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How can Search contribute to saving lives during epidemics? How can we deploy the Common Ground Approach (CGA) when we face limits in safely convening people face-to-face?

Public health crises exacerbate divisions in a society. At the horizontal level, these crises lead to stigmatization, drive communities apart, and amplify or create new dividing lines. At the vertical level, epidemic responses are hindered by lack of trust and collaborative relationships between citizens and states.

In this context, overcoming epidemics and addressing their short and long term consequences require collaboration and both horizontal and vertical cohesion. Searchers across the world can leverage the CGA to inspire hope, foster empathy, highlight interdependence, and uncover common ground, ultimately strengthening collaboration across dividing lines.

If trusted communication channels can deliver credible information, counter rumor, and humanize others; if connections, networks, and relationships can be maintained and enhanced across dividing lines; and if governments and other responders are equipped to respond in a conflict sensitive manner, then epidemics will be addressed more effectively and their duration reduced, with contributions from multiple stakeholders’ collaboration.

This note aims to offer avenues for action. It can be used to adapt existing programs, or design new programs. It was developed to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and informed by lessons learned from Search’s programs during Ebola and other disease outbreaks that have limited the ability of Searchers to directly access and bring communities together.

It is organized around three key pillars:

1) **Information Management: Dissemination of Credible Information and Rumor Management**

2) **Social Cohesion: Bridging Dividing Lines and Tackling Root Causes**

3) **Conflict Sensitive Responses: Incentivizing Collaboration**
**Pillar 1: Information Management: Dissemination of Credible Information and Rumor Management**

**Problem**
The lack of information, misinformation, and the spread of rumors in a time of epidemic can negatively impact the efficiency of prevention and health response. It can also lead to rapid stigmatization of individuals or groups, driving communities apart, and amplifying dividing lines, leaving them ill-prepared to deal with recovery. Where conflict is active, or recent, there are often low levels of trust between citizens and their governments. This is often reflected in a polarized and politicized media landscape, which aggravates credibility gaps and fosters suspicion, rumors, and conspiracies.

We can rapidly respond by leveraging trusted existing **platforms** (rather than creating new ones) and **messengers** to help deliver credible information, dispel rumors, counter stigmatization, and humanize issues.

**Pillar 1 Key Objectives**

1. Ensure that the public, including marginalized groups, has access to accurate and timely information about the epidemic and the response tactics;
2. Coordinate information management among communicators, including public health officials, media, and other key influencers;
3. Foster trust between citizens and emergency health responders; and
4. Prevent stigmatization of groups and communities.

**Approach**
Search reaches dozens of millions of people through media programs every year. The strengths which can be leveraged to support a health response include:

- **Ability to deliver messages, raise awareness, humanize issues, and uncover common ground** in captivating and entertaining formats. Through these **diverse formats and platforms** (e.g. dramas, reality TV, social media groups), our storylines and content can be easily adapted to audiences, messages, and phases of an epidemic.

- **Ability to reach a wide audience**, including in remote areas, through partnerships with community radio stations and traditional communicators.

- **Existing partnerships with radio and TV stations**, which can be strategic relays of critical messages, conveners of dialogue, and can counter rumors.

- **Trusted and trained messengers** that can serve as resource persons and deliver messages directly to communities (e.g. local influencers, youth, religious and traditional leaders).

**Lessons Learned and Recommendations**
- The **messenger** and **delivery** are as critical as the message. Communities that have been historically marginalized and underserved by healthcare systems consume information with mistrust, particularly from government or perceived official sources, even those internationally reputed. We also know that information does not in and of itself trigger action, and changing behaviors requires adding a human and emotional element to information delivery. In this context, rumors and conspiracy theories thrive, and even well-resourced and well-intentioned awareness raising initiatives may fail. In the **DRC**, we helped on-the-ground Ebola response teams collaborate with community leaders to deliver messages to families, as both authorities and NGOs were not trusted by the communities.
they aimed to reach. This was particularly true when it came to addressing social norms, and religious or traditional practices, such as the need to desist traditional burial practices. It also aided in Guinea, where Search helped communities overcome fears of death and disbelief in a cure, resulting in healthier behaviors and collaboration with the health services.

- In contexts where our existing media programs are already popular and trusted, they should be leveraged and rapidly adapted to incorporate relevant messaging. In Sierra Leone, listeners’ feedback showed the population already trusted the characters of our drama, so it was easy to get them to believe the messages related to Ebola prevention. This is also much more rapid than initiating a new series or program, particularly if it is a drama.

