

Evaluating: Is the polio response team ready to convince unwilling parents?



Polio remains endemic in three countries – Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan. Rest of the world is at a constant risk of outbreaks of polio imported from these infected countries.

WHO, UNICEF, Rotary International, US Centers for Disease Control and most recently Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, through their global anti-polio campaign are aggressively focusing on eradicating polio from the three regions. Communication interventions – such as intensive interpersonal communication and social mobilization, media campaigns, and political and national advocacy combined – are consistently playing a crucial role in this large public health initiative.

It is estimated that \$1 billion is invested every year to support anti-polio campaign worldwide. Seeing high cost and risks attached to the campaign, constant efforts are being made to improve the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes – so it could lead to improved outcomes.

Polio helpline launched in Pakistan as a communication intervention

Pakistan has a worsening case among the three endemic countries. Efforts to reach unvaccinated children are also hampered by security risks. But the trend across Pakistan regarding parent refusals to get polio drops administered to their children on basis of various cultural and religious misconceptions is alarming. If not intervened, this trend of ‘parent refusal’ would continue to haunt Pakistan’s anti-polio drive in future.

UNICEF, in collaboration with the local governmental bodies, has launched a Polio Helpline in Pakistan. This helpline is one of the communication interventions aimed at reducing parents’ resistance by educating them about polio risks and benefits of polio immunization, removing any religious and cultural misconception and persuading difficult parents to take children for polio drops.

Monitoring and evaluating the impact of polio helpline operators on parents

The success of the Polio Helpline is highly dependent upon the ability of the helpline operators to educate and convince the callers.

Polio Assessments is an initiative launched by Assessment Fund to support the polio eradication cause by providing a simple, real-time monitoring system. This project is backed by UNICEF Pakistan, EPIGP, PM Cell for Polio and a few known telecom players of Pakistan. Through Polio Assessments, the helpline response team would be assessed on their ability to respond to situations impacting the polio campaign.

Assessing polio response team will help identify possible skill gaps and indicate areas of strength. Relevant training can be designed and provided to close the skill gap, and increase the proficiency of the helpline to manage parent’s refusal to administer polio drops to their children.

Lessons from the M&E process initiated in form of Polio Assessments may contribute to other public health communication programmes, particularly those trying to reach out to the marginalized and poor through a large network of health workers, helpline operators and field workers – all those directly in contact with the on-ground realities.

Challenge

- Monitor and evaluate the impact (readiness) of the Polio Helpline operators on reducing parents’ resistance to administer polio vaccination.
- Identify possible skill gaps and design training to fill those gaps

Solution

- Provide Polio Assessments, a real-time skill assessment system, equipped with related competency tests
- Design Polio Assessments microsite – illustrating communication and advocacy strategy
- Provide online analytics for monitoring
- Provide talent assessment reports that indicate helpline’s operators training need.

Approach

- Study different situations affecting effective administrations of polio drops
- Create competency assessments to measure helpline response team’s readiness
- Launch Polio Assessments (assessment center and related communication plan)
- Invite helpline response team for assessments
- Identify possible skill gaps
- Provide relevant training and other remedies

Outcome

- Simple, real-time skill M&E system launched to build a qualified polio response team
- Lessons learned from Polio Assessments can be applied to other public health communication programmes

“One of our goals is to highlight the steps that are taken in the fight against polio, and also to show positive impact of these steps. We are working with our partners to help build a qualified polio response team.”

— Zubair Bawany, Country Lead for CSR, UNICEF
