

Strategic communications in social protection programs

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In response to COVID-19, 212 countries have planned or implemented more than 1,100 social protection programs to help 1.8 billion-plus people, as the data from September, 2020 shows. While this looks impressive on paper, often less than 50% of the intended recipients know of the programs or how to access these funds. This is because communication around these programs is often weak and poorly targeted. Poor communication results in exclusion, misinformation, and rumors, which in turn lead to a negative spiral of perceptions, lack of credibility, and reduced opportunities to optimize the uptake and impact of the programs.








Communication is consistently the weakest link in the social protection programs

Communication is often ignored as a core design principle of social protection programs and is at best an afterthought for those who implement the programs. Effective implementation of programs depends heavily on maintaining regular and clear communication with stakeholders on both demand and supply sides. Most programs kick off with outreach to build awareness and encourage active participation from potential applications. The core outputs of the outreach campaigns, however, are limited to disseminating the macro-level information about the programs.

On the demand side, program recipients or applicants need more nuanced information on the eligibility, registration process, entitlement, accessibility, rejection, and grievance resolution mechanism, among others. Program applicants are rarely notified of their selection in the program of rejection from it, leaving no scope for corrections if required. On the supply side, frontline workers, such as banking or mobile money agents and government officials who are charged to ensure effective distribution of the benefits need the nuanced information outlined above. They also need clarity in terms of their role, remuneration, and ways to counter misinformation and rumors to implement the programs effectively.



Table 1: Essential communication components for social protection programs

| Demand-side (G2P beneficiaries) | Supply-side (Front-line workers) |
|---|---|
|  <p>Program awareness (eligibility and entitlement) and guidelines to be followed (social distancing, health and safety etc.)</p> | <p>Program awareness (adjustments over time -operational, technical, etc.) and guidelines to be followed (exception management, safety, etc.)</p> |
|  <p>Benefit withdrawal process (when and where to collect the benefits, documents required etc.)</p> | <p>Compensation for front-line workers (extra commissions, health and safety costs to be covered, etc.)</p> |
|  <p>Communication channels (considering different programs, geographies, culture, capabilities and practices)</p> | <p>Channels used to spread awareness (leveraging above the line media, and digital mass communication with local P2P communication)</p> |
|  <p>Frequency of communication (one time, recurring considering the program objectives and target population)</p> | <p>Frequency of communication (formal v. informal, one-off v. continuous feedback)</p> |
|  <p>Managing fraud and grievance resolution (how and where to complain/see redress)</p> | <p>Accountability (tracking and rebutting rumors/incorrect information)</p> |
|  <p>Exception mechanisms for the vulnerable (sick, old, single women, etc.)</p> | |
|  <p>Two-way communication and feedback mechanism (to improve the program)</p> | <p>Query resolution (contact details of relevant department officers for urgent help on scheme implementation)</p> |

*Details vary country to country depending upon the nature of the program

MSC's assessment of the Indian government's social protection response to COVID-19 suggests that [only 41%](#) of the program recipients were fully aware of the benefits they were eligible to receive. The low levels of awareness on social protection programs are not limited to any particular country or the context of the current pandemic. The awareness level among recipients for Indonesia's Program Keluarga Harapan (PKH) was only 50% as per MSC's evaluation [report](#) from 2019.

Less information can confuse the recipients, waste time and resources, and generate inefficiencies to reduce the effectiveness of the overall implementation of the respective programs. While evidence suggests that governments and policymakers have made communication mistakes in the past, they recognize the need to build effective and strengthened communications for social protection programs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has complicated communication and outreach for social protection programs

Governments have widely used cash transfers as a social protection response to COVID-19, with an increased emphasis on digitization to deliver safe, secure, and convenient payments. Governments around the world have announced many policy changes and developments in their existing programs to expand the reach of the social protection programs at the last mile. However, communications for these developments are not updated adequately. For instance, in India, the government distributes benefits after adequate beneficiary authentication, usually using the biometric *Aadhaar* system.

Local governments or community leaders identify eligible individuals for COVID relief for a cash transfer program in Brazil. Individuals then receive **SMS messages in the local language** that directs them to open an account via WhatsApp or through a Facebook chat message

A few state governments have laid down exception management guidelines, for example, suspending biometric authentication to mitigate the spread of infection and providing doorstep delivery of in-kind benefits to the recipients. However, since many recipients were not aware of these guidelines, they struggled to access their entitlement, particularly as initially at least because of the high number of transaction failures.

The lack of awareness of the changes in entitlements, eligibility conditions, available programs, and modes to withdraw benefits tend to leave vulnerable people without access to the benefits. MSC's work in India suggests that frontline workers and word-of-mouth communication are important sources of information for recipients of social protection programs. However, even the frontline workers faced several challenges to get the right information during the strict lockdown imposed across the country. They struggled with poorly coordinated and delayed information that

the government announced on the changes related to the program, operations, and technical aspects.

An effective communication strategy must be designed to incorporate a range of considerations and components for stakeholders on both supply and demand sides.

Vulnerable groups need more attention and customized communication

An estimated 15% of the population are often invisible and excluded. They are likely to become even more vulnerable during emergencies. In particular, persons with disabilities, indigenous and migrant populations, and people who live in remote areas are more likely to miss out on the desired information. Such people depend mostly on the informal economy, have no or poor literacy levels, and have limited access to technology and the internet. Many women are similarly challenged as a result of socioeconomic norms—communication strategies must therefore have a gender-intentional design.

