

# COMMUNICATING WITH COMMUNITIES

## LESSONS FROM COMMUNITY-LED AWARENESS IN PNG

### Introduction

On March 20, 2020, Papua New Guinea (PNG) recorded its initial confirmed case of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), marking the onset of the pandemic in the country. Concurrently, authorities declared a state of emergency, resulting in the cessation of both international and domestic flights and imposing restrictions on inter-provincial travel. Additionally, the PNG government instituted the National Control Centre (NCC) to oversee targeted interventions in response to the crisis.



*Central branch volunteers meeting with community leader in Papa Lealea about their community-led Covid-19 awareness.*

In PNG's central province, the Papa Lealea community illustrated a strong commitment and understanding of community-led risk communication and community engagement fundamental practices. In recognising the particularly negative impact that lockdown was having upon his community, underpinned by significant misinformation and fearmongering on social media platforms, a local community leader, Alfonse, and the Papa Lealea population, responded to the need for alternative and better means for community engagement.

### Community engagement approach

A range of engagement methods and modalities were used across Papa Lealea. Alfonse took it upon himself to ensure there was clear community messaging and administered such through the church and the installation of a PA system. Adding to this, the community established a roadblock, run by volunteer shift workers, to ensure no one from outside of the town entered. There were also restrictions on community movement in and out of the area unless for medical purposes. "It seems harsh, but at the time, we needed strict measures – all we heard was about people dying". Local stakeholders, including a local gas company, quickly backed the efforts of the community and supported them with food rations and stipends to sustain volunteers. Alfonse explained, "They saw the initiative we had for keeping our community safe and wanted to chip in".

Collaborating closely with Provincial Health Authorities (PHA), Alfonse organised the distribution of IEC materials and ran face-to-face awareness campaigns across the community. “During those times it was necessary to have the right information to share back to the community,” he says. Despite stakeholder provision to conduct awareness campaigns - social media and misinformation continued to spread; “we try our best, but there were still reservations within the community”. Alfonse, with the support of the church committee, decided to connect an old speaker system up at the church to make morning awareness callouts. “It began with the key messages; ‘keep distance, air your homes, wash your hands’ and then we added information about vaccines and who was coming to do awareness in the market. We tried to stick to the facts from PHA and other stakeholders.”

Each morning, the church committee would do the morning reminders on COVID, and after church service on Sundays came a more extensive information session. After a while, it reduced to once-a-week announcements on a Sunday. Today, Alfonse understands that “covid is still around”, so they do reminders about it occasionally on their weekly ‘radio program’ where they continue to provide updates and other community announcements over the PA.

“People are used to it now, every Sunday after church we do the announcements for the week, it goes for 10 to 15 minutes”. They have a two-way dialogue with other groups as well, and they use the system for announcements, such as your youth fellowship, women's group, schools and in exchange “we use these groups for awareness campaigns too”. They don't have the resources to upgrade the system to cover the 3,000 individuals in the community, but when the weather is good, Alfonse feels confident 2/3rds of his community members can hear it.

## Lessons learned

Whilst the community leader tells the Red Cross they are grateful for the support from stakeholders like the PHA during such a complicated time – it wasn't enough. “They came out for a few visits, did some awareness in the open market, and gave us IEC materials, but there wasn't ever any training for me. I can't inform my community if I'm not informed”.



*The church where the PA system is situated (2 sides)*

Stakeholders such as the Institute of Medical Research, Provincial Health Authority, and NGOs like Childfund have all supported in facilitating vaccine days in the market or the community's 'resource centre' - a large multipurpose hall space. The community clinic, currently run by the Salvation Army -

stocks COVID-19 vaccines to this day. But the uptake hasn't been as strong as they would like because there are many questions that the community leaders can't answer about vaccines. That piece of the puzzle was and continues to be, missing.

**"IF IM NOT INFORMED – I CAN'T INFORM"**

*-COMMUNITY LEADER, PAPA LEALEA*

### Next steps

Alfonse advised he is not familiar with the PNGRCS and the work they do today. "Years ago, PNGRCS meant medical, blood donations, ambulances. That's what people think when you come into the community - you're here for medical. More awareness on PNGRCS programs needs to be done".

It was suggested that PNGRCS could support the community of Papa Lealea with some Community-based health and first aid (CBHFA) programs in 2024, as the community reports having a lot of younger people who need education on snake bite treatment and general hygiene.

In February 2024, PNGRCS volunteers attended the community to assist with the baseline survey, and received positive feedback from individuals about how the PA system, and the awareness campaigns, kept them well informed. For PNGRCS, the above case study and the feedback received from the community - shows us that sometimes the best modalities for assistance already exist within the community themselves.

### Contact information

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