

Coming of age: communication's role in powering global health

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Executive summary

HIV. Ebola. Polio. These figure among the major public health challenges faced in the last half century in low- and middle-income countries. The most effective responses to these diseases have been fiercely debated, yet the role of communication is rarely at the centre of this debate.

This is surprising. Never before has communication offered such potential to accelerate progress towards a healthier world. Even in the poorest parts of the globe, technology is enabling “always on”, networked communication, and fast flows of information. More people own radios, televisions and phones than ever before and media channels are proliferating. At the same time, people working with communication to improve health have access to unprecedented evidence about the approaches that are most effective.

Through a careful review of the evidence, this paper illuminates how communication has been a consistent current running through many major health developments of recent years. Whether by influencing individual behaviour, galvanising community action, shaping social expectations or informing the way in which health services are provided, communication has been at the heart of public health. It has the potential both to mitigate health crises and to exacerbate them.

This critical interplay between human health and communication has now been recognised in assorted global and national health policies on paper. However, when it comes to funding allocation and the ways in which health programmes are implemented on the ground, clear deficits can be seen. Too often, health communication is poorly funded, under-utilised and badly planned, bolted on to programmes as an apparent afterthought. This needs to change if progress towards a healthier world is to be accelerated.

In addition to the limited funding for well-planned health communication efforts, programmes have not consistently integrated lessons learned from past practice. Successful health communication programmes have shown the importance of underpinning interventions with sound behavioural analysis, rooted in socio-ecological understanding of change and new insights from behavioural science. They have also shown the need to move beyond the idea of health communication as top-down “messaging” to something that encompasses dialogue and respects the opinions of those most affected by particular health challenges. Too often, however, these key ingredients are missing.

There are many reasons why the global public health community has not fully seized the power of communication. These include the complexity of many of the issues being tackled by social and behaviour change communication (SBCC, see page 10 for a definition), debates around “what counts” as evidence, and the need for more effective learning and capacity strengthening in health communication.

Certain agencies and organisations are taking important actions to overcome these obstacles, but more needs to be done if communication's potential to help to achieve – as well as to undermine – global health goals is to be properly addressed and absorbed into development thinking. This briefing concludes with a series of recommendations for policy-makers, donors, health communication practitioners and academic institutions committed to better health and wellbeing for all.