

THE CURVE

**How might we
use communications
to encourage physical
distancing in developing
countries?**

Purpose of this document

COVID-19 is a ‘once-in-a-century’ pandemic.¹ As countries around the world wrestle with the issue of how best to contain the virus, physical distancing (or social distancing, as it is often referred to) has emerged as one of the leading public health recommendations for limiting infection rates.² Developed and developing countries alike are adopting this as a policy, as seen through a succession of state- and country-wide ‘lockdowns’ and ban on mass gatherings.

Physical distancing is essential in areas where public health systems are weaker and access to healthcare is more limited. And yet, population density in informal settlements, low literacy levels and poor WASH facilities mean that it is in precisely these areas that physical distancing is hard to achieve.

This guide is the product of a one-hour virtual working session, hosted by The Curve and attended by leading practitioners, donors and civil servants working in developing countries across the world. It outlines **9 pragmatic ways** in which public health **communications might promote both the understanding of, and adherence to, physical distancing measures** in developing countries.

This document is not intended to be an exhaustive study or a complete answer to the question. Rather, it is a contribution to a vibrant sector-wide discussion including publications and perspectives by the [Hygiene Hub](#) and many others (see References and Literature Overview). The following recommendations is a set of pragmatic advice based on the contributors’ experience that is intended to complement and invigorate the broader conversation.

¹ Bill Gates, ‘Responding to COVID-19 – A Once-in-a-Century Pandemic?’, The New England Journal of Medicine (2020)

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ‘What is social distancing?’ (2020)

9 Recommendations for Effective Communications

All communications should seek to convey the seriousness of the threat presented by COVID-19, whilst also increasing peoples' perceived ability to take actions to protect themselves. The 9 steps below relate to encouraging physical distancing, but they contain lessons that can be applied to other health policies, such as the use of face masks.

1

Break advice down into simple steps

Often, physical distancing is an unclear concept and people lack a practical understanding of how to follow this advice. The importance of simplifying key messages becomes even more essential in a crisis when we are less able to process information.³

It is therefore essential to translate advice to 'physically distance' into simple actionable steps that increase understanding of what physical distancing actually means. These steps should be communicated in clear and simple terms that are specific to the circumstances where physical distancing is contextually constrained.

Individual steps like staying 2-metres apart, making essential trips only, and avoiding mass gatherings helps bring to life how physical distancing is enacted in different circumstances. For example, holding ones hands together in *Namaste* – as is popular in countries like India – has been widely [offered as an alternative](#) greeting to handshakes, hugs and kisses.

2

Visualisation is key

A picture can say a thousand words – in the info-demic, powerful images cut through in ways that words often cannot. Simple and direct visuals can bring to life not only *how* to physically distance but also *why* physical distancing matters. [This matchstick](#) demonstration succinctly conveys the importance of physical distancing in limiting contagion.

³ Radley Yeldar, 'The psychology of communicating in a crisis' (2020)

However, images are only effective if they feel relevant to their audience. Repurposing stock imagery of people clearly not from the locality risks alienating populations already distrustful of global public health advice further. Engaging people with relatable characters that look like them and reflect their own experience is key.

For example, in their cartons, [Stay Safe Africa](#) makes a concerted effort to represent the audiences to whom they are speaking .

3 Nudge nudge

People may intend to physically distance from one another, but can forget to apply this at the right moments in the day to day life, especially when it is not a habit or when panic sets in, as [this video](#) shows.

Timely reminders – or nudges – can prompt people to follow guidelines in critical moments and locations. Visual prompts – such as markers on the floor and spacing of benches – are often more effective than written messaging because of the they make correct behaviour intuitive. One study in Bangladesh showed that painting footprints on the path between the toilet and the handwashing facility increased handwashing behaviour by 64% in schools.⁴

At the village level, nudges can include rota systems for collecting water, or markers for spacing on the ground at bore holes.

Nudges should be articulated in a metric that carries meaning. For example, supermarkets are encouraging people to stay ‘one trolley’s length’ apart, and in Canada, guidelines from Yukon’s Department of Health advised residents to keep the distance of four ravens – the official bird of the territory.

4 Contextualised messaging

Health advice risks being rejected if it is not sensitive to local realities, audiences and customs. During the Easter weekend, [many attended religious ceremonies](#) in churches despite this being at odds with physical distancing guidelines in many countries.

