

LOCAL PARTNERSHIP MATTERS

COVID-19 vaccine awareness in Madang Province.

This case study outlines the learnings and experiences in engaging communities during COVID-19 in Papua New Guinea.

Interview with Janet Philemon and Hagar Dagen, PNGRCS Madang branch, February 2024

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.

Unfortunately, many of these interventions did not make it to outer provinces. Vaccine uptake halted as community members quickly became too scared to attend the local hospitals to get vaccinated for fear of contracting the virus. In the north coast province of Madang, PNGRCS volunteers on the ground acted fast to ensure a localized response for their communities.



Madang Red Cross Branch Volunteers sorting Information Educational Communication (IEC) materials before going out to

Community engagement approach

From the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, it was evident to the Madang Branch that localised action was required. Collaborating closely with Provincial Health Authorities (PHA), PNGRC personnel and volunteers actively engaged in community outreach initiatives to promote COVID-19 vaccination awareness, distribute essential Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and facilitate the operation of vaccination clinics.

One significant instance of this was in Madang province, where the PNGRC branch has forged partnerships with the local PHA and the Country Women Association (CWA)



to launch a targeted COVID-19 vaccination campaign. Here, Red Cross volunteers encouraged local employers to participate in vaccination drives while also offering vital administrative support at the vaccination centre located at CWA premises, including the management of registration procedures and data entry tasks.

Janet Philmon PNGRCS national treasurer based in Madang tells us “Papua New Guinea was under lockdown and people were scared to go to the health facilities where they believed they would get infected. People were trying to stay away from those health facilities.” Despite this challenging condition, two local organizations chose to act quickly, collaborating on vaccine awareness and opening of a vaccination centre. Madan Country Women’s Association (CWA) and Papua New Guinea Red Cross Society (PNGRCS) Madang branch have been long-term partners and cooperating for decades to support women and children in Madang through community-based First aid activities and other community services. Both PNGRCS and CWA realized that people in Madang were afraid to go to the hospital to get vaccinated and they quickly decided to open the vaccination centre in the CWA premises, that are next door to a community health clinic. Firstly, they got an agreement with Provincial Health Authorities and provide vaccines and health professionals. Secondly, four PNGRCS volunteers were trained on how to register people vaccinated. Thirdly, Madang CWA provided a space at their office as the vaccination center and provided some refreshment. Lastly, PNGRCS treasurer prepared and provided COVID-19 and vaccine awareness sessions using IFRC COVID-19 awareness

and RCCE materials. Hagar added that “the decision was quickly made due to their existing trusted partnership and cooperation. Many volunteers were already trained in community-based first aid and easily learned how to register and mobile people for the vaccination.”

In June 2021, people who needed to be vaccinated due to their travels and workplace policy came to get vaccinated. Over 300 people were vaccinated within a month. However, after a few weeks of

steady vaccinations, stigma around the vaccine had begun to spread, and uptake for the vaccine quickly declined, and the collaborators had to close the vaccination centre.

This was a great collaboration, decision-making, and achievement by two local organizations to tackle this sensitive issue despite the potential risks.

Lessons learned

Vaccine hesitancy remains strong in the community population in Madang. **“Vaccine hesitancy was going to remain and many volunteers were not vaccinated - that was a significant impact on**

the CEA project implementation in those days and could be a risk factor and accountability issue for any community engagement “says the National Treasurer and Madang Branch volunteer, Janet PhilemonPhilemon

As of 26 November 2023, 540,970 doses have been administered and only 4 % of the total population vaccinated with a complete primary series of a COVID-19 vaccines. (COVID-19 vaccines | WHO COVID-19 dashboard) Many reports show that this is because of strong vaccine hesitancy due to disbelief of COVID-19 and its vaccine, worry about side effects, religious beliefs and access to health facility. In some areas, community health volunteers and aid posts were implemented early in the response, but these were discontinued due to vaccine hesitancy and a lack of willingness and funds of the provincial health office to support them.



Community Members attending the vaccination clinic in Madang.

Next steps

As we reflect on the PNG Endline survey from February 2024, we can still see signs of major distrust and disbelief in COVID-19 and its vaccine. On the other hand, a large number of people, including community leaders, school teachers, and parents - indicate a lack of information and a need for more awareness on COVID-19 as well as routine immunization

within their communities. PNGRCS has a major role to play in filling a gap and increasing community engagement to listen to the community and deliver good knowledge to improve their health and well-being.

PNGRCS will use their time in the field during this recent survey to assess the opportunities to work with communities on revised awareness of Covid-19 and tackle community wide vaccine hesitancy.

Contact information

For more information on our work in Papua New Guinea please contact: Maki Igarashi, head of country delegation, IFRC Papua New Guinea, maki.igarashi@ifrc.org

For more information on the content of this report please contact: Moh Yin Chang, PhD, Data Analyst consultant, IFRC Asia Pacific, mohyin.chang@ifrc.org