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RESILIENT COMMUNITIES, STRONGER FUTURE

A Compendium of Case Studies on Effective Risk
Communication and Community Engagement
Among Vulnerable Communities

2023

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INTRODUCTION



UNICEF India and USAID successfully partnered to support the Government of India in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and continued with support till March 2021. The interventions implemented under the partnership covering Delhi, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh aimed to appropriately respond and mitigate the risks of extensive Stigma and Discrimination caused by COVID-19 through a comprehensive Risk Communications and Community Engagement (RCCE) Strategy supporting and supplementing the efforts made by the government at the national and state level.

USAID was amongst the first donors for UNICEF's RCCE response to COVID-19 and with the generous support to the tune of \$3.5 million, UNICEF India has managed to achieve some commendable results. The partnership led to the development of over 100 communication materials in 11 different languages focusing on the themes of COVID-19 Appropriate Behaviors (CAB) and 'stigma and discrimination'. In addition, under the partnership, the campaigns against stigma and discrimination had a reach of more than 150 million through messaging on social media platforms. The partnership also led to direct engagement with the most vulnerable communities and networks living in urban slums, and hard to reach rural areas. Under the partnership, the RCCE efforts played a crucial role in effectively delivering COVID-19 and vaccine-related information to more than a 100 million people.

This compendium of stories brings together a collection of successful case studies from different states of India. These stories are selected from both rural and urban settings, and they represent the work done at the grassroots by collaborative efforts of UNICEF and USAID under different subject areas.

FOREWORD



Sangita Patel
Director, Health Office (USAID/India)

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States (U.S.) government has been supporting the Indian government to respond with decisive action to save lives, mitigate the threat of dangerous new variants and protect the safety, and health of Indians, particularly the most vulnerable. During the pandemic, the vulnerabilities of tribal populations have been exacerbated; out of the districts identified by the Government of India with low vaccination coverage, half fall under tribal majority districts. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) partnered with the Government of India to support India's largest vaccination campaign to combat COVID-19, particularly reaching the most difficult areas to strengthen vaccine supply chain logistics, address misinformation and vaccine hesitancy, and train healthcare workers to deliver vaccines safely and effectively.

To end COVID-19 and vaccinate as many people as possible, USAID and UNICEF led a Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) coordination group on behalf of the Government of India. The RCCE work contributed to strategic efforts to reach over 100 million people with COVID-19 and vaccine-related messages, training over 500,000

Frontline Health Workers and youth influencers, and engaging 300,000 women in self-help groups as positive role models for increased adoption of COVID-19 appropriate behaviors (CAB). These best practices can serve future immunization strengthening efforts.

USAID, through UNICEF's RCCE work, has demonstrated great successes in partnership with state governments – in Jharkhand, tribal districts achieved 100% vaccine coverage; in Rajasthan, through folk art forms, communities got convinced about COVID-19 vaccination. Strategic engagement through theater and street plays, music, and local festivals helped tribal communities overcome their fears and misconceptions about the COVID-19 vaccine and confidently avail vaccine shots.

The partnership helped bring about systemic changes with government, private and institution-level collaborations that led to the setting up of a one-of-a-kind Center of Excellence in Communication for Social and Behavior Change seated in the Gujarat University – one of the oldest and largest public universities in India. UNICEF, with support from USAID, launched **Duur Se Namaste** (Greeting from a Distance), a 36-episode edutainment show broadcasted pro bono at a primetime slot on India's national television channel - Doordarshan, leveraging USD 570,000. The series supports the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) with its efforts to promote COVID-19 vaccination, CAB, and address mental health issues.

To cater to the anxiety of school-going children who spent a long time coping with online education, UNICEF developed an inspiring storybook focusing on hygiene, infection prevention and online safety. Another initiative in Uttar Pradesh provided psychosocial support and mental health counseling to students through an interactive voice response system. An e-learning platform helped adolescents cope with issues of menstrual health and hygiene. A remarkable community-based activity is helping create a more inclusive and level playing field at work for the transgender community in Rajasthan.

I congratulate UNICEF for documenting these inspiring narratives and for its efforts to reach the most disadvantaged and underserved groups. We are hopeful that these lessons and partnerships will be leveraged to improve broader public health systems in India and other countries. It is my hope that this collection of stories will be the first in a series demonstrating efforts in social and behavior change.

FOREWORD



Yasumasa Kimura
Representative, a.i. (UNICEF India)

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on our world, leaving in its wake social, economic and health implications that have affected societies across the globe.

In this challenging time, the Indian health system has been a beacon of hope and has shown remarkable resilience, exemplified by the government's commitment to launching the world's largest vaccination drive, which reached the last miles in all terrains, and to the most vulnerable.

UNICEF India's partnership with USAID proved instrumental in helping us navigate this unprecedented reality. As 'RCCE' - Risk Communication and Community Engagement - became the new buzzword, we recognized the critical role it played in any health program aimed at improving the well-being of people. Through our partnership, we were able to reimagine our communication interventions to reduce the spread and negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children, families, and communities.

Together, UNICEF India and USAID focused on identifying newer communication modalities for raising awareness, implementing behavioral change interventions, and strengthening the capacity of health systems to deliver critical information and services to those who needed them the most. We made concerted efforts to generate awareness and demand for COVID-19 vaccination among marginalized communities in India, with a focus on women and children. Our partnership supported the development of communication plans, capacity building of frontline workers and partnerships with civil society organizations to ensure effective community engagement and participation in RCCE promotion efforts.

Throughout these endeavors, 'equity' remained our driving force. Through diverse communication mediums, leveraging multiple community and digital platforms, the partnership's efforts across communities have been highly successful in shifting social norms and improving access to vaccines.

This compendium of case studies brings alive the impact of all this work. These pages will introduce you to resilient communities and champions who will demonstrate the power of community action in increasing demand for vaccination, promoting their own well-being and reaching the most marginalized with life-saving interventions, even during health emergencies like COVID-19.

These stories, from various parts of India, inspire us and provide valuable lessons for future endeavors. They reinforce that transformations in India can accelerate the world's achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

As you read through these inspiring accounts, we hope that they not only showcase the impact of our partnership, but also serve as a reminder of the power of community engagement and participation in improving health outcomes for all.

Together, we can continue to make a difference and strive towards a healthier, more resilient world.

HEALTHY AND SAFE BEHIND BARS

Healthcare and social inclusion

The spread of COVID-19 pandemic witnessed high incidence of cases and reports of deaths from prisons around the world. As prisoners lagged in terms of COVID-19 Appropriate Behaviors (CAB) and vaccination, it was realized that vaccination in prison settings has been highly dependent on vaccine delivery and reach. The following story establishes how vaccinating all those who live or work in a prison can help reduce cases and deaths as an efficient step towards controlling the ill effects of a pandemic.

01

A mix of urban and rural areas, Lohardaga district is situated in the southwestern part of the Indian state of Jharkhand. Spread in an area of 1,502 square kilometers, Lohardaga is known for its rich mines and minerals. The world class produce of Bauxite has given it the name of Bauxite Town in the country. With a population of 512,587, the district records literacy rates of about 68 per cent with a population growth of 26 per cent. Limited health resources and distance from the main cities throws many challenges at the population residing in the interiors of Lohardaga.

