Use of U-Report to strengthen humanitarian action

Uganda: timely communication and referrals to fight Ebola
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CONTEXT
The Ministry of Health of Uganda has had a long collaboration with U-Report since its inception. U-Report has been used for major campaigns and disease outbreaks by the Ministry, such as long-lasting insecticide treated nets mass distribution campaigns, polio campaigns and disease outbreak alerts (e.g. Zika, Marburg and Ebola).

In August 2018, Ebola was confirmed in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, putting Uganda at a high risk. Given the high demand for information, the U-Report Uganda team developed a communication plan as part of a larger UNICEF multimedia strategy to support the Ministry of Health.

ACTIONS TAKEN

Action 1: Risk Communication
A poll was sent out in August 2018 to 22 Ebola high-risk districts, targeting 98,635 U-Reporters. The poll included 10 key alert messages on Ebola, approved by the Ministry of Health, that provided information on symptoms, spread, prevention methods, and where to report suspected cases. U-Reporters were also asked if they found the information useful.

Action 2: Real-time conversations with U-Reporters and referrals through U-Partners
All communication materials (posters, banners, radio and television spot messages and interviews) from the Ministry of Health informed communities to send ‘FREE SMS’ to U-Report on 8500 to get more information on Ebola.

The U-Partners page allowed UNICEF U-Report team, the Uganda Red Cross Society and the Ministry of Health call centre to monitor real-time conversations, respond to questions about the Ebola virus and get a feel of what was happening Ebola high-risk communities. Over 5,000 responses were provided to people across the country. Furthermore, the Red Cross monitored the dashboard for any reports of suspected cases. The reported suspected cases were followed up by their Branch managers and volunteers in the various districts and cases referred to the District Health Officer reporting to the Ministry of Health.

Through real-time conversations, U-Report provided communities with the correct information from the Ministry of Health and WHO, which helped to relieve the uncertainty caused by mixed messages (from various sources, often informal) and the communities’ limited knowledge. It also provided an opportunity to get a feel of what was happening in the communities; for example, people sharing messages of fear and reports of suspected cases, highlighted people being alert and on the lookout.

Communities provided feedback on service delivery, which was used to assess the effectiveness of services, adapt programming, as well as adjust communication content such as talk shows and frequently asked questions, and identify rumours which inform risk communication interventions. An update report on the feedback received was compiled on a weekly basis, disseminated, and information included in the Uganda Ebola Virus Disease update report. These practices contribute to strengthening Accountability to Affected Populations.
Frequently Asked Questions about Ebola

- Signs and symptoms of Ebola, its origin, how it spreads and how to prevent it.
- Measures taken by the government to prevent the spread of Ebola.
- The incubation period of Ebola.
- Cure, treatment and first aid for Ebola patients.
- What happens after one recovers from Ebola.
- Requests for updates on Ebola in Uganda and DRC.
- Which animals can spread Ebola.
- Care and handling of an Ebola patient.
- Burial of Ebola victims, availability of burial teams in communities.
- Sexual transmission of Ebola.
- Ebola vaccination: who is eligible, and requests to be vaccinated.

Action 3: Obtaining community feedback on the usefulness of information share

U-Report was used to check if the information on Ebola sent to people in the high-risk districts was useful. Out of the 6,333 respondents 90 per cent said the information on Ebola was useful. It was also used to find out the effectiveness of the various channels used to share awareness messages on Ebola, and radio emerged as the most popular channel.

U-Reporters also shared their views on how to improve the information shared and make it more useful to them; for example a Kampala U-Reporter suggested: “Make it a routine sensitization through radio program, introduce it in schools, mobilize the leaders at grassroots.”

LESSONS LEARNED

- U-Report allows to reach large numbers of people in a short period of time during emergencies.
- The platform can relieve uncertainty caused by mixed or erroneous messages in a situation of emergency. The U-Partners dashboard helps addressing myths, rumours and misconceptions through real-time monitoring and individual responses.
- U-Report can establish linkages to community surveillance components in preparedness and response by alerting about suspected cases reported by communities.
- Cost-related challenges linked to sending out and receiving SMS through U-Report were noted as a main hindering factor for wider use and scale-up of the tool.

CONCLUSION

U-Report is a solid tool to be used to meet the high demand for information and urgent need to interact with affected populations during emergencies. The platform’s comparative advantage is its ability to quickly reach many people at once and provide opportunities for immediate communication and interaction with affected populations.

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