⁴ Dreibelbis R, Kroeger A, Hossain K, Venkatesh M, Ram PK. Behavior Change without Behavior Change Communication: Nudging Handwashing among Primary School Students in Bangladesh.

Elsewhere, many have [opted to ignore](#) advice to ‘stay at home’ as starvation through loss of income presents a greater threat to their lives than COVID-19.

Therefore, health advice should be adapted to cultural realities, aimed at teaching people how to do distancing in ways that suit their context. Making the advice more achievable encourages higher adherence rates. ‘Social isolation circles’ in small villages and refugee camps offer a practical alternative where full isolation isn’t possible.

Not only this, but messages should be co-created with people from within the target audiences who are best placed to understand the limitations and mobilise community networks. When done in this way, it becomes possible to work alongside religious and community leaders in order to leverage the value and belief systems within communities and create engaging messages.

In Pakistan “*Khair Khwah*” (*trans*: ‘well-wisher’) developed a [TV commercial](#) encouraging Pakistanis to socially distance during Eid. To do so, it identified passages in the Quran that celebrated those who act to save the lives of others, connecting them to the specific act of praying from home.

In another example, the Mexican government’s COVID-19 [social media campaign](#) is led by a cartoon superhero – *Susana Distancia*. Her name is a play in Spanish, meaning “Your-Healthy Distance”.

5

Celebrate positive deviance

People take cues from others to understand what is socially acceptable, and adapt to fit in. Celebrating those who adhere to physical distancing advice helps publicise and popularize these behaviours, particularly if celebrities or community and religious leaders act as role-models. Over time, this will help to create a new social norm around physical distancing that increases motivation for others to engage in this behaviour and follow advice.

This has been the case in China where a market research company has shown that face masks were a fashion amongst young people, long before the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby meaning that mask usage was very high when this was introduced as guidance.⁵

⁵ Mintel, ‘Trending in China: Facial masks with cleaning functions’ (2018)

6

Inspire people to act for the sake of others, not just themselves

Aware that for them, COVID-19 is less of a health threat, many young people aren't motivated to physically distance for their own protection.⁶ Motivations to adhere to physical distancing measures declines over time, especially as the mental health effects of separation from friends and family are felt.

Framing distancing as in the service of others inspires people to adhere to measures that they otherwise may not take to protect themselves alone. Drawing on the idea that physical distancing protects your grandparents, sick family and others, leverages a feeling of collective responsibility to act. Communications can compound this responsibility by sharing stories of those who are vulnerable or sick thanking their communities for physically distancing for their sake. In developing countries, communications can rally individuals to protect the household or the village, leveraging this as the unit of change.

In a [Pakistani TV commercial](#) by *Khair Khwah*, young people were encouraged to physically distance for the sake of their elders during Eid by using passages in the Quran that celebrated those who act to save the lives of others. In [another video](#), they emphasized the fact that the virus does not discriminate, and that all of us are at risk.

7

Distinguish between physical distancing and Social confinement

Many people mistakenly feel that physical distancing equals social confinement, leading them to abandon the practice after a short time or dismiss it altogether.

Communications should be careful in its language. *Physical distancing* as a term is preferred over *social distancing* because of the way in which the latter wrongly implies that social connections are cut off. Similarly, the term *shielding* encapsulates the physical distancing element, whilst also conveying that this is an act carried out to protect others as well as oneself.

Messaging should focus on the opportunities provided by, and positive consequences of, physical distancing – rather than dwelling on the freedoms that have been lost. Where

⁶ Larua Foster, 'Coronavirus: Young men 'more likely to ignore lockdown' BBC (2020)

relevant, highlight opportunities to listen to new radio shows or connect digitally with people through discounted phone credit that many companies are offering.

Similarly, communications should emphasise that mass gatherings can be conducted online. For example, religious leaders can conduct services over radio or online. A good example of this is MTV Shuga's [Alone Together series](#), which shows friends from Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire connect via video calls as they navigate their 'new normal' under COVID-19. This engaged people with relatable characters, educated them with messaging that resonates with their own experiences and also directed viewers, via a microsite, to the WHO WhatsApp line for further information and advice.



