

Case Study Series: Learning from Innovative and Proactive Civil Servants

Case Title:

Handling distrust of Rohingya people in vaccination program by a street-level bureaucrat

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The cases for this series are collected by interviewing the civil servants working in different South Asian countries. This collection initiative is an attempt to document different innovative initiatives taken by different civil servants and encourage other civil servants to be more proactive and innovative through the ideas of these cases. If you know of any innovative case, then please send us an email (farin.ritu@northsouth.edu), we will communicate with you for further details.

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Distrust in vaccination: a public health challenge in the refugee camps

Problem

Rohingya people in a camp were reluctant to taking vaccine shots because of their superstitions and distrust.

Solution

The CIC (camp in-charge) himself takes the vaccine shot publicly in order to prove the point that there is no harm in taking it.

Outcome

Establish trust among Rohingya in vaccination programs and between them and the camp authorities.

The Kutupalong refugee camp is the world's largest refugee camp. It is situated in Ukhia, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The Kutupalong refugee camp network includes about 26 subcamps and is home to around 700,000¹ of the roughly 1.1 million Rohingya² people who currently reside in Bangladesh. Each subcamp is supervised by a camp in charge (CIC). The CIC is responsible for managing camp activities and coordinating donor agency support. This is a mammoth undertaking, requiring the management of services, education, food, health, clean water, and sanitation for a large number of people. But this has been worsened by a common suspicion of vaccines amongst the Rohingya people.

The case in question is regarding a health-related issue in a subcamp located in Kutupalong. Camp administration usually faces enormous challenges in carrying out health services. In one instance, camp administration faced significant problems implementing a vaccination program when all residents in a subcamp showed reluctance to take the vaccine. The residents of the camp argued that they were not sure of what exactly was inside the doses they would be given.

They were worried that the vaccine might comprise of harmful elements or substances which may be in conflict with their religious faith. This led to a rather tense situation between the camp administration and the Rohingya people.

Leading by example

In order to solve the problem of the suspicious Rohingya, the CIC had to act in a way that was both creative and bold. The CIC called the camp residents into an open area and took a shot of the vaccine in front of all and gave a brief speech. In his speech, he addressed them directly, saying that he had been with them for several years and that he himself was of Islamic faith and a practicing Muslim, praying regularly and following religious rules. As such, if the vaccine did not hamper his religion, why would it hamper theirs?

The exhibition followed by the CIC's speech proved to be effective, with the previously doubtful Rohingya beginning to take the vaccine right away. This case exemplifies the challenging lives of street-level bureaucrats, who have to develop ad hoc mechanisms to cope with the problems which arise during their jobs and carry out their responsibilities effectively.

In the aforementioned situation, the CIC or camp administration could have tried to force the vaccination program or promote the advantages of vaccination and, eventually, many people might have ended up taking the vaccine, but suspicion and distrust would remain. Instead, the CIC came up with a solution that directly addressed Rohingya concerns and generated trust between them and camp officials. His actions undoubtedly averted a most unpleasant situation.

This case is especially important now as nations across the world seek to vaccinate their populations. Similar acts were seen in other countries, where leaders publicly showcased their vaccination to validate the safety of the vaccine, encouraging many to take the shots. The above case shows that public display or exhibition or showdown is very effective to handle distrust among the service recipients. As we can see, creating trust through transparency is an effective way of providing essential public services to people.

References

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