Health challenges and the pandemic

Lohardaga district has one District hospital, four Community Health Centres (CHCs), six Public Health Centres (PHCs) and 75 Sub Health Centres (SHCs). However, most villages in the district are hard to reach, especially the ones in two blocks of Peshrar and Kisko. These two blocks also have the greatest number of villages facing vaccine hesitancy and prevalence of myths and misconception related to COVID-19. Affected by left-wing extremism and conflict, these areas are far from normalcy, which also makes them hard to reach in terms of health facilities. The challenges increased with the spread of COVID-19 in between 2019-2021 as the health

workers struggled to ensure that vaccination and CAB awareness reached these areas and communities.



UNICEF/India/2022

The vaccination drive in Mandal Karagar started in May 2021 and has led to positive impact in terms of prisoners' health. During the second wave of pandemic 90% people were infected, however no loss of life has been recorded.

Pandemic control behind bar

The Mandal Karagar (district Jail) situated in the District Headquarters of Lohardaga has more than 350 prisoners who reside inside the Public Correction Facilities Centre. The Health Department realized that this facility was in serious need of CAB awareness as well as vaccination drives, as most prisoners were unaware of the grave impact of COVID-19 virus on the world. Hence, first an awareness campaign was conducted in the jail that facilitated the path for vaccine acceptance as well as following CAB. After which, the vaccination drive was organized in four different stages in a span of three months. This resulted in 100 per cent vaccination with 1st dose and around 20 per cent population covered for 2nd dose of COVID-19 vaccine.

“We faced no resistance or hesitancy towards the vaccine from all the jail mates. The ones who were not sure, checked with us about the information they wanted on the vaccine and easily agreed to get immunized after that,” said Subhash Kumar, Jail compounder, Mandal Karagar.

Transformation of a prison

At the time of the intervention, Mandal Karagar had 385 prisoners, among whom 170 had been fully vaccinated for COVID-19. The authorities were regularly raising COVID-19 awareness and registering names for vaccination, as new prisoners were constantly being added to the facility.

While the prisoners continued to live in vulnerable conditions, the number of cases reported went down remarkably. The vaccination of both prisoners and staff helped improve the health conditions and led to confidence amongst the prisoners as well as the staff at Mandal Karagar. Varun Kumar, the computer operator at the prison says, “All staff are vaccinated with both doses now and we are very comfortable. We also understand the importance of vaccination for all and the impact it has on our immune systems.”

The vaccination drive started in May 2021 and has led to a positive impact on prisoners’ health. 90 per cent people were infected during the second wave, but no loss of life has been recorded.

As India accelerates its vaccination drive, the Government of India has revealed that 165,108 prisoners across India have received their first dose of COVID-19 vaccine and the second dose is under progress. As per government records, 4,78,600 prisoners are housed in various jails across India. Mandal Karagar vaccination drive was supported jointly by UNICEF and USAID.

(Behavior Change Matters Vol.19)

MYTHS TO MILESTONES

Fighting superstition

Lack of awareness has been a major hindrance to COVID-19 vaccination in several rural parts of India. Factors like fears of change, superstition and myths have stopped people from openly understanding and accepting the idea of immunization in many conservative communities around the country. The following two stories witness how UNICEF with support of USAID worked with two such vulnerable communities in Jharkhand villages to eradicate vaccine hesitancy and leading to social behavior change.

02

Known for its ancient connection with the Hindu mythology, Gumla is one of the 24 districts in the Indian state of Jharkhand. The district has been an age-old meeting centre for people following an old barter system in the region where they exchange goods and livestock during fairs and gatherings. The name itself is derived from the word **Go-mela** literally meaning 'cow festival'. Due to geographical challenges, the local communities have to face many hurdles to avail the government facilities available in terms of health and medicine. The district has a total population of 972,228, more than 70 per cent of which is constituted of Scheduled Tribes (STs). Spread in an area of 5337 square kilometers, Gumla has a tropical climate with 944 inhabited villages and constant struggle for electricity and clean drinking water.

The power of native language

90 per cent of the Kodi village in Dumri Block of Gumla district has a tribal population who earn a living from agricultural labor jobs in the area. With low literacy rates, the village follows many superstitions, which are a hindrance to growth and awareness especially in difficult times like the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, when the frontline workers supported by UNICEF reached the village, it was realized that only 48 per cent of the population had been vaccinated with the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine. The rest did not agree to get vaccinated. The challenge was to eliminate superstition and myths from the minds of community members and convince them for

vaccination. The project coordinator, along with various frontline workers organized a meeting with the villagers and a local person was assigned the task of communicating the required messages in the local tribal language. Based on UNICEF's flip book, all doubts were cleared one by one and the villagers seemed convinced to accept the concept of immunization. Within a few days, a vaccination camp was organized in the village campus where 72 persons were vaccinated.

At the start of the intervention in Kodi village in December 2021, the health workers had a target of vaccinating 534 people in the area. Currently, 514 persons have received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccination, while 504 are vaccinated with both doses. 66 persons have also received their booster dose of COVID-19 vaccine.



Theatre leads to change of heart

Village Barwe Nagar in Gumla has a total population of 2272, out of which 70 per cent are Muslims, while 30 per cent belong to other communities. During the COVID-19 vaccination drive, the biggest challenge faced by frontline workers was the myths associated with the vaccine. Majority of the people believed that the vaccine leads to death, infertility and genetic disorders. Despite regular home to home visits by the ANM (Auxiliary Nursing Midwife) workers, people refused to come out for vaccination.

UNICEF discussed the matter with the local authorities and decided to organize a **Nukkad Naatak** (street play) to try delivering the message in a different form and tone to the villagers. Promotional announcements were made around the village for this in advance and influencers like the village head were also invited to watch the performance. Hundreds of people, including women and children gathered to watch the play

after which, there was a round of discussion for all. This helped people openly ask questions related to the vaccine which were answered by the frontline workers and supported by influencers. A few locals immediately opted for vaccination while others agreed gradually.

Tur Mohammed, Block Coordinator of UNICEF's local NGO partner **Lohardaga Gram Swarajya Sansthan** played an instrumental role in mobilizing the village communities. "I went from house to house with the health workers and spoke to everybody about the benefits of the vaccine. I told them that I was from their community too and all my family members and I have taken both doses of the vaccine. Gradually, everybody understood that they need to keep the rumors and myths aside, and focus on their health," he said.

100 per cent of the villagers in Barwe Nagar have received both doses of COVID-19 vaccine. People in both Kodi and Barwe Nagar village are aware of the vaccine benefits and COVID-19 Appropriate Behaviors (CAB).

(Behavior Change Matters Vol.19)



UNICEF/India/SyedAltafAhmad

A street play organized in Barwe Nagar village of Jharkhand led to 100% of the villagers getting both doses COVID-19 vaccine.

'DUUR SE NAMASTE': MIND THE GAP!

Awareness through entertainment

A 30-episode edutainment television series promotes good health practices during COVID-19, supported by UNICEF and USAID India in partnership with Doordarshan.

