

Community feedback on COVID-19: Fears of returnees from China, eating garlic and ginger to prevent COVID-19 and other misconceptions

This is a brief overview over community concerns that have come out from Risk Communication and Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) activities in Indonesia and Nepal. Key topics to address are fears and stigma against people who return from China, information on response measures and confusion about transmission and prevention of COVID-19. It is important to note that some of the community questions and concerns have been quite specific, i.e. individuals that are convinced that COVID-19 is transmitted through waterways, so it is key to tailor responsive action towards those specific gaps. Both National Societies do a variety of risk communication and CEA activities in addition to the two feedback collection examples highlighted in this report.

Indonesia

When the data was collected Indonesia still did not have any confirmed cases of COVID-19. However, it evacuated 238 Indonesian citizens from Wuhan, China to be quarantined for 14 days on Natuna Island. TV News that shared the increased number of deaths but no information about the symptoms and prevention of COVID-19 caused anxiety. The word 'isolation' further frightened people as the quarantine process was not clear to them. Because of this communication gap many people of Penagi communities fled to the outer islands (Midai, Subi, and Serasan), as they were worried about the proximity of the quarantine site to their home. Before the evacuated citizens arrived the Indonesian Red Cross Society (Palang Merah Indonesia – PMI) shared health information about COVID-19 and documented questions, concerns and misconceptions of Natuna locals between the 5th and 7th of February 2020. In total PMI collected 40 community interactions on Natuna island (28 women and 12 men).

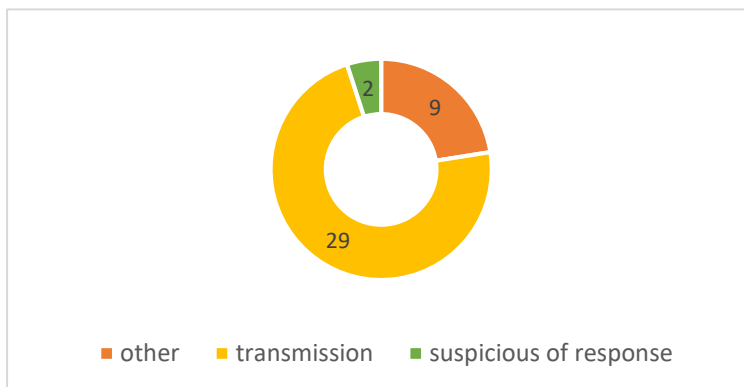


Figure 1 Community feedback by topic from Indonesia (n=40)

A lot of rumours spread through WhatsApp Groups, including misinformation about the use of masks, which resulted increasing prices and shortages.

The key confusion of people about transmission of COVID-19 was that community members thought the virus was air-borne or could spread through water ways (29 out of 40 responses).

While most concerns were about transmission, other feedback stands out for its potential impact, such as confusion and suspicions about security measures, i.e. individuals questioned the correct implementation of a safe zone around the quarantine location. If individuals don't understand security measures and therefore doubt that the response to COVID-19 keeps them safe, this can lead to erosion of trust and partnership which in turn makes people less likely to follow health advice.

Some individuals shared that they believed people who contract COVID-19 would die quickly. Additionally, some people believed that all the evacuees had already contracted the virus, thus heightening the risk to Natuna citizens.

Response:

In the process of documenting the concerns and misconceptions about COVID-19, PMI addressed all concerns with verified information such as, how COVID-19 is transmitted and information about the process of quarantine. Additionally, PMI distributed 15,300 masks and joined a local radio talk show (RRI) in Natuna as a guest speaker discussing the theme “Impact of Wuhan Observation for the Natuna Community”.

Nepal

At the time of feedback collection Nepal had only one confirmed patient with COVID-19 but evacuated 175 Nepali citizens from Wuhan, China. Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS) has been running their helpline since mid-2016. The hotline was set up during the earthquake operation and receives an average of 100 calls per month, at times more.

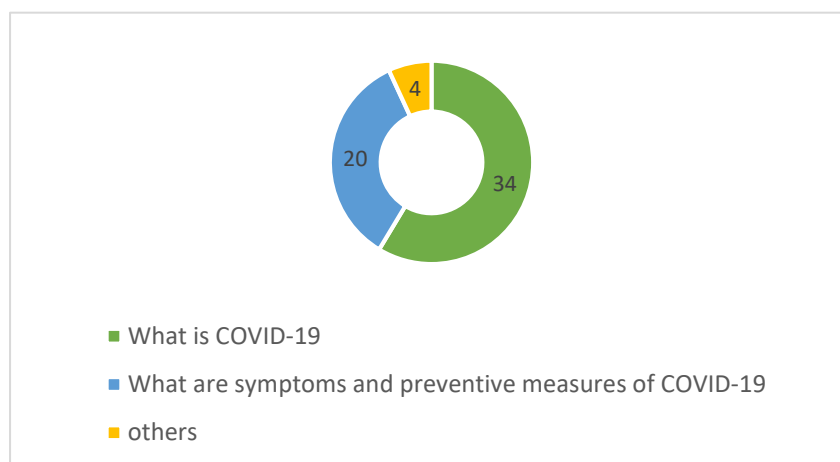


Figure 2 Community feedback collected by NRCS hotline (n=58)

The hotline received 58 calls relating to COVID-19 between 5th February 2020 and 26th February 2020 (12 women and 46 men).

Main questions were on what COVID-19 is, its symptoms and transmission. People also shared concern that students and others returning from Wuhan may already be infected with COVID-19.

Additionally, NRCS captured rumours through social and traditional media that eating garlic or ginger can help with preventing COVID-19. Another rumour documented was that because hand sanitizer with alcohol kills the virus, that drinking alcohol will do the same. This last rumour may come from humanitarian communication that hand sanitizer needs to contain alcohol and people accordingly misconnecting the dots on how alcohol. Additionally, some people shared that they thought all people travelling from China to Nepal were infected with COVID-19.

Response:

NRCS gives callers answers based on WHO information. Additionally, NRCS shared information on COVID-19 through their regular radio programme in five different episodes, which also advertised the hotline and has set up two health help desks at different community points around the quarantine area to answer questions. NRCS has a designated call in hour for COVID-19 during which health professionals are available to answer community questions. Collected rumours and misinformation are also shared with WHO and Unicef.

Resources: <https://www.communityengagementhub.org/what-we-do/novel-coronavirus/>

Contact: Viviane Lucia Fluck, regional CEA coordinator, IFRC, Asia Pacific, Viviane.fluck@ifrc.org