

AUGUST 2020

Mass media campaign to promote behaviour change and solidarity through the COVID-19 pandemic:

Yangon, Myanmar

CITY POPULATION: 5,157,000ⁱ



World Health Organization

Facing rising cases of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) with inadequate public awareness or uptake of protective practices, the city of Yangon developed a national mass media campaign: “Let’s Beat COVID Together.” Their communication campaign – supported by a global network, the Partnership for Healthy Cities – is designed to provide timely guidance, encourage positive behaviour change and promote solidarity during the 2020 pandemic.

Myanmar reported its first two cases of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on 23 March 2020.ⁱⁱ As cases rose, stay-at-home orders were introduced alongside travel restrictions and public place closures.ⁱⁱⁱ With almost 25% of the population living below the global poverty line and a further third highly vulnerable to poverty, a severe outbreak requiring lengthy confinement measures would have a catastrophic impact.^{iv} The cost of the pandemic has already been felt across the country. In the capital city of Yangon, at least 60,000 garment workers had lost their jobs by the end of April.^v With clear economic incentive to reduce virus transmission and public behaviour recognised as a key determinant, researchers at the University of Public Health, Myanmar examined public awareness, perceived risk and protective behaviours towards the COVID-19 pandemic.^{vi} Findings which showed inadequate knowledge and uptake of protective practices prompted a civil society group working with the government in the city of Yangon to lead a national mass media campaign to promote behaviour change, control the spread and lessen the need for onerous nationwide containment measures.

— Risk communication and community engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic

Experience from previous public health communication campaigns enabled the People’s Health Foundation in Yangon to act swiftly and support local and national partners in educating the public on the new disease and preventive measures. Informed by insights on public awareness, risk perception and behaviour change towards COVID-19 in Myanmar, practitioners in Yangon set out to develop a mass media campaign which would:

- **promote awareness** of the virus, how it is spread and the disease, including the symptoms and possible outcomes;
- **ensure all those at risk have life-saving information** needed to protect themselves and their family, including protection from social and economic risks;
- **provide transparency** on the preventative and control measures taken by the government;
- **boost solidarity**, social cohesion and community support for patients and healthcare workers on the frontline; and,
- **reassure the public** and prevent anxiety-driven behaviour such as panic-buying.

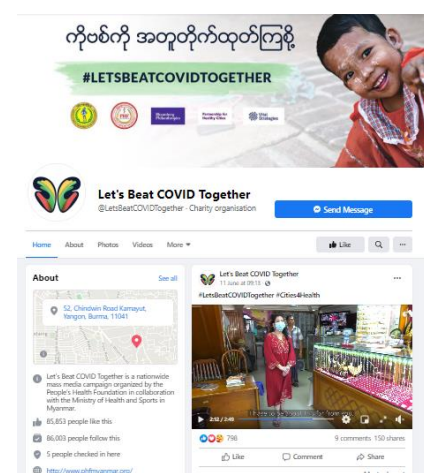
With a positive tone and a message of solidarity, the People's Health Foundation sought to unite the public around playing their part in preventing the spread of COVID-19 and supporting patients and healthcare workers on the frontline.

How risk communication was delivered in Myanmar: “Let’s Beat COVID Together”

The national communication campaign entitled “Let’s Beat COVID Together” and launched in April 2020 is an example of highly successful coordination between city, regional, national and international stakeholders. The project was run by the People’s Health Foundation, in collaboration with the Yangon Regional Government and the national Ministry of Health and Sports for Myanmar. The campaign was supported by the [Partnership for Healthy Cities](#), a global initiative by Bloomberg Philanthropies, in collaboration with the World Health Organization and Vital Strategies. While the Partnership ordinarily supports local-level action to prevent noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and injuries, in late March the initiative expanded to provide technical guidance and resources to cities responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of the Partnership, Yangon was therefore able to access additional support for its COVID-19 response.

The campaign began with a radio drive. To deliver a rapid roll-out, precedent scripts were sourced from other countries and adapted for use in Myanmar. Utilising existing partnerships is critical in mobilising an emergency response. Partnerships with national media outlets through the Ministry of Information enabled public service announcements to be aired on a number of popular radio stations frequently without charge.

Social media was positioned as an essential component of the campaign, given the high usership in Myanmar and its important role in facilitating two-way communication with residents. This kind of dialogue can help health officials better understand community attitudes towards risk perceptions, behaviours, barriers and knowledge gaps, and can also provide residents with a channel to voice their experiences, questions and concerns. A Facebook page was created and populated with content from trusted international agencies to ensure that information sources were accurate and verified, and new videos and infographics were prepared and localized for Myanmar. Some of the videos took an instructional format to promote knowledge of protective behaviours, whilst other videos included interviews with local residents. The page also hosted short videos on how the government is working to protect residents of Myanmar, as well as inspirational personal



Source: Let's Beat COVID-19 Together, People's Health Foundation

stories of how local people are overcoming the challenges of COVID-19 and helping others in the community.

