

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO COUNTER MISINFORMATION IN ROHINGYA REFUGEE CAMPS

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ABSTRACT

For a vulnerable population such as Rohingya refugees, the case study shows that accessing reliable information and rapidly debunking rumours can save lives. In response to an alarming spread of misinformation in crowded Rohingya refugee camps, humanitarian organisations and the Bangladesh government implemented a communication strategy that relies heavily on the ground-up engagement of the Rohingya community.

- **Misinformation about the coronavirus (COVID-19) delegitimises credible advice and impedes measures to contain the spread.**
- **A risk communication strategy starts with identifying how and where people get their information and form their perceptions, then targets these sources.**
- **Community engagement is key to effectively communicating credible information and responding rapidly to rumours.**

When COVID-19 hit Bangladesh, it brought a surge of misinformation and rumour along with it. Rumours during a pandemic can be deadly, and the risk of their spread is disproportionately high for Rohingyas. About 860 000 refugees living in 34 camps in Cox's Bazar makes the population density 40 times greater than the average density in the rest of Bangladesh (Hoque, 2020^[1]). An Internet ban imposed exclusively on the camps and lifted only in August 2020 (Kamruzzaman, 2020^[2]), coupled with a complete lockdown and an 80% shortage of humanitarian staff due to a government directive, left Rohingyas especially vulnerable (RFI, 2020^[3]). Additionally, about 19% of the population suffers from acute respiratory infections, and their dependence on communal distribution for food and water makes their situation in a pandemic all the more complicated (Hossain et al., 2019^[4]). The conditions are such that researchers had projected that the first positive case of COVID-19 in the camps would result in anywhere from 119 to 504 additional cases within 30 days (Smith, 2020^[5]). As of the end of August, however, only 101 cases and 6 deaths were officially confirmed in the camps (WHO, 2020^[6]).

Rumours and misinformation

Within the crowded confines of the camps, a myriad of rumours spread rapidly through the community about the connections between COVID-19 and everything from diet

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to religious and social beliefs. As reported by BBC Media Action and Translators Without Borders (2020^[7]), many people associated the consumption of certain meat and meat derivatives with the virus, and some thought an infected person could spread the disease by biting and scratching others. Rohingyas refrained from seeking medical help, thinking security forces would shoot and kill them if they were infected and many found solace in believing that COVID-19 came as a divine punishment for how the world tortured the Rohingyas, according to the researchers (BBC Media Action and Translators without Borders, 2020^[8]).

The problem with such diverse rumours is twofold: not only are they essentially inaccurate, but their pervasive nature also delegitimises credible information about how to deal with the virus.

Identifying and targeting the sources of misinformation

Protecting and preparing such a disadvantaged population requires a

contextualised risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) response, one that tracks and counters misinformation; informs people about preventive measures, symptoms, testing, disease management and healthcare facilities; and shares real-time updates on infection and fatality rates in the camps (WHO/UNICEF/IFRC, 2020^[9]). However, the Rohingya refugee camps did not see a full-fledged implementation of RCCE response immediately in the pandemic, and it was implemented only after rumours had already spread.

To facilitate effective communication, the Inter Sector Co-ordination Group, the joint platform of the government of Bangladesh and humanitarian agencies working on the Rohingya crisis, adopted a two-way communications approach (Inter Sector Co-ordination Group, 2020^[10]). Partnering organisations collected information on community perceptions through interviews and focus group discussions with the refugees and then disseminated information tailored to refugees' needs (Inter Sector Co-ordination Group, 2020^[10]).

Through these interactions, the Inter Sector Co-ordination Group learnt that Rohingyas primarily get their information from social media and messaging services, mosques and religious leaders, block leaders, diaspora networks, and Rohingya-led initiatives (BBC Media Action and Translators without Borders, 2020^[11]). The joint response platform then targeted these channels and disseminated audio and video messages about COVID-19 through mosques, food distribution and information points at the camps, and motorised vehicles and in the Bangla, Burmese and Rohingya local languages.

Community engagement drives public awareness campaigns

To strengthen the community-led approach and as one method of implementing RCCE,

national and international organisations are now prioritising communication with communities (CwC) activities through community leaders. Small group sessions are being held at distribution points, community centres, and religious and radio listening groups to facilitate awareness messages and long-term behaviour changes. Trained volunteers are also establishing household-based communication to include women and children. To ensure these activities can continue and be scaled up, additional funding is needed. The 2020 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis estimates USD 10 million is needed for CwC activities alone (Inter Sector Co-ordination Group, 2019^[12]), an estimate that was produced before the COVID-19 crisis.

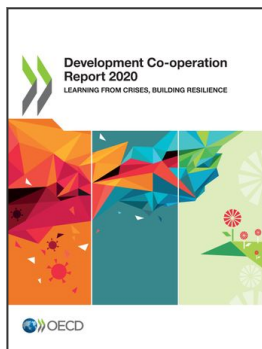
Contextualising the top-down approaches in risk communication to capture and reflect the community's voice is imperative to ensure effective interaction. The community-led approach has proven particularly effective. Not only does it engage people on the ground who know what rumours are circulating and which demographic to target, the linguistic similarities and shared group belonging also make the messaging much more effective than mass and mechanical messaging. The enhanced efficacy in interaction has led agencies to scale up CwC activities.

Lessons

When crises strike, action must be taken quickly. This is possible only when bureaucratic complexities are minimised and funding gaps are addressed. Targeted risk communication coupled with community engagement is an effective way to counter misinformation and would be powerful if deployed early in crises, before misinformation spreads. There is also a clear lesson for governments: disconnecting an already marginalised community from the digital space during a crisis can be deadly.

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