

Applying humanitarian standards to the global COVID-19 response

Engaging with migrants during quarantine Lessons from Peru

Summary

Border closures, travel restrictions and quarantine during the COVID-19 crisis has prevented humanitarian agencies from reaching many people who need support. A WhatsApp business line was successfully piloted by the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) in Peru to facilitate remote community engagement.

Key question

How can we listen and answer to communities when we cannot be physically close to them? How can commitments on community engagement, participation and feedback in Sphere standards be fulfilled under quarantine conditions?

Humanitarian standards

Humanitarian response requires effective communication, participation and feedback to ensure interventions are appropriate and relevant ([Core Humanitarian Standard Commitments 1 and 4](#)). Creativity and innovation are needed to replace traditional methods of community engagement, such as group discussions or face-to-face meetings, where they are impeded by travel restrictions and the need for social distancing.

Engaging with migrants in the Andean Region

Since 2015, the Americas region has experienced a surge in migration flows from Venezuela and by late 2019, there were almost 5 million migrants and refugees. As the numbers continue to rise, so do the needs of migrants and host communities. When COVID-19 reached the region in early 2020, the migratory flows changed: those that were once directed from south to north and from west to east changed from north to south and east to west. Agencies were not prepared for new movements and social service support networks were weak. The spread of the virus exacerbated migrant populations' vulnerability due to their instability, precarious informal incomes, overcrowding, lack of sanitation, language barriers and lack of access to health care.

"Where there are already feelings of xenophobia and discrimination towards people in situations of human mobility, an increase in stigmatisation and exclusion of the population is expected with the spread of the virus", reads an [IFRC situation report from April 2020](#). "Refugees and migrants are often the first to be stigmatised and unfairly blamed for the spread of diseases."

Peru is one of the countries most affected by coronavirus in the region. To reduce transmission of the virus, borders were closed, quarantine imposed, and people were unable to move freely. For migrants and refugees, this disrupted their livelihoods and cut them off from their support networks - including humanitarian agencies. The IFRC country team in Lima and the Peruvian Red Cross had to suspend mobile clinics and social inclusion activities for migrants and refugees from the first week of March 2020.

[Prior research](#) by IFRC and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) within [the regional platform of response to Venezuelan migrants "R4V"](#) had identified the WhatsApp mobile application as the best suited for maintaining communications and engagement with their target group (78% of Venezuelan migrants in Peru have cell phones, 81% have access to the internet and 99% prefer to use WhatsApp to receive information). The WhatsApp 'business line' provided remote assistance to migrants affected by the COVID-19 crisis, by answering questions about the pandemic, providing key information to promote preventive behaviour, and identifying, monitoring and addressing rumours or fake news. The business line was promoted via digital media and women influencers, specifically migrant mothers who promoted the line in their own social media accounts.

The business line had two staff online to manage communications, with medical staff on call to provide technical support. During its first four months, 25,000 WhatsApp messages related to COVID-19 symptoms and economic aid were sent to 1,254 users. The business line has proven to be an effective tool to provide key information, creating a reliable two-way communication channel that is accessible and easily adaptable - integrating new information needs, different languages, voice messaging for the blind, SMS for those without internet - evolving on the basis of feedback provided by the target audience.

The IFRC soon found that the line could also provide remote support to non-health programmes and based on feedback received, they rapidly adapted their intervention strategy to address the exclusion of their clients from the public social protection measures announced by the Peruvian Government. The new IFRC strategy included cash transfer, hygiene kits and remote emotional support.

“Implementing a two-way communication tool helped to strength programme transparency”, said Melissa Monzón, IFRC Peru. “People knew they had a channel they could go to in case they had doubts or questions about the programme. Having a WhatsApp line meant having a direct link to the Red Cross, which helped to increase trust. The line also serves as a channel to receive reports or complaints about the programme.”

Sharing accurate, timely, understandable and accessible information strengthens trust, deepens levels of participation and improves the impact of a project. It is key to being transparent. IFRC’s WhatsApp line is a good example of a feedback mechanism which can be used to ensure that a humanitarian response is based on communication, participation and feedback (CHS Commitment 4).

Lessons

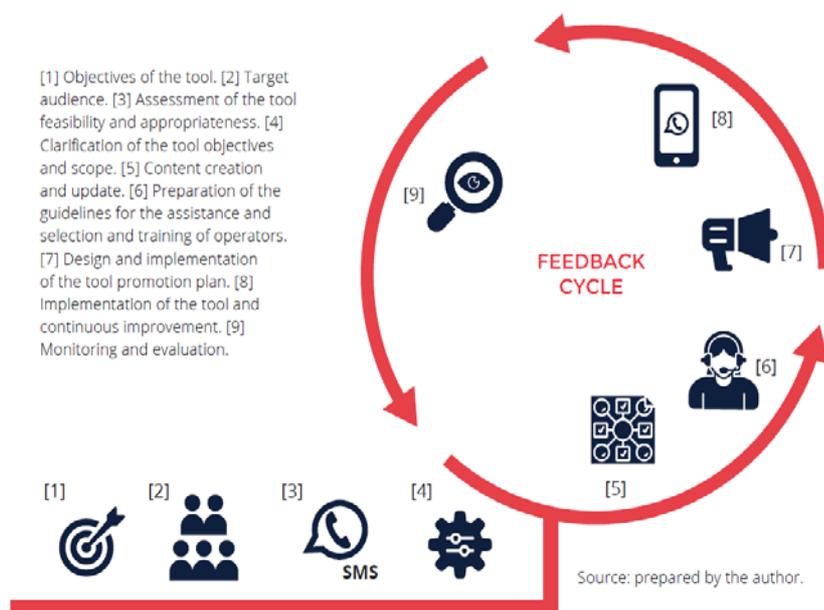
1. The IFRC case study offers many practical tips, including a checklist of essential preconditions for successful application of the WhatsApp methodology. Internet access for users is important. IFRC are considering piloting free hotspots in strategic locations for their target groups.
2. Establishing a database of frequently asked questions (FAQ) ensured efficiency and consistency of messages. It was important to maintain fluid communication between the business line operators and the Operations Team so that timely decisions and programme adjustments could be made.
3. The speed and reliability of responses available to users via the business line quickly built trust and a sense of transparency.

Resources

- The IFRC case study: [Covid-19/Migration WhatsApp Business Line](#) and [Feedback Starter Kit](#)
- Read the [Sphere guidance on COVID-19 response](#) and [CaLP’s guidance on cash assistance](#)

For more information:

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Process for developing IFRC's WhatsApp business line. Source: IFRC