Improved access to public health information: More effective responses to COVID-19 in the MENA region

Policy brief - September 2021

Maharat

This policy brief is the result of series of discussions organized by Maharat and EuroHealthNet, with journalists, government representatives and civil society organisations. The brief stresses the link between public information, public health, and inequality and presents recommendations for three main stakeholders, including journalists and the media, policy makers and civil society organisations. The recommendations emanated from the participants in these discussions.

Key messages:

- Policy makers should ensure citizens' fundamental right to access to public health information so that they can make informed decisions about their health and wellbeing, particularly in times of health crisis.

- Policy makers should adopt COVID-19 mitigation measures in line with current international standards, and enact laws that protect and promote access to information when dealing with health issues.

- Policy makers should provide quality health services and enhance public communication regarding health measures and services, with a particular focus on reaching disadvantaged groups.

- Journalists, civil society and scientists must play a key role in efforts to share accurate information with the public and hold governments accountable.

Public Information, Public Health, and Inequality: What's the link?

Ensuring the free circulation of accurate and understandable information is essential to supporting public health infrastructure, ending the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and managing future health crises. As enshrined the Constitution of the World Health Organization, "The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition".

To control health crises, government health bodies (such as ministries of health), can work with the media (including independent and citizen journalists) and civil society actors to ensure that accurate epidemiological statistics and recommended public health measures (informed by the latest international guidelines) are widely shared with the population. This information can allow people to make informed decisions about their health and help slow outbreaks.

A special issue of the Maharat Magazine highlighted how access to information and challenges of misinformation were handled during the pandemic. Cases from Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon, Algeria and Egypt are profiled. Read more here:
http://magazine.maharat-news.com/accesstoinformationcoronaenglish

During the COVID-19 crisis, access to vital information has sometimes been restricted. New laws or measures have been introduced which criminalise publishing of certain information, ostensibly to stop the spread of misinformation. However, doctors, journalists, activists, and civil society members have been summoned for investigation or jailed due to application of the new measures and laws without any transparency and public accountability.

A general lack of verified information and trusted messengers has encouraged further proliferation of misinformation about the pandemic and exacerbated issues of trust in public institutions. This in turn has affected compliance with internationally recognised practices to prevent COVID-19 transmission, such as mask-wearing, social distancing, and vaccination. **Working in alliance with investigative journalists, civil society actors and other public health advocates can help identify and stop the proliferation of fake news, helping to save lives.**

Simultaneously, COVID-19 has had disproportionately negative impacts across all population groups, causing much greater illness, death, and loss of income in impoverished and marginalised groups. Members of those groups may also have lower levels of literacy and less access to information in general. This imbalance makes it more important than ever to improve public communication, fight disinformation, and make specific outreach efforts to vulnerable groups, ensuring their access to health services and accurate, transparent, health information.

The following recommendations and case studies offer inspiration and suggestions for action.

What can policymakers do…

To fight disinformation:

● Facilitate access to transparent and accurate public health information and statistics to share with journalists and the general public

● Prioritize health over political agendas, especially in conflict zones where trust in public authorities is lacking

● Enact or implement access to information laws, where not already in place

To ensure effective public communication:

● Prevent and avoid victim blaming or stigmatization in public health communication

● Adopt tailored communication approaches based on defining target audiences and building trust

● Design contextualized and integrated messages, understanding social habits and needs

● Engage communities in development and implementation of emergency preparedness plans

● Engage with all actors who can contribute to enabling societies to feel safe, including journalists, civil society actors, and other community leaders and influencers

● Monitor and evaluate communication strategies

To protect national and public health security while respecting civil rights:

● Mitigate the impact of states of emergency and other health security measures on human and civil rights

● Continue pursuing reforms related to access to information, freedom of expression, transparency and improvement of citizen participation in spite of health emergencies

● Adopt clear and transparent policies for COVID-19 monitoring and tracking technologies and protect citizens health data

● Adopt necessary measures to help ensure safety of health care professionals and other essential workers providing care (e.g., ensuring supply of sufficient protective equipment in healthcare settings)

To support the role of the media in reporting on COVID-19 and public health measures:

- Acknowledge the role of investigative journalists in providing important public health information with the public

- Cooperate with the media to provide public health information in a timely manner

