

'This is how we did it', the strong voice of resilient people: A paradigm shift for risk communication during fatigue phase of COVID-19 pandemic

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Almost twenty-four months have passed since the first patient of COVID-19 was reported. COVID-19 is no more felt like a novel, unfamiliar, acute health threat by the public. In the current context of COVID-19, it is not only a health crisis but also a major socio-economic and information crisis. Pandemic and its response are pushing the world to a major global recession. Although public health measures remain the best way to minimize the spread of the virus, people are becoming less adherent to these measures. Pandemic fatigue impacts people, making them complacent and less receptive to risk perception; along with less interest, less trust, and less confidence in their role to control the virus. Therefore, creative and engaging ways to motivate people need to be identified for the local context and implemented to overcome challenges in risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) at this juncture.

People understand according to their experience and often display 'herd behaviour'. Thus, risk communication must be contextual and should engage the right people and influencers for the relevant community. Health and socioeconomic resilience are equally important to combat the pandemic. The RCCE efforts should be prioritized to reach both medically and socioeconomically vulnerable groups and enable them. Therefore, community-led communication, sharing their success stories during the pandemic was utilised as a novel approach for risk communication in Sri Lanka at the beginning of 2021.

The project was conducted by the Disaster Preparedness and Response Division (DPRD) to identify and publicize 'Champions' among the general public who restarted/continued their economic activities successfully adapting to new normalcy through

innovative approaches and public health measures. Triangulation of methods was used to identify people and occupational settings that have well adapted to new normalcy to combat COVID-19. Mainly they were randomly selected by observing different occupational settings and conducting in-depth interviews with a range of employees from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds across the society from various parts of the country. In addition, selection of occupational settings was done through nominations from grass-root level health workers and through self-nomination, calling to a dedicated telephone number at DPRD publicized through a media channel. However, these places were visited by a team of three experts representing relevant locality, DPRD, and the media station before finalizing as a 'Champion' of new normalcy to share their success stories with the public through mass media. The occupational settings and employees identified as 'not adapted to new normalcy through public health measures' while conducting random observations were guided on adapting to new normalcy through public health measures. The process was conducted with the informed consent of individuals and organizations.

A news segment was designed and telecasted regularly over three months in partnership with Sri Lanka Rupavahini Cooperation (SLRC) to introduce the 'champions of new normalcy'. A range of role model occupational settings and individuals who successfully continued their economic activities using innovative approaches, well adapting to new normalcy were introduced; including a labourer, grocery shop, garment factory, bakery, three-wheeler driver, pharmacy, builder, art academy, garage, Zumba class, textile shop, bookshop, restaurant, batik factory, salon, aquarium, veterinary service, plant nursery, fish seller, mason,

IT company, along with their life style changes. This was an opportunity given to people to share their real experience of 'successful change' and its benefits with the public. This was a community-led, multi-sectoral coordinated effort using an innovative communication approach to combat COVID-19 while safeguarding the economy of the country. The news segment was published as 'Rise again 2021- move forward with confidence' ('Yali Nagitimu 2021, Vishvasayen Perata'). The news segment commenced on 27th December 2020 and continued for more than three

months regularly. Two minutes of prime-time news in SLRC was dedicated for this segment. The news segment was marketed as a new year's gift for 2021 from DPRD and SLRC to the Sri Lankans. The message was well-received by the public and the participants were identified as heroes within their community. The feedback from the participants confirmed an increase in their customer base after the programme and was accepted as a healthy setting by the community.

The proposed model for innovative, motivational communication approach involving resilient people during the pandemic as 'change agents', can be identified as one of the best practices of RCCE in Sri Lanka shifting the communication strategies, from one-way communication at the initial stages of the pandemic towards the community engagement and participatory approaches during the pandemic fatigue stage. It well addresses the overarching goal of the global RCCE strategy of people-centred, community-led approaches resulting in increased trust, social cohesion, and ultimately a reduction in the negative impacts of COVID-19.



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