

SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL CHANGE COMMUNICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19: A CASE STUDY REVIEW FROM BANGLADESH

Project title: Social and Behavioral Change in Communication in the Context of COVID-19 in Bangladesh

Implementing agency: Md. Al Amin

Central focus: Countering mis/disinformation and promoting positive messaging

Country/region: Bangladesh

Grant amount: 5,000 EUR

Date of approval: November 2020

Closing date: April 2021

Main activities: Online community outreach meetings, town-hall meetings, in-person training sessions, creation of a social media page for continuous communication

Three lessons:

1. Digital content that contains positive messaging is likely survive and be transmitted because it is channeled through social media.
2. The multistakeholder composition of the monitoring, evaluation, and sustainability committee provides a continuing mechanism to monitor hate speech and misinformation incidents.
3. There is a continuing need for small grant funded projects until the end of the pandemic and beyond.

INTRODUCING THE CHALLENGE

With the unprecedented scale and duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding the complex and multifaceted factors that shape each country's response to reducing harm is essential. Mass vaccination, movement restrictions, and key positive protective behaviors are the key preventative measures against the pandemic. Scholars argue that "maintaining positive behavioral traits and socially learned behaviors related to disease prevention is dependent on how individuals and communities are motivated and educated."¹ Faith leaders and houses of worship are influential in their communities, especially in areas of health and social norms. They adapt to barriers and work within cultural and religious contexts to address issues affecting communities. At the same time, deep cracks in social cohesion have become visible in many countries during the pandemic, and many fall along religious lines. Global efforts to tackle the pandemic, therefore, need to include the broadest range of civil society possible, with equitable and meaningful inclusion and engagement of faith actors.

The AHA! Project (supported by the European Union) has directed 50 small grants in South Asia to groups that aim to address these facets of the COVID-19 crisis. The case review series draws primarily on this experience, with the goal both to provide narratives to help in understanding diverse situations and to explore the experience through several programs supported by AHA! Project grants. The current review highlights a comprehensive approach to raise awareness, primarily among faith and community leaders in Bangladesh, through digital and social media-based social and behavioral change communication strategies. The project lead Md Al Amin designed and implemented a five-phased intervention technique that helped to reduce misinformation and hate speech. The goal has been to highlight how youth leaders like Al Amin can make meaningful contributions to Bangladesh's overall efforts to contain the virus by engaging participants from vulnerable groups, utilizing a blended approach of online and offline communication strategies.

¹ Wijesinghe, M.S.D., Ariyaratne, V.S., Gunawardana, B.M.I. et al. Role of Religious Leaders in COVID-19 Prevention: A Community-Level Prevention Model in Sri Lanka. *J Relig Health* (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01463-8>

CONTEXT OF THE CASE REVIEW

Relationships between religious beliefs, institutions, educational strategies, and delivery that result in social and political tensions pose practical challenges for policymakers in Bangladesh. A related challenge involves national objectives to instill shared civic values through education and to address mounting intergroup tensions. Bangladesh has seen a steady decline in the shares in overall population of its religious minority communities from the time of the independence in 1971 up to the present. Muslims are the largest religious group in Bangladesh. Other religious groups comprise an estimated 9.6% of the total population, a sharp decrease from 23.1% fifty years ago.² According to the 2011 national census, Hindus are the largest religious minority (8.6% of the population), followed by Buddhists (0.6%), Christians (0.3%), and various indigenous faiths (below 0.1%). In addition, there are some smaller but significant sectarian minorities within the broader Muslim (Sunni) populations such as Shi'a (<1%) and Ahmadiya (approximately 100,000)³. The Baha'i community is active in the civil society in Bangladesh; estimates of their number vary widely (from 10,000-300,000).⁴ Recent reports suggest that minority populations, particularly Hindus in Bangladesh are on the rise (while Hindu population in Bangladesh declined from 22% to 9% between 1951–2011⁵, the percent increased again to 10.7% in 2017 according to an estimate⁶).