03



Television has emerged as one of the most trusted communication mediums in recent studies. Most audiences respond to and recall most of the messages they watch in specifically crafted Entertainment

Education (EE). Such inventions can be a powerful tool to engage people and generate behavior change, as the aim is to not only change the level of knowledge among viewers but also impact their attitudes, and eventually alter their practices.

Duur Se Namaste is produced by UNICEF with the EE principles of educating viewers while entertaining them. The show will be broadcast on Doordarshan, the national television network and will have an outreach component to facilitate wider reach and deeper engagement with the audiences. The initiative also has a strong monitoring and research component for impact assessment and learning for the sector.

Quirky characters, serious messages

Duur Se Namaste (greetings from a distance) is a show where a close-knit community comes together in the 'new normal' resulting from their experiences and lessons of COVID-19 pandemic. The 30-episode television series has been designed in a storytelling format with elements of humor, drama and comedy, and a host of memorable characters. As the story moves forward, the audiences will witness family feuds, turf wars, chilling ambition and a budding love story. While the male lead character Vishu is always ready to help others but is lost in his own life, Geet the female lead, dreams of success and



fame but finds herself caught between the old and the new. Vishu and Geet's love story faces some interesting twists and turns woven alongside serious COVID-19 communication messages that finally help the whole neighborhood find new meaning to their lives.

The show promotes the COVID-19 vaccine while dealing with reasons for vaccine hesitancy and the need for continuing COVID-19 Appropriate Behaviors (CAB). It also highlights issues of mental health among adults and ways to support children as they return to school. An interesting element in the show is COVID-19 virus itself, which plays the narrator and throws up many challenges at people, forcing them to confront who they really are!

Transforming lives through communication

Duur Se Namaste follows the everyday life of its characters, weaving in the messages on COVID-19 vaccination, CAB and navigating life in a changed world. It promotes vaccine eagerness, counter hesitancy and takes on the many myths around the vaccines. It also encourages ambassadors of the vaccine and CAB among viewers of the show to spread messages within their families and community.

The narrative moves forward with positive stories of vaccination and demonstrates how CAB has to be adopted in everyday situations taken from real life. It also empowers audiences with information on social protection schemes and other safeguards during the uncertain times brought on by the pandemic. There is focus on mental health challenges being faced by women and children due to the long nature of pandemic, isolation, and lesser space for social interactions. It also highlights the need for fortified nutrition, continuation of education, mental health support for children, especially girls and adolescents as they deal with COVID-19.

Duur Se Namaste aims at community outreach through UNICEF state offices and NGO partners, while building strong roots on social media and ensuring concurrent monitoring and baseline/endline assessments. The show will broadcast new episodes every Sunday at 11 am on DD National channel and YouTube, with repeat telecasts on Saturday at 6 pm.

Triggering the right conversations

UNICEF is a pioneer in the space of Entertainment Education in India, starting conversations on social norms surrounding women's rights and empowering through unique initiatives like **Jeena Isi Ka Naam Hai** (2008-11) and adolescent health with **Adha Full** (2016-18). While most interventions tackle existing norms, with **Duur Se Namaste**, UNICEF is bringing the focus on setting up new norms of behavior (CAB) and following new practices such as wearing face masks, handwashing/sanitizing and social distancing. The show also triggers conversations on closely held beliefs on education and nutrition, mental health, the value of girl child, among others.



Watch as the lives of a close-knit community are touched, changed and challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic; the pandemic that gives them a choice of stepping up to be heroes, or carrying on with their old ways and becoming side characters, or worse, villains!

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjaay oCANU4uXiZRXR oW aMw/featured>

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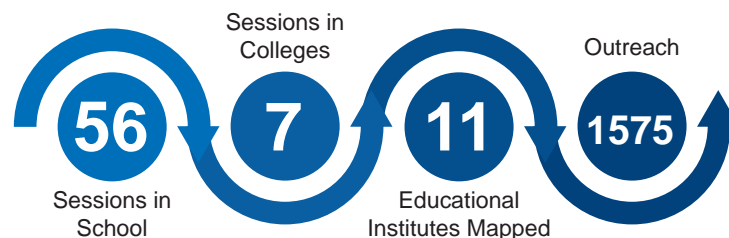
TAKING EXCELLENCE TO THE GRASSROOTS

Education for change

A look at UNICEF Gujarat's all-round interventions towards strengthening systemic capacity for SBCC in the state through Center of Excellence, with support from USAID.

04

Behavior change is not only about changing people, but it is also about changing the environment in which they are. UNICEF Gujarat has adopted an institution driven approach, collaborating with people and partners at individual, community and institutional level through community influencers, platforms and networks, academic institutions, faith-based organizations, industry associations, government agencies and private sector to amplify Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) interventions in the state. This has resulted in setting up one of a kind and the first, within the oldest and largest public university of India, Gujarat University's Centre for Development Communication under Department of Communication, Journalism, and Public Relations.



Center of Excellence in Communication for Social and Behavior Change (CoE-CSBC)

CoE-CSBC was set up with an objective of providing thought leadership for adapting different social behavior change models leading to system strengthening, capacity development, building social capital, strengthening community platforms

and mega- partnerships at large scale. It is the first of its kind academic hub that aided policy advocacy through evidence based behavioral research and supported capacity development in Government of Gujarat, civil society, and other community- based networks.

Through its journey from 2020 till now, the activities conducted by the Center have resulted in setup of key state level platforms for driving social and behavior change - State level civil society coalition (Gujarat Samajik Sangathan), Community Media Association (including Community Radio and Traditional/folk media), Tribal Youth Fellowship and CoE-CSBC is now becoming an independent institution as Institute for Social and Behavior Change (ISBCA).



Youth as change agents for SBC

Leveraging the immense potential of youth as agents of social and behavior change (SBC), several initiatives were undertaken offline in 2020, and subsequently in a hybrid mode to promote COVID-19 Appropriate Behaviors (CAB), COVID-19 Vaccination, reduce vaccine hesitancy, promoting mental health and extending psychosocial support to the communities at large. This resulted in creating several platforms and mass campaigns which were led by the youth and young influencers of Gujarat. Nearly 300 youths from Ahmedabad schools and colleges were inducted and empowered through the **Young Ambassadors Program**. Approximately 79 sessions were conducted with young people on COVID-19. They reached out to 1,690 adolescents and overall, 129 young ambassadors were registered to curb the adverse effects of COVID-19.

The success of the **Young Ambassador program** led to many impactful campaigns and creating state level engaging platforms. Tailor-made social

media strategy and communication campaign aimed at developing a community-based model to meet the basic needs at the time of lockdown was designed. This led to establishing state level interactive collaboration platform **Gujarat Youth Forum**, which leveraged the power of youth influencers of Gujarat in advocating CAB and COVID-19 vaccine. A state level campaign called Gujarat Na Karamveer (hardworking hero of Gujarat) was launched to create a mass movement in the fight against COVID-19. Over 10,000 youth volunteers were trained in CAB, CAB+, which then disseminated the messages at community level. For inclusive SBC programming, CoE-CSBC pioneered the launch of Tribal Youth Fellowship in 2021 to train young tribal youth in promoting CAB+ and vaccines among their communities and empower them to facilitate government schemes and flagships.

