



Protecting You, Protecting Us: COVID-19 Prevention

► Introduction

Guyana recorded its first case of COVID-19 on March 11, 2020. Four months later, 568 cases and 22 deaths were reported. Most cases fell within the age groups of 21–40 and 41–60 years, and nine out of 10 regions of Guyana had reported cases. Region 4, which is the most populous region and home to the nation’s capital, reported the most cases, followed by Regions 1 and 7. An increasing concern focused on border communities, especially in Region 9, which borders Brazil, and Region 1, which borders Venezuela, owing to the high number of cases being reported in both countries and the porous borders between Guyana and these neighbors.

With the first cases in March, the Ministry of Health (MOH) recommended wearing masks or facial coverings in public spaces, avoiding crowds, physical distancing, and practicing frequent hand hygiene as measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Guyana. A knowledge, attitudes, and practices survey conducted by the MOH and UNICEF in April–May 2020 showed that 14% of respondents reported not wearing a mask and 43% reported not physical distancing within the past two weeks. Reported barriers to protecting oneself from COVID-19 included unavailability of items such as face masks and hand sanitizer, the increasing price of such items on the market, loss or decrease in wages due to the pandemic, and insufficient information about COVID-19 treatment and prevention. Within this context, Breakthrough ACTION Guyana received funding in June 2020 from USAID to support the MOH’s COVID-19 risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) efforts.



► Interventions

In collaboration with the MOH, Breakthrough ACTION implemented a suite of RCCE activities to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Guyana:

Supported the Health Emergency Operations Center (HEOC) Communications Technical Working Group (TWG) and the coordination and collaboration of other RCCE structures in country. Breakthrough ACTION participated in weekly meetings with the HEOC and was actively involved in the COVID-19 Regional Task Force through the regional support coordinators. The project reviewed national and hinterland RCCE strategies and the national stigma and discrimination strategy and guided the development and implementation of the ministry’s COVID-19 RCCE response.

Designed and implemented the “Protecting You, Protecting Us” COVID-19 RCCE campaign. With technical support from the HEOC Communications TWG, the team held weekly virtual meetings or convened more often based on the urgency to pretest, review, finalize, or provide feedback on the campaign strategy and materials. With the overarching aim of increasing the sense of responsibility Guyanese felt for their family, friends, and community, the campaign promoted correct mask-wearing, handwashing, physical distancing, stigma reduction, and general COVID-19 information. The project developed and disseminated

five radio spots, three television spots with Spanish and Portuguese subtitles, five posters, a vinyl banner (in Spanish and Portuguese), Facebook and Instagram posts, and flash drives and CDs that combined COVID-19 messages with popular music, and implemented the campaign in Regions 1, 7, 8, and 9. Town criers encouraged physical distancing and other preventive measures. The project also reviewed and sponsored a COVID-19 storyline on “Merundoi,” a popular radio serial drama in Guyana, and adapted Breakthrough ACTION Guyana’s malaria materials to include COVID-19 prevention cues, including characters wearing masks and taking other precautions in the mining setting.

Trained RCCE community facilitators in COVID-19 community engagement. Breakthrough ACTION developed, printed, and disseminated a COVID-19 facilitator’s guide that regional support coordinators and community volunteers used to conduct RCCE activities in hinterland communities. Breakthrough ACTION conducted virtual orientation and training on the facilitator’s guide with the regional support coordinators, who then oriented and trained the community volunteers to implement the activities in the guide.

Developed a rumor-monitoring system and addressed misconceptions through “Myth Busters.” Breakthrough ACTION developed a rumor-tracking system to monitor rumors posted on social media accounts and heard through community dialogues and trained five MOH Public Relations/Health Promotion Unit staff members on its use. The rumor-tracking system used the Extended Parallel

Processing Model to identify, categorize, and appropriately address rumors based on the audiences’ levels of perceived vulnerability to COVID-19 and self-efficacy to engage in recommended COVID-19 prevention behaviors. Most rumors emanated from Regions 4 and 8 (29%), and over 71% of the rumors recurred, typically related to COVID-19 treatment or prevention (40%) and transmission (35%). Almost one-half (48%) of the rumors collected reflected low perceived vulnerability to COVID-19 infection and low efficacy to adopt and maintain appropriate behaviors for the treatment and prevention of COVID-19. The ministry and the project addressed the prioritized rumors and disinformation through a series of 12 Myth Busters posted on social media, disseminated through television and radio, and printed in newspapers. They also integrated Myth Buster messages into the “Protecting You, Protecting Us” campaign. In March 2021, Breakthrough ACTION transitioned the rumor-tracking system to the MOH to continue its interventions on addressing rumors and stigma.

