



UNHCR's eighteenth meeting with NGOs partners on preparedness and response to COVID-19 in refugee situations

Theme: Communicating and Fundraising in the COVID-19 context.

22 July 2020

Online

Participants:

UNHCR moderator:

- Arafat Jamal, Head, Partnership, and Coordination Service

Panelists:

- Dominique Hyde, Director, Division of External Relations
- Cecile Pouilly, Senior Communications Advisor
- Carlotta Wolf, Emergency Fundraising Coordination Officer
- Suzanne Van Meegen, Global Advocacy and Media Adviser, Norwegian Refugee Council

NGOs:

- About 50+, mostly NGOs.

Dominique Hyde

- Last time we discussed communication was on 15 April and a lot has happened since then.
- Key to acknowledge the challenges caused by the pandemic which forced all of us to adjust and the difficulty to implement – to some extent – the principles of stay and deliver. We also have been under tremendous pressure when it comes to fundraising and communicating.
- Since we met in April the landscape of COVID-19 has also changed and become much more diverse. Different regions are now in different phases and we are also witnessing changes when it comes to the impact.
- It was very much a health crisis at first, which it still the case, but it is also turning into a socio-economic crisis for refugees and people of concern. Poverty is increasing which also impacts on SGBV, education, and many more areas.
- On the communication side, we are noticing less media attention to the issue which also has an impact on us and the work we do. So, this is the right time to take stock and discuss what is working and what is not working with today's discussion.
- Could you update us on UNHCR's communication approach since the start of the pandemic? How has it evolved and what are some lessons learned or areas we need to focus on?

Cecile Pouilly

- COVID-19 is an unprecedented situation and associated with a stream of risks, a broad range that we face, a crisis directly impacting our entire workforce across the globe.
- Humanitarian organizations are used to dealing with emergencies but not to that extent.
- Many challenges also relate to a rise of misinformation/disinformation, e.g. on social media.
- Many places faced the crisis on top of pre-existing emergencies, with the risk of creating additional social tensions and even civil unrest.
- It was and it is still a complex communications environment, competitive fundraising context, very crowded, requiring quick reaction.
- When the crisis started, we had to rethink our editorial approach to communications, helping us to be proactive because the refugee angle was not the central element of the COVID-19 story. There was also a risk of fueling xenophobia and tensions.



- Filippo Grandi and Michelle Bachelet jointly raised the alarm against xenophobia and showed how we needed an inclusive response and prevention efforts.
- It was not possible to function as we normally operate, e.g. collecting visuals became much more complicated as we had to be mindful of respecting social distancing.
- We did not want to put field colleagues under additional pressure. We rethought our approach, being mindful from the start of the risks associated with the crisis and the need to balance how we showcase the work we were doing in our communications.
- We dropped a number of communications products, we strengthened our communications, we realized at an early stage that the crisis was going beyond the health issue, e.g. SGBV concerns, the socio-economic impact, education, mental health issues.
- We used the crisis as an opportunity to advance in some of our advocacy efforts, e.g. showing PoCs as contributing, not as a burden, whether it was to make masks, to save lives such as doctors or nurses, or advocating for them to have better access to job markets.
- We also worked on collaborative models, e.g. trying to align all communications efforts with a number of initiatives taken, including SG Policy briefs.
- Now we have entered into a third phase.
- Slide 2: we have different regions impacted at a different level of the pandemic, it is important to continue talking about the COVID-19 and at the same time there is now more room to discuss about emergency that might have been neglected. At the peak of the crisis, there was no room to discuss about anything else but the pandemic.
- There seems to be some degree of improvement in some regions, but the situation can again quickly escalate, and we cannot exclude a major outbreak.
- It is also very important to keep the big picture in mind. In one hand, we need to be very active because we want to showcase what we are doing, to help in the prevention and response and on the other hand, being very cautious because it is a very fluid situation, we need to act in a very responsible manner in all our communications efforts.
- E.g. very alarmist tone can have a potential detrimental consequence with the risk of discrimination against refugees, creating a sense of panic among our PoCs, increasing tensions with communities.
- When we use words like “thousands may die”, “devastating consequences”, refugees also follow the news and it could lead to negative impacts, raised anxiety, and mental health issues.
- As a humanitarian workers community, we need to keep in mind the need to not appear as divided or uncoordinated.
- Keep in mind the different audiences, make sure that if one product works, it might not work with all the PoCs and that might have negative consequences.
- Keep in mind the importance of communicating with communities, continuously monitoring, and being aware of new issues emerging.