CoE-CSBC enhanced the capacities of all the departments through the design, development and dissemination of key risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) messages in Gujarat. 500 leaders of dairy cooperatives reaching to 2 lakh audience, 8 lakh SHG and 16,000 PRI members, 2 lakh ICDS and health



UNICEF/UN0379949/Panjwani

Gujarat's youth rose to the occasion, with 300 young ambassadors leading the charge on COVID-19 safety, vaccination and psychosocial support.

functionaries, 40,000 ASHA and Anganwadi functionaries and 10 faith-based organizations were trained and engaged in CAB, CAB+ communication.

Urban Micro-planning through COVID-19 Resource Centers

In 78 out of targeted 80 informal residential settlements in Ahmedabad (nearly 12,000 households with 60,000 people), micro-planning exercises were undertaken by local committees to develop COVID-19 response micro-plans. COVID-19 Resource Centers were established to provide support on mental health, nutrition and institutional reopening.

COVID-19 Vijay Rath

Five outdoor publicity vehicles travelled across all 33 districts of Gujarat for 44 days with more than 400 song and drama division artists of Press Information Bureau/Regional Outreach Bureau (PIB/ROB) reaching out to the public with key behavioral messages in folk art forms. These vehicles termed as 'COVID-19 Vijay Rath' covered approximately 8000 kms, more than 21 districts, travelled to more than 720 villages/towns, performing no less than 600 folk arts and reached out to 7.9 lakh audiences.

Intensifying voices through community radio

Community radio channels were mobilized to spread COVID-19 messages through various creative campaigns. Over 21 lakh people including children, women, migrant workers, fisher folk community, slum dwellers, saltpan workers and members from the minority communities, spread across 900 villages of 10 blocks in Kutch district of Gujarat were reached out through innovative programs like **Patipen** (slate and pencil), **Tu Jiyro**

Ai (to be alive), **VijayRath** (victory cart) and **Bhag Corona Bhag** (run corona run).

Gujarat's traditional and folk media art forms

230 traditional and folk media artists groups were trained to build community awareness and engagement on health, nutrition, and education issues along with COVID-19 communication. 40 traditional and folk media artists intensively engaged and went to four districts to advocate adoption of CAB and COVID-19 vaccination through 60 performances, reaching out to 41 villages of Gujarat. The cohort of 230 organizations would work closely with communities in generating insights for designing behavior change interventions in key health and wellness and nutrition programs.

SBC interventions in Gujarat are scaling up to now support the global agenda of using behavioral insights for effective programming. As the first step towards this, CoE-CSBC is now being envisioned as an independent institution – Institute for Social and Behavior Change (ISBCA). This will be an institute of eminence in SBC established in Gujarat. The Government of Gujarat entered partnership with UNICEF during pre-Vibrant Gujarat summit events on 5th January 2022 to establish this institute in partnership with Gujarat University. ISBCA will promote and apply behavioral insights within policy, and programs. It aims to use its behavioral insights capability as a communication, policy and research tool to improve policy and program outcomes through a better understanding of human behavior.

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AWARENESS THROUGH THE LIGHT OF FESTIVALS

Faith and culture

Religious leaders and faith communities have played a major role in saving lives and reducing illness related to COVID-19. It has been observed that during religious gatherings and festivals, volunteers who work along with faith actors have been able to reach the communities with a practical, science-based approach that helped build public trust. In the last two years, various districts of Chhattisgarh state in India have created their volunteer networks with the support of UNICEF, with the objective to address the challenges of COVID-19, ensure COVID-19 Appropriate Behaviors (CAB), encourage vaccination and overall help the district administration in improving its socio-economic indicators. In the following case studies, we witness the role of volunteers that has been indispensable in containing the spread of COVID-19 with equitable and meaningful inclusion of faith and religious beliefs.

05

Reaching the masses through fairs and pilgrimage

The small town of Rajim in Chhattisgarh has been a holy pilgrimage site for Hindus for centuries. Located on the banks of the Mahanadi River, it is renowned for a rich historical past and its varied cultural heritage. The **Rajim Lochan Mahotsav** is the biggest spiritual event of the region and attracts many visitors. The 15-day-long fair witnesses tourists in large numbers, not only from within the state but from across the country and world.

With the support from the Department of Health and Family Welfare, Chhattisgarh Government, '**Ruko Au Tuko**' (stop and tell) volunteers were given the responsibility to ensure that CAB was followed at the fair. Around 100 volunteers were divided in groups of five and each group was given a dedicated task to implement. The volunteers were extensively trained on the complete knowledge of the fair and different tasks that they



UNICEF/India/2022

100 volunteers covered around 4,000 persons directly each day at the 15-day long Rajim festival in Chhattisgarh.

had to achieve such as CAB, COVID-19 vaccination and the desired Social and Behavior Change (SBC). Volunteers then educated people about the same. Approximately 10,000 people visited the fair every day and one volunteer reached out to around 40 people directly; thereby the team of 100 volunteers covered around 4,000 people each day. The direct reach of the volunteers across the 15 days of the fair was 60,000 people, who were advised to further educate people in their families and communities. If each person further spoke to at least five people in their family and friends, the tentative reach is expected to be approximately 3,00,000 people.



The **Ruko Au Tuko** program started in Raipur with around 600 volunteers and today it is operational across 22 districts of the state. Thousands of volunteers are working towards effective observation of CAB, COVID-19 vaccination and mental health awareness.

Building the connect through deities

Navaratri (lit. the nine nights) is a biannual Hindu festival that spans over nine nights and ten days. It is observed and celebrated differently in various parts of the Hindu Indian cultural sphere. With various customs and rituals surrounding **Navaratri** in Chhattisgarh, the onset of the festival is a special time for its people, symbolizing the state being the melting pot of various cultures.

To create awareness towards COVID-19 vaccination and to educate people on the need for it, the **Ruko Au Tuko** volunteers dressed up as different avatars of Goddess **Durga** (a major deity in Hinduism) and communicated the message of COVID-19 vaccination in line with the festival. They spoke to people at their homes, in public offices, gatherings and event venues such as fairs to ensure maximum reach. Dressed up volunteers performed various songs, dances and skits to attract crowds and made sure that required messages reached people in the most engaging of ways.

As a result of this campaign, it was observed that people's curiosity towards vaccination increased and their myths reduced. Dressed up as goddesses, the volunteers helped people connect with the messages and those who had taken both doses, felt proud of their action. They not only spoke about the advantages of vaccination, but also helped convince their fellow residents to get the same.

Over 10,000 people were reached out to by volunteers, with the rightful information on vaccination.

A promise of protection

The festival of **Rakshabandhan** (the bond of protection) rests on the belief that siblings should take care of each other and protect each other against any harm. They assure this through a vow of sorts by the sister tying a **Rakhi** (a colorful thread) on the brothers' wrist and the brother gives a gift to the sister. Understanding the core ideology of the festival, **Baapi** volunteers of Dantewada district in Chhattisgarh connected the festival with the evils of malnutrition and COVID-19. They spoke to their community and educated them on how ensuring their families' health is the biggest gift one can give and protecting them against the evils of malnutrition and COVID-19 is the need of the hour.

