

Credocast

A publication of Credo Advisory

Vol. 5 Issue 1. April 2020



Flattening the Curve

Public Health Campaigns

3

A Health War

4

Enlightenment Challenges

5

Information Channels

3

A Health War

The rapid escalation of the virus in many countries has led governments across the world to implement emergency response public health protocols to curb the spread.

4

Enlightenment Challenges

In countries where the states can act independently, synergy from all arms of government during health emergencies is needed to collaborate towards a common goal.

5

Information Channels

WhatsApp has been instrumental in spreading information (particularly explainer videos) on health communications and is accessed by a wide and diverse demographic

About Credo Advisory

Credo Advisory is a strategic communications firm that specializes in designing and implementing strategic, operational and tactical communication initiatives. We provide a full suite of communications support to our clients, which include public communications and advocacy, government relations, community engagement, media relations, crisis communications, digital communications and capacity building.

Our mission is to develop bespoke communications products, activities and campaigns based on knowledge, research and industry insights. With our ability to communicate effectively with diverse audiences and stakeholder groups, Credo's mission is to provide impactful strategic communications advisory from inception to implementation. At Credo, we are committed to improving the way societies communicate.

www.creadoconsulting.com

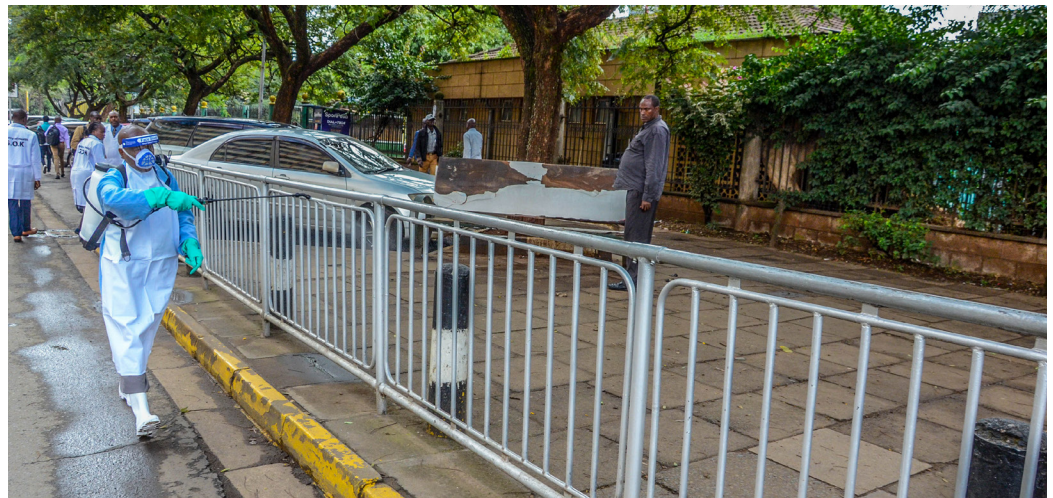


“Governments are responsible for equipping citizens with infection prevention information about the pandemic; especially those at the grassroots.”

A Health War

Currently, the world is at war with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which began in Wuhan China in December 2019.¹ The rapid escalation of the virus in many countries has led governments across the world to implement emergency response public health protocols to curb the spread.

In times like these, public health awareness campaigns are a necessity. Governments are responsible for equipping citizens with infection prevention information about the pandemic; especially those at the grassroots. This thought piece analyzes public awareness campaigns in response to the pandemic, the challenges encountered, and how they can leverage informal communication channels to reach citizens at the grassroots more efficiently.



Governments at Work

¹ Erin Schumaker (2020) Timeline: How coronavirus got started. Available at: <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/timeline-coronavirus-started/story?id=69435165>

² Africa Press Office (2020) Kenya: National Emergency Response Committee Press statements on the Updates of Coronavirus in the Country and Response Measures as at 22nd March, 2020. Available at: <https://www.cnbcfrica.com/africa-press-office/2020/03/22/kenya-national-emergency-response-committee-press-statement-on-the-update-of-coronavirus-in-the-country-and-response-measures-as-at-22nd-march-2020/>

³ Africa Press Office (2020) Coronavirus - Kenya: Sensitization on COVID-19 in various areas in Nyamira. Available at: <https://www.cnbcfrica.com/live/>

⁴ Ellen Dapaah (2020) COVID-19: Government intensifies public sensitization, precautionary measures. Available at: <https://citinewsroom.com/2020/03/covid-19-government-intensifies-public-sensitization-precautionary-measures/>

⁵ AfricaSource by Cameron Hudson (2020) Coronavirus comes to Sudan. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africa-source/coronavirus-comes-to-sudan/>

⁶ Africa Press Office (2020) Coronavirus-Sudan: UNAMID and State Health Authorities launch Community Awareness Campaign against COVID-19. Available at: <https://www.cnbcfrica.com/africa-press-office/2020/04/03/coronavirus-sudan-unamid-and-state-health-authorities-launch-community-awareness-campaign-against-covid-19/>