- Coordination and alignment with government, public health officials, and other organizations doing messaging is critical to ensure synergies, build on key stakeholders’ strengths, and avoid duplication or discrepancies. While there are numerous bodies, such as the United Nations, involved in coordination, Search has been able to bring value, particularly by working with distinct groups, such as youth organizations or media. Ensuring that they are connected with international and governmental organizations is a key role that Search can play. In Liberia, Search co-chaired the local civil society response mechanism during the Ebola epidemic. In the DRC, Search facilitated media synergies to coordinate messaging around Ebola prevention.

- Adapting dissemination channels is critical to ensure the widest audience is reached, especially when movements are limited. In Sierra Leone, during the Ebola outbreak, Search formed a new partnership with the Pharmacy Board, which had deployed public information booths, to broadcast our PSAs and reached new audiences (e.g. markets). Search has also adapted to limited movements by sharing content via CDs, USB, and online platforms (e.g. Soundcloud, Facebook).

- Programs should be contextualized and tailored to the audience, and should be adapted as issues emerge and needs evolve. While information and awareness raising is critical and can be delivered through PSA, our health-related media programming has also focused on rumors management and conflict transformation in the short term, as well as trauma healing and humanization, which are critical to address longer-term needs and new fault lines that epidemics can create. In Guinea, some of our projects focused specifically on the reintegration of Ebola survivors. 88% of participants surveyed said they believe Ebola survivors should be reintegrated; 82% said they did not believe this 8 months prior.

Illustrative Programs

- In Sierra Leone, Search integrated Ebola prevention and response messages into our long-standing and popular Atunda Ayenda radio drama, leveraging the familiar and popular storyline with our local community radio partners to combat the disease.

- In the DRC, Search integrated HIV/AIDS-related information in its radio quiz show Duel des Jeunes Démocrates targeting young students.

- In Guinea, Search trained and supported over 900 community leaders to deliver health messaging, dispel rumors, believe in the treatment centers, and minimize stigma and manage conflict within their communities.

In the DRC, Search just produced, in partnership with the Catholic University of Bukavu, a short video raising awareness on COVID-19 and its risks, targeting students and available on YouTube.
Illustrative Results

- Among those who were exposed to Search-produced spot campaign on cholera in the DRC, the percentage of people who knew that they could get cholera from drinking untreated water was 83% compared with 48% among non-listeners.
- After watching or listening to Search’s TV and radio programs produced in Myanmar, 62% of surveyed audience members said that they now check the veracity of news and rumors before sharing them.
- After empowering young social media influencers in Sri Lanka, our survey showed that as a result of the project, the percentage of targeted youth who became active content creators increased by 28%.
- Over 70% of surveyed Guineans found messages delivered by Search-supported local youth and community leaders to be more effective than messages from state health workers during the Ebola crisis.

Pillar 2: Social Cohesion: Bridging Dividing Lines and Tackling Root Causes

Problem
Epidemics strain the social fabric in every community. In societies affected by conflict, these dividing lines are often exacerbated. Epidemics bring simmering divisions to the surface and can result in stigmatization or blaming of whole groups, triggering hate speech or violence. Isolation and control measures can lead ethnically and geographically divided places to “turn inwards” as many connection and socially diverse places are closed (e.g. markets, schools). Movement and public gathering restrictions, and the consequences of the crisis (e.g. death, economic crisis), can increase boredom, loneliness, trauma, and social stress.

Approach
In response, Search’s approach aims to focus on social cohesion programming that can foster empathy and prevent backsliding in inter-communal relations as communities distance themselves from one another. In line with prevention measures that include social distancing and limit movements, Search can:

1. Leverage its media production facilities and online tools to continue its social cohesion work.
2. Maintain and expand connections and networks across borders.

Pillar 2 Key Objectives
1) Reduce dehumanization and polarization between diverse communities;
2) Increase self-awareness about stereotypes and increase empathy among diverse groups;
3) Amplify and build positive relationships across dividing lines; and
4) Strengthen collaborative networks at the national and global level.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations
- In instances of social isolation, more and more people turn to media to stay connected and entertained, especially when schools close. However, producing new, quality entertaining and pro-social media content requires time and participatory curriculum development processes. In contexts of limited movements, producing new content on traditional media might be challenging, but Search could consider rebroadcasting relevant existing content,
using existing footage with new voice overs, or producing new content online (e.g. Facebook campaigns with already trained messengers). Search is continuing to produce a series of podcasts and webinars since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, including our internal What Works podcasts, our external DME for Peace Thursday Talks, and our Peace Campaign podcasts in Nigeria.

- Virtual exchange (VE) programs are a powerful vehicle to strengthen social cohesion. However, they require dedicated resources and time to be designed and rolled-out, and are not informal social media interactions such as Facebook groups or unmoderated, unsustained, unstructured online communication. Additional guidance and lessons learned on designing VE programs are captured here. When thinking of designing and implementing a VE program, the capacity of Soliya, our main VE partner, should be considered.