Baapi Na Uwat is a volunteering initiative in Dantewada district, which focuses on the traditional knowledge and influence of the village elderly. Grandmothers are the key volunteers in this program, who primarily focus on mother and child health by working on behavior change. Around 250 grandmothers are working selflessly to motivate people towards rightful nutrition, health and immunization.

District Administration, UNICEF India and Baapi volunteers came together to celebrate the festival in the most unique way possible. Anganwadi Centres (Integrated Child Development Service Centres), Community Halls and Nutrition Centres in the area were the hub of festivities. Malnourished children of the district were invited to these centres and were gifted with '**Poshan Tokri**' (nutrition basket), a wholesome hamper with nutritious food and all the required information to curb malnutrition. Message of CAB and encouragement towards COVID-19 vaccination were also key components of the festival.

Creating an ambience of awareness

On **Guru Purnima**, a festival celebrated to honor spiritual teachers, District Administration requested the citizens of Jagdalpur to contribute left over lamps from previously celebrated festivals. **Yuvoday** volunteers, Ambassadors of Cleanliness and Hygiene and people of the city came together to light 51,000 lamps to symbolize their pledge in keeping their city and environment clean.

Yuvoday literally translated as 'Rise of Youth', is a volunteering initiative in Bastar and Kondagaon districts which aims to bridge the gap between administration and citizens by creating an army of volunteers who have a drive to contribute towards the development of their community. Around 10,000 volunteers work across 10 social sector

areas including COVID-19. In one year, **Yuvoday** volunteers have assisted 2,00,000 people for COVID-19 vaccination and distributed 1200 books to children in need during the pandemic.

Clearly, with the right communication and message delivery, the volunteers working along with faith actors and religious activities have helped ease the community struggle to overcome the virus and acted as a support system in the COVID-19 pandemic response. Several interventions that were initiated in April 2021 are still ongoing and volunteers continue to contribute and participate in COVID-19 awareness and disease prevention programs across the state.

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People of Jagdalpur city came together to light 51,000 lamps to symbolize their pledge in keeping the city clean.

FOLK TUNES BIND COMMUNITIES AGAINST COVID-19

Music for change

Folk music has been the soul of Rajasthani culture for centuries. Each region here has its own form of traditional entertainment, storytelling and engagement with the surrounding communities. In Jaisalmer, the largest district of Rajasthan, traditional music has helped play a bridge between COVID-19 awareness campaigns and the local population. A mid-media campaign with the local Manganiyar folk artists has led to better understanding of COVID-19 Appropriate Behaviors (CAB) and vaccination process.

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UNICEF, in consultation with the government and partners, identified the lowest vaccine coverage areas in the district. Two blocks Sum and Jaisalmer were selected after analyzing the vaccination records and awareness programs were conducted in 16 Gram Panchayats here in October. The program was extended to six more panchayats in the last week of December and over 5,000 people participated in them. The two selected blocks of the district resulted in a 50 per cent population getting their first dose of the

vaccination in August 2021. By the end of December, this went up to a remarkable 90 per cent.

Jaisalmer district lies in the Thar Desert, which straddles the border with Pakistan. It is the largest district of the state and the third largest in India. Despite being far-flung and least populated in the state, it is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Rajasthan. As of January 2022, Jaisalmer district has recorded a total of over 13,000 COVID-19 cases.



A group of nearly 50 musicians were trained by UNICEF and partners. The awareness programs recorded a participation of over 5,000 people in Jaisalmer district, Rajasthan.

The Manganiyars are a clan of hereditary folk musicians popular in the Thar region. A group of nearly 50 musicians were trained by UNICEF and partners in a week-long workshop. “We gave them the script and messaging on CAB, CAB+, importance of both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, vaccination of pregnant women and myths vs. facts. They wrote the songs in the local dialect,” says Zameer Anwar, a UNICEF consultant. In all, there were eight groups of six performers, trained and ready to spread awareness in the community. Folk artist Dayam Khan says a day ahead of each program the group would visit the villages to make announcements to invite people for the program. “Men and women came to these programs; we told them about the COVID-19 vaccine through songs and encouraged them to vaccinate. Many of these people, including pregnant and lactating mothers, took the vaccine. All the hard work of going house to house in remote areas has paid off,” he says.

Manjaree Pant, UNICEF Social and Behavior Change (SBC) Specialist, Rajasthan, says that one

of the key challenges was the low vaccination rate amongst women, especially pregnant, breastfeeding and newlywed. Despite new directives, the communities were apprehensive and fearful. It was critical to break myths and instill confidence and trust and the folk form was very effective in doing this. Interactive delivery methods were used during the program, which concluded with collective oath taking to practice CAB and vaccination. Follow up by the **Panchayati Raj** Institutes (PRIs) and health workers helped ensure participation of the left out and drop out communities.

Another challenge was ensuring that the songs were inclusive. “Folk forms tend to glorify social norms which may not be pro-women and inadvertently send out messages which may not be rights centric. While orienting the folk musicians, we spent a lot of time discussing the rights perspective. We went through the songs they wrote. It was important to weave out not just gender-based biases but even community-based biases,” says Manjaree.



While orienting the folk musicians, UNICEF staff and partners made sure that there was no gender or community-based biases in the folk songs prepared for the program.

This intervention was supported by funds from USAID. The campaign was flagged off by the District Collector and special effort was made to reach out to the communities who reside in remote areas. COVID-19 awareness programs were conducted at Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) work sites. Vaccination camps were also organized at convenient locations to make it accessible for remote communities.

Local influencers such as the **Gram Pradhan**, Ward Panch, teachers, faith leaders, frontline workers and women Self Help Groups (SHGs) actively participated in the campaign. Similar mid-media campaigns using

folk media were also organized in Barmer, Sirohi and Dungarpur districts. By the end of December 2021, the folk campaign went to four districts, 16 Blocks and 160-gram panchayats with a total of 166 shows, reaching over 888,850 people.

(Published in Behavior Change Matters Vol.11)