Leverage trusted voice and community networks

Established community leaders and networks can give credibility to health messages and help with information dissemination, ultimately increasing adherence rates. For example, in Uganda religious leaders have played an active role in promoting the acceptance of routine immunization against Tetanus, Diphtheria, HPV and other diseases.⁷

They can also help navigate complex realities on the ground and co-create messaging and advice that is sensitive to cultural and religious customs. In this way, engaging trusted voices also reduces confusion and misinformation through increasing message consistency.

- Equipping [traditional healers](#) with accurate information on COVID-19 and best-practice advice can prevent mistreatment.
- [Religious leaders](#) can broadcast messages, identify scriptures to support them, and reconcile health advice with religious beliefs. They are well positioned to prevent mass gatherings by encouraging people to stay at home, pray in solitude, postpone celebrations such as weddings.
- [Town unions](#) can be an effective channel for localising messages and penetrating hard to reach audiences.
- [Celebrity voices](#) can role model positive behaviours at scale. The [Africa United](#) campaign shows how football stars and other celebrities can have a huge role in inspiring positive change.

⁷ UNICEF, 'The Role of Religious Leaders in Promoting Routine Immunisation' (n.d.)



Build resilience to misinformation

Myths and misinformation often undermine motivations to physically distance by reducing perceptions of risk. Not only that, but the prevalence of misinformation often makes it hard to know which messages to trust, especially when faith in governments and the media is low.

If possible, populations should be educated on the nature of misinformation and the problem it creates in layman's terms. In the UK, the BBC has led [informative campaigns](#), which can be adapted for other contexts. This will reinforce the efforts by many social media platforms to tackle misinformation at the source.

Where separate misinformation campaigns are not possible, or social media platforms not widely used, physical distancing messages should be disseminated through already trusted authorities such as town chiefs and unions. Equally, catchy physical distancing messages may encourage these to be repeated and spread through word-of-mouth more widely than misinformation and rumours.

Given the scale of misinformation and 'fake news' surrounding COVID-19, we welcome further suggestions about how best this can be tackled.

With thanks to...

Abi Gleek, Every1 Mobile

Adolor Asiri, CCSI Nigeria

Amina Dorayi, Pathfinder

Aminu Sudawa, Kano SPHCDA

Andy Wright, M&C Saatchi

Anne Palaia, USAID

Anton Schneider, USAID

Benson Ohemu, Society for Family Health

Bolade Ogunfuye, MTV Staying Alive

Caroline Enye, Global Affairs Canada

Cecilia Angelone, Pathfinder

Cecilia Orvañanos, Population Media Centre

Charlotte Neil, DFID

Christina Synowiec, Results for Development

Comfort Booth, BMGF

David Olayemi, CS-SUNN

Diksha Radha Krishnan, Ashoka

Elizabeth Serlemitsos, JHU

Emeka Okafor, Society for Family Health

Eva Jimenez, CAWST

Eva Manzano, CAWST

Farouk Musa, Society for Family Health

Femi Owoeye, BMGF

Habiba Mohamed, CIDT

Jarret Cassaniti, JHU

Jenny Sequeira, BMGF

John Dada, Malaria Consortium

Katja Schiller Nwator, BMGF

Maryam Buhari-Shehu, Dangote Foundation

Mohammad Jalloh, Focus 1000

Mohammed M. Alhaji, Solina Group

Namrata Tomar, Dimagi India

Olufunke Fasawe, CHAI Nigeria

Purnima Mehrotra, Ashoka

Rachel Faulkenberry, Harvard

Raihanah Ibrahim, Solina Group

Rebecka Lundgren, The Learning Collaborative

Reshma Trasi, Pathfinder

Ritika Pandey, IPE Global

Robert Hornik, Annenberg School

S Sri Krishnan, Dimagi India

Sada Danmusa, M Space

Sam Gil English, CAWST

Sohail Agha, BMGF

Stanley Ukpai, dRPC

Supriya Sadagopan, Results for Development

Toyin Akomolafe, dRPC

Ugo Osigwe, AFENET

Usman Garba, Kaduna SPHCDA

Victoria Agbara, DAI

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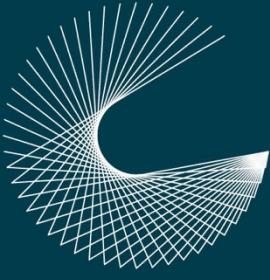
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