

Case study

Innovative concepts to communicate science

DURING COVID-19

Contributor
Mercy Corps

Country of implementation
Puerto Rico, United States of America

Start date of the initiative
February 2021

Track
From science to action

Target audience
General public

Website

<https://europe.mercycorps.org/en-gb/where-we-work/united-states>



Rumour Tracker Programme: A community based approach to address information gaps and misinformation on COVID-19

Summary of the initiative

An infodemic is the overabundance of information including false or misleading information that is spread by people in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion, impacts trust, has the potential to exacerbate tensions, and hinders behaviours that protect health. All of these undermine the public health response. Mercy Corps, in partnership with the Puerto Rico Public Health Trust, Ciencia Puerto Rico, Ciencia en tus Manos and Internews, had initiated a campaign to track rumours related to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The project aimed to map the local information ecosystem to identify information gaps and circulating mis- and disinformation to address them in a timely and targeted manner.

Mercy Corps collaborated with Internews to build a rumour tracker tool and conducted a social media mapping exercise with community leaders to identify relevant media outlets. Identified channels were closely monitored through social

media listening and rumours were logged on a spreadsheet. Additionally, Mercy Corps team conducted community listening through forms that could be filled by the participating community leaders and health promoters. Those with low digital literacy could also submit rumours through WhatsApp messages. Data collected was similarly logged in the spreadsheet. The Mercy Corps monitoring team met on a weekly basis to identify most common rumours that needed to be addressed. Besides social media scanning, the project team also engaged with community leaders to get a better understanding of the information needs of the local communities. Based on these insights, evidence-based messages tailored to the respective communities were developed, particularly on vaccination. Messages were shared and amplified through Mercy Corps and partner organizations' social media channels. Community leaders and health promoters would also share the content in their own networks.

In Puerto Rico, Mercy Corps worked with a local farmers association to provide food baskets with fresh produce and fish to families in the midst of COVID-19. The food baskets helped feed families as well as supported farmers and fisherfolk struggling to navigate restricted and limited access to markets to sell their goods.

Context and relevance of the project

Mercy Corps consists of a global team providing humanitarian support to affected communities during crises. When the first cases of COVID-19 were identified in Puerto Rico, the local team repurposed its efforts to form a COVID-19 information programme. Drawing on longstanding partnerships and networks, the team disseminated accurate and timely information on COVID-19, particularly to marginalized communities in remote locations. During the pandemic response, it realized that there was a significant need for reliable and tailored health information that could be instantly shared via multiple channels to maximize its reach. Further, a targeted and systematic infodemic management response was organized to monitor the circulating mis- and disinformation identified. To ensure a culturally appropriate intervention, Mercy Corps collaborated with 14 community leaders and health promotion specialists.

Summary of the analysis



Innovation factors

The Rumour Tracker Programme is innovative as it combines an off- and online assessment of communities' information needs. Social media channels were monitored to filter circulating mis- and disinformation and community members were consulted to understand the risk perception and concerns in the target population.

The initiative's messages were amplified as:

- the digitally savvy population was reached via social media channels, and
- in areas with low literacy and digital infrastructure the population was directly reached by community leaders and health promotion specialists.

Thus, the project could reach people in all age groups and with varying literacy levels in the community.

By involving the community leaders in the content development, the responsible team increased trust in the messages among the target audience and ensured the messages were relevant and culturally appropriate.

Focus group discussion with community leaders and health promoters that participated in the Rumour Tracker Programme, San Juan, 2021. Credit: Dennis Vázquez, Puerto Rico Public Health Trust.



Accuracy of scientific information

To ensure that the information provided was accurate, contextualized, and trustworthy, the team collaborated with the reliable local science-based organizations such as Puerto Rico Public Health Trust, Ciencia Puerto Rico and Ciencia en tus Manos. Most content were further fact-checked using trustworthy sources such as the World Health Organization, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and the Pan American Health Organization.

To provide access to additional resources, the team provided a hyperlink to conferences or campaigns for related issues on its social media channels. This enabled the reader to register for events of interest.



Impact on knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of the target audience

Social media analytics, as of June 2021, when project activities ended:

Mercy Corps Facebook page	27 978 visitors
Ciencia Puerto Rico Facebook page	252 000 visitors
Ciencia Puerto Rico Instagram account	140 000 followers
Ciencia Puerto Rico Twitter account	209 000 followers
Puerto Rico Public Health Trust Facebook page	6 226 visitors
Puerto Rico Public Health Trust Instagram account	1 000 followers
Puerto Rico Health Trust Twitter account	2 620 followers
Ciencia en Tus Manos Facebook page	17 967 visitors
Ciencia en Tus Manos Instagram account	2 626 followers
Ciencia en Tus Manos Twitter account	1 102 followers

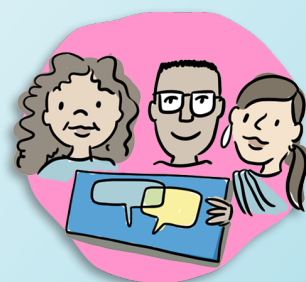
The program reached over 118 000 people through the following interventions:

- 2 trainings were organized for community leaders on identifying rumours and mis- and disinformation;
- 14 community leaders and health promoters conducted community sensitizations;
- 10 educational materials were shared in social media about vaccine efficacy and reasons for getting vaccinated;
- 2 community articles published on local newspapers;
- "Infodemic management" training was convened for journalists, journalism students and media professionals; and
- 1 080 rumours were detected and addressed.

The project team responded to most comments from audiences on the social media posts, establishing a two-way communication channel. Feedback was also collected from community leaders and health promoters on a weekly basis and questions were responded via WhatsApp.

Gender equality, equity and human rights considerations

The project was established by integrating a community participatory approach. It reached remote and hard-to-reach areas inhabited by marginalized communities. The team paid close attention to address gender-related needs of diverse groups of men and women. For instance, by conducting a rapid needs assessment to understand inequalities on access to trusted information on COVID-19. The community leaders that represent the population were further selected with diversity and inclusion in mind. The project considered special needs during its training by including sign language for audiences with hearing disabilities.



Limitations

The team faced challenges in collecting community feedback on their online form due to lower levels of digital literacy in the target population. They temporarily resolved this by introducing an option to submit rumours through voice messages.

On the social media listening side, the team put considerable effort to systematically collect and code qualitative data. Despite leveraging tools and processes to help automate some of the work, to be truly listening to the community meant human time to actually listen. To address the qualitative coding needs the team defined a simplified set of codes and streamlined a weekly report which made identifying narratives more accessible in real time.



Looking forward

The project ended in June 2021. The team produced a final report in Englishⁱ and Spanishⁱⁱ.

Other country teams of Mercy Corps are using this project template as a learning opportunity to replicate similar initiatives in their country contexts.

References

- i. Mercy Corps. July 2021. CAMPAIGN: INFÓRMATE, PROTÉGETE, VACÚNATE (https://www.cienciapr.org/sites/cienciapr.org/files/downloads/mercy_corps_english_puerto_rico_rumor_tracker_program2021july.pdf).
- ii. Mercy Corps. July 2021. CAMPAÑA: INFÓRMATE, PROTÉGETE, VACÚNATE (https://www.cienciapr.org/sites/cienciapr.org/files/downloads/copy_of_spanish_puerto_rico_rumor_bulletin_3.pdf).

Illustrations by Sam Bradd

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