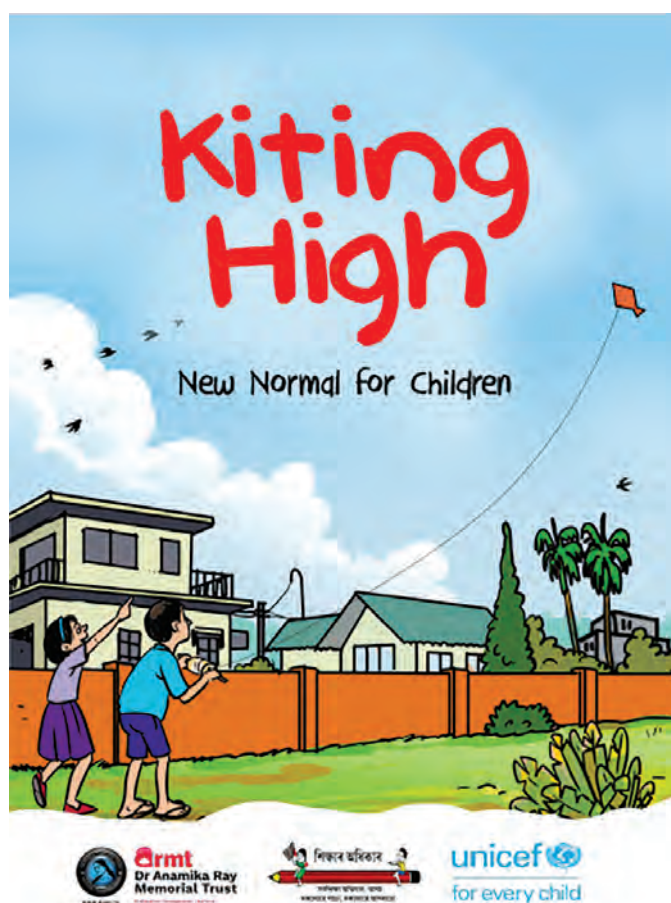


A STORYBOOK THAT HELPS CHILDREN COPE WITH COVID-19

Storytelling and education

As schools reopen in India, an inspiring new story book 'Kiting High – New Normal for Children' developed by UNICEF office in Assam in collaboration with Dr. Anamika Ray Memorial Trust (ARMT) is helping children understand COVID-19 and cope with it. Partnership with the state education program Samagra Siksha has ensured wide dissemination to schools and teachers across the state.

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Gitali Kakati, SBCC Consultant, UNICEF Assam and Dr Ankuran Dutta, Managing Trustee ARMT, share how the book was created.

When did the idea for the book emerge?

Gitali Kakati: The idea first came around mid 2020, at the peak of COVID-19, when we were discussing development of risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) materials to raise awareness among children and the community. We wanted to create a book that is intriguing and stimulating for children that delivers key messages on COVID-19 and COVID-19 Appropriate Behaviors (CAB) in the form of a story. We decided to partner with ARMT as they have a young and diverse team of journalists, academicians, and illustrators. Our brief to them was that the information must be simple so that it is easy to understand.

How was the story developed?

Dr Ankuran Dutta: We adopted the model of 'community learning program' developed by the Commonwealth of Learning. This model is based on formative research. A message matrix is developed with four parameters: bad behaviors – its consequences; good behaviors – its benefits.

Interviews and focused groups discussion were done with 40 children in several rural, urban, and remote locations. During our research, we tried to gauge children's understanding of CAB. Interestingly, children knew more about COVID-19 than young people. They had a vague idea of bacteria and virus, some terms were difficult for them to understand, but they were maintaining excellent hygiene. Based on this, we developed the story and its two protagonists. It was important to include both rural and urban contexts. Parents, grandparents, health workers and teachers, are included in the story, apart from children of course.

Since students were exposed to the online medium throughout the pandemic, online safety has been touched upon. Addressing COVID-19 related stigma has also been discussed. We tried to keep the language simple without any technical jargon. The book was developed in Assamese and translated into English. Given that illustrations are vital to children's books, great care was taken to ensure that visuals communicate right messaging and include different contexts.

How has the book been disseminated?

Gitali Kakati: Collaboration with state education program Samagra Siksha has ensured that the book has been widely disseminated across the state. It has been distributed to their district officials through WhatsApp for further dissemination to over 4,000 secondary schools in the state. A one-day virtual orientation was conducted for the district

officials of Samagra Siksha on using the book. It has also been disseminated in over 100 tea gardens in Assam through our partner organizations. Over 300 teachers at the tea garden schools, 270 community members and 5,500 adolescents of tea gardens have been reached through this initiative. Feedback from teachers and children has been positive. In fact, we have received a request from tea gardens for a translation in Sadri, the local language.

According to a recent UNICEF rapid assessment of learning during school closures conducted in six states including Assam, on a typical day, 97 per cent of students spend three to four hours studying and learning. WhatsApp is reported to be the most used mode for remote learning, followed by textbooks. Beyond learning shortfalls, school closures have affected students' mental health. Interviews suggest that social isolation, disruption to learning and family's financial insecurity are key reasons for poor mental well-being. In this regard, initiatives such as this fill in a much-needed gap.

(Published in Behavior Change Matters Vol.8)

MOBILIZING DRIVERS TO PROTECT COMMUNITIES AGAINST COVID-19

Community mobilization

“I don’t usually wear the personal protective equipment (PPE) kit as it is uncomfortable. The doctors in the ambulance drivers’ training made me realize it is my responsibility to prevent spreading infection to others, so I will do so from now on,” said ambulance driver Muniyappa from Bengaluru of Karnataka State in south India. Dozens of drivers like Muniyappa have attended COVID-19 awareness sessions organized by UNICEF’s partner NGO Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM).

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An ambulance driver leaves to pick up a patient in Naroda, Gujarat.

When the second wave of COVID-19 hit India in April 2021, ambulance drivers say they spent the night waiting in the ambulance with COVID-19 patients on oxygen support until they were allotted a bed in a designated hospital. As frontline workers (FLWs), the drivers are vulnerable to infection on duty unless they are provided protective kits and comply with COVID-19 health protocols.

To address this issue, UNICEF engaged the union of ambulance drivers in comprehensive training. Sessions included the role of front-line workers in COVID-19 response, prioritizing patients for transport and most importantly, safe transfer of patients following appropriate precautions as well as the importance of the vaccine and how it works.

and emphasizing the role of COVID-19 appropriate behaviors in protecting livelihood. According to Dr. Gowthami of SVYM, a single taxi driver has since mobilized 30 young people to join community engagement activities. To ensure the community has access to the vaccine, camp hours have been adjusted to serve until late night, with the registration process supported by community mobilizes.

In Bengaluru, UNICEF efforts have contributed to vaccinating 16,000 people from most at risk and marginalized groups between July and September 2021, while 9,000 households participated in surveys.

(Published in Behavior Change Matters Vol.7)

WHEN AGE IS NO BARRIER

Elderly care

How volunteers motivate an 85-year-old man for vaccination:

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I am Buvnesh Bakde, resident of village council Pusal, Chhattisgarh. I grew up studying at the local school and playing in the streets of this village. Having spent all my childhood here, this village is my home and its people, my family. I have always wanted to contribute to the growth of my village. For the past four months, I have been working as a volunteer with the Yuvodaya program. I feel that Yuvodaya is a platform that provides great opportunities for the youth. Under the support and guidance of Yuvodaya, we can accomplish many difficult tasks with ease. The village boys feel confident that they can come forward and bring about a change.

These days the villagers are living in fear due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As volunteers, we have motivated about 400 people to get vaccinated till now. Although it has been very challenging to convince people to come forward for the vaccination process. Due to lack of information, the villagers clearly refused to get vaccinated. They would say that they have never let any syringe or injection enter their bodies and they would like to keep it the same way in future.

I feel that my love for the villagers keeps me motivated to do something for them every time there is a challenging situation. So let me share an incident with you. This is about an 85-year-old man



UNICEF/UN0517046/Panjwani

Yuvodaya youth volunteer ferries an 85-year-old man to a vaccination centre

who had no one to look after him. When we went to his house, we realized that he could barely walk. However, when we informed him about the vaccine and how it shall help us fight the virus, he immediately agreed to join us for vaccination. We took him to the vaccination centre on our vehicle and dropped him back after he was given the vaccine. He seemed very happy after the whole process and I kept visiting him to see if he was back to his usual health once the post-vaccination fever subsided. It was indeed a very satisfying experience for me.

