



Building capacity of the university communities in Cameroon to prevent COVID-19

BACKGROUND

When Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) was first detected and reported in Cameroon in March 2020, the government, through the Ministry of Health, quickly designed and implemented strategies to contain the pandemic. These included restrictions of social events and limitation of in-person interactions in the early phase of the pandemic, and subsequently vaccination against COVID-19. This disrupted the university community's day-to-day functioning, including in-person learning, necessitating a shift to online learning. To ensure business continuity, the universities needed to adapt their business processes and build the necessary capacity to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on education. While the spread of the virus has slowed, deaths reduced, and communities learning to live with the virus, it remains a global health emergency that requires resilient health and, in this case, education systems.

Recognizing the role Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) plays in responding to health emergencies, AFROHUN Cameroon, with support from USAID within the realms of ARPA funding and in collaboration with the government, engaged Universities and surrounding communities to design and implement an emergency preparedness and response action plan that would ensure continued learning, thereby supporting the building of institutional capacity in RCCE that had become urgent.



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APPROACH

This was a two-phase project

The first phase which happened in the early stages of the pandemic, targeted awareness creation about COVID-19 and infection prevention measures. In this phase, the focus was on the general materials that the government had designed and with a consultant, these were adapted to fit university communities' mindset and lifestyle. We learnt that seemingly small things like hairstyle can make the difference in how individuals respond to behavior change messages. An interesting debate was whether we should use real life images of actual students, faculty and support staff as opposed to illustrations/cartoons. In the end, we chose to mix both. However, due to unforeseen challenges, including long government approval protocols, we were unable to implement much of what we had designed in this phase.

The second phase started when vaccination against COVID-19 was gaining global momentum. In 2021, as the pandemic progressed, and vaccination was adopted to strengthen the fight against the pandemic, the previously developed communication materials and products were adapted to include vaccination to improve vaccine uptake in the universities and their surrounding communities. This was done in collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Public Health, and national partners engaged in COVID-19 RCCE. So, this phase of our work, supported through the US Government ARPA funding mechanism focused on addressing vaccine hesitancy to improve uptake.

This phase too involved materials adaptation and training for improved RCCE capacity.

Adaptation of Materials

It is important to note that the Government of Cameroon was already putting out mobilization messages. These were adapted and customized to university communities' needs and peculiarities. A three-day workshop was convened, bringing together faculty, USAID staff, officials from relevant government departments and agencies, implementing partners and student leaders. Existing materials were presented and discussed, and necessary adaptations suggested, discussed, and agreed on. The workshop was conducted in both French and English to ensure everyone contributes comfortably and maximally. Materials and products discussed and drafted included posters, leaflets, radio/ TV messages, messages on T-shirts and caps, bags, and other materials.

To ensure fast turn-around of drafts, a graphic designer was resident at the workshop venue to capture the changing thinking and present the revisions as soon as they would be ready.

The presence of students in the workshop provided the much-needed understanding for framing of messages that resonate with the mindset and lifestyle of this population, while faculty that included professors were able to support framing of messages for that well-informed but vaccine-hesitant segment of the university community.

Training in RCCE

AFROHUN engaged different categories of the university community (Lecturers, students, support staff and campus radio station journalists) with a goal of equipping them with the right information on COVID-19 and appropriate prevention measures. As a first step, with the help of subject matter experts, a Training

of Trainers (ToT) was conducted for 60 lecturers from 13 public and private universities. These further trained students on COVID-19 mitigation strategies including mask wearing, hand washing, social distancing, and E-learning. A training agenda and materials were developed, and interactive exercises included to deepen understanding. Thirty students from four (three AFROHUN member institutions: University of Buea, University of Ngaoundere, Université des Montagnes and another invited partner, University of Douala), who were members of the Student One Health Innovation Club (SOHIC) participated in these trainings.

With the use of technology, online training using three webinars, six hours each, was employed to limit physical interactions. The key topics covered included: Covid-19 epidemiology and response strategies; One Health approach to disease response; Risk communication; and Community engagement.

The COVID-19 risk communication tools (radio spots, posters,) were adapted and validated by lecturers and communication students, for the university community, with the help of a COVID-19 communication specialist.

