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HOW TO SET UP GOVERNMENT-LED NATIONAL HYGIENE COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS TO COMBAT COVID-19

A STRATEGIC BLUEPRINT

Val Curtis, Robert Dreibelbis, Myriam Sidibe, Jason Cardosi, Jennifer Sara, Chris Bonell, Kaposo Mwambuli, Soma Ghosh Moulik, Sian White, Robert Aunger

Background

Governments across the world are rapidly developing communications campaigns to combat COVID-19. Behaviours that are targeted include hand hygiene, physical distancing, surface disinfection and mask wearing, as well as measures for particular groups, such as isolation of the vulnerable.

Whilst governments must develop campaigns urgently, to be effective they require a minimum of strategic thinking. Here we set out the key steps and a set of behavioural principles that should underpin COVID-19 communications campaigns.

Develop a national behaviour change communications strategy

STEP 1 **Set up a communications task force and appoint a national focal person.** An agile and action-oriented task force is needed to execute the strategy. Key members include the Ministry of Health's health promotion unit, representatives from the private sector, media, behavioural scientists, and creative and communications specialists. A National Focal Person with sole responsibility for pandemic behaviour change planning should lead the task force, to ensure a joined-up approach across all channels and partners.

STEP 2 **Mobilise resources, including from the private sector.** Core Government funding for COVID Communications needs to be mobilized rapidly. Additional support can be sought from external funding agencies and partners, many of which are switching to COVID-19 programmes. A sophisticated communications campaign also needs the support of experts in behaviour, content development, media and impact monitoring. Industry has access to professional creative companies and individuals, understands how to manage communications output, possesses digital and social media expertise and can communicate at scale. The government team should enlist business as early as possible; Ministers can begin by calling on national CEOs for help.

The communication campaign developed by the National Business Compact in Kenya shows how the private sector can contribute to communications efforts. Multiple soap companies are not only giving soap, but also expertise and funds for a three-month unbranded campaign through mass media and digital channels. https://www.covid19businessresponse.ke.

STEP 8 **Develop executions employing the most relevant channels for the target audiences.** The next task is to develop creative materials such as ads, posters and other media that embody the brand message and insight. These should be designed to fit the dominant channels of communication in society, as set out in the brief. Content may take the form of standard TV and radio commercials, or of 'memes' for social media, or of content for existing TV and radio shows to generate discussion and social media sharing.

For messaging to go viral it must be worth sharing - one person who sees the 'meme' must believe it will entertain or enlighten the next person to see it. The below box sets out some examples of good communications materials with some explanation of why they are likely to be effective.

Examples Of Communications Materials On COVID-19

NAME	CONCEPT	THEORY OF CHANGE	SOURCE
Corona Virus Alert	People need to learn about new virus and how to respond	Educational, but with a catchy song making the message memorable; seeing everyone play/sing the song can promote new norms of behaviour	Bobi Wine and Nubian Li (Ugandan singers)
Ping Pong Balls	Visual demonstration of effect of physical distancing on transmission	Seeing consequences instantaneously at a 'population' level is more comprehensible to our visually-oriented brains	Ohio State Department of Health
Komboni Housewives	People who wash hands are 'one of us'	Neighbours may gossip about you if you don't wash your hands, but they would be wrong!	Zambia Ministry of Health/CIDRZ/ LSHTM
'Play for the World'	People who exercise at home are heroic for ensuring they don't expose others	Celebrating personal hardship as socially valuable makes people more likely to avoid going back into social contexts	Nike
Universidade do Futebol	Uncomfortable reminder of moments when footballers refused to shake hands	Whilst refusing to shake hands may seem rude, nowadays people are actually showing their social conscience	Liberdade agency

STEP 9 **Rapidly pre-test and continually revise materials.** In emergency conditions, some pre-testing - for example through phone calls with small samples of target audiences - is possible, allowing course corrections before materials are released. Content will need to be revised and refreshed often, as the impact diminishes as surprise fades and circumstances evolve.

STEP 10 **Monitor, evaluate, and share lessons.** Continual monitoring of the effect of communications on behaviour and behavioural indicators is essential, even if the circumstances of a pandemic offer particular challenges. Professional telephone panel survey companies can remotely monitor the effects of communications. For example, Geopoll has conducted SMS studies of the effects of coronavirus in 12 African countries and because these surveys will be repeated at regular intervals, they can provide indicators of the success - or otherwise - of government-led communication programmes.

Behavioural Principles

1. **Do it for others.** People are not just motivated to help themselves - altruistic behaviour is a feature of all human societies. Highlighting exemplary selfless behaviour and sacrifice can inspire pro-social behaviour. Affiliation is powerful motive - people wish to conform to the norms of groups. It is always important to emphasise how people are conforming to national guidelines, rather than not, as this reinforces norms.

2 **Act together.** There is evidence that when people work with each other as members of a group rather than work against each other as individuals, they are more likely to provide mutual support and are better able to cope with challenging circumstances. Highlighting the fact that a few defectors can put the sacrifice of the whole group at risk adds moral pressure to conform to the new rules of behaviour. Community leaders and local voluntary organisations can play a key role in engendering cohesive action.

3 **Facilitate trust.** Communications are only effective when they are trusted and there are ways of building trust. The government needs to be transparent, admitting what they know and what they do not know. They should make clear the distinction between science and politics, publish their data, explain their sources and their reasoning for adopting particular strategies. Further, communications should employ sources that are trusted by their target audiences.

4 **Make it possible.** Providing advice that is not feasible is likely to be counterproductive. People are more likely to behave in ways that require minimum time, physical effort or cognitive load. Messaging can help people to figure out how to reduce such costs for themselves. For example, keeping soap and a bowl of water placed and ready will make handwashing more likely.

5 **Get attention.** Communications that do not attract attention fail. Communications about COVID-19 must therefore be surprising. Standard messages must be presented in new ways with new insights and not just tell people things they already know. For example, having the Prime Minister of Ethiopia demonstrate handwashing, as part of a '#SafeHandsChallenge' might be surprising.

6 **Emphasize reward.** People do things because they are rewarding. These rewards can be physical, like money or food, or social, like praise or acceptance into a group. Making sure people understand and appreciate the possible physical and social rewards for doing the target behaviours is important. This is why many COVID-19 communications emphasize how staying at home benefits others about whom one cares deeply.

Constant congratulation of the public for following recommended measures is a reward strategy used in press briefings by the French government.

Conclusions

Whilst strategic thinking in an emergency can be a challenge, it is vital that country governments take responsibility for the organisation and coordination of national behaviour change strategies.

Whilst every government will want to fit its content to their particular circumstances, following general principles of communication will ensure maximal impact.

Whilst the current pandemic has focused attention on the vital importance of behavior change, countries should take this opportunity to improve their ability to implement strategic communications for the future.