- Peer-learning programs have the potential to build capacities and bridges across cultures and regions, creating lasting relationships and impact. Yet, in the traditional e-learning structure, participants often cite their lack of time and incentives as the main reasons for non-completion. Recognizing these challenges, DME for Peace has developed digital learning programs that provide a flexible structure and are based on dual-accountability; participants enter and complete the program with a designated partner (from the same geography, focus of work, and language), and their completion is dependent on one another.

- Communities of practice can be an effective avenue to maintain our networks of partners and continue to connect our staff, partners, and key target groups while movements are restricted. However, they cannot develop without regular contributions from members of the community. To create this sense of community, it is not enough to just set up an interactive platform. Contribution needs to be provoked. Online communities develop when they are given content, and contextually relevant opportunities to engage with and participate in, and ultimately lead. Through publishing blogs, hosting webinars, etc., it allows community members to have a sense of ownership over the platform.

Illustrative Programs

- When CAR faced outbreaks of retaliatory violence between communities divided along religious lines, often fueled by rumors on social media, Search responded in the online space. We empowered youth activists to counter these rumors by creating an all-inclusive Youth Editorial Group, which could plan and moderate joint online dialogues on key challenges facing youth in Bangui. The group participated in a multi-media campaign to mobilize Bangui youth around dispelling and countering hate speech and disinformation on social media groups.

- One of the newest versions of our popular radio and TV show The Team, which fosters social cohesion while providing entertainment to the audience, was produced and aired in Myanmar. It followed the struggle of fictional young footballers, each from a different ethnic group, as they strive to overcome their cultural differences and win a tournament. Many other countries have previous seasons of The Team that could be appropriate for rebroadcast.

- In Sri Lanka, Search trained 100 young social media influencers from different backgrounds and ethnicities in leveraging social media for social cohesion and reconciliation, who then generated an average of 125 posts per month, with an average reach of over 2 million Facebook users and engagement of over 1 million per month.

- In Iraq, Search has built a virtual Community of Practice for democracy, human rights, and governance practitioners to foster increased strategic coordination, improve civil society
networks, and strengthen capacity and knowledge sharing. The Community of Practice includes an online knowledge sharing platform and regular What Works webinars.

- In **European** and **Middle Eastern countries**, Search implements the [Erasmus + Virtual Exchange program](#). This project brings together diverse young people and facilitates intercultural learning through [virtual exchanges](#), which are technology-enabled people-to-people dialogues. Over 16,000 young people have participated in these exchanges.

- At the global level, Search's [DME for Peace](#) platform has run a successful online [mentorship program](#), which connected practitioners and built their capacity leveraging simple, accessible online technology. It also hosts several [virtual communities of practice](#), and regularly brings dozens of practitioners and evaluators through [bi-weekly webinars](#).

**Illustrative Results**

- In **South Sudan**, our flagship radio program Hiwar al Shabab (HaS) became a popular platform for youth to discuss relevant peace issues. HaS is highly appreciated by listeners, who reported higher levels of social cohesion and conflict resolution. 82% of the listeners reported being aware of positive models for community peacebuilding.

- In **Sri Lanka**, the youth we trained became more active on social media: there was an increase in 23% in the number of youth who said they are “very active” after they participated in our trainings.

- 62% of participants in our [virtual exchanges](#) reported increased self-awareness about stereotypes they hold about other groups and 72% built positive and/or meaningful relationships with peers from different countries/regions.

- [DME for Peace](#)’s Digital Learning Programs have a completion rate of 52%, whereas completion rates for free online learning programs usually range between 5-10%. With more than 1,000 applications from over 80 countries, DME for Peace mentorship program trained over 300 practitioners with 97% of participants learning something new that was directly applicable to their work due to their involvement in the program.

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**Pillar 3: Conflict Sensitive Responses: Incentivizing Collaboration**

**Problem**

The magnitude and speed of the spread of the disease during epidemics require centralized, coordinated national and international responses. International assistance is usually channeled via the UN, WHO, World Bank, etc. and therefore by national government (i.e. Ministries of Health, infectious disease response authorities). In most fragile contexts, governments lack trust, access, and/or skills to engage efficiently with their constituencies, especially already marginalized or vulnerable groups, including displaced communities.

**Approach**

Search can leverage its [impartiality](#), existing [partnerships with governments](#), and work on participatory governance and [conflict sensitivity](#) to equip governments and other international and national responders with the capacities to deliver responses in a way that:

- Minimize the risks of conflict
- Constructively engage a diversity of citizens
- Foster collaboration at the local, national, and international level.
**Pillar 3 Key Objectives**

1) Ensure conflict sensitivity of responses to the epidemics;
2) Strengthen vertical cohesion between citizens and governments;
3) Foster participatory mechanisms for governance and decision-making processes; and
4) Encourage regional and international collaboration around common challenges.

