



**REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE WESTERN PACIFIC
BUREAU RÉGIONAL DU PACIFIQUE OCCIDENTAL**

REGIONAL COMMITTEE

WPR/RC73/5

**Seventy-third session
Manila, Philippines
24–28 October 2022**

9 August 2022

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Provisional agenda item 9

COMMUNICATION FOR HEALTH

When used effectively, communication is a powerful tool for delivering positive public health outcomes. Well-designed, data and evidence-informed, targeted communication strategies are public health interventions that can support the delivery of health programmes and services. Measurable improvements in public health outcomes can be achieved when communication efforts: understand and respond to the specific influences of a health issue; draw on data and theory; connect with audiences through powerful stories; and combine the efforts and skills of a broad range of partners, stakeholders and multidisciplinary teams.

Communication has a role to play in addressing the most pressing health challenges in the Western Pacific, as set out in *For the Future: Towards the Healthiest and Safest Region*. The vision identifies strategic communication as a key operational shift – a new way of thinking and working for WHO to more effectively support Member States to tackle critical health challenges. To harness the power of communication for improving health and well-being in line with this shift, WHO in the Region established the Communication for Health (C4H) approach. It applies insights from social, behavioural and communication sciences to inform and change attitudes and behaviours for improved health outcomes at the individual, community and societal levels.

This panel discussion on C4H is an opportunity to exchange perspectives on the role and value of C4H in the public health landscape, experiences in applying C4H and visions for C4H implementation, including actions required to further strengthen this field of work at the regional and country levels. This document aims to facilitate the discussion by providing background on the current situation and issues.

Member States are invited to share their experiences and perspectives on scaling up the use of C4H in the Western Pacific Region.

1. CURRENT SITUATION

Today people everywhere are constantly exposed to huge volumes of information, whether from social media, online news and other internet sites, television and radio programmes, billboards, posters and fliers, or conversations with family, friends and colleagues. Information – and misinformation – spreads rapidly and has the power to shape health knowledge, perceptions, decisions and behaviours, and therefore health outcomes. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has clearly demonstrated this.

The digital age has dramatically altered the communication landscape. An estimated additional 1.55 billion people gained [access to the internet](#) in the past five years, and today more people have a mobile phone subscription than access to basic sanitation services. [Social media users](#) around the world exceeded 4.62 billion in 2022, a more than 10% increase from a year earlier. The volume and types of information people can access continue to multiply, and this is fundamentally changing how people communicate. For many young people especially, online and social media have become an integral part of life, having never experienced a time without the internet – resulting in both positive and negative consequences. The speed at which information flows, the increasing length of time that people are spending online and on social media, and the presence of online “echo chambers” and misinformation, along with the [declining trust in governments and institutions](#), present a challenge for both WHO and Member States.

At the same time, opportunities exist for new and smarter investments in strategic health communication by leveraging technology and drawing on data and approaches from across social, behavioural and communication sciences to create more targeted, audience-centred and effective communications.

To address these challenges and harness the potential of communication to make measurable contributions to health outcomes, WHO established the Communication for Health (C4H) approach in the Western Pacific Region. Using theory, practice and evidence from social and behavioural sciences, C4H puts people at the centre, targets particular audiences for specific purposes, measures outcomes and impacts of communication interventions, and uses this information to learn and constantly improve. The approach draws on the United Nations Children’s Fund Social and Behaviour Change programme, formerly known as Communication for Development (C4D), as well as on Member State and partner expertise and experience in complementary fields, such as social and behaviour change communication and risk communication and community engagement.

C4H has already shown positive results in improving health outcomes in the Region. In Papua New Guinea, WHO worked with the Government and partners to contribute to improving maternal and newborn health through a C4H intervention. A television and radio programme was created to directly address key individual and social factors leading to low utilization of family planning, antenatal care and supervised delivery. Among target audiences, both men and women demonstrated clear shifts in their prioritization of maternal health, awareness of the topic and planned behaviours following the broadcast. Importantly, the programme also successfully challenged cultural and gender norms that affected maternal health issues.

WHO's regional response to COVID-19 also applied C4H. Multi-source social listening generated insights on what the community needs and concerns are, who people trust, and where they seek health information. These insights ensured that information to the public was relevant and engaging, going beyond statistics and technical jargon, to engage people on a human level. Analysis of seven countries across the Western Pacific Region in 2021 showed that 55% of respondents who had seen or heard information on COVID-19 from WHO reported changing their behaviour in response to guidance on personal preventive practices, such as how to correctly wear a face mask, wash hands and practise cough hygiene.

Cooperation between WHO, Member States and partners to scale up C4H in the Region will ensure that health communication programmes, campaigns and interventions achieve greater impact and support the goal of making the Western Pacific the healthiest and safest region in the world.

2. ISSUES

2.1 The potential of strategic communication to improve health and save lives

Access to and exchange of health information is essential for building understanding, shifting perceptions, and shaping the decisions of individuals and communities. Human behaviours are shaped by psychological, sociocultural and environmental factors, and the strategic use of communication can play a role in influencing each of these factors. Communication can be a tool for health – as a public health intervention and strategy to maximize gains achieved by health programmes and services. Communication must be recognized as a technical public health field and applied in a more strategic and systematic manner. The C4H approach seeks to address the potential for strategic communication to contribute to health outcomes across the Western Pacific Region.

2.2 Strategic communication during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond

Strategic communication has been a key element of the COVID-19 response, critical for debunking rumours and sharing accurate health advice to support informed decision-making, encourage compliance with public health and social measures, and promote individual protective behaviours. The pandemic has highlighted the need to: keep pace with the rapidly evolving situation and communicate about it clearly and impactfully; listen and understand community worries, concerns and information gaps; and respond to the proliferation of misinformation – through timely, targeted, data-informed communication. WHO's COVID-19 communication response and support for Member States has employed key techniques such as: social listening; localization of information that is relevant and engaging, including through the use of storytelling; targeting audiences through a range of channels and strategic partnerships; and working with trusted spokespeople and influencers. While this approach has provided many learning opportunities, there is still a need for WHO and Member States to further adopt, strengthen and expand these practices across the Region to support the sustained management of COVID-19, prepare for future health emergencies and address a range of other priority health issues.

2.3 The ability of C4H to shape interventions and maximize outcomes

To support the achievement of desired public health outcomes, C4H takes a data and evidence-informed approach, employing a variety of tools and channels. The approach draws on complementary disciplines such as behavioural insights and sciences, infodemic management, risk communication and community engagement, health promotion, measurement and evaluation, and social and behaviour change communication.

Leveraging powerful digital technologies, C4H gathers audience insights to tailor and target strategies, while using storytelling techniques to increase audience receptivity and understanding of communications. Through collaboration and teamwork with key stakeholders and target populations, interventions are tested and contextualized to reflect cultural, religious and social norms and preferences of the audience. Evaluation techniques are applied at formative, process and summative phases to measure and, most importantly, learn from outcomes to drive continuous improvement.

2.4 Scaling up C4H to full power

C4H enables Member States, WHO and partners to use communication to make measurable contributions to public health. To realize this objective, WHO is collaborating with academics, experts and other partners to build capacity and experience in the application of C4H and support Member States as they scale up the use of C4H. Through joint efforts to test and learn from C4H implementation, WHO, government and partner health communications will contribute to better health outcomes in the Western Pacific Region.