



RESPONDING TO THE COVID-19 INFO-DEMIC: LESSONS FROM QUICK, COLLECTIVE, AND LOCALISED ACTION

A POLICY BRIEF BY
THE H2H NETWORK
ON WHAT WORKED
AND WHAT WE NEED
TO DO NEXT



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The Covid-19 pandemic makes the case for a collective approach to humanitarian communication and community engagement with devastating clarity. The mass of information, misinformation, and disinformation around Covid-19 makes it hard for people to find clear answers they can trust. As the virus reaches into ever more vulnerable communities, an effective response requires timely information management to reach everyone. Impact on a global scale calls for collaboration, complementarity, and two-way communication in the widest possible range of languages, formats, and channels. This hinges on appropriate resources.

To that end, the H2H Network recognised the need for collective action within a week of the novel coronavirus being declared a public health emergency of international concern. The network activated its fund quickly to provide humanitarian-to-humanitarian services addressing the info-demic, one of the six priorities identified by WHO. Services in the package focused on countering misinformation by listening to community perspectives and responding with trustworthy information in relevant languages and accessible formats. Prioritising the Asia-Pacific region, the package targeted countries with less developed health systems. The services, provided by four network members, were ready to go by the end of February and the work ran through May.

Achieving collective impact within a multilingual information ecosystem

The collective action was designed to create an information ecosystem that benefits from the technical expertise of each of the four network members and supports responders from the local to the global level. The collective goal was to analyse information gaps and develop evidence-based content to address them in relevant languages, formats, and channels.

In practice, Internews, Translators without Borders, and BBC Media Action collaborated to track and analyse rumours and misinformation circulating on social media in a range of languages. At the same time, Evidence Aid produced plain-language summaries of existing high-quality research to inform the decisions of health professionals and policy makers. While TWB translated these to expand their reach, Internews and BBC Media Action incorporated them in guidance and training. These resources in turn supported local media to provide factual responses to people's concerns and questions using the channels people use, in languages people understand. BBC Media Action also created clear, fact-based content for social media, radio, television, and grassroots community engagement. TWB further supported communication in local languages by mapping language and literacy among at-risk populations, creating a multilingual terminology resource of commonly used technical terms about Covid-19, and translating partners' community-facing content.

The net result was a regular and extensive program of information, guidance, and training based on scientific evidence, tailored to local needs and delivered in local languages. The four organisations engaged with Covid-19 coordination mechanisms globally and in the Asia-Pacific to integrate this expertise into the wider response.

Providing deep, swift support to local and global responders

- Over 1600 health communicators and journalists in the region used a weekly digest of high-quality resources and fact-checked information
- Media and general public (at least 40,000 individuals) accessed 200 systematic, multilingual reviews of high-quality research in plain language
- WHO and PAHO used high-quality research summaries to map existing evidence base and draft guidance documents
- 23 organisations amplified reach of critical information for different audiences through translation support into 45 languages
- More than 150 media partners and dozens of NGOs and local community organisations used and shared over 150 pieces of content
- 10 media support webinars in local languages supported a network of more than 250 journalists to connect with health experts in their context and build health and science reporting skills
- Journalists responded to key rumours through media guidance documents with the latest research in local languages
- Rumour analysis bulletins were downloaded more than 2000 times by journalists, fact checkers and health communicators
- Responders in 6 priority countries (over 3200 individual users) developed more accurate communication strategies based on language and literacy data and maps

Combining fundamental qualities for effective collaboration

- **Listening first:** a focus on listening to people's real concerns and producing responsive content in accessible languages and formats
- **Speed:** rapid funding to small, lean organisations enabling early action
- **Technical expertise:** specialist communication knowledge contributing to wider understanding of trends and issues and enhancing capacity for consistency of language and messaging
- **Local knowledge:** understanding of community perspectives and gendered communication dynamics essential for identifying gaps and facilitating two-way communication by supporting the channels people already use
- **Integration:** securing efficiencies through participation in formal coordination mechanisms
- **Trust and accessibility:** engendering trust by channeling high-quality information in the right language and format

Highlighting insights and recommendations for effective Covid-19 communication

The H2H Network's experience offers insights about the difference that a genuinely collective effort harnessing existing technical expertise and local knowledge can make for communication during Covid-19. These insights apply to programmes specific to the pandemic, but are also relevant for adapting other humanitarian programmes that are impacted by the added pressure of Covid-19. This is the moment to take this approach to scale and to normalise it. To make it sustainable, by supporting local responders, media, and communities so they are also ready for the next disease outbreak. To do that, the response must prioritise three core actions:

- **Support a two-way information flow.** Responders must ensure there is space to listen and respond to feedback, myths, and rumours about Covid-19 as well as communicate information and counter misinformation. To avoid further excluding marginalised groups, use existing and accessible communication channels and work with local influencers and capacities like trusted media outlets and grassroots groups. To engage less literate and less connected individuals, harness technology like integrated voice recognition (IVR) for telephone hotlines.
- **Be data-driven and adaptive.** The response should take people's questions and concerns and their communication preferences as the starting point for communication strategies. Track uptake of new content; questions and comments generated in response to content can inform further content development. In this way, responders can continuously refine their outreach based on evidence of impact from their audiences themselves. This is even more important when people's information needs shift, for example, with new hot spots and when a vaccine becomes available.
- **Ensure resourcing for response-wide communication expertise.** Important groundwork that has been laid in contexts like the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh needs more stable, predictable financial resourcing. We have seen further efforts to place a multilingual information ecosystem at the centre of the global response architecture. But further investment is needed in response-wide support capacity if we are to expand the reach and impact of communication to halt the Covid-19 pandemic and its multiplier impact on other humanitarian crises.

