Current major event
EWARN evaluation protocol rolled out

A protocol for evaluation of Early Warning Alert and Response Network (EWARN) in emergencies has recently been developed and rolled out in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR).

Editorial note

Humanitarian emergencies often increase the risk of transmission of communicable diseases, resulting in increased morbidity and mortality, particularly from outbreak-prone diseases. To address this increased risk, the World Health Organization (WHO) and its partners established the early warning alert and response network (EWARN), a simplified disease surveillance and response system that focuses on early detection of and rapid response to outbreaks or unusual health events. The EWARN is implemented as an adjunct to the national surveillance system during the acute phase of an emergency, when existing communicable disease surveillance systems may be underperforming or disrupted.

Since its introduction in 1999, the EWARN has been implemented in response to emergencies in multiple countries in the EMR such as Sudan (1999, 2004), Pakistan (2005, 2009, 2010), Lebanon (2006), Somalia (2010), Syria (2013) and Iraq (2013). In the past, several evaluations of EWARN have been conducted, however no standardized methodology currently exists.

In order to address this gap, the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office has collaborated with Emergency Response and Recovery Branch (ERRB), Division of Global Health Protection, Center for Global Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to develop an evaluation protocol after doing pilot evaluations in Iraq and Darfur, Sudan in January 2016 and further revised based on input from partners at a consultative meeting held in WHO Regional Office in Cairo in February 2016 prior to finalization.

The purpose of this guidance is to provide standardized methods to evaluate EWARN implemented in countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region of WHO, based on lessons learned from previous EWARN implementation and evaluations.

Findings from previous EWARN evaluations consistently revealed these systems were primarily used for weekly reporting rather than early outbreak detection and response. They also demonstrated poor data quality and seldom resulted in public health action. Furthermore, implementation delays and lack of exit strategy hindered its effectiveness and utility in an emergency setting. For these reasons, this guidance emphasizes both process (e.g., implementation) and operational (e.g., public health action and data quality) procedures.

It is expected that the countries in crisis implementing the EWARN will be able to identify strengths and weaknesses of the system using this evaluation protocol and be able to use the findings of the evaluation not only to improve the system but also to enhance and sustain the early detection and response functions of the EWARN which is its main purpose.