Most African countries have launched public campaigns to enlighten citizens about the coronavirus pandemic. In Kenya, their National Emergency Response Committee gives press statements about response measures aimed at containing the coronavirus.² Also, social media sensitization campaigns like #Komeshacorona (a nationwide COVID-19 awareness campaign set up by NGOs, in collaboration with Kenya Ministry of Health) have become popular.³

The Ghanaian government holds press conferences to give updates on their efforts to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus. The Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies in Ghana have mobilized public health emergency committees to ensure that the public is well-educated about the threat. These sensitization measures involve stakeholder engagements and public awareness on best practice hygiene protocols to prevent community transmission of COVID-19.⁴

A Committee of Ministers was established in Sudan to organize responsive measures and citizens' engagement on prevention best practices. The government also collaborates with telecommunications companies to inform the public about the pandemic and their interventions.⁵ Darfur state authorities partnered with the United Nations African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) to launch a two-week community awareness campaigns in internally displaced person (IDP) camps; on the preparedness, prevention and fight against coronavirus in the region.⁶

“In countries with a high poverty index, hunger is considered to be a more dominant challenge than an actual pandemic.”

The Nigerian government set up a committee of high-level officials and ministers called the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19. The Task Force oversees the country’s multi-sectoral intergovernmental response to combat the spread of the virus.⁷ Through daily press briefings and timely presidential addresses, the Task Force ensures that the public is informed about containment, testing, and management of coronavirus.⁸ The PTF is currently running a nationwide campaign that spans the federal, state and local governments to educate Nigeria’s approximately 200 million citizens.

In Lagos State, which is currently the epicenter of the virus in Nigeria (with Kano closely behind), the Governor holds regular press conferences to inform citizens about COVID-19 updates in the state. Lagos, with the support of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), kicked-off awareness campaigns at the grassroots. The campaigns focus on interpersonal community awareness using media channels, U-report (a social messaging tool and data collecting system developed by UNICEF) and SMS bulk messaging to reach a wider audience.⁹ They have also leveraged social media influencers and celebrities to aggressively spread awareness messaging.

Enlightenment Challenges

During a pandemic, risk communications efficiency is likely to be challenged by some elements that may affect the communications strategy implementation and impact. The factors which have to be addressed for risk communications to be effective include:

Poverty

In countries with a high poverty index, hunger is considered to be a more dominant challenge than an actual pandemic. This often hampers public receptiveness to information about necessary health protocols. With the risk of the coronavirus spreading faster at the grassroots, proper sensitization and provision of palliatives/ relief materials are vital for a robust national response to the pandemic. Social safety nets like cash transfer programs must be implemented if not, more people are at risk of dying from hunger (and its effects) than the actual virus.



⁷ The State House (2020) Presidential Task Force (PTF) Covid-19 Objectives. Available at: <http://statehouse.gov.ng/covid19/objectives/>

⁸ Olawale Ajimotokan (2020) Nigeria: Govt inaugurates Presidential Task Force on Coronavirus. Available at: <https://allafrica.com/stories/202003180032.html>

⁹ Geoffery Njoku (2020) Empowering children to stem the tide of coronavirus in Lagos, Nigeria. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/stories/empowering-children-stem-tide-coronavirus-lagos-nigeria>

¹⁰ APO (2020) Coronavirus- South Africa: Government monitors and responds to misinformation and fake news during Coronavirus covid-19 lockdown. Available at: <https://www.africanews.com/2020/04/15/coronavirus-south-africa-government-monitors-and-responds-to-misinformation-and-fake-news-during-coronavirus-covid-19-lockdown/>

“If states fail to mirror the policy directives of the Federal government, the response activities can be significantly hampered.”

Fake News



A lot of false information has been disseminated (especially via social media) about the COVID-19 pandemic. A significant one in Africa was that black people were immune to the virus. This misinformation can single-handedly cause the death of thousands of people in Africa who wrongly believe in their immunity. The South African Government uses technology to increase its fake news surveillance during the pandemic. The technology tracks complaints from the media and the public; and takes down fake news from various platforms, which are then submitted for investigation.¹⁰

Nigeria is also grappling with a wave of fake news stories as it tries to dispel many social and cultural myths amplified by fake news. To curb the proliferation of fake news, people are advised to obtain information from reliable sources like the World Health Organization (WHO) and Centre for Disease Control (CDC) websites in different countries. Additionally, religious and traditional rulers and influencers are being used to counter fake news at the grassroots due to the overwhelming influence these figures garner.

Government Misalignment

In countries where the states can act independently, synergy from all arms of government during health emergencies is needed to collaborate towards a common goal. This involves developing policies and crafting core messaging on health and logistics protocols that are jointly agreed upon and disseminated for effective sensitization of the citizens. If states fail to mirror the policy directives of the Federal government, the response activities can be significantly hampered. For instance, lockdown directives from the Federal government can be jeopardized if the states don't comply.