The next step involved training of university journalists. In times of new epidemics or pandemics like COVID-19, people need timely, accurate, up-to-date health information they can trust. The media and journalists are usually the first and most accessible source of such information. However, journalists are rarely trained in RCCE. AFROHUN partnered with the National One Health Platform to support the training of **25 (08 females, 17 males)** journalists of university campus radio stations and public health communicators. This aimed to improve reporting on COVID-19 and vaccine uptake, increase efficiency and minimize misinformation and rumors during the pandemic.

RESULTS

Lecturers and students gained skills in behavior change communication

A total of 48 lecturers out of the targeted 60 participated in the ToT, with a lot of enthusiasm. They were able to cascade this training to their students, which ensured continuity of learning. By April 2022, **198 (93 females, 105 males)** students were equipped with skills to conduct behavioral change communication in the universities and surrounding communities through outreaches.

“I wish to heartily thank AFROHUN for the knowledge transmitted to us, especially for the clarifications given regarding the COVID-19 vaccine, which has been a subject of great controversy. This training was very practical, especially the role play exercises. I gained a lot of knowledge on practical steps in carrying out risk communication in the community. I really look forward to putting these skills acquired into practice during COVID-19 vaccination campaigns on campus”
- **Djogang Manuella Sandra, University of Douala, Clinical Biology student.**

“After the training, we organized a training session to engage more students on communication strategies and techniques. After that, we organized a communication activity in July 2022 on vaccination against Covid-19” - **Nsangou Mbang George, University of Douala.**

Resource mobilization for the dissemination of COVID-19 prevention IEC materials

The full-time presence of the representatives of the National Zoonotics Program was a firm indication of the interest the Program had in the process and the products. As a result, the Program financially contributed to the production of some of the materials to the tune of USD 10,000 when it became clear that AFROHUN funds would not be able to cover all that had been drafted.

The adapted Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials were printed and distributed to the university members of AFROHUN (University of Buea, University of Ngaoundere, Université des Montagnes).

Below are some of the physical promotional materials developed for outreach purposes to educate target audiences around campuses about COVID-19.



Journalists were equipped with accurate information on COVID-19 prevention

Audio messages on COVID-19 prevention were shared through radio stations. Some of the journalists have applied the knowledge learned, as seen in their articles, radio editions and television spots. The collaboration between Journalists and public health communicators was strengthened, recognizing ways they might help each other in their communication efforts.

“One of the things I learned from this training was how to use the immense possibilities of new technologies to keep up with the topics I cover as a journalist. Being able to provide accurate information is a constant challenge for the journalist, and the RCCE training has equipped me to meet this challenge. I have also mastered the One Health approach - having to look at the problem of zoonoses and their treatment in a holistic manner” –**Jean AMOUGOU, community journalist**



Lessons learned and recommendations

Responding to epidemics such as COVID-19 requires a deliberate strategy and meaningful partnerships. Unifying risk communication messaging across partners is critical in fighting misinformation and disinformation during times of crisis and public health emergencies. The skills obtained through this training will continue to be a resource in other epidemics such as Ebola and Monkeypox. Building an adaptable preparedness and response plan that caters for both the technological infrastructure and risk communication will go a long way in ensuring minimal disruption of learning.

ABOUT AFROHUN

Africa One Health University Network (AFROHUN) is an international network, currently in 28 higher education institutions of public health, veterinary medicine, pathobiology, environmental sciences, medicine and global health, in 10 countries in Africa. The countries are *Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Liberia, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda*.

AFROHUN is working to transform the training environment and approaches in universities and allied institutions in Africa, to develop a One Health workforce: a workforce with no disciplinary boundaries. AFROHUN is building a workforce with competency to predict, detect and respond to the kind of complex health challenges we are witnessing today. To achieve this transformation, we are reviewing curricula, designing new and exciting experiential learning multidisciplinary training programs, re-tooling teachers and trainers, educating communities on existence and transmission of zoonotic and infectious diseases, while engaging national and sub-national governments to integrate One Health into national policy and strategic planning.

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