A range of sources indicates that religious extremism⁷ and intolerance⁸ are increasing in Bangladesh, marginalizing secular and alternative thoughts and beliefs. Hefajat-e-Islam, a coalition of local radical Islamic organizations, has repeatedly demanded that the government declare Ahmadis non-Muslim.⁹ The group has been vocal against women's empowerment policies and had been successful in its efforts to press to Islamize the country's public education curriculum.¹⁰ Deadly attacks have killed secular bloggers, writers, priests, clergy, foreigners, and LGBT rights activists since 2013.¹¹ The spread of hate speech and disinformation against religious minorities has increased over the years in social media. Islamic speakers regularly spread hatred against sectarian groups and other religious minorities, "fanning communal tension" during organized talks called Waz Mehfil across the country and on social media such as Facebook and YouTube.¹² Christian churches, missions, and philanthropic organizations are often suspected of proselytizing. According to the Christian Welfare Trust and other human rights NGO reports, Christian converts face harassment, communal threats of physical violence, and social isolation. Minority women face discrimination that go beyond the headlines of violence, atrocities, and discrimination. Along with discriminatory personal/family laws, minority women face social, economic, and political exclusion. In the context of intercommunal conflict, they are often targeted with sexual violence.¹³

² Minority Rights Group International, ed. *Under Threat: The Challenges Facing Religious Minorities in Bangladesh*. Report / Minority Rights Group International, 2016,[4]. London: Minority Rights Group International, 2016.

³ There are approximately 300,000 Urdu-speaking Bihari populations living in Bangladesh who migrated from Bihar and West Bengal during 1947 partition. Biharis follow Sunni tradition and seen as ethnic and linguistic minority in Bangladesh, not a religious one.

⁴ Minority Rights Group International, ed. *Under Threat: The Challenges Facing Religious Minorities in Bangladesh*. Report / Minority Rights Group International, 2016,[4]. London: Minority Rights Group International, 2016.

⁵ Haider, M. Moinuddin, Mizanur Rahman, and Nahid Kamal. "Hindu Population Growth in Bangladesh: A Demographic Puzzle." *Journal of Religion and Demography* 6, no. 1 (May 6, 2019): 123–48. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2589742X-00601003>.

⁶ "Hindu Population in Bangladesh Increasing: Delhi." Accessed June 17, 2021. <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/Hindu-population-in-Bangladesh-increasing-Delhi>.

⁷ Lintner, Bertil. "Religious extremism and nationalism in Bangladesh." *Religious radicalism and security in South Asia*. Honolulu, Hawaii: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (2004).

⁸ Hasnat, Saif, and Mujib Mashal. "Bangladesh Strengthens Security as Violence Targets Hindu Festival." *The New York Times*, October 15, 2021, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/15/world/asia/15bangladesh-muslim-hindu-violence.html>.

⁹ ucanews.com. "Cleric Demands Bangladesh Ahmadis Be Declared 'Non-Muslim' - UCA News." Accessed May 12, 2021. <https://www.ucanews.com/news/cleric-demands-bangladesh-ahmadis-be-declared-non-muslim/85004>.

¹⁰ Roy, Sudipta, Samia Huq, and Aisha Binte Abdur Rob. "Faith and Education in Bangladesh: A Review of the Contemporary Landscape and Challenges." *International Journal of Educational Development* 79 (November 1, 2020): 102290. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2020.102290>.

¹¹ Washington Post. "These Bangladeshi Bloggers Were Murdered by Islamist Extremists. Here Are Some of Their Writings." Accessed February 21, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/04/29/these-bangladeshi-bloggers-were-murdered-by-islamist-extremists-here-are-some-of-their-writings/>.

¹² The Daily Observer. "15 Named for Fanning Communal Tension, Militancy Thru Waz - Front Page - Observerbd.Com." Accessed May 12, 2021. <https://www.observerbd.com/news.php?id=192164>.

¹³ Minority Rights Group International, ed. *Under Threat: The Challenges Facing Religious Minorities in Bangladesh*. Report / Minority Rights Group International, 2016,[4]. London: Minority Rights Group International, 2016.

Trends towards tensions with and attacks on minority communities have not eased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC) reported 17 deaths in religious and ethnic minority communities between March and September 2020.¹⁴ Outbreaks of mass sectarian violence have occurred periodically: during the 2021 Hindu Durga Puja festival, for instance, social media rumors and incitement led to deadly mob violence against the Hindu community. Ethnic, religious, and gender minorities endure scapegoating and hostile rhetoric. The COVID-19 crisis has aggravated such problems, which had showed worrying signs of increase in pre-crisis years.

More positively, religious leaders such as Imams have been actively engaged in social development projects in Bangladesh for decades.¹⁵ They have broad and interconnected networks and are highly regarded by their respective communities. They often play crucial roles in shaping opinions regarding social issues and norms. Leveraging their strong networking and communication skills, many religious leaders have played active roles combating misinformation against COVID-19 and delivering critical information among their followers in Bangladesh.¹⁶ According to an UNICEF estimate, currently about 500,000 Imams and religious leaders are disseminating information about COVID-19 in Bangladesh on topics ranging from hygiene and infection prevention, social distancing, and how to benefit from the Holy Quran when in lockdown at home.¹⁷ Most Christian churches have remained closed or operating with limited capacity. Some have worked actively to support pandemic limiting measures. Most Rev. Ponon Paul Kubi, bishop of Mymensingh Diocese in north-central Bangladesh, for example, used Facebook to communicate with 75,000 Catholics in his diocese about new pandemic practices, “pray at home, no gatherings and keep social distancing everywhere.”¹⁸ Transnational organizations such as World Vision,¹⁹ and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)²⁰ are directly working with religious leaders in Bangladesh to raise community level awareness about best practices to stay safe during the pandemic as well as the dignified management of the dead.

SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL CHANGE IN COMMUNICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 IN BANGLADESH

Md. Al Amin, who studied at different religious institutions for 12 years, aimed to address the “outrageous infodemic” among the religious leaders in Bangladesh around COVID-19 through his AHA! funded project. He has leveraged his strong connection with national and community level religious leaders and faith actors and his experience as a youth leader to raise awareness and reduce misinformation and hate speech. Al Amin observes, “The massive infodemic was seen when some of the most popular religious leaders announced that Coronavirus will not affect the Muslims and those who come to Mosques regularly. In this pandemic, community people have relied mostly on the religious narratives where religious leaders misled in many segments that stimulates the outbreaks. Moreover, we have seen that these types of misinformation create hate speech against some specific groups of people that destroyed the harmony and peace among the societies.”²¹ Al Amin emphasized the need for both digital and in person communication with religious leaders from diverse faiths for a sustainable impact and designed his project accordingly.

¹⁴ United States Department of State. “Bangladesh.” Accessed May 12, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bangladesh/>.

¹⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/stories/religious-leaders-play-key-role-battle-against-covid-19>

¹⁶ ibid

¹⁷ <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/stories/religious-leaders-play-key-role-battle-against-covid-19>

¹⁸ <https://www.wvi.org/stories/bangladesh/bangladeshi-faith-leaders-urge-followers-worship-home-covid-19-cases-continue>

¹⁹ ibid

²⁰ <https://frontline-negotiations.org/icrc-bangladesh-helping-families-from-religious-communities-in-the-dignified-management-of-the-dead-during-covid-19/>

²¹ Quoted from Al Amin’s 2020 project proposal.

In order to combat hate speech, misinformation, and intolerance, Al Amin’s project took a five-pronged communication approach:

1. Digital and social media-based community outreach meetings;
2. Digital and social media town hall meetings;
3. In person knowledge and training sessions;
4. Creation of a social media page to share authentic communication materials and continuous reminders about best practices;
5. Formation of a monitoring, feedback, and sustainability committee for quality control.

Through these programs, Al Amin reached two main target groups: direct and indirect beneficiaries. The project reached about 100 direct beneficiaries that include Imams and Purohits (Hindu priests), women leaders, and school children who participated in the social media-based outreach meetings, townhalls, and in person training sessions. The indirect beneficiaries are the larger group of people who have either watched livestreamed town hall and outreach meetings on Facebook, have been reached out to by the project trainees, and interacted with the awareness raising posts on social media. As part of the project, Al Amin collaborated with a nonprofit research, education, and consulting organization called the Center for Governance, Policy, and Advocacy (CGPA) to design and disseminate content among a broader group of people.

Al Amin faced some backlash from the rural population, particularly women and elderly people, who either did not take the pandemic seriously or did not understand the benefit of participating in the project’s activities. Despite the initial qualms, Al Amin was able to ensure participation from both groups by contextualizing risks and educating best practices.

Lessons and takeaways from the program

The sustainability of the work started through the AHA! small grant program remains the central question. Promising indicators include the following:

- Digital content that contains positive messaging is likely survive and be transmitted because it is channeled through social media.
- The multistakeholder composition of the monitoring, evaluation, and sustainability committee formed as part of the project, with religious leaders, schoolteachers, women, school children, and community actors, provides a continuing mechanism to monitor hate speech and misinformation incidents. Interactions among them through the digital platforms are a mechanism that can prompt action.
- There is a continuing need for small grant funded projects until “the last covid-19 patient is found.”

This paper is one of a series of research elements produced by the European Union funded AHA! Awareness with Human Action project that seeks to contribute to the response efforts of the COVID-19 pandemic by preventing conflict and building social cohesion in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and broader South Asia. The AHA! project is implemented by a consortium of project partners, including the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers/Finn Church Aid, World Faiths Development Dialogue, the Center for Peace and Justice – Brac University, the Center for Communication and Development of Bangladesh, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the Youth Development Foundation, and Sarvodaya.

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