COVID-19: Communication with Communities (CwC) Plan for Refugees in Uganda

1. Background and Operational Context

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19 as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. As of 4 April, COVID-19 has now spread to 207 countries including Uganda, with over 1,000,000 confirmed cases (including 48 cases in Uganda) and over 57,000 deaths globally.

In response to the outbreak in neighbouring countries, the Ministry of Health (MoH) of Uganda immediately activated a National Task Force and developed the Uganda COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan. On 19 March, the President of Uganda issued the first guidelines and preventive measures to contain the spread of Coronavirus in the country. These measures included immediate closure of all educational institutions, prohibition on mass public gatherings, closure of religious places of worship, scaling down the number of people attending weddings and funerals, and restriction on travelers arriving in the country. The measures were further tightened following the confirmation of the first COVID-19 case in Uganda on 20 March, including closure of all border entry points (air, water and land), ban on entry of travelers including asylum seekers, suspension of public transport and closure of all markets save for food vendors. On 31 March, the President announced the suspension of all private transport and closure of arcades, shopping malls, non-food stores, salons, and lodges until 14 April. The MoH is at the forefront of leading the COVID-19 response with the support of national and international health partners.

In view of the fast-developing situation and increase in the number of cases, it is important to engage with refugee communities to raise their awareness on preventive measures as advised by MoH. Various types of IEC materials have been developed MoH for public awareness and sensitization, and messages are widely disseminated through diverse channels such as TV, radio, newspapers, sms, and social media. However, for various reasons including the remoteness of refugee settlements, language barriers, lack of TV / radios or phones, specific needs of groups with mobility or communication challenges, limited phone network connectivity in settlements, etc, it is highly unlikely that messages on protective measures have reached all refugees across the country. Targeted measures for risk communication and community engagement vis-à-vis refugee communities are therefore crucial to ensure that reliable information is clearly communicated in ways that are accessible to the refugee community, in the absence of which rumours and misinformation will circulate thus misleading and heightening their exposure to risks of COVID-19. In our efforts for CwC, it is critical to use a wide range of communication channels to reach diverse groups within the community, including women, men, girls, boys, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, and minority groups, while being mindful of the need to adapt communication modalities in order to minimize exposure to risks.[1]

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[1] See also UNHCR, *Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) – COVID-19*, 17 March 2020: https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/wp-content/uploads/UNHCR-Risk-Communication-and-Community-Engagement-RCCE-COVID-19-2103202.pdf; Regional Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) Working

2. Purpose of Plan

This Plan is a roadmap for all partners that are operational in refugee hosting districts to activate their community engagement channels and support communication of messages related to COVID-19 to refugee communities who may not have the privilege of obtaining accurate information through mass media or other authentic sources, as well as communication of information related to service delivery in refugee settlements and other issues that are faced specifically by refugees.

This plan is to be implemented with immediate effect by OPM, UNHCR, and partners that are operational in refugee settlements and Kampala.

3. Objectives, Contents and Methods of Communication

3.1 Communication objectives

The objectives of the CwC initiatives / mechanisms envisaged in this Plan are as follows:
- Enhance community engagement through immediate activation of all community engagement channels
- Educate and sensitize refugees on adopting preventive measures to contain the spread of COVID-19;
- Inform refugees and other people of concern on where to access assistance in case of health or other types of emergencies
- Inform refugees of continuation of critical activities and modalities in preparation for and in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak in refugee settlements.
- Engaging with refugee communities on CwC strategies during the COVID-19 preparedness and response and beyond

3.2 Key Messages

All messages on preventive measures are annexed to this document. These messages have been developed by MoH with the support of WHO and UNICEF and are being translated in various languages including those spoken by refugees. In addition, UNHCR has developed a detailed Q&A document tailored for refugees, which addresses questions related to service delivery and issues affecting refugees' daily lives during this crisis. Partners are encouraged to further share these messages with communities through various communication

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Group, *COVID-19: How to include marginalized and vulnerable people in risk communication and community engagement*, 13 March 2020: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/COVID-19_CommunityEngagement_130320.pdf

channels that are listed below, as well as feed back to UNHCR on common types of questions that are raised by refugees so that they can be included when updating the Q&A document.

3.3 Methods and Stakeholders

The main methods / channels for communication that are being / planned to be used across the Uganda refugee response are as follows.

- Announcements through **public address system**, using motorcycles or vehicles with loudspeakers or megaphones, that drive around settlements broadcasting pre-recorded messages in various languages spoken by refugees (e.g. boda boda talk talk, drive through vehicles, etc).
- Awareness-raising through **community structures** who have been trained on key messages related to COVID-19 and can cascade messages in their communities. Such structures include Refugee Welfare Committees (RWC), Village Health Teams (VHT), protection social workers, Child Protection Committees (CPCs), Community Activists, WASH Committees, youth groups, peace clubs, teachers, etc. These include initiatives led by the community, such as RWC-led initiative to establish taskforces comprising of youth, CPCs and teachers for awareness-raising; dissemination of key messages using music recordings of key messages produced by refugee youth, etc.
- Inter-agency Feedback, Referral and Resolution Mechanism (FRRM) **toll-free helpline** and other hotlines, which refugees can call with queries / assistance requests and receive feedback. Since mid-March, the FRRM helpline has observed an increasingly upward trend in the number of calls and queries related to COVID-19.[2]
- Displaying **Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials** in various languages in key locations and disseminating them to community members.
- **Bulk SMS** in various languages spoken by refugees to all registered phone numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers, using functions available in the FRRM system
- Local / community **radios**, for both one-way (e.g. spot messages, radio jingles) and two-way communication (e.g. radio talk shows where callers can call in an ask questions)
- **VHTs conducting door-to-door surveillance** for COVID-19 and other diseases of outbreak potential on a daily basis and report to the health facilities.
- Other community mobilization methods, such as **door to door visits** by trained community facilitators supported by protection partners are also envisaged in some settlements.

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[2] A summary of trends of COVID-19 related queries / issues received on the FRRM helpline will be shared with partners to inform them in adapting their programmes and communication strategies as appropriate. In addition, work is underway to create a new COVID-19 interactive dashboard, which will allow partners, staff, government and researchers to monitor and track COVID-19 related call trends across the country in real time. The dashboard will provide a detailed breakdown of issues facing POCs by sector and location along age, gender and diversity lines.

- In **urban Kampala**, additional channels such as **social platforms (e.g. facebook page) and WhatsApp groups** can also be utilized. Refugees who have access to internet can also be referred to follow the MoH website on a regular basis.[3]

Please refer to the consolidated mapping of COVID-19 CwC initiatives for further details on the communication channels used, partners involved, contacts of focal points, and timelines for the respective settlements and Kampala.

The recently activated COVID-19 CwC Task Team will have the responsibility to ensure a coordinated approach to COVID-19 CwC activities in the overall Ugandan refugee response and establish linkages with the Risk Communication Sub-Working Group of the National Taskforce under MoH. At field level, OPM, UNHCR and partners will ensure coordination amongst all concerned stakeholders within the refugee response as well as with district authorities / taskforces.

Members of the COVID-19 CwC Task Team with expertise in working with specific groups (e.g. children, older persons, persons with disability, etc) will support the CwC Task Team to promote tailoring the format and/or content of messages to address needs of such groups, while ensuring that all messages are aligned to guidance from MoH.

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[3] https://www.health.go.ug/covid/document/the-dos-and-donts-on-coronavirus-disease-covid-19/