Dominique Hyde

- What have been some of the lessons learned in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic regarding your communication approach and how did you adjust to the pandemic?
- How you also adjusting to the decline of the media attention?

Suzanne Van Meegen

- We are still learning through the pandemic. When the pandemic started, I was working in Somalia and I am now in our office in Oslo. It is very interesting to have two different perspectives, particularly on communication. One of the key learning is the reactivity we saw



from our head offices, all of our organizations, driven by an interest in ensuring that the pandemic was gathering enough attention.

- We all had reactivity in communications effort to ensure that countries with fewer resources and humanitarian needs received enough attention. In doing so, we may have created an inherent tension and hysteria that caused a huge amount of fear in those countries.
- All of us with our organizations used words like “devastation” and “carnage” and that could be potentially hugely damaging for the populations we are working with and for our own staff, our frontline responders.
- We are all trying to create our own space, called out messages that we want to give whether we are focused on displaced people, children, or the medical world and as a result, there has been a lot of speculation about what impact will be.
- E.g. organizations raised the risk of conflicts due to the pandemic but some data shows there is in many places a reduction in violence and a reduction in displacements, both for negative and positive reasons and outcomes but we need to be clearer and careful in the coming months about how we communicate what the real issues are.
- “Everyone is going to die” is not necessarily helping us to communicate effectively including for fundraising, we should not underestimate the level of nuance that donors are now looking for.
- The feedback we have had from the field is that the pandemic is not seen as the central issue.
- The donors’ interest is still high, but they are now looking for more detail, more and new information.
- We need to be conscious that we are now seeing projections of a contraction, up to 20 billion or trillion dollars over the next year and next two years. Calling for more money to help people is not necessarily going to have an impact on donors.
- We have an opportunity, as a humanitarian community to look for solutions and messaging that will pick up on some of the Grand Bargain commitments. Looking at making sure that humanitarian money is spent more effectively, showing that we are a professional sector, we are not just chasing money, we are looking at the best possible ways to spend the money for the people we are trying to serve.

Dominique Hyde

- How do we manage the dilemma of striking a balance between the need to communicate and fundraise as well as follow the Do No Harm principle?

Suzanne Van Meegen

- The timing of the COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter movement has given us all reason to reflect and interrogate our ways of working.
- We are under a lot of pressure to fundraise, but the context also forces us to examine when we do have money, how we are spending it. How we are working towards reform in a way that does not become paralyzed by the idea of just keep focusing on fundraising and do what we have always done.
- COVID-19 should absolutely be our opportunity as a community to say this can happen but the changes we make do not have to stop here. This should be the reason we change our ways of working entirely.
- Communications needs to be more driven by feedback from our colleagues in the field or country offices and tapped into the mood and the interest of those countries.



- There is still a huge appetite for media that would support the positive portrayal of displaced people within those countries. We can still do a huge amount of good; it is not about money, but it is about positive portrayal within the countries we are working in.

Dominique Hyde

- What are your ideas for better coordination on communication and fundraising when facing a crisis? What could we do better together?

Suzanne Van Meegen

- Every agency has its own goals and pressure to fundraise. The issues like COVID-19 can bring out the worst in us as agencies. We hustle and elbow each other out of the space to make ourselves as relevant as possible and to try to show that what we are doing is the most important. In an ideal space, we would be able to let that go and say, we as NRC do not do health, we are not health experts and this x organization is the one that needs to be prioritized now.
- As a collective, we could at least concentrate some collective messages to our donors and to other partners on our need for example for multiyear, unearmarked, and flexible funding.
- The fact that our frontline responders can get in and respond quickly has been a positive example through the COVID-19, that might not seem very interesting, but it has saved lives.
- It is a good investment regarding our communication because it is shifting the way we work rather than just repeating the same old thing.

