

Engaging fishing communities to address the socio-cultural and behavioural risk factors that may facilitate transmission and spillover of COVID-19 (BEFA)

Project team

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Background

SARS-CoV-2 is a new type of coronavirus, causing COVID-19, a respiratory disease that was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020. Transmission and spill-over of COVID-19, as well as failure to comply with the prevention and control measures in fishing communities and cross-border fish markets is attributable to the socio-cultural and economic risky behaviors. We engaged the fishing communities to guide on the socio-cultural and behavioral risk factors that may facilitate transmission and spillover of COVID-19. Specifically, the cultural and socio-economic behavioral risk factors likely to enhance the spread and spillover of COVID-19 among fishing communities were investigated. The findings thereof were used to strengthen the fishing communities' compliance to COVID-19 management. Data were collected from actors dealing in fish businesses at Kiyindi (Lake Victoria) and Panyimur (Lake Albert) landing sites/fish markets, on the prevailing behaviors, movements, housing and general demographic factors. Under the guidance of landing site administration (including the in-charge fisheries and health officers), data were collected from transporters, loaders/off-loaders, middle men, packers, retailers, and wholesalers/buyers. While observing the COVID-19 Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs); small Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with respondents seated 2-4 meters apart to ensure physical distancing. A semi-structured questionnaire was administered to the key actors in fish business value chain and other community members. Data on socio-cultural and economic behaviors likely to enhance the spread of COVID-19 disease were gathered. Furthermore, observations and enumeration of the risky activities was done parallel to the field data collection.

The results were used to identify the risky points/stages (hotspots) within the value chain that congregate people together. Subsequently, tailored messages were designed to warn and advise actors at those specific hotspots. The messages were translated into Luganda, Alur and Runyoro to ensure easy interpretation by communities around Lake Victoria and Albert, respectively. Further to ease dissemination among fishing communities, visual-aid illustrations were made to demonstrate unacceptable and acceptable behaviors that may aid the control of COVID-19. Community-based COVID-19 management committees were established at both Panyimur and Kiyindi landing sites, trained in hand washing, provided with hand washing stations and sanitizers. A seven-member committee at each site was given terms of references (TOR) and well defined roles, among which was taking on community sensitization, identification and reporting of suspected COVID-19 cases, training other community members in effective hand washing and hygiene related issues. A fish trading App was developed and operationalized at Kiyindi to aid social distancing. COVID-19 committees were also instituted at Kiyindi and Panyimur landing sites/fish markets to take on management and prevention of COVID-19, as well as disseminating related information. The committees were given ToRs (in-line with the National Task Force) against which their operations are anchored.

Main outputs of the study

This project developed and operationalized a fish trading App, identified the COVID-19 risky segments and hotspots along the fishing value chain, developed value chain-stage specific customized messages, which can also be promoted across landing sites in Uganda. The customized messages were translated to Luganda, Runyoro and Alur, illustrated and printed in easy-to-follow formats (i.e., pictorial forms).

Main lessons from the project

- i. The actors in the fish value chain at Kiyindi and Panyimur come from a wide range of communities, and so exhibit divergent social-cultural behaviors.
- ii. Most houses in Panyimur are grass thatched, with poor ventilation, and yet they house a number of people. On average, houses in Panyimur host more persons per unit area (i.e., 2 to 11) than in Kiyindi (i.e., 2 to 5).
- iii. There are several potential hotspots for COVID-19 transmission along the fish value and supply chain. Accordingly, specific messages should be designed and communicated in a manner that benefits the target stages along the supply and value chains.
- iv. The majority of the actors in the fish value chain are early school leavers, with minimal education and ability to understand complex information. Therefore, COVID-19-related information needs to be simplified and presented in an easy to understand format (i.e., summaries and pictorials).
- v. There is limited access to smart phones at both Kiyindi and Panyimur landing sites, the scenario being more of a challenge at Panyimur than at Kiyindi.
- vi. There is willingness to take on the online fish trading App, but its actualization is limited by the minimal access to smart phones, unstable internet connections and expensive data bundles.

Wider application of the project results

- a. The formation of community-based COVID-19 management committee and providing them with Terms of References (ToRs) is an elaborate concept in this project report. This can be utilized in areas where business operations gather several people. For example, in the shopping malls, designated foods and beverages markets, schools and churches, weekly open markets, and in the management of social-cultural functions.
- b. Aware that congested business centers are characterized by individuals with high illiteracy level, careless behavior, and undefined hotspots, it is prudent to identify the hotspots along their supply chain and execution nodes and subsequently design tailored messages that are fit-for-the intended purpose. In addition, such messages should be put in an easy to interpret format (i.e., illustrations) as it were in this project.
- c. Involvement of health workers experienced in the treatment and management of COVID-19 to offer experiential-based sensitization (as it were in this project) can aid effective information flow and assimilation by the target community.
- d. Encouraging business operations that gather several people to consider online interactions with clientele without gathering with them can minimize COVID-19 transmission. However, emphasis should be put on the social-cultural integrity to build trust in online business transactions. Besides, the internet infrastructure needs to be spread widely, made affordable and reliable.