PUBLIC POLICY BLOG

The importance of messaging for COVID-19. What can we learn from messaging against Sorcery Accusation Related Violence?

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The recent announcement of the second positive case of Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Papua New Guinea (PNG) has no doubt raised concerns for many citizens. These concerns can easily turn into social disharmony and violence if not addressed appropriately. During times of crises, minimising fear and stopping stigmatisation of others is key to helping individuals, communities and government workers overcome crises.

Effective COVID-19 messaging for PNG

Drawing on some key findings from our four-year collaborative research project on how communities respond to fear relating to misfortune in selected PNG communities, we present six points that are relevant for COVID-19 messaging for PNG as the following:

- Health messaging should not just be based on scientific or biomedical explanations alone. It should be supplemented with messages based on Christian principles, appeals to shared principles of humanity, and if necessary reference to the law. In a place like PNG where stories are enhanced and shared, education/messaging about causes of sickness and death based on science alone are not sufficient to quell doubts about the root cause of harm and why it occurs and impacts some people and not others.

- Messages should be contextualised within local understandings of community and social interaction, as well as local constraints such as access to water and soap for handwashing. Specifically, in relation to COVID-19, the need for social distancing is a challenge to resilient local understandings of solidarity. It requires careful messaging that is translated into languages such as Tok Pisin, Motu and local vernacular where possible to engage with communities properly.

- Messages need to come from trusted authorities within particular communities. It is not sufficient to rely only on central government messaging or awareness. It is also important to have consistency of messaging across these different networks of trusted authorities. A well thought out, and if possible piloted, communication strategy that pays attention to these chains of messaging is key to delivering important and accurate information.

- Authorities and communities need to look out for, and actively counter, individuals who, for economic or political gain or other motivations, will seek to exploit community uncertainty and fears. We see people such as "glasman" or diviners stirring up trouble in relation to Sorcery Accusation Related Violence (SARV). Similar individuals could trigger

stigmatisation and violence in relation to COVID-19 as well and should have any claims to authority or special knowledge challenged as early as possible.

- One important message should be that communities that react to sickness and death through stigmatising others and engaging in violence do not make themselves safer, but actually put themselves more at risk. Such actions create ripples of impact that affect targeted individuals, their families, their kinship networks and eventually the entire community. It may set up cycles of revenge that may play out over generations. After the first person testing positive to COVID-19 in PNG was identified as a Caucasian expatriate, a considerable number of entries on Facebook pages such as "PNG News" reveal antagonism against "expatriates" in general, and renewed expressions of patriotism within PNG. Furthermore, it is well known that the virus originated from Wuhan, China. Messaging about COVID-19 must ensure that community reaction does not stigmatise groups of people who are also at risk, such as our expatriate community or other outsiders.

- A final critical message is that everyone has a role to play in stopping the spread of misinformation and fear. Unfortunately, fear flourishes where there is uncritical use of social media. This happens across a wide demography of social media users, both young and old and those who have more easy access to various social media platforms. Leadership is required by all sections of the community to encourage critical reflection upon any stories that seek to attribute blame to particular individuals for the spread of the virus or other misinformation.

Conclusion

Overall, our experience with SARV suggests that there is a risk that the health crisis posed by COVID-19 has the potential to precipitate economic and social crisis. This in turn may well involve violence, as people look to allocate blame and find protection in uncertain times by scapegoating others. Our experience with SARV shows that there are some communities that are more vulnerable at times of crises, it is important that authorities are cognizant of this and ensure that all vulnerable people are protected. The government and society at large needs to act fast to prevent the spread of fear that is a catalyst for violence and social unrest. Ensuring there are trusted sources of information about COVID-19 that are consistent, communicated by locally trusted authorities, and are locally relevant is a key priority.

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