. Typically, this will include actual deployment of the resources required to demonstrate coordination and response capabilities in as realistic a setting as possible.