Information Channels

The World Health Organization has reiterated that being well informed is the effective way to reduce the transmission of coronavirus.¹¹ Communication about government response strategies and preventive measures can be executed by leveraging various information channels for effective sensitization of the masses.

¹⁰ APO (2020) Coronavirus- South Africa: Government monitors and responds to misinformation and fake news during Coronavirus covid-19 lockdown. Available at: <https://www.africanews.com/2020/04/15/coronavirus-south-africa-government-monitors-and-responds-to-misinformation-and-fake-news-during-coronavirus-covid-19-lockdown/>

¹¹ World Health Organization (2020) Coronavirus. Available at: https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1

“During press conferences, journalists have the opportunity to ask critical questions and receive immediate responses.”

Formal Channels

TV/Radio

Government-approved health messaging and content should be developed and disseminated across strategic TV and radio time slots; importantly, translated into local languages. Information on health tips, case updates, protocols, and related government policies can leverage primetime programmes and channels; using a combination of government spokespersons and third-party advocates. Additionally, special COVID-19 programming is being utilized across Africa to raise awareness and promote national discourse on the emergency responses.



Social Media

Social media continues to play a major role in the dissemination of information. Most governments are leveraging this platform to reach a wider audience with information about the spread of the disease, emergency response strategies, health communications and general updates. WhatsApp has been instrumental in spreading information (particularly explainer videos) on health communications and is accessed by a wide and diverse demographic. Social media platforms allow influencers to amplify messaging and ensures that people stay socially connected, especially in countries that have instituted emergency lockdowns.

Press Conferences

During press conferences, journalists have the opportunity to ask critical questions and receive immediate responses. It is therefore a vital communication channel for government officials to address public concerns and provide real-time information on the national response plan towards mitigating the effects of the pandemic.

Short Message Service (SMS)

The government can partner with telecommunications companies to quickly disseminate sensitization messages to citizens via their phones. Messaging could include tips on hand washing and social distancing, emergency numbers, list of testing/isolation centers, etc.

“Town criers are useful channels of communication in rural communities across Africa.”

Informal Channels

Posters & Flyers

During a pandemic, printed posters and flyers can be strategically placed at entrances to stores, on street corners and in market squares to educate the public on best practice hygiene protocols. Dissemination of sensitization materials should be done in adherence to stipulated hygiene and physical distancing protocols. Information should be simple and graphical for the benefit of uneducated citizens.

Indigenous Radio

Community-based radio stations are used to reach the grassroots. As a popular source of information in rural communities, this channel can be leveraged to pass vital educational information about the virus, using local dialect.

Announcement Vans

Typically used as a sensitization channel for political campaigns, announcement vans can be used to sensitize rural communities about the pandemic. However, strict adherence to physical distancing protocols should be implemented to prevent community transmission of the disease. Messages about the pandemic via this channel should be short, direct and communicated in the local language.

Community Leaders

Traditional, religious leaders and figures are revered in most African communities. Their influence can be galvanized to elicit behavioural change, especially within communities that may be difficult to reach. Through direct communication, while adhering to physical distancing rules, community leaders can inform their community members about preventive measures to contain the spread of the virus.



Town Criers

Town criers are useful channels of communication in rural communities across Africa. They can be used to enlighten community members about government protocols and prevention practices to take in order to curb community transmission which is growing at an exponential rate in communities; most recently in Kano, Nigeria. Information from a town crier is usually trusted; as it is seen to be coming directly from the village head or king of the community. This channel of communication is particularly effective in communities without electricity or access to traditional media.

“ If citizens are aware of the dangers of the pandemic and preventive actions to take, the spread is better controlled which leads to flattening the rate of infection curve. ”

Credo Experience

Credo Advisory’s health communications expertise includes the provision of strategic communications advisory and technical assistance to the COVID-19 response in Nigeria. It is currently facilitating the emergency response with the development of strategic and tactical messaging, content development, cross-government communications coordination to mention a few. With a major emphasis on grassroots sensitization, Credo crafts and translates response messaging that are disseminated using a combination of formal (digital, print and social media) and informal communication channels (community-based mobilization and advocacy). Credo’s support is centered on the development and implementation of a national communications strategy in coordination with all the levels of government.

Conclusion

When mitigating and responding to global health emergencies like COVID-19, governments need to effectively ensure citizens are regularly updated on the crisis response, in a proactive and timely manner. This can only be done with significant grassroots mobilization and leveraging informal and formal channels of engagement.

Risk communication campaigns for a pandemic must ultimately galvanize the masses for behavioural change to take root and be sustained for the duration of the crisis period. If citizens are aware of the dangers of the pandemic and preventive actions to take, the spread is better controlled which leads to flattening the rate of infection curve. Communicating during crisis periods can be intense, but with the right communication strategy and implementation plan through country (or community) specific channels, the maximum impact will be attained.