- Review laws, including libel and defamation laws, which would restrict journalists from effectively doing their job

- Adopt necessary measures to help ensure safety of journalists and end impunity for crimes committed against journalists

To improve outreach and engagement with underserved populations:

- Consider the specific needs of refugees and migrants in the health emergency to comply with mitigation measures (e.g., access to clean water to ensure hygiene)

- Develop tailored approaches to communicating with underserved populations

What can journalists and the media do…

To fight disinformation:

- Increase factchecking skills and use of factchecking to debunk misinformation related to public health

- Act responsibly and refrain from using sensational titles and inaccurate information

- Maintain communication channels with public sources and crosscheck public information

- Support translation of factchecking tools and resources into Arabic to increase their availability to all journalists and media outlets

- Improve data journalism skills to understand, analyse, simplify and visusalize data and numbers

- Collaborate with scientists and credible health experts to improve reporting on scientific health information

- Collaborate and join other efforts, including cross border efforts, to increase the presence, outreach and role of journalists and factcheckers in debunking misinformation (especially since a lot of misinformation is shared across borders)

To ensure effective public communication:

- Provide information to local communities in accessible way (not using a tone of blaming or preaching)
- Adopt more localized media campaigns
- Help improve health literacy and public awareness through effective reporting on public health matters

To protect national and public health security while respecting civil rights:

- Monitor public health security measures to hold decision-makers accountable
- Ensure the protection and safety of journalists covering COVID-19-related stories
- Reveal violations of human rights and civil liberties related to COVID-19 measures

To support the role of the media in reporting on COVID-19 and public health measures:

- Cooperate with other investigative journalists to publish and disseminate investigations widely through common spaces and platforms
- Facilitate exchange of resources and information with other investigative journalists
- Enhance relationships with human rights organisations and international associations to access reliable data and information
- Increase capacity building programmes to strengthen the skills and knowledge of investigative journalism
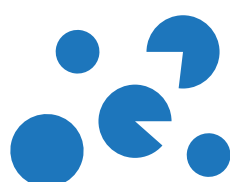
To improve outreach and engagement with underserved populations:

- Prepare content targeting refugees and underserved communities with the aim of raising their awareness and providing evidence-based information and specifically debunk misinformation and rumours which may be targeting certain communities
- Work with representatives of underserved communities to see what kind of content and information they need

---

What can NGOs, civil society actors and community leaders do…

To fight disinformation:

- Increase media literacy (including digital media literacy) initiatives to foster community trust in quality journalism.
- Engage more actively with factchecking platforms to debunk misinformation being disseminated among local communities, including the most vulnerable.

To ensure effective public communication:

- Support engagement between policymakers and local communities

- Listen to local communities and understand ways to appropriately inform risk communication and public health measures

- Increase engagement with journalists and other public actors to enhance effectiveness of public communication efforts

To protect national and public health security while respecting civil rights:

- Monitor civil rights violations related to COVID-19 mitigation measures

- Lead and support local and cross-border advocacy campaigns to urge policymakers to adopt COVID-19 mitigation measures which are sensitive to human and civil rights

To support the role of the media in reporting on COVID-19 and public health measures:

- Advocate for increased protection and a supportive ecosystem for investigative journalists to conduct their work

- Work with policymakers and journalists to facilitate establishment of data centres to enhance and assist investigative journalism work

- Advocate for wider financial support to investigative journalists in the region

To improve outreach and engagement with underserved populations:

- Facilitate discussions with underserved communities to understand their information needs, preferences, and sources

- Engage with key community members to disseminate evidence-based information and raise awareness

- Increase (digital) media literacy initiatives and support for citizen journalists

---

The evidence: Case Studies and Useful Resources

Build Back Fairer: Achieving Health Equity in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

The Regional Commission on the Social Determinants of Health was established by the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office in 2019 to review health inequities in the region. In their executive summary, published in March 2021, they provide recommendations on how to reduce inequalities related to many areas of regional concern, including:

- COVID-19
- Conflict and forced migration
- Economic crises and employment
- Culture and society, including gender equity and religious norms
- Climate change and the natural and built environment
- Governance and health systems for health equity

Find out more

EU DisinfoLab:

EU DisinfoLab is a young independent NGO focused on researching and tackling sophisticated disinformation campaigns targeting the EU, its member states, core institutions, and core values. They have put together "Covid 19 Resource Hub", essential resources for those interested in tackling the coronavirus infodemic. On this page, you can find information on what the online platforms are doing to combat coronavirus mis— and disinformation. You can find content on the narratives, trends, and strategies defining the infodemic. Moreover, they have dedicated sections on free tools to use, commentary on the infodemic, as well as its impact on our societies.

