

Community engagement from a distance

This short guide is designed to assist development and humanitarian agencies to think through how risk communication and community engagement activity related to Covid-19 can be carried out without face-to-face interaction with communities. By using remote methods, agencies will be able to safeguard the health of their own and their partners' staff and volunteers, while still ensuring that communities receive accurate, up-to-date information as well as having access to communication channels which allow them to provide feedback and share their concerns and worries.

If you normally operate courtyard meetings or group counselling, then...

...consider using your established and trusted networks to share information by phone or online.

You may have contact details of group members, or at least group leaders, in local areas. Use these to share accurate information – perhaps through SMS or audio MMS messaging. Encourage group leaders and members to share information within their local area (but discourage them from doing so face-to-face).

If members have mobile internet access, then this channel can also be used for sending and sharing information. Remember that most audiences in Bangladesh are very nervous of using large amounts of data – so make sure that your content is produced in a low resolution format that allows for sharing over internet or MMS with the minimum file size.

Encourage group leaders and members to share their feedback and worries with you – and make sure your agency has a mechanism to record and react to that feedback.



If you normally operate mobile miking, then...

...consider setting up fixed-site loudspeakers within the community.

Using mobile miking at this time may pose a risk to operators and drivers, and also undermines the central public advice to stay at home as much as possible. Instead, consider mounting fixed-site loudspeakers through the community – ideally in places where your staff and volunteers can operate them without leaving home. You could also use your links in local areas to ask if loudspeakers at mosques can be used to get information out – and work with the mosques to make sure that the information they are distributing is accurate.



If you normally operate face-to-face health services or counseling, then...

...make sure your remaining front-line staff are able to carry out good inter-personal communication

Key staff remaining at health facilities (or in other, critical roles) will be very busy – but can still play a role in ensuring that communities have access to high-quality information, and the ability to raise concerns and questions. Try to brief your front line teams on the basics of good inter-personal communication; and make sure that they have access to accurate, up-to-date information that they can pass on to communities. Make sure that front-line staff know how they should record and deal with any feedback, concerns or complaints that they receive from service users, too.

Audio or video messaging at health facilities is likely to encourage people to gather there in larger groups – and so this mechanism is unlikely to be appropriate. Consider using posters at these locations instead – regularly updated with the latest information and advice. Posters don't have to be printed – hand-written information on a whiteboard or flip-pad can be equally useful.



If you normally operate telephone hotlines, then...

...make sure they are up-to-date with the latest information and referral routes

Existing hotlines, which community members are already aware of, can be an excellent way to maintain communication, as long as you are able to operate them without staff needing to travel or take unnecessary risks. Make sure that the staff or volunteers operating the hotlines have access to accurate information, regularly updated, and that they know how to record and deal with complaints and feedback, according to your agency's protocols. Your hotlines may get very busy, so think about ways that you could increase staffing to cover more calls. Try and ensure that the people answering calls speak the right local dialect, so they will be able to communicate clearly with the community members calling.

Setting up a new hotline is unlikely to be the best solution at the moment – since there are already several government-led initiatives to provide public information and advice by phone, which are being widely advertised.



If you normally use internet or social media, then...

...try and use these channels for two-way communication

The internet and social media are clearly excellent ways of sharing information at this time – particularly if you already have established, trusted pages or channels with significant levels of audience engagement. Think carefully before spending time and resources on creating your own content – there is a lot of video and audio material already available that you can share. Make sure that the content you are sharing is accurate and up-to-date – seek help to verify it if you are not sure. Similarly, now is probably not the time to establish a new page or channel – you will have more success if you concentrate on reaching audiences through channels that they already engaged with (and trusted) before the emergency started.

Remember that social media can be an excellent way of engaging communities in two-way communication – it's not just useful for disseminating 'messages'. Think about how you can encourage discussion and answer questions from your audience – evidence shows that people who engage in discussion after watching or listening to information gain a lot more from it than those who only engage passively. Consider how you can record and respond to feedback that you receive over these channels.

Social media users in Bangladesh tend to be young, male and urban – so this channel might not be the only one you choose to use if you want to reach everyone. Encourage your social media audience to share (remotely) the information you provide with friends and family in their local area and back in their home villages – particularly women and older people – to help widen the reach beyond the immediate audience.



Above all, remember...

- ◆ Be clear about the goal of each of your communication activities. If you are clear about what you want to achieve, you are more likely to be successful.
- ◆ Think before you communicate. Is it practical and actionable for the audience? Is the advice you are giving realistic for people to carry out in their context? Could it do harm to anyone?
- ◆ Be clear and concise. Avoid technical jargon and use everyday words that communities are likely to understand.
- ◆ Stay up-to-date so that you are communicating the latest and most accurate information and not contributing to myths and misconceptions. If your information is perceived as inaccurate or incomplete, you will lose your audience members' trust and could do more harm than good.
- ◆ Co-ordinate with other communicators, such as local authorities, NGOs and community organisations, to ensure you are not giving contradictory information to people. If there are inconsistencies in messages, find out why and aim to correct them.



For more information:

- ◆ Asia-Pacific RCCE Working Group - [Including marginalised and vulnerable people in risk communication and community engagement](#)
- ◆ BBC Media Action – [Guidance and toolkits](#)
- ◆ BBC Media Action – Research and evidence on [communication in emergencies](#)
- ◆ [BBC Media Action / IFRC guide for the media on communication in public health emergencies](#)
- ◆ [Shongjog website](#) for a range of communication tools, guidance and resources
- ◆ [CDAC Network resources for Covid-19](#)

This guide has been produced by BBC Media Action on behalf of Shongjog, the national platform for Communication with Communities in Bangladesh.