Being a part of Yuvodaya has been a great learning experience for me. I would like to thank Yuvodaya, UNICEF and the district Administration for this.

(Published in RCCE Bulletin June'21)

MUSKURAYEGA INDIA: SMILES IN ADVERSITY

Mental Health

With masked faces in every corner of the world, a smile became the rarest expression during the COVID-19 pandemic. Humans connect between individuals was lost as they were faced with new realities like restricted movement, physical distancing, isolation and financial challenges. As an aftermath of 2020, there has been about 35 per cent rise in depression and around 36.4 per cent rise in anxiety disorders registered in India during the pandemic. However, a new initiative called **Muskurayega India (India shall smile)** in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh has given many people a reason to smile, despite loneliness and the challenging circumstances.

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UNICEF/India/2021

MI initiative has provided psycho-social aid to over 5500 persons including students, through its telecalling (IVRS) system.



Muskurayega India Counseling: Filling the gap

With a population of over 200 million, Uttar Pradesh is the most populated state in India as well as the most populous country subdivision in the world. The National Mental Health Survey 2015-16 revealed high mental morbidity and an alarming treatment gap in the state. During COVID-19, the need for mental health interventions further increased. Started in April 2020 by the National Service Scheme (NSS) Uttar Pradesh and UNICEF, **Muskurayega India** (MI) is a unique, one-of-its-kind largest team intervention in the field of mental health awareness that offers psycho-social support and counseling to the students as well as general public.

Today, over 120 active, committed and specially trained university teachers of NSS Uttar Pradesh are contributing as **Muskurayega India** counselors in different districts of the state. MI counselors are currently present in 36 universities across 69 districts of Uttar Pradesh. Till date, it has provided psychosocial aid to over 5500 persons, through its telecalling (IVRS) system.

Changing lives via telephone

Psychosocial support over telephone is a specialized area and a series of training webinars were organized with specialists drawn from Public Health

Foundation of India (PHFI) and National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS). A total of 28 webinars and technical sessions run over 50 hours have been organized for the MI counselors. All this aimed at catalyzing a bigger change and helping people reach out to the correct platforms for psycho-social support during crisis.

In the past two years, UNICEF has witnessed many positive stories of resilience which validate the significance of such an intervention. Most of the cases were mild in nature and were related to academics and career amongst college students. Several women faced domestic issues while financial strain and unemployment were the biggest challenges among men. MI counseling service reached out to the general population across the state and contributed to managing the issues at an early stage.

Dr. Rashmi Soni, **Muskurayega India** core group member and NSS coordinator narrates, "A 24-year-old girl Renuka (name changed), holding a very respectable degree from a renowned institute of India came to me for counseling with her parents. I was briefed that Renuka is undergoing psychiatric treatment and since last one and half years she has been taking medication. She was diagnosed with OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) by the psychiatrist. Through an initial counseling interview, we were able to identify her anxiety about her career and that was triggering lack of confidence and mood swings and aggression. After only three to four sessions with her and applying some effective NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming) the girl was back to her

normal routine. At present her medicines are being reduced and she is successfully pursuing her career”.

Dr. Poonam Tewari, a **Muskurayega India** counselor at Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar University, Agra, also came across cases that were looking for a ray of hope which they eventually found at the MI centre. “21-year-old undergraduate student Kishore (name changed), pursuing Law from Aligarh reached out to me, sharing that he is unable to concentrate and wanted to quit his course. This was primarily triggered by exam-related stress. I provided him eight intensive non-directive counseling sessions, which ultimately instilled confidence in his own abilities and he was able to cope up. Thereafter, he successfully completed his examination,” she says.

NSS Uttar Pradesh and UNICEF made special efforts to ensure that the phone numbers for counseling reach the masses through newspaper advertisements and social media posts. Videos of two puppets called Tara and Appa were also widely used to spread the word. Tara and Appa are popularly known as “Happiness Warriors” among the youth participating in the initiative.

Looking ahead

Muskurayega India has highlighted the immense importance and potential of mental health counseling for students and general public. In a short span, this initiative has received an encouraging response and showcased the openness of society to reach out for counseling and have an honest discussion with the mental health counselors.

On 7th April 2022, commemorating the World Health Day, the first Muskurayega India (MI) Centre was launched at Shri Jai Narayan Mishra Post Graduate College (KKC College), Lucknow University. Envisioned as a physical centre hosted within an identified College/ or a University, an MI Centre is equipped to provide counseling services by qualified counselors as well as facilitate Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) interventions particularly among NSS volunteers and young people.

The next course of this journey, as the network of NSS affirms, is an amalgamation of digital platforms along with empathy and personal touch. Through MI centres in university and college campuses, ‘Wellness Warriors’ shall be created who will work on dismantling the taboos in the society as well as provide psycho-social support and career counseling to the people in need.

(Published in Behavior Change Matters Vol.20 Jan'23)

eGARIMA: DIGITAL OUTREACH FOR ADOLESCENTS

Menstrual hygiene and adolescent health

Menstrual health is an important indicator of overall physical health in adolescents, but it is also an important factor in the psychosocial well-being for women and girls. While adolescence is a crucial point of entry into a healthy life, taboos surrounding menstruation could limit access to health care and recommended levels of hygiene. UNICEF and its partners with the support of USAID have been working intensively to promote menstrual health education for adolescents in India. eGARIMA is a digital platform that empowers students especially girls with information to act, participate and magnify their voices in a safe environment in order to reach optimal health with safe practices.

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Muskan Khan, a young student of Karamat Hussain Degree College in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh always wondered if there is a way to deal with menstrual pain other than the heavy medicines all her friends and peer group had been depending on. One day she got to know about the eGARIMA course from one of her teachers. Muskan found the contents of the modules very informative and opted to pursue the course online through the app content created by UNICEF. Going through a difficult time of puberty, Muskan feels that the course provided her with correct information and helped her deal with the challenges of adolescence. “I read in this course that there is always mild pain during periods. And in such a situation, one may also get relief with some basic exercises instead of opting for medication. In case of severe pain, the medicine should be taken only after consulting a doctor. Now I try to pass on this information to others as well,” says Muskan.

In another instance, Shalu Vishwakarma from the same college learnt about adolescent nutrition on the app while Hafza Yasmeen understood the importance of clean water and sanitation. They then disseminated the knowledge they had gained from the eGARIMA course to their community members.



From GARIMA to eGARIMA

Between 2013-16, UNICEF had successfully implemented GARIMA (Girls' Adolescent and Reproductive Rights: Information for Management and Action), a **menstrual hygiene program** that engaged **adolescent girls** and their immediate influencers in the state of **Uttar Pradesh, India**. The program led to an increase in knowledge of MHM (Menstrual Hygiene Management) practices

and increased positive attitudes and beliefs around menstruation and hygiene among adolescents.

Taking this to a step further, a digitized version called **eGARIMA** was conceptualized and designed to promote optimal health in adolescents. eGARIMA is an e-learning course focusing on the adolescent population of 14-19 years age group. It is designed to improve the understanding and increase self-efficacy of beneficiaries on anemia, safe menstrual health management and environmental health. It also aims to improve adoption of optimal health and nutrition, menstrual hygiene, and WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) practices among adolescents.