A public service announcement was also created for television. This PSA on physical distancing was designed to be accessible and memorable, and help the public to understand how they can keep themselves and their families safe. It was accompanied with printed flyers with large low-text infographics; these were distributed in public places, and addressed the need to reach citizens without access to digital media.

Throughout the campaign, unity and inclusiveness were key themes. Care was taken to make the campaign inclusive and accessible to those with low or no literacy skills and those who do not speak Burmese as their first language. Graphic- and photo-based materials were prioritised and some videos included English subtitles.



Source: People's Health Foundation



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Communication challenges

Communication during the COVID-19 pandemic is complex in the breadth of stakeholders with diverse needs and the rapidly changing landscape of the outbreak. Adding to this challenge is the concurrent “infodemic”: an overabundance of information, some of which can be misleading or harmful. To tackle the spread of misinformation, public health and government agencies must consistently track falsehoods and counter them with evidence-based guidance.

Overall, the People's Health Foundation have continued to look at how their work can tackle the issue of the COVID-19 infodemic: the risk of misinformation negatively affecting behaviours. They have engaged with the print and online media outlets, acknowledging their role in educating and informing the general public and influence in behaviour. External agencies have been provided with the text of official health messages, as well as a bank of government-approved infographics. There has also been a deliberate call to media agencies to use approved language.

Preliminary results of the mass media campaign

Following the launch of the national mass media campaign in April, the dedicated Facebook page has garnered over 90,000 followers, 160,000 post interactions and an online reach of 3.5 million. Two radio stations have aired four public service announcements on protective behaviour on high-

rotation. Three national newspapers have each printed six campaign infographics alongside approved text on how to stay safe.

“Let’s Beat COVID Together” is an excellent example of a whole-of-society pandemic response. As an experienced civil society partner, the People’s Health Foundation has supported the local and national government in their vital communication efforts. Looking ahead, clear and accurate communication around the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to be a priority, and this Yangon collaboration will serve as an excellent base to support future communication campaigns for COVID-19 and other health issues.

For more information see [Let’s Beat COVID Together Facebook page](#).

Key Resources on COVID-19 and Risk Communication

- [Risk Communication and Community Engagement \(RCCE\) Action Plan Guidance COVID-19 Preparedness and Response](#); WHO, Unicef, IFRC
- [COVID-19: How to include marginalized and vulnerable people in risk communication and community engagement](#); Risk Communication and Community Engagement Working Group on COVID-19 Preparedness and Response in Asia and the Pacific, co-chaired by WHO, IFRC and OCHA
- [A guide to preventing and addressing social stigma associated with COVID-19](#); WHO, Unicef, IFRC
- [COVID-19 Advice for the Public: Myth busters](#)
- [WHO COVID-19 message library](#)

ⁱ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2018). World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision, (<https://population.un.org/wup/>; accessed 22 September 2020)

ⁱⁱ COVID-19 ရောဂါ စောင့်ကြပ်ကြည့်ရှုမှုနှင့်ပတ်သက်၍ သတင်းထုတ်ပြန်ခြင်း (23-3-2020, 11:45 PM). Ministry of Health and Sports, The Republic of the Union of Myanmar. (<https://mohs.gov.mm/Main/content/new/covid-19-%E1%80%9B-%E1%80%82-%E1%80%85-%E1%80%84-%E1%80%80-%E1%80%95-%E1%80%80-%E1%80%8A-%E1%80%9B-%E1%80%99-%E1%80%94-%E1%80%84-%E1%80%95%E1%80%90-%E1%80%9E%E1%80%80-%E1%80%9E%E1%80%90%E1%80%84-%E1%80%91-%E1%80%90-%E1%80%95-%E1%80%94-%E1%80%81-%E1%80%84-23-3-2020-11-45-pm>; accessed 11 June 2020)

ⁱⁱⁱ Timeline: Myanmar’s Government Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Irrawaddy. (<https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/myanmar-covid-19/timeline-myanmars-government-responses-to-the-covid-19-pandemic.html>; accessed 12 June 2020)

^{iv} Poverty Report- Myanmar Living Conditions Survey 2017. The World Bank. ([https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/myanmar/publication/poverty-report-myanmar-living-conditions-survey-2017#:~:text=Estimations%20from%20the%202017%20Myanmar,per%20day%20are%20considered%20poor.](https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/myanmar/publication/poverty-report-myanmar-living-conditions-survey-2017#:~:text=Estimations%20from%20the%202017%20Myanmar,per%20day%20are%20considered%20poor.;); accessed 11 June 2020)

^v COVID-19 leaves over 60,000 workers jobless in Myanmar. Myanmar Times. (<https://www.mmtimes.com/news/covid-19-leaves-over-60000-workers-jobless-myanmar.html>; accessed 11 June 2020)

^{vi} Mya, Kyaw Swa & M., Aye & Hlaing, Win & Hlaing, Su & Aung, Thida & Lwin, Swe & U., Ei & Tun, Thandar & Sann-Lwin, Kyawt. (2020). Awareness, perceived risk and protective behaviours of Myanmar adults on COVID-19. International Journal Of Community Medicine And Public Health. 10.18203/2394-6040.ijcmph20201530.