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Radio: a key humanitarian response tool

How can we optimise the use of radio as a public health messaging tool for vulnerable crisis-affected communities during infectious disease outbreaks?

Community involvement improves radio health messaging

This study, undertaken during the COVID-19 outbreak in Burkina Faso, found that radio enabled sharing of rapid, relevant, and reliable information, even during COVID-19 and a deteriorating security situation. Radio can be considered and deployed in emergency context as an urgent response tool. Humanitarian actors can use radio to disseminate rapid, relevant, and reliable information to conflict-affected communities and counter disinformation. Involving affected communities in the production and dissemination of information, through interactive broadcasts and as sources of information, helps improve its effectiveness as a public health messaging tool.

Outside broadcast of «Let's talk Coronavirus» recorded by Studio Yafa at an IDP camp in Kaya, Burkina Faso, 18/12/20. © Olympia de Maismont / Fondation Hirondelle

Background

Burkina Faso's 1.2m (January 2021) internally displaced persons (IDPs) face crisis on three fronts: security, humanitarian, and health. In emergency situations, rapid, relevant, and reliable information is essential to this population. Radio is the main source of this information and is trusted. Through regular broadcasts in national languages and many formats (news, debates, soap operas, magazines), accessible, timely and accurate information can reach isolated and marginalized communities, providing knowledge, enhancing understanding of complex and new situations, and countering misinformation. During the COVID-19 outbreak, it was critical for local actors to understand how radio could best be used to disseminate public health messages to IDP communities.

How the research was conducted

IDPs and host communities in three regions in Burkina Faso (Kaya, Pissila, and Kongoussi) were surveyed via WhatsApp about their information needs. Feedback was combined with content analyses of factual IDP-targeted radio broadcasts. Regular reports enabled Studio Yafa (in Ouagadougou), broadcasting to communities through partner local networks, to adapt output as needed.

Key findings

- Radio enabled sharing of relevant and reliable information. It acted as a survival tool, and provided space for exchange, solidarity, and communion between IDPs and host communities
- Radio was effective and trusted, in a context of uncertainty where rumours, or uncertain truths, proliferate. Talk shows, news bulletins, and interactive or entertainment programmes were preferred by IDPs during emergencies.
- Repeat broadcasts or 'booster' campaigns are needed to improve and reinforce understanding and to counter misinformation about the pandemic and the vaccine.
- Involving affected communities in radio programme production and delivery increases their awareness and commitment to act on the public health recommendations.
- The use of fictional characters, celebrities or well-known personalities in broadcasts increased message retention amongst listeners.

Implications for humanitarian practitioners and policymakers

- Radio is an important tool for broadcasting timely, relevant, and reliable information to displaced and host populations in emergency contexts.
- Organisations should not simply use the radio to bombard top-down messages produced by outsiders. Involving the target listening community in the production and dissemination of messages, for example through interactive programmes, will improve the uptake and implementation of public health recommendations.
- Humanitarian actors should see radio not only as a means of one-way communication of public health messages, but as a holistic tool for community engagement which can be used to help identify needs and concerns, unite fractured communities, and inspire hope for the future.
- Radio must be considered, by the actors who use it in emergency contexts, as one of the urgent responses to be integrated in the strategies of information, countering disinformation, and citizen education and accountability towards them.
- Information on training and opportunities, such as snapshots of those who have successfully returned to their trade or who have established a new one helps IDPs maintain aspiration and wellbeing.

Recommendations for future research

Further research would be welcome into the information needs of specific groups within the IDP population in Burkina Faso, for example, the specific needs of IDP youth and women, and methods to improve media literacy skills.

About the study team

The research was conducted jointly by an international team bringing together academic expertise (Dr Emma Heywood - Sheffield University (UK), Dr Lassané Yaméogo – CNRST-INSS (Burkina Faso) and extensive practical and media development expertise (Fondation Hirondelle (Switzerland) and Studio Yafa (Burkina Faso).

A doctor answers questions from a Studio Yafa journalist during recording of a programme in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso,

Keywords

Burkina Faso, internally displaced persons, radio, humanitarian response, awareness campaigns, security

Articles and further reading

https://www.elrha.org/project/internally-displaced-persons-radio-and-covid-related-misinformation-in-burkina-faso/