

## case study



Benoit Carpentier/IFRC

# Malaria prevention through social media

## Background

According to the World Health Organisation<sup>1</sup>, malaria affects an estimated 219 million people worldwide and kills up to 655,000 each year. While the majority of cases are in the African continent, the region of South-East Asia accounts for around 15 per cent of malaria cases.

In recent years, National Red Cross Societies in the Mekong-sub region have been supporting national governments and health authorities in responding to threats of malaria. This work is only expected to increase given the continuous seasonal outbreaks and flooding.

In 2013, the Norwegian Red Cross committed to work with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) South-East Asia regional delegation and the Red Cross of Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam for malaria prevention activities. The main goal of the collaboration is to promote healthier and safer living, and increase resilience at a community level.

One element of the project funded by Norwegian Red Cross focused specifically on support to National Societies for the development of malaria-prevention campaigns. The work incorporated the technical expertise of health, disaster management and communications teams in the Red Cross.

Utilizing a combination of social and traditional media, the campaigns aimed to enhance the reach and penetration of malaria prevention messages, and help build resilience within at-risk communities. Rooted in the operational knowledge, capacities and vulnerabilities of targeted communities, the campaigns have identified specific objectives, dependencies, deliverables and monitoring recommendations to support National Society implementation.



Increase incidence of flooding from the Mekong Delta affects the rates of malaria in Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam. Credit: Tran Quang Tuan/Viet Nam Red Cross

## Social Media in the Region

In 2012 it was documented that Asia Pacific is home to 50 per cent of the world's social media users and 102 million new internet users. In the region of Southeast Asia, the countries of Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia are in the top 15 of the fastest growing countries using Facebook for 2012. Around the globe, and especially to Southeast Asia, social media is fundamentally changing how we communicate.

A number of National Societies in the region have already made significant advances in harnessing the power of social media with many using mobile and web-based technologies to improve communications and interactions with the communities they serve. At the same time, there is also a gap in these advances, often due to lack of connectivity in rural areas even with increased rates of mobile penetration. As a result, countries such as Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam, to name a few, are embracing social media at a different pace to their Southeast Asian neighbors.

<sup>1</sup> World Malaria Report 2012

## Key Activities

In order to help bridge this gap and harness the potential of social media, the three targeted National Societies received support to further develop their online communications capacity, in a bid to increase and strengthen their engagement with vulnerable communities. The communication (specifically social media) activities aim to complement the community-based malaria prevention activities taking place as part of the larger project. This support includes the following:

### Regional Workshop

In July 2013, the IFRC South-East Asia regional delegation hosted a workshop focusing on the role of social media in supporting community resilience. The 2-day event brought together National Society staff from the region with a focus on assimilating the knowledge of disaster management, health and communications representatives to develop social media strategies for specific campaigns. The project funding from the Norwegian Red Cross ensured that health colleagues from the National Societies of Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam were able to participate in the workshop.

In addition to bringing together International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement partners to discuss how social media can be used to support humanitarian objectives

and to share examples of best practice, the workshop also included contributions from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and a variety of external social media specialists who led discussions on current trends, challenges and the potential links between social media and resilience. Each participating National Society submitted a pilot proposal for a social media campaign, which was then further developed at the workshop.

Utilizing Facebook, the campaign proposals centered on launching malaria awareness campaigns which would reach out to staff, volunteers and the wider public. The first step of this process was to ensure each National Society had established a Facebook account/page. Training of staff, to help build up an internal network of social media experts, was identified as integral to the success of the campaigns and featured as a high priority for all National Societies. The proposals also focused on the type of malaria-prevention information to be shared such as two-way communication with communities, use of photography, etc. Finally, National Societies also included potential ways to integrate their social media campaigns with off-line activities such as articles in internal publications and outreach to local authorities and journalists.



A staff member of the Thai Red Cross Society's Information and Communications Department provides advice on using Facebook to members of the Laos Red Cross, during a social media training in Vientiane. Credit: Thai Red Cross Society

## In-country training

Building on the learning from the regional workshop, in-country training was organised by each of the three National Societies. Established with the financial support provided by Norwegian Red Cross, the trainings were held in branches/provinces where malaria rates are particularly high and where the Red Cross is providing malaria prevention programmes.

The aim of this follow-up training was to further develop the social media skills of targeted staff and volunteers' in-line with the National Societies' social media strategy, recognizing the specific internal contexts, staff and volunteer capacities and internet accessibility. Building the basic skills and understanding, and cultivating best-practices for social media engagement in each National Society is expected to lay the best foundation

for sustainable engagement in the long-term. In order to further aid this process, the IFRC regional delegation and secretariat have jointly developed a social media guidelines template that has been provided to the National Societies to help provide guidance internally as they begin to build their social media presence.

Lao Red Cross (LRC) held a successful training session in December 2014, with the peer-support of the Thai Red Cross Society who contributed sessions on public relations and effective writing during emergencies. The Cambodian Red Cross (CRC) held one session in Kampot Branch in mid-February and one session at headquarters in March 2014. The final training for the Viet Nam Red Cross (VNRC) was held in mid-March 2014.