Using murals to raise COVID-19 awareness among Kenyans who live in informal settlements

Korogocho is the fourth-largest informal settlement in Kenya, with more than 150,000 people crammed together in tin-and-mud shacks with open sewers and

narrow paths. These people have limited or no access to social and mainstream media, which makes them more vulnerable during COVID-19. Korogocho saw inhabitants tear down public awareness material for personal use like toiletries, which compounded the problem.

Hope Raisers, a community organization used murals painted on walls to raise awareness and spread information about safety measures to protect against the pandemic.

These high-risk and vulnerable groups need specific interventions to overcome existing communication barriers. These include:

- Identity, culture, language, and norms
- Social, environmental, economical, and geographical context
- Participation and community engagement
- Behavioral reasons, fear, or hesitation
- Lack of access to media or digital channels
- Disability (lack of mobility and health issues)

A focused communication plan that targets each of these barriers is essential. Recruiting or training multilingual staff, providing information in

multiple and accessible formats, and community engagement with the involvement of community leaders, frontline workers, and women can ensure active outreach to the vulnerable groups.

A strategic approach can help improve communication significantly

Social protection programs need a well-designed strategy on communication and outreach to be effective. [Well Made Strategy's \(WMS\)](#) six-step framework provides an approach to develop impactful communications to influence policy change, respond to the crisis, and improve participation in social schemes. The framework integrates the essential communications components into the following steps:



<https://wellmadestrategy.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/WMS-Handbook-SC-for-Social-Change.pdf>

Chart 1: Six-step strategic framework for awareness, communication, and outreach



Objective:

Define the communication objectives clearly as multiple policy changes and reforms announced during a crisis can confuse vulnerable people



Audience:

Customize the content and frequency of communication, based on the nature and involvement of the many stakeholders involved in the program



Audience analysis:

Identify and analyze the stakeholders addressed by the communication strategy to tailor messages, channels, and “teachable moments” suited to them



Messages and requirement:

Ensure the messaging is on-brand, clear, continuous, and tailored for program recipients and front-line workers to enhance the efficiency and accessibility of cash transfer or food relief programs



Tactics and channels:

Adopt the use of multiple communication channels—the efficacy of a channel depends on its outreach, engagement, and cost-effectiveness

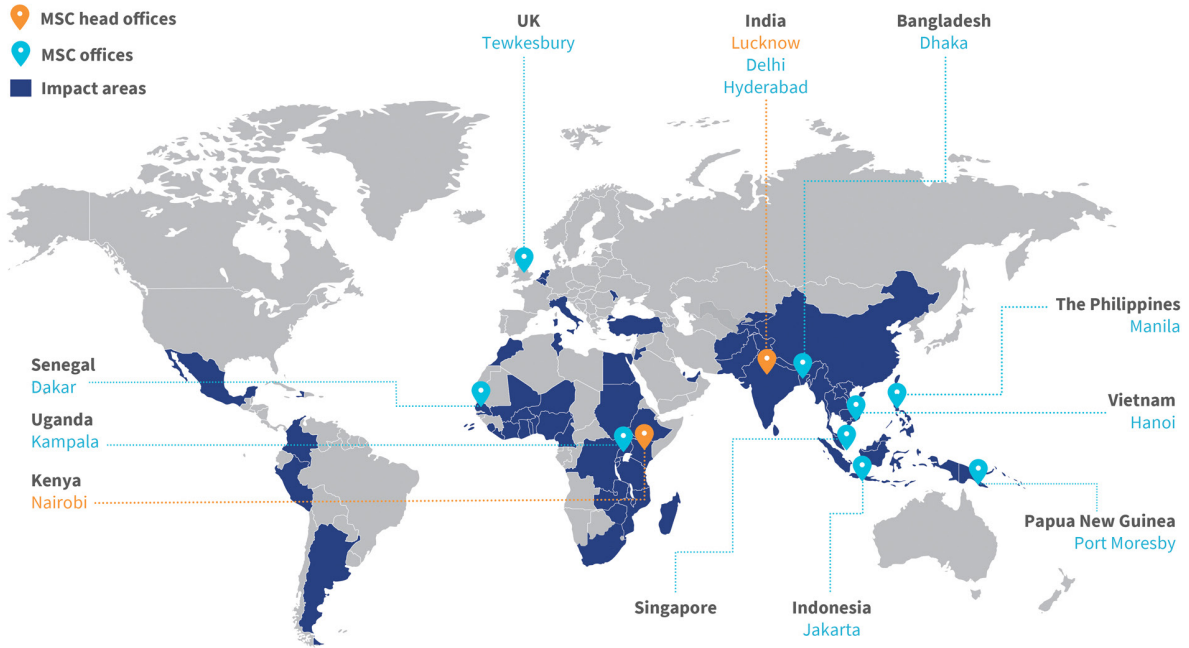


Monitoring, Evaluation, reporting, and learning:

Ensure that communications are strategic: understand and learn from what works, what does not, when and for whom, and make changes accordingly

We believe the use of WMS’s framework for communication can help governments and implementers of the programs assess the effectiveness of existing communication strategies. The framework will also ensure that governments use communication as a strategic tool to strengthen stakeholder participation and improve the design and delivery of social protection programs.

Discover more discussions of these ideas and case studies from across the globe here.



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