



Media & Advocacy

Media and advocacy has been one of the key components of the communication strategy for polio eradication in India, constantly evolving and adapting to the changing needs and the challenges facing the programme. The aim has been to build an atmosphere conducive for polio immunization. The media strategy has complemented other efforts to reinforce key programme messages and bring about long-term behavior change in the community to accept polio immunization.

Brand Ambassador

In 2002, UNICEF approached the most popular Bollywood star Amitabh Bachchan to be the ambassador for the polio programme in India. Since then the top celebrity has been the face of the polio programme. His appeal to the masses through TV and radio spots, beamed across the country ahead of each polio round, helped garner community support to the polio booths. The mass media campaign also figures a number of other Bollywood stars and cricketers along with Mr Bachchan.

Branding of polio IEC

Branding of all polio information, education and communication (IEC) material with bright yellow, pink and blue, consistently in every state has given a distinct and unique identity to the programme. Polio posters and banners are easily recognized by the community in any part of the country.

Logos and taglines for the programme have evolved with the changing programme needs. The first tagline being 'do boond zindagi ki', (two drops for life) to advocate with the community the importance of the two drops of polio. This was followed by 'har bachcha har bar' (every child every time) to reinforce the message of the need for repeated doses. The present 'aapka bachcha har bar' (my child each time), puts the onus on parents to protect their child against polio.

Focusing on the most vulnerable migrant and mobile populations, polio posters advocate for "where ever you go where ever you stay, ensure polio immunization (jahan bhi jao, jahan bhi raho, polio ki khurak zaroor pilao). Posters and banners with these messages are strategically displayed at border transit points along identified routes of people on the move such as at international borders posts with Nepal and Pakistan, and in states hosting construction workers and farm and industrial workers, especially from the polio endemic areas.

Before each polio round polio posters are put up in huge numbers in the polio high-risk areas to ensure the community is notified of the booth day and polio immunization week.



Advocacy with celebrities

Other than Mr Bachchan, other celebrities from the film and sports worlds have been engaged to mobilize the community. Film star Farooq Sheikh, and famous cricketers like Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi and Ravi Shastri have visited high risk areas and addressed the families who were refusing to give their children the oral polio vaccine. These interventions helped break refusal.

Bowl Out Polio

With cricket being the most popular game in India, cricket stars and teams have been engaged to endorse the message on polio immunization. International events such as the T20 series in Colombo, the India-Pakistan test series and One Day International, the India-West Indies test series, and India specific tournaments such as Ranji Trophy and IPL have all been effectively used to reinforce the message to Bowl Out Polio.

Partnership with Media

Media is a critical partner for the programme. Media reports are tracked and analyzed at the national, state, district and block levels. Advocacy meetings, briefings and field trips are ongoing to share with the media the challenges, initiatives and programme updates. These initiatives are intense in high priority areas or where rumours and community concerns need to be addressed.

A strong partnership has been built with the electronic media, especially radio, ever since the programme shifted focus to the migrant and mobile populations. Radio is the most effective way to reach people on the move. A series of capacity building workshops to weave health messages into existing entertainment programmes has been rolled out covering all private and primary radio channels across India. As a result, at the time of all polio immunization campaigns, radio jockeys remind parents of the ongoing round while they entertain their audiences with jokes, songs and drama.

Frequent engagement with editors and reporters of local and language dailies, popular among target populations, has helped counter rumours in the community and ensured positive reporting on polio.

Media Management

The Governments at the national, state and district level provide the key spokespeople to respond to and address the media. The partner agencies support governments with content and updates and help build a two-way communication channel between government and media. There are clear protocols within each partner agency as to who would respond to a media query. Not everyone speaks, and those who do stick to the messages developed with the consensus of all partners. Whether pre-empting media interest or to responding to media, the partners come to an



agreement on the response. Talking points are shared with all of the identified spokespeople. A proactive approach and consistency of response to media has helped build the polio programme's credibility.

Advocacy with Political Leaders & Others

Rotary leads political advocacy at the highest level, engaging with state heads and top level bureaucrats. The engagement of top politicians has helped send out a clear message of strong government ownership of the programme. UNICEF and partners WHO and CORE advocate with programme managers, religious leaders and institutions, community leaders, elected representatives, medical associations, medical practitioners, and small and big businesses like construction companies, brass factory owners, managers of brick kilns etc. This has helped build strong community ownership of the programme.



Local Media Workshops - Vaccine Refusals Gone

Journalists (pictured) interview locals at a UNICEF media workshop at Nashik, Maharashtra

A cavalcade of around 35 motorcycles, decked with flags and banners with polio messages, meandered its way through the narrow alleys in Bhiwandi, Maharashtra - one of the remaining polio hot spots in India. It was a 'Polio Sunday' and scores of people stood in pouring rain cheering the motorists who embarked on this journey to spread awareness on the importance of polio immunization.

Only one year earlier these very people refused polio vaccination for their children. Rumours were circulating that the oral polio vaccine caused impotency. Vaccinators were unwelcome and shooed away. The local Urdu media fed these rumor mills by running negative stories on the polio campaign and ill effects of the vaccine.

Realizing the critical role of mass media, specifically print media, in mobilizing communities and building perceptions, UNICEF and its polio partners, organized a media workshop in Nashik in Maharashtra to actively engage with the local media on polio vaccination and related issues. Building media as pi advocates is one of the key elements of strategic communication support to polio eradication efforts. The workshop focused on Hindi, Urdu and Marathi print media from Malegaon, Nashik and Bhiwandi in Maharashtra, where pockets of resistance to the polio vaccine still exist. Participating journalists were updated on polio and polio-plus issues through technical sessions, interactions with experts as well as visits to the community. The workshop evoked a good response from participants who committed their active support in the massive effort to eradicate polio from India.

The workshop received widespread coverage in the local media. Local newspapers, which earlier ran stories condemning the polio campaign, took out advertisements endorsing polio immunization and called on parents to get their children vaccinated against polio. A group of journalists from Bhiwandi took it upon themselves to address those refusing the polio vaccine in their area. They went from house-to-house, families on the need for polio vaccination. The local theatre group Ada Academy performed nukkad natak (street theatre) in resistant pockets, reaching out to refusal families with messages on polio vaccination. A tableau depicting how polio maims and how it can be prevented by giving OPV went around the town catching people's attention.

Despite facing stiff resistance, the motley group of polio advocates did not relent and carried on with renewed vigour. With their persistent efforts, they have been successful in stimulating behaviour change in the community. A stage show on polio which ran to a packed house stands testimony to this, as do the numbers. The number of parents now refusing the oral polio vaccine for their children in Bhiwandi, Maharashtra now stands at zero.

