POLIO | GLOBAL ERADICATION INITIATIVE

CASE STUDY

Using WhatsApp Groups to Shape Social Media Impact on Polio Vaccination

UNICEF Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, efforts to effectively communicate polio information to the community are increasingly occurring in digital spaces. For some time, the UNICEF Afghanistan polio programme has proactively used social media campaigns – on **Facebook**, **Twitter**, **Instagram**, and **YouTube** – to increase public awareness on the importance of polio vaccination and to combat the rumors and misconceptions that spread on social media. Now, a new digital platform has been added to the toolkit: the WhatsApp Messenger application (WhatsApp).

Senior social mobilizers in Kandahar have created a WhatsApp group to target and facilitate the communication of key messages to communities. These senior social mobilizers, who work at provincial levels, operate as critical channels to communicate tailored messages down to the lower levels. Senior social mobilizers pass on key messages received through the WhatsApp group during meetings, personal interactions, and even through their personal social media accounts.

The purpose of the WhatsApp group is to amplify positive social media posts and to receive requests for support from the group members. The communication is two-way. Senior social mobilizers communicate upwards to UNICEF and report the challenges that they face. In response, UNICEF sends appropriate messages to address reported issues or identified rumors.

For example, if a group member reports challenges to vaccine acceptance in his/her community due to religious reasons, UNICEF can send videos of religious leaders from that specific locality who discuss the issue directly. Senior mobilizers download the video and share it with their colleagues at district and village

levels, as well as with their own social networks. This direct engagement allows a more targeted response than simply posting key information to social media accounts, where there is less control over who views the posted content.

WhatsApp Messenger is a free mobile phone application (app) that supports messaging services and allows users to establish a closed group with multiple members. Group members can then send messages to all group participants simultaneously. Social media apps, like Facebook and Instagram, allow the polio programme to post and broadcast key messages, photos and videos to a broad audience, and to directly respond to questions and concerns from frontline workers (FLWs) and caregivers. WhatsApp Messenger adds another dimension, by delivering content directly to social mobilizers in key hotspots, who can then ensure that information is shared with their communities.

HOW WAS THIS ACTIVITY ACCOMPLISHED?
To roll out this initiative, UNICEF targeted 55-60 senior social mobilizers

from the southern region—especially Kandahar, a hotspot for wild poliovirus transmission and rumors—for further engagement. First, group members were identified and invited to participate in a training to launch the initiative. UNICEF's Social Media Specialist conducted a two-hour training in Kandahar, which covered topics such as: 1) objectives of social media; 2) how to counter misinformation online; 3) how to share challenges with UNICEF; 4) next steps for using WhatsApp; and 5) networking and communication with the UNICEF team.

UNICEF's Social Media Specialist leads this initiative and is responsible for creating the group, conducting rollout trainings, and serving as a focal point. In addition, the polio Communication Working Group (CWG) helps to create the content. Key UNICEF staff in the polio programme in Kandahar are members of the WhatsApp group and can share content. Since the initial training, district level mobilizers have created two additional groups.

LEVERAGING THE WHATSAPP NETWORK IN COVID-19 RESPONSE
During COVID-19 pandemic response, over 120 Immunization Communication Network (ICN) workers quickly capitalized on the existing WhatsApp groups to support response and used the groups to share information on COVID-19 prevention measures, personal hygiene, case numbers and other critical topics. ICN workers also shared photographs of their community engagement activities, such as soap distribution and handwashing demonstrations.

WHY WAS THIS DONE?

WhatsApp allows quick and easy engagement of social mobilizers, who can then share messages rapidly with FLWs in target communities. The group allows UNICEF and group members to monitor rumors as they begin. In addition, this platform provides another channel to respond to and "drown" rumors identified on social media.

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS?

Currently, around 120 ICN staff participate in one of the three WhatsApp groups. This represents over 70% of ICN workers. While this initiative is in its early stages, WhatsApp engagement is seen as an easy way to influence behavior change and to amplify and tailor the content developed for social media. Group members can download the pre-created content they receive on WhatsApp, and then easily share this information on the ground. WhatsApp engagement makes their work easier, as they can report issues and be supplied with the key messages they need.

> "The WhatsApp groups are very useful, as information is quickly and easily shared, and response is instant. If any assistance is needed, it is done over the WhatsApp groups. This includes guidance on the tasks to the social mobilisers."
>
> - Provincial Communication Officer, Kandahar and Zhari District

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

In 2020, the UNICEF polio communication team plans to expand WhatsApp groups to cover every social mobilizer and to bring the initiative to lower levels. As a pilot, the team engaged senior social mobilizers in Kandahar. Next, the office gradually will target senior social mobilizers in the eastern region. After piloting engagement at provincial and district levels, UNICEF will expand the program to FLWs and vaccinators, and possibly even include the community and parents.

Organizers are rolling out the program slowly, to test the concept, identify issues, and improve implementation before expanding the groups to lower levels. A key risk is that rumors or misinformation could penetrate the closed WhatsApp group itself, especially at lower levels, where groups would have larger numbers of members. For instance, at lower levels, over 4,000 FLWs exist, and each member might belong to many other WhatsApp groups that are not managed by UNICEF. If a rumor creeps into the UNICEF-facilitated WhatsApp group, it could easily be shared with other groups and spread quickly. To mitigate this risk, the polio communication team first engaged a small group of social mobilizers working at higher levels on WhatsApp. In order to improve its use of social media in general, the polio monitoring and evaluation team is considering conducting an impact assessment of social media and developing social media strategy to support its work.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

View materials and tools from UNICEF Afghanistan on Rhizome | Poliok.it

Check out the UNICEF Afghanistan's social media outreach on:

- **f** poliofreeafghanistan
- **Instagram** poliofree_afghanistan
- **Twitter** PolioFreeAfghan
- **YouTube** Polio-Free Afghanistan

WHAT WERE THE KEY LESSONS LEARNED?

1 WhatsApp allows a simple, direct way for social mobilizers to ask questions and to receive targeted messages to support their response. It also allows UNICEF to reach FLWs and the community through social mobilizers.

2 The CWG can engage influencers from areas reporting issues for a more targeted response. For example, the CWG can record a video clip of religious leaders, sports figures or music personalities from specific localities to target messages to local areas.

3 Training must be completed in advance of launching the group. In this case, training described the WhatsApp initiative and covered what group members should and should not share.

4 Social mobilizers can successfully serve as a conduit between digital content and the community. WhatsApp group engagement allows UNICEF to tailor social media exposure to shape the discourse around digital content.

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