Read more: https://www.disinfo.eu/coronavirus/

The #CoronaVirusFacts / #DatosCoronaVirus Alliance:

Led by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at the Poynter Institute, unites more than 100 fact-checkers around the world in publishing, sharing and translating facts surrounding the new coronavirus. The CoronavirusFacts database is updated daily. Members use simple tools to collaborate on this massive crowdsourcing project: a shared spreadsheet and instant messaging apps. This international collaboration has allowed members to respond faster and reach larger audiences and is the largest collaborative project ever launched in the fact-checking world.

Find out more: https://www.poynter.org/coronavirusfactsalliance/

COMBATTING MISINFORMATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

"We trust each other in our community. Someone in the village will help you or connect you with someone that can help."

A community member, Lebanon

Rooted in Trust

Many Syrians and Lebanese have a complicated relationship with trust. For both Lebanese and Syrians interviewed and surveyed within the Rooted in Trust (RiT) Project implemented in Lebanon by Internews in partnership with Maharat Foundation, trust appears most directly linked to proximity and relationship building. For both communities, strong relationships are built at the community and familial level. Such relationships are increasingly relied upon as trust in the Lebanese government and the international community has waned.

RiT used Rumor Tracking Methodology and Managing Misinformation in order to understand the information ecosystem. Social media monitoring provides the opportunity to capture data in its raw form and gives space for the unfiltered voices of the community. A social media mapping exercise precedes the social media listening to identify the main sources of rumors across different platforms and different communities. Often the most vulnerable people are the least likely to have access to the information or assistance that may be available for them.

Therefore, it is vitally important that those collecting rumors actively seek out vulnerable groups. Data was collected via online and offline platforms from the period between October 2020 and February 2021. Online platforms included social media groups and pages on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. More than 2700 rumors were collected. Offline data was collected through focus group discussions conducted with Lebanese, refugee and migrant communities across different areas in Lebanon.

Read the full report, "PEELING THE ONION: a multi-layered infodemic and its impact on trust for Syrians in Lebanon" https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/RiT_IEA_Lebanon_202102_en.pdf

About this project

About Med Dialogue

Med Dialogue for Rights and Equality is a 3-year EU-funded Technical Assistance Programme (2019-2022) with the overall objective to strengthen the role of CSOs active at the regional level in building sustainable development, regional cohesion and resilience, as well as in influencing policy-making in the Southern Neighborhood and the Euro-Meditetrranean Space.

Med Dialogue supports pilot campaigns which enhance transnational strategic skills for advocacy, facilitate coalitions and alliances between CSOs in different countries, test advocacy campaign models and exchange advocacy practices, and empower CSOs as agents for change. www.meddialogue.eu

About our campaign

Maharat Foundation, in collaboration with Euro-HealthNet, launched the 'Access to Public Health, a Key for Public Accountability and Health Equity in Times of COVID-19' campaign in January 2021. The aim of the campaign is to provide recommendations for sharing information on COVID-19 and internationally-recognized public health measures to reduce its spread. Through a series of webinars, the campaign has explored ways to enhance the space for critical expression, access to information, and monitoring accountability of national public health measures, particularly those addressing vulnerable groups. The campaign emphasizes the obligation of Arab States to protect free flow of information while implementing health measures and sensitizing journalists to report on accountability issues related to health rights.

Find out more on our websites
maharatfoundation.org
eurohealthnet.eu

i - http://magazine.maharat-news.com/accesstoinformationcoronaenglish

ii - Commission on the Social Determinants of Health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Build back fairer: achieving health equity in the Eastern Mediterranean region. World Health Organization Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, Cairo 2021
http://www.emro.who.int/media/news/report-of-the-commission-on-social-determinants-of-health-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-region.html Date accessed: 24 June 2021