Dominique Hyde

- Could we have your perspective in a hugely competitive environment on how do you strike the balance between the need to communicate and fundraise but also being careful on not using the PoCs that we all served in a negative way and the Do No Harm principle?

Carlotta Wolf

- Do No Harm principle should prevail despite any fundraising opportunities.
- This is a global pandemic affecting all of us including our staff all over the world as well as PoCs we serve.
- Most of the PoCs are in developing countries where very often water, sanitation and health systems are weaker, and they could be more exposed.
- We recognize in all our communications that this is a global health crisis where refugees and displaced people were part of that, has anyone else.
- Due to the risk of spreading panic among the refugees and our staff, we gave importance of reflecting the field perspective and we always put it into account.
- We kept in mind the risk of spreading xenophobic reactions and stigmatization of refugees and displaced people especially in an environment where misinformation and fake news have been a very important issue.
- From the private donor perspective, many donor countries, e.g. China, Italy, Japan, Korea were themselves struggling with the outbreak. We needed to adjust our messaging tool to consider and acknowledge that they were going through difficult times.
- Overarching messages have been that COVID-19 is affecting everyone and does not discriminate, that everyone can be safe only if everyone is safe, including the most vulnerable, i.e. refugees and displaced population.
- We highlighted in our fundraising communication the resilience of refugees that join the fight against COVID-19 in the countries that were hosting them as well as the resilience of our staff in the field.



- Slide 3: Some examples of UNHCR's COVID-19 fundraising content, focusing on the role of refugees and the fact that it is not because of their status but because of their temporary condition of being hosted in this country that they might not have the possibility to put in place the prevention measures.
- We also put an emphasis on the socio-economic impact of the crisis. The fact that COVID-19 would affect the people who have actually the least, like refugees and displaced people who would rely on fragile income to sustain their families.
- We developed the series "Living with uncertainty" which quotes and accounts from refugees to try to emphasize the refugee's situations to the donors. E.g. being separated from their families, dealing to keep in touch with dear ones and using technology, dealing with children out of school, showing that everyone could be a refugee one day or could be in a very uncomfortable situation like the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Sharing a negative example, one of our country where we do fundraising had put out in a digital advertising a baby from South Sudan with a picture taken before COVID-19. We thought it was giving a mixed message about the COVID-19 that is not widespread in the African continent and also children were not the main population group at risk from a health perspective. We decided to remove the picture.
- We also did not raise the alarm bells for any of COVID-19 first cases in fragile environments such as Yemen, Syria, Bangladesh but tried to tone our messaging down and focus on the efforts that our staff and the refugees, the displaced and host communities were doing.
- Slide 4: The graph shows the digital fundraising results for UNHCR. 60% of the most fundraising raised happened during the first two months of the pandemic, when we launch the appeal, and it is very much aligned with the media coverage.
- The crisis is still very much a crisis, but it is a phase with a decreasing of media coverage, with the digital individual fundraising decreasing or at least there is donor fatigue.
- Agree with NRC that donors want more information, more details and a different type of approach. They want to know how we are building capacities also with the people we serve.
- From a fundraising perspective it is the time to focus on emergencies on top of this emergency, e.g. Venezuela situation, and show economic impacts of the pandemic which is affecting refugees and displaced population in partnering and collaborating closely with WHO and also WFP on the livelihoods and food insecurity angle.