How does eGARIMA work?

eGARIMA is readily available on the Justlearn online learning management system (LMS). It promotes interactive learning, gamification of the contents and consists of relatable stories. The course consists of three interactive modules. The first module is called 'adolescent health' which is an introduction for adolescents, young adults and youth to understand the changes in their bodies as well as recognize and appreciate their social and emotional experiences. Students in this course learn about different aspects of these changes and what they can do as individuals and as volunteers to manage their own health and guide their peers.



eGARIMA modules promote interactive learning, gamification of the contents and consists of relatable stories. The course also encourages healthy discussions and dissemination of information amongst the youth.

The second module is 'adolescent nutrition' and exposes students towards the concepts of adolescents and young adults' nutritional requirements. They learn about how as an individual they can make correct dietary choices and as well as help their peers to do the same. The third module revolves around sanitation where students read about different types of water contaminants and ways to prevent and treat the contamination at the household level. This module builds the capacity of individuals to manage sanitation and sensitize their peer towards the same.

The modules also share some videos, games and quizzes to aid understanding amongst the youth. The videos are named as **Healthy Growing, Paanch Din Ka Sach** (the truth about five days) and **Paheli Ki Saheli** (friend of the riddle) and are designed with the idea to break myths and clear confusions related to the topics.

Engaging youth for bigger change

eGARIMA is part of a UNICEF spearheaded project that addresses and strengthens MHM in Uttar Pradesh. It aims at piloting a social and behavior change communication strategy for menstrual health and hygiene management among rural adolescent girls experiencing menarche. Under the initiative, 935 NSS volunteers (National Service Scheme, a Central Sector Scheme of Government of India, Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports) from seven colleges and eleven Project Officers have been enrolled for the course. All eleven POs have received orientation on eGarima and its process.

"As an NSS officer, I have observed that there is apathy among people about cleanliness and nutrition. I have joined this online course through eGARIMA program and learned how to use the app after getting the proper training. After that, the female students at the college

were also made aware through this course with the help of the program officers of the National Service Scheme. eGARIMA program is a good medium to create awareness among the society," believes Dr Nagma from Lucknow.

200 volunteers from Bharat Scout & Guides, the national Scouting and Guiding association of India have also enrolled into the network. A total of nine districts with 11 colleges and 1094 students are registered to have enrolled into the initiative.

It is through USAID funds that the MHPSS element was possible with the COVID-19 intensive and sensitive messages. Its dipstick assessment provided insights that mental health was an issue and intervention through the NSS network was prioritized with the general population, which later focused on adolescents and youth. This opportunity was taken forward with institutional networks like NSS within colleges/universities. Since depression and anxiety including body image was prioritized based on FGDs with students and teachers, the latter being oriented on the program and issues. The setting of IVRS calls and Muskareyga India Counseling centres supported building confidence amongst students and teachers to break the silence. All this investment created by the need was initiated through USAID funding opportunity.

JOINING HANDS WITH THE TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY IN RAJASTHAN

Social inclusion

How more than a thousand members of excluded communities in Rajasthan were engaged into COVID-19 awareness drives with support from USAID.

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Gender diverse individuals with intersecting marginalized identities became particularly pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic around the world. Mental health disparities experienced by transgender and gender diverse people were notably exacerbated during the pandemic, as COVID-19 precautions reduced access to social support. To crystallize the experience of working on RCCE and communication on COVID-19 sensitive behaviors in urban spaces of Jaipur, UNICEF Rajasthan joined hands with a local partner **Manjari Sansthan**, with special focus on equity. Supported by USAID funds, this collaboration helped reach out to some of the most left out groups like transgenders and sex workers. UNICEF staff came across some heartwarming stories of the hard work leading to change and awareness despite difficult circumstances thrown by a pandemic.



At the age of nine, Suresh's father (name changed) gave him two options to build a life. Either he could pick up a pen and choose education, or a pair of ghungroos (anklets worn by Indian classical dancers) symbolic of dance and entertainment most of the transgender community indulges into, to make a living. Suresh chose education as he wanted to learn, grow and build a wider horizon despite the taboos and prejudices he faced due to his nature, and appearance. After several rejections at workplaces, Suresh was introduced by a friend to Manjari Sansthan that was running awareness campaigns with the transgender community on COVID-19 vaccination. Suresh gradually realized that helping the transgender community to join mainstream was a part of his calling and started

working intensively to spread awareness and help people get access to proper healthcare. "When I first encountered the team and they offered me that I could join them, I had said yes with a hesitant mind, but I kept thinking that how would I be able to talk to people, with people always teasing me. But during my training, I was taught how to talk, work with courage and dedication instead of getting frustrated with questions from people. The team at Manjari Sansthan taught me through behavior change and inspirational videos that helped me a lot to learn effective communication and conducting community meetings."



UNICEF/India/2022

301 transgenders and 979 community sex workers are recorded to have been engaged into COVID-19 awareness drives in Jaipur slums with support from USAID.

Suresh now works with both general as well as transgender communities and visits more than 100 houses on daily basis in the slum areas of District Jaipur. He has helped sensitize them about the importance of COVID-19 vaccination by providing appropriate information on the same. "I understood that most transgenders want to hide their identity from the community and do not visit the vaccination sites to take COVID-19 vaccine. So, I planned and facilitated special COVID-19 sessions for them to help them get the correct information and feel encouraged to get vaccinated," Suresh said. Suresh was introduced to Manjari Sansthan by Kiran (name changed), a fellow transgender community worker. Kiran himself has a similar journey and has become one of the beacons of change in his community. Both became the backbone of the COVID-19 awareness drives during the pandemic in Jaipur.

The UNICEF-Manjari Sansthan collaboration created an opportunity to understand the term social exclusion thereby practicing inclusive programming in Rajasthan's urban settings. The work on Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) and COVID-19 vaccine promotion paved a pathway to reach out to the most excluded communities and ensure their inclusion in the process. The first step was to build an inclusive environment for frontline workers like Suresh and Kiran. After which, the process of capacity building was followed and a roadmap for their progress was developed. Suresh and Kiran became integral part of the COVID-19 initiatives, and both have acquired their desired place in the team. Meanwhile, representatives of urban local bodies and duty bearers of the health department

were also very forthcoming and engaged with the transgender leaders for charting out an enabling and mutually convenient process of engagement for COVID-19 vaccination with resounding potential to extend to other health needs as well.

"We are committed to building the capacity of Suresh, Kiran and all others who are in touch with us as development workers. Both of them are gaining practical skills in community mobilization, organizing community events, basic surveys and grassroots communication. In turn, the rest of the organization is also learning and adapting to create a more inclusive, and level playing field at work. Suresh is now rallying for support to complete his master's degree in social work. Besides Suresh and Kiran, we are in touch with a few others who hold good academic qualifications," said Manish, secretary, Manjari Sansthan.

Inducting transgender members into the COVID-19 awareness drives not only helped the UNICEF-Manjari Sansthan collaboration to build an inclusive environment, but also generated better access of healthcare for them. Up until December 2022, a total of 301 transgenders and 979 community sex workers are recorded to have been engaged into COVID-19 awareness drives under the initiative.



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