From managing misconceptions to building trust in Covid-19 vaccination

In 2020 when the outbreak of Coronavirus spread rapidly, Banke, a district in southwestern Nepal, became a hotspot for Covid-19. The district that adjoins the border of India had many Nepali migrant workers return home following the pandemic. The situation increased the risk of Covid-19 in the country and triggered fear and Covid misinformation faster than ever.

Sarif from Narainapur Rural Municipality, Banke, is one of many locals who believed that the Covid-19 vaccination was a hoax.

"We were terrified to hear about the first death case in our community. No one was allowed to go near, not even the family members. We didn't know what would happen to us back then," says Sarif.

In the initial days when the Covid cases skyrocketed in Nepal, the Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS) mobilized its volunteers to the entry points. The Red Cross volunteers were the first on the ground to set up a help desk, facilitate antigen testing for incoming migrants, and distribute hygiene kits in the quarantine, isolation sites, and households. With the increasing cases and Covid waves, the volunteers also helped in contact tracing, transporting infected people to the hospitals, disseminating Covid messages, and combating misinformation. In the later stage, when the Covid-19 vaccination rolled out, the NRCS, with the support of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) helped people access the vaccination information and services.

It took a lot of work for the volunteers to build public trust in the Covid-19 vaccination. Mostly in rural parts of Nepal, persuading people to get vaccinated was challenging.

Sarif's community was one of many communities where people hesitated to get vaccinated against Covid-19. The misinformation about adverse vaccine side effects caused people not to uptake Covid-19 vaccines.

Sarif says, "When the Covid-19 vaccination drive started in Nepal, it brought hope for all of us. But soon, we heard different rumors. There was a rumor that Covid-19 vaccination affects fertility, and the vaccines were a trial in low-income countries. It scared us, and we began to wonder if it was true. My family and I denied getting vaccinated."

Since the beginning of Covid-19, Nepal Red Cross volunteers have been actively disseminating messages on Covid-19 in the communities. When the volunteers knew about such rumors, they immediately visited the community where Sarif lives and approached locals with risk communication and community engagement activities.

The activities included public service announcements on Covid-19 messages, door-to-door visits for information dissemination on Covid-19 vaccination, and engaging communities in engagement activities.

"One day, a Red Cross volunteer visited my home and explained the common myths and misconceptions about the Covid-19 vaccination. I didn't believe her at first. But she kept revisiting us to share the importance of getting vaccinated," says Sarif.

"Later, she asked me to join her at the nearest health post. She took the Covid-19 vaccination before my eyes," he says, expressing disbelief. "The health staff also provided detailed information about the Covid-19 vaccines and encouraged me to get one. It gradually convinced me. I then took my first dose of Covid-19 vaccination that day."

A few days after, Sarif again visited the health post with his family members to get them vaccinated.

He says," When I didn't get any severe symptoms after vaccination, my trust in the vaccination increased. I took my family to get their first dose and persuaded my friends and neighbors to do the same."

"I am grateful to the Red Cross volunteers for busting our misconceptions. We now know that getting vaccinated means preventing the spread of Covid-19."

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Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy was challenging in Nepal. In rural areas, the hesitancy to get vaccinated impacted the efforts to curb transmission and vaccine uptake among marginalized and vulnerable people. In response to this, as part of the IFRC's global Covid Operation, the Nepal Red Cross Society implemented the Covid-19 preparedness and response operation focusing on Risk Communication, Community Engagement, and Accountability (RCCEA) with support from the USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance to build trust in vaccination across the country.

For the Covid Operation, Nepal mobilized more than 3,000 local red cross volunteers in the communities. It reached at least three million with Covid-19 awareness activities, including 400,000 people supported to access the Covid-19 vaccination.

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