Dominique Hyde

- We know that fundraising is key, we all need it. It is a balancing act, competition does exist, but we need to keep in mind that it does not come at the detriment of the people we served.
- It is key to our communication to always tuned our colleagues in the countries they are serving and to hear the local sensitivities when it comes to our communication.
- We can be successful despite the competition, Carlotta mentioned WFP, WHO, Suze talked about NGOs on the health side, we need to be rallying around common themes and coming together to have a collective push. Especially as the situation evolves and it is also what donors want to hear.
- With the COVID-19, we can see how we can attract attention to more neglected emergencies, e.g. Sahel and focus on much larger consequences, whether on SGBV, education, social-economic impacts.



Q&A

ICVA

- A practical question around how your communications work. How do you decide on the correct message? Do you consult your protection colleagues for example? Do you consult the persons of concerns directly or it is based on survey? I would like to understand a bit more the practice of how you select key messages.
- Are there any mechanism at field regional or global levels to look at the exchange and collaboration and communications between UNHCR and NGOs that could help to seek alignment or if no alignment, at least avoid unintended consequences?

Cecile Pouilly

- The first question is very useful, first it was a challenge for the entire organization, we had a management cell put in place where we discuss all the issues we were facing and that helped to define the final communication strategy.
- We were synchronized with the field. Colleagues told us that the biggest concern is not health, it is also the socio-economic impacts, e.g. in Lebanon, our colleagues quickly told us that the impact was huge with people started skipping meals, losing their job, it was massive.
- A constant flow of information circulated between field-HQ, HQ-field and we looked at the risks we had, where some risks were exacerbated by the crisis or nearest to emerged. We tailor it and adjusted it into our communication thinking. It was a very fluid process and we had coordinated meetings at a daily basis.
- Packaging was shared with communications teams on the ground and our colleagues in the field feed into the thinking.
- You have to be extremely careful in the way you communicate, or you might make the security situation for colleagues worse. Remembering incidents in South Sudan, in West Africa with colleagues being told they are spreading the virus.
- It has been quite a challenge, but we learned a lot from listening our colleagues on the ground at the local and regional levels. We also learned from colleagues in Asia who were the first one impacted on how they adjust to the situation, what were the challenges they were facing, and we tried to share good practices with other colleagues.
- One simple tool that we put in place very quickly was a board (a platform) and we did ask all our colleagues to reflect on key messages. We have now a list of answers to complicated questions, key messages, an extensive Q&A for the colleagues worldwide and that work continues.
- We prepared a risk analysis which we shared with our colleagues and also listed for them a number of preparedness measures they could take to help mitigate those risks. E.g. we asked our colleagues to document the social-economic impacts and then moving into communication on that particular concern.
- Colleagues use the board depending on their own regional needs. Not every single risk would apply to every single operation. They had to do their own analysis.

Carlotta Wolf

- From the fundraising perspective, we liaise and give guidance, key messages, updated content to our network of fundraisers in the different countries where we do fundraising in 36 markets.
- We make sure that the same guidelines and messages are also shared to the fundraisers, at least to the private sector fundraising.



- Messages have to be aligned but they are not exactly the same, we have to adjust them through the fundraising angle.
- We give examples both of messages and content for colleagues to use when talking with the donors in an effective manner, keeping always at the center to the protection and the safeguard of the people we serve and of our staff in the field.

Suzanne Van Meegen

- We found two aspects particularly helpful and it took us a while to build momentum on it. Regarding coming up with our messages, one aspect was to determine what would be the barriers to people in the field in receiving the assistance they would need, in the case of a COVID escalation. We saw a lot of borders started to close, we were concerned about stigma and we used those concerns to inform most of our communications at the country and the global levels and our communication with donors. Our messaging was informed by our key advocacy objectives.
- There is a second aspect, speaking from the Somalia perspective. In the first week of identification of cases in Somalia, we conducted a survey of 82 different displaced communities and asked community leaders whether they have heard of COVID-19 and what they understood about it. The overwhelming feedback we got from communities was that they were receiving messages, but they were not being provided with an opportunity to engage with that messaging and to understand it, to ask questions. We started partnering with local radio stations to set up panels where displaced people could be part of the panel or could have access to phones to call in and ask questions.