**Lessons Learned and Recommendations**

- From central governments to frontline health responders, officials **often lack the necessary skills in strategic communication and conflict sensitivity**, as well as contextual knowledge to deliver an effective response that does not aggravate existing or create new conflicts. In **Beni, DRC**, our conflict sensitivity training was the first one for some of the health respondents we targeted.

- Understanding existing conflict dynamics, especially related to periphery-center and majority-minority relationships, should be a prerequisite to any on-the-ground responses to avoid doing harm. In **Guinea**, three radio reporters, trainees of Search, who had joined a convoy of health workers and government officials heading to the south of the country, were killed by hostile community members. In the **DRC**, temporary Ebola response health facilities were burned, and workers faced attacks and death threats. Contingency planning should be done to identify and mitigate risks, ensuring the protection of staff, partners and participants in our programs.

- Health responses should be paired with **continued or renewed support for existing local conflict transformation** mechanisms, as conflicts will continue and can be exacerbated by health crises. In **Yemen**, where Search regularly conducts conflict scans, health service delivery (or absence of) is often included in the conflicts and root causes that emerge from the scans.

- Participatory mechanisms put in place around health emergency response and service delivery can contribute to **shifting behaviors and norms** related to governance and civil society, media, and citizen engagement. However, this type of change takes time: programming focused on improving health governance should be long-term interventions rather than implemented in emergency mode to create enduring change. In **Guinea**, we started working on accountability and participatory governance around health three years after the beginning of the Ebola crisis - the project is five-year long.

- In conflict-affected contexts where divisions and mistrust are high, **health** issues can be one of the **few topics that can bring people together** across dividing lines, both at the national and international level. When it is included in peace process frameworks, gains in collaboration on health service delivery could be positive opportunities to build confidence between parties and trust with local communities around peace processes that are stalling. However, our experience with the **Middle East** Consortium on Infectious Disease Surveillance (MECIDS) has shown that gains in the health sector do not necessarily translate into similar positive transformation in other more sensitive sectors.

**Illustrative Programs**

- In **Yemen**, Search is partnering with John Snow Inc. to strengthen health systems in a context of widespread violence where state service delivery has collapsed and some factions abuse humanitarian aid. Search will implement a comprehensive set of activities to ensure conflict sensitivity, including **conflict scans, community dialogues, communication campaigns, trust building activities, and enhancement of Local Health Committees**.
- In **Sierra Leone**, Search supported the Ministry of Health and Sanitation to foster the implementation of the Free Healthcare Initiative. Search empowered the Ministry to develop its own **communication strategy, capacity building programs** for health centers, frontline health workers, and District Social Mobilization Coordinators, and **platforms for constructive interactions** between local authorities, health providers, and citizens (e.g. participatory theater, town hall meetings). In the post-Ebola context, these efforts focused on (re)building trust in the health system, accountability, and quality customer service.

- In **Guinea**, Search is supporting post-Ebola recovery, with a focus on improving the participation of the population in decision-making processes, particularly in the health and education sectors. This program has already included the creation by the Ministry of Public Administration of a Technical Support Committee that aims to formalize and strengthen the engagement of civil society in State reforms.

- Since 2002, Search has facilitated the MECIDS mechanism, comprising public health officials from neighboring Health Ministries and academic experts in the region and internationally. Search has leveraged health issues as common ground to foster collaboration through cooperative cross-national activities, despite on-going conflicts in the region.

**Illustrative Results**

- In the **DRC**, Search trained frontline health workers responding to the Ebola crisis in conflict zones, such as North Kivu, in topics such as conflict analysis, conflict transformation, etc. As a result of our training, participants increased their conflict sensitivity skills by 41% and were able to jointly analyze conflict hindering their response, and design a conflict-sensitive response to the issue identified.

- In **Sierra Leone**, Search observed a shift in the behavior of health officials over the course of the project from a non-cooperative approach towards collaboration, including active participation in town hall meetings. The project also contributed to enabling the participatory monitoring of the implementation of the Free Healthcare Initiative through the establishment of monitoring groups established in communities with health facilities.

- In **MENA**, MECIDS has fostered cross-border collaboration around public health despite the challenges of 18 years of cycles of conflict in the region and the mistrust and divisions that resulted from this cycle. Over 90% of the participating health officials reported a desire to ‘stay in touch with other participants,’ over 95% reported a willingness to ‘work on common issues,’ and 96% reported a more positive view of the other after participating in the program.