

Focus on strategic communication in COVID-19 prevention

The turbulent socio-economic environment resulting from COVID-19 has left policy makers, practitioners and scholars alike in some kind of confusion. The effects of the pandemic that has ravaged social systems globally are continually on the rise.

World leaders have taken various approaches to the prevention of the further spread of the coronavirus among their peoples. In Uganda, the Government equally took a multidimensional model of a full lockdown and the gradual easing of the same. In his initial addresses to the nation, the President emphasized what he borrowed from military science and in local lingo, used the term, "musoke musoke"; imploring the nation "to first stand still and listen". This message was clear and the standstill from weeks to months was welcome. To the listening he gradually kept adding on the restrictions. Indeed, this communication approach instituted a national feel of fear and desire to control the spread of the coronavirus. Again, after further listening, the Government decided to ease the lockdown gradually. The latest

being additional guidelines for the reopening of educational and religious institutions.

However, over the months since lockdown restrictions were eased there has been widespread complacency. In public places, many people reluctantly observe the standard operating procedures (SOPs). Some people have abandoned them altogether. Medical experts have warned that COVID-19 has entered a dangerous stage of community infections.

From a management perspective, COVID-19 is now a strategic problem. We need strategic approaches of planning, communication and execution of guidelines. The policy makers are now dealing with increasingly fragmented audiences with diverse view points of the epidemic. The Ugandan society as a whole requires a purposeful, intentional, futuristic and long-term focus on communication in order to achieve steadfast prevention milestones. A colleague at MUBS studied strategic communication and how it was instrumental in the control of Ebola outbreaks (Bashir, 2018). He found that the strategic approach



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to communication involves building stakeholders' cognitive awareness and feelings of attachment to the purpose of communication.

This influences behaviour. In the case of Ebola, misconceptions had led to easy and rapid spread. The communication interventions through

the Ministry of Health saw the setting up of co-ordination committees for political direction, international relations, surveillance and logistics management. From national level to district and community mobilisation, strategic communication was a key tool (Hassan Bashir, PhD thesis, Makerere University, 2018).

Coupled with the multiple efforts of the health workers, we need social and management interventions. Organisations, public and private, business and non-business must take up this task. The overriding duty of the Government is to provide correct information and direction.

Organisations must package messages that will appeal to their stakeholders that COVID-19 is real. Prevention banners should appear on letterheads, website screens and company premises. COVID-19 prevention measures should be highlighted during meetings, in churches and schools. Companies should customise masks and other branding material giving them out as they do with calendars. Both soothing and somewhat frightening slogans should be part of religious sermons,

court hearings, virtual political rallies and cultural events.

Local authorities should form roving teams to households, marketplaces, businesses, schools and communities. The Ministry of Health prevention guidelines of wearing masks, handwashing, social distancing and quick evacuation of suspects require strategic communication to be adhered to. Let institutions and local governments nominate volunteer COVID-19 ambassadors.

These ambassadors should be committed individuals with exceptional neutrality to rally positive cognitive behaviour without political, religious or cultural sentiments attached to it. They should be people of high integrity to whom people will have no problem listening. It would be an honour for me to be one for any designated audience. COVID-19 is real and it does not know the social boundaries that segment us.

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Uganda, please do not forget Sophia!

Dear people of Uganda, today, October 28, may be an ordinary day for you. For us, a Dutch family of five, living in Amsterdam, it marks the ultimate nightmare, which started exactly five years ago. That day our beautiful daughter and sister, Sophia, went missing in Murchison Falls National Park.

A medical student, she had come to Uganda two months earlier to work as an intern at Rubaga Hospital in Kampala. She quickly took to the country and its people. In one of her first weekly reports to us she wrote: "I am starting to get used to Uganda more and more. The way of life, the habits. I am almost considering simply staying in Africa, cause geez, it's so relaxed here!" She enjoyed working with the nurses and doctors at Rubaga.

On her last day of work she wrote: "Before we left I really wanted to say a warm goodbye to everyone in the hospital. We gave our medical goggles and white coats to the midwives and surgeons who were very happy to receive them. After saying goodbye to everyone in the maternity ward we also stopped by the other wards. I am really sorry my stay here is over. All the people here are so sweet. I will truly miss them and hope to be back one day. Who knows, as a doctor of tropical medicine?"

The next day she left for her trip through the country, prior to returning home. Six days later she disappeared. She has not come home to this day. We have no clue what happened to her. Circumstances surrounding her disappearance are very vague. A proper investigation never took place at the time.

The Police quickly jumped to the conclusion, without evidence, that it must have been a fatal accident. End of story. But this story has no end and we cannot move on. Sophia's disappearance has dominated our lives for five straight years now. No child is as present as a missing child and there is no manual for parents who find themselves in this situation.

Given such unbearable circumstances, it would be easy to fall into a big black hole and



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Sophia

then stay in a continuous state of pain and apathy, but that would mean desecrating Sophia. Absolutely no option.

I have travelled to Uganda many times now, telling our story over and over again. On those trips I have met lots of people; wonderful, sincere ones willing to help, some have become friends. But also those with their own agendas who might see a desperate mother as an easy way to make money. It does continue to amaze me how many Ugandans have not heard about her case. Even at the Uganda Wildlife Authority.

Is a tourist who disappears too difficult to deal with and then conveniently forgotten? Or simply not important? We don't know. All this time I have been trying to convince the Ugandan and Dutch authorities to seriously investigate. When you know next to nothing, how can you rule out anything, including a crime? The DPP's office agreed and ordered a fresh probe into Sophia's disappearance, not ruling out anything.

Meeting President Museveni earlier this year gave that investigation an important boost. Finally it felt like we were making progress, but then a virus appeared, turned into a pandemic and affected everything. It could not have come at a worse time. Now that Entebbe Airport has reopened I hope to make my 15th trip soon.

I feel my being in Uganda does make a difference. All we want is to find Sophia and uncover the truth. We will never give up hope of finding her alive. Whatever the outcome may be, we need to know. We need to find peace. Madam Speaker's words, in her chambers earlier this year, are etched into my head: "You must not relent and Sophia must not and cannot be forgotten. Please help us find her."

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Traffic Police not helping us to fight COVID-19

LETTER OF THE DAY

EDITOR: I am an ardent traveller on the Mbarara-Ntungamo-Rukungiri road. Every week, I travel on this road twice using a minibus. The way the traffic policemen on this road go about their work leaves a lot to be desired, especially so during these days of COVID-19.

The taxis on the road carry more than the required number of passengers. From Mbarara, more than 14 people are packed into the minibus yet President Yoweri Museveni allowed taxis back onto the road on condition that they carry half the number of passengers they were hitherto carrying, which is seven passengers.

To make matters worse, this is done right under the nose of the traffic officers. There is the Nyanukwana roadblock, for instance. I don't know why this roadblock exists. It is just a scarecrow and only there for purposes of making money.

If you don't have sh10,000 you will not go past it. Drivers of vehicles now buy envelopes into which they put the money and address it to the officer manning the roadblock. The drivers do not slow down and stop at the checkpoint. They drive past it, stop the vehicle and walk back to the roadblock to hand over the envelope. All the traffic Police say is: "Asante sana ndugu. Safari njema."

They do not bother to look into the vehicles to ascertain whether they are not carrying more than the required number of passengers or if all those on board are wearing masks.

I appeal to those concerned to call the traffic policemen to order lest COVID-19 spreads like a bushfire or another lockdown of private transport comes into force.

Frank Mwiliwe
Concerned passenger