Strengthened the Government of Guyana’s capacity to implement and monitor RCCE interventions by engaging them directly in “learning-by-doing” activities. Such activities included development of the RCCE campaign creative brief, development and testing of creative concepts, message prioritization, activity development and implementation, utilization of the rumor-monitoring system, and participation in an after-action review to reflect on the campaign, analyze what happened and why, what worked well, and what could be done better or differently in the future.

► Results

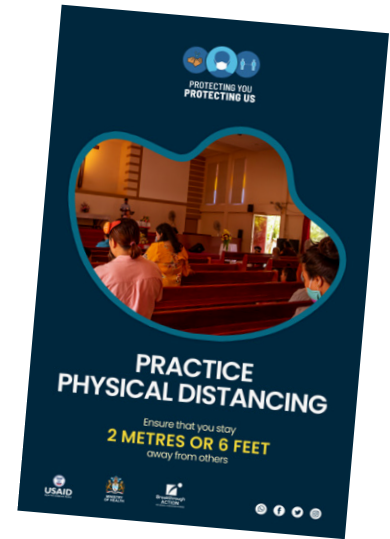
Breakthrough ACTION’s COVID-19 prevention activities yielded the following key achievements:

- Reached 190,689 people through social media, 139,146 through television, 109,029 through radio, 13,857 through flash drives/CDs, and 7,112 through town criers as part of the “Protecting You, Protecting Us” COVID-19 RCCE campaign.
- Trained four regional support coordinators, who then oriented 23 community volunteers across Regions 1, 7, 8, and 9 on the COVID-19 Community Volunteer Facilitator’s Guide to assist with their COVID-19 community outreach and engagement activities.
- Developed 12 Myth Busters to correctly address rumors, misinformation, stigma, and uncertainty regarding COVID-19 identified by the rumor-tracking system, reaching an estimated 30% of the population of Guyana aged 15 years and older, including an estimated 17,088 people through social media, an estimated 92,728 by print media (Sunday newspaper edition), and an estimated 41,947 by radio.
- Engaged 23 government and regional representatives in learning-by-doing approaches that strengthened capacity to implement and monitor RCCE strategies, plans, and tools.
- Published an article in *Global Health: Science and Practice* titled, “Addressing COVID-19 Rumors and Behaviors Using Theory in Guyana: A Program Case Study.”



▶ Lessons Learned

- **Coordinate stakeholder efforts to ensure synchronized campaigns and harmonized messaging.** Multiple stakeholders implemented independent COVID-19 prevention campaigns at the same time, which resulted in the public being exposed to multiple campaigns and, in some instances, conflicting or incorrect information. Future campaigns addressing an emergency response would benefit from stakeholders sharing resources and planning and executing coordinated and unified RCCE interventions together under a synchronized and harmonized approach.
- **Strengthen selection guidelines for identifying community volunteers.** While community volunteers were key to community engagement during the COVID-19 response, some of those chosen did not lead by example. For instance, they violated physical distancing guidelines and/or organized parties, contrary to the government’s COVID-19 guidelines. These volunteers presented a challenge when community members questioned their veracity as role models and followed the same unhealthy behaviors themselves, countering the intention of the community engagement. More rigorous selection guidelines need to be established and followed to better ensure community volunteers take their role in the community seriously and can engage as trusted role models and influencers.
- **Balance following social and behavior change best practices with the speed needed during an emergency response.** Developed materials required various stages of review before final production to ensure that critical details were included (e.g., the presentation of the most current information and guidance and balanced ethnic representation of actors to properly reflect the Guyana context). Additionally, production of materials required careful consideration of the quantities and sizes with built-in flexibility in contracts so adaptations could be made in an evolving context. The ability to quickly pivot to address a situation is crucial for successful RCCE.



Mr. Henrito walks around the community and the backdam clearing up misinformation and sharing more information. Villagers are now wearing their mask and doing physical distancing more... We are thankful that he is brave to visit camps to tell persons how to protect themselves from this deadly virus; adherence to the guidelines has increased a lot since the educational program started.

— Hilda Frances, Princeville Resident, Region 8 describing the role of a community volunteer

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