

Countering Vaccine Hesitancy with Effective Communication

Findings and recommendations on COVID-19 communication preparedness in India, Indonesia and the Philippines



Abstract

The significance of vaccine hesitancy for the COVID-19 global public health emergency is now well understood. Vaccine hesitancy refers to a delay in acceptance or refusal to receive available and accessible vaccines. It is influenced by public confidence in the vaccine, trust in government, the convenience with which the vaccine can be accessed, and any widespread complacency about its relevance, safety and efficacy. The unprecedented spread of Covid-19 has highlighted the need to strengthen vaccine confidence and increase uptake of vaccines to save lives. Countering vaccine hesitancy has become an urgent public health priority of governments across the world.

The low acceptance rate of COVID-19 vaccines among certain sub-groups and areas in low-and middle-income countries has necessitated the need to examine innovative communication strategies that can be effectively employed to reach these different groups. Communications strategies can overcome issues with vaccine confidence and complacency if they address public concern about vaccine safety and side effects, any lack of confidence in healthcare leaders and healthcare workers, and the negative influence of social media and other technology platforms.

Drawing on the expertise of key opinion leaders and experiences of countries that have achieved a measure of success in minimising vaccine hesitancy, this brief presents a framework for best practices in COVID-19 vaccine communication. The recommendations are drawn from best practices from countries with a high vaccine acceptance rate, including developing countries that are much more resource-constrained and have low healthcare capacity.

The 'LISTEN' framework defines six clear and actionable best practices that can ensure an effective COVID-19 vaccine communication and engagement plan. The framework can also be applied to counter routine vaccination communication roadblocks for re-emerging vaccine preventable diseases, such as measles and polio. The LISTEN framework with its key enablers, will likely drive greater effectiveness in vaccine communications in budget-constrained economies in the Asia Pacific region and beyond.

What is LISTEN?

- Longitudinal surveys to understand vaccine hesitancy drivers – Frequent broad-based public surveys can help governments understand public sentiment and refine its communications plans to tackle vaccine hesitancy.
- Integrated and consistent messaging – Proactive and consistent messaging from a multi-ministry government task force throughout different pandemic phases is critical to raise public awareness and elevate public trust.
- Suitable local engagement plan – Adapting communications plans to address unmet needs of local communities while involving local stakeholders. This may include voices from religious, community and civil society leaders, potentially even at a neighbourhood level, to understand the local context and unmet needs.
- Targeted use of media and communications ambassadors – Information, education and communication (IEC) materials should be distributed using multiple channels and different formats, with the messaging tailored to the stakeholder groups and formulated around the progressive phases of the pandemic.
- Education of key messengers – Healthcare workers and government institutions must understand the importance of communications and appreciate cultural and religious sensitives to curb misinformation and deliver a successful vaccine roll out.
- Near or real-time misinformation monitoring and legal provision – A multi-pronged approach is required to mitigate infodemics, such as measuring and monitoring the spread of misinformation, detecting and understanding the impact of the spread, and responding and deploying interventions that protect against the infodemic. Finally, regulation or law-based provisions for taking punitive action against those who spread misinformation and fake news may be considered in order to curb and deter the spread of misinformation.

Key recommendations:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the need for countries to develop effective, integrated, evidence-based communication strategies to drive awareness of the value of vaccines. The effective implementation of a prepared vaccine communications guideline remains a serious governance gap for many countries, often due to the lack of capacity and accountability, inadequate structured monitoring and evaluation of programmes, and the absence of skilled teams dedicated to attitudinal research.
- The LISTEN framework can be used by countries to ensure an effective COVID-19 vaccine communication and engagement plan. Pre-COVID-19, anti-vaccination messaging was primarily targeted to parents and focused on creating doubt about the safety and efficacy of paediatric and adolescent vaccines. More recently, opposition to vaccines has taken on more political overtones related to the trade-off between societal responsibility and personal choice. The framework addresses potential barriers of a lack of knowledge and education, access, and data monitoring that apply to routine immunization more broadly.
- The LISTEN framework can also help pinpoint weaknesses and gaps in national vaccine preparedness guidelines and implementation roadmaps.
- Budget-constrained economies will need to leverage technology (for conducting surveys, social listening and data monitoring), public-private partnerships (with enterprises and NGOs that claim outreach expertise and those that offer valuable resource support) and behavioural science expertise to enable the LISTEN framework.
- More research is needed on the net cost-benefit of investing in vaccine communication preparedness versus the health and economic hardships that come with high levels of vaccine hesitancy.