## Social media activity

Following large-scale flooding in South East Asia in September 2013, National Societies were able to employ their recently developed social media skills to help promote their response to online communities and to integrate malaria prevention and hygiene promotion information into these communications.

- CRC launched its Facebook page in August 2013 and as of mid-2014, have uploaded over 100 posts featuring information on distributions, local events, pictures and video updates. This includes a series of posts during the 2013 floods.
- The CRC malaria campaign was also featured on the RCx2 Facebook – linked to the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement Facebook page – with details of local branch malaria prevention activities and pictures.
- LRC has recently launched its new website and continues to cultivate the branch Facebook page where malaria activities are taking place. It includes information posts on emergencies and on malaria prevention activities from local branches. Support continues to be provided to LRC as they develop their online presence including the official Facebook page for the National Society.
- VNRC has also continued to post regular updates on their Facebook page, including information on malaria prevention and hygiene promotion.

- As outlined in their planning from the regional workshop, VNRC have simultaneously run an off-line campaign by including malaria prevention information in Viet Nam and elsewhere, as well as information on the disease in the Humanitarian Magazine.





Malaria prevention activities posted on the new Facebook pages of Quang Ngai chapter and Minh Long branch.

**Ly Phương Nguyễn**  
TNV CTD truyền thông nhóm với người dân huyện Minh Long về phòng chống bệnh sốt rét.

Ảnh: CTD tỉnh Quảng Ngãi.

Like · Comment · Share · March 18 at 3:56pm  
Sam Hang Tran, Dongthanh Tranchau, Meo Con and 3 others like this.

**Hội Chữ thập đỏ huyện Minh Long**  
March 18

người dân trong vùng có nguy cơ dịch sốt rét cao ở 2 xã Long Môn và Thanh An hãy mang màn đi tắm và ngủ màn thường xuyên

The top photograph shows three volunteers in white shirts and caps, one is kneeling and talking to a woman. The bottom photograph shows four volunteers in white shirts and caps standing outdoors, one is wearing a face mask.

## Impact

The changing communications landscape, and the rise of social media, has the potential to transform humanitarian operations. By learning and engaging with these platforms, National Societies can deliver integrated, sophisticated communications campaigns which reach more people, more quickly and more cost effectively. The investment in training of key staff has enabled the targeted National Societies to re-consider how they communicate with their key audiences on malaria prevention, how to shape their messages for particular communications mediums and how to create spaces in which staff, volunteers and communities can interact and share information. This has produced tangible results with campaigns already up and running and social media activity underway in all three countries. For example:

- **Cambodia:** 75 per cent of the participants from the training in Kampot branch successfully created a Facebook account and report a better understanding of the distinction between personal and professional social media accounts. Postings of information on the CRC Facebook account have greatly increased since the training with regular updates now appearing.

- **Laos:** The Lao Red Cross Facebook page was established and a steering group of LRC staff was appointed to regularly update the page with news, activities and photos. The Thai Red Cross continues to provide support remotely as required.
- **Viet Nam:** The number of participants with a Facebook page increased from three to 18 after the in-country training. Participants also indicated increased levels of confidence in using Facebook for both personal and professional purposes following the training.

This knowledge can impact future engagement strategies through training of trainers, with the end goal of developing a network of social media users with whom National Societies can engage not only on malaria prevention, but on a variety of community-based resilience projects. Working in tandem with traditional communications approaches, such as community meetings and door-to-door dissemination, this interaction with online communities has the power to dramatically expand the reach of National Society staff and volunteers.



## Lessons Learned

- **Integration:** By targeting communications and operational staff, the projects were able to combine on-the-ground knowledge of programmes with communications expertise. This worked effectively and should be considered as a blue-print for future trainings, as the project could be extended for disaster relief and recovery operations and for wider health initiatives. The campaigns have also demonstrated the ways in which communications techniques can be used to complement one another; with National Societies utilizing traditional and non-traditional communications techniques simultaneously and reaching out to people in a variety of ways.
- **Capacity Building:** While technology continues to transform humanitarian communications at a rapid rate, it is essential to consider the different starting point of each National Society in relation to the specific country context, the internet accessibility and the internal resources and capacities. By investing in tailored training and capacity building, this initiative was able to assist each National Society to identify their specific needs and the ways in which social media could be integrated into overall plans. The common key areas of concern also highlighted by all 3 of the National Societies included reputational risk, and 2-way communication with communities. These themes became large parts of the trainings as they are also critical to successful engagement on Facebook.
- **Challenges:** The rise of social media is something humanitarian organisations ignore at their peril. While it undoubtedly brings with it the danger of reputational risk, it can also provide the opportunity to increase and deepen our engagement with communities. The IFRC is working closely to ensure that National Societies are equipped with the knowledge needed to help navigate some of the obvious pitfalls and to embrace the unprecedented opportunities. The workshop and trainings have played a vital role in this and have helped to develop a skilled set of social media representatives from each National Society, as well as providing a forum by which colleagues from within the region can share their learning and examples of best practice. As the communications landscape is constantly evolving, so too should National Societies approach to social media. As such, future trainings which foster regional coordination and cooperation should continue to be encouraged.



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