Media Discourse and Way Forward

Polio Eradication Initiative



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Shaping the Future of Journalism

Journalists Against Polio

Media Discourse and the Road Map

The polio eradication initiative (PEI) was formally launched in Pakistan by Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto in 1994. At present, the Pakistan polio eradication initiative is considered as the most visible and is by far the largest public sector health initiative ever undertaken in the history of the country. Hundreds of millions of dollars in international investment, thousands of workers across the length and breadth of Pakistan, targeting over 33 million children in urban centers as well as the furthest corners of the country turned Pakistan's Polio Eradication Initiative into one of the largest public health campaigns being undertaken anywhere in the worldi.

The number of polio cases was 24,000 according to the government of Pakistan's official statementsii which later declined to 1,155. The cases kept decreasing showing a remarkable success of the polio eradication initiative from 2001 to 2005. In 2007 the number cases reported declined to only 32.

Since 2007 onwards, the eradication initiative was hit by an unforeseen hype gradually developing around the number of cases based on the attitudes of the parents, which was a strong influence on vaccination rate. This parental attitude was not only influenced by the perceptions of infectivity and severity of the disease, but also by the parental perception of vaccine safety and its effectiveness. The parental perception of severity of the disease was also influenced by the prevalence of the disease itself. If the prevalence of a particular vaccine preventable disease is low, the fear of the disease and its severity is also low as the disease is not physically seen in the communities[iii]. Other factors contributing to this build-up was the operation in FATA (Waziristan and Bajaur Agencies) and Swat and the inaccessibility of the polio vaccination teams in the conflict areas; Between Taliban attacks and US drone strikes, vaccination was impossible in many areas. Fighters have killed health workers, and conservative mullahs have denounced the vaccine as part of a western conspiracy to sterilize Muslim children. Adding to this were the false rumors against Polio drops relating to it being in opposition to the Islamic Beliefs. These rumors resulted several refusals reported mainly from the Pukhtoon communities.[iv]

The extremist elements consisting local Taliban leadership in Swat and FATA took great benefit from these rumors; using it as a tactic to engage the mainstream media to extensively report on these rumors; this created a great public diversion from vaccinating the children against the Polio virus[v]

Another problem was public demand, to make the government fulfill their demands on social development and infrastructure for peace pact and provision of employment opportunities in specific areas as a result of agreeing to the polio campaigns.

Maulana Faqeer Muhammad from Bajaur Agency issued a fatwa against polio vaccination in 2007. Immediately after this Agency Surgeon, Dr. Abdul Ghani Khan in Amber Valley, Bajaur Agency became a victim of a suicide attack[vi]. Himayat-ul-Haq, who ran a madrassa in the North-West Pakhtunkhwa, where people follow a strict form of Deobandi school preached that polio, like all endemic diseases are signs of God's will and therefore anything blocking them are an insult to Allah: "We are all Muslim. We will do what Allah has said. God is the creator of all diseases. And he knows how to heal them", likewise many religious leaders misquoted the verses from the Holy Quran[vii]. In January 2007 during a

Polio campaign to convince remote areas in Pakistan to allow their children to be immunized against polio, which disables many PAKISTANI children, Maulana Fazalullah was quoted on his local FM channel telling his listeners the vaccination drive was "a conspiracy of the Jews and Christians to stunt the population growth of Muslims"[viii]

Local media's intensive coverage of Polio's fake campaign launched to trap Osama Bin Laden (OBL) created new issues and made many areas suffer[ix]. The initial report on a fake immunization campaign used to lead to OBL hideout was filed from abroad, led the local media into a follow up mode where they started to avail every opportunity to spin the topic from every angle.[x]

Polio eradication has always been a controversial topic in Pakistan; media is playing a very important role in the form of health journalism, however weak capacity of health journalists and lack understanding on basic socio-economic issues resulted in out of context and misreporting. The most recent examples of these negative incidents include:

- a recently reported scandal by DUNYA where 7,500 polio vaccine containers were found missing upon their arrival in Pishin-Balouchistan[xi].
- Mubashar Luqman's four consecutive shows against polio vaccine and the campaign[xii],
- Shakil Afridi's affair with polio[xiii] [xiv],
- hiring of hundreds of UNICEF's communication officer without the knowledge of the government[xv],
- fake post campaign monitoring by WHO in Islamabad[xvi], increased in the number of refusals[xvii].

However a common understanding that the negative news makes headline and is always noted, whereas there were a number of positive articles and reports were not much highlighted by the press[xviii] [xix].

This indicates a massive failure on communication of the success-factors by all stakeholders.

Issues related to Polio; including hiring of new resources, misunderstanding among key news professionals about the polio vaccine and the vaccination processes and increased number of refusals being quoted should be communicated with media in a systematic and engaging manner, so the lack of information at the media end should not become the news against the polio eradication initiative.

Recently the media has been reporting on Polio in a manner that it identifies the gaps in healthcare delivery mechanisms[xx]. It also picks out stories which identify the malpractices in the polio vaccines, corruption scandals within the Polio delivery mechanism[xxi] [xxii], however lack of information and knowledge on the sector leads to reporting on hearsay and speculations. Such information not only leads to irresponsible reporting but also creates serious issues for the Polio vaccinating teams in terms of access and credibility, which ultimately both the politicians and media start out of context debates[xxiii] [xxiv] [xxv].

To bridge this gap media's capacity to understand the issues and put them in the right perspective is required; capacity building of the journalists through interactive workshops and role playing exercises

would be required. This will also enable media professionals to realize how media is being used by certain interest groups in Pakistan[xxvi].

(The Eighteenth Amendment) of the Constitution of Pakistan, was passed by the National Assembly of Pakistan on April 8, 2010. Post 18th Amendment, the Ministry of Health has been devolved to provincial levels[xxvii], the Federal Ministry of Interprovincial Coordination is looking after the polio eradication under the auspices of Prime Minister's National Task Force on Polio Eradication[xxviii].

With health becoming a provincial subject, there is a greater need and importance of platforms required to be promoted in order to create interaction between the Press and health delivery professionals. It is also important that the health journalists should start working as a cluster on the sector, so more focused capacity building initiatives can be designed, so knowledge-based relearning processes can be disseminated on critical issues in a timely manner.

The Eradication Programme, currently, stands in a reactive mode; which provides a huge opportunity for the journalists to speculate, which in return puts the communication teams and the health delivery officers on a back-foot.

The consultants, during their interactions with the health journalists have identified that it is important that an initiative is owned and respected by the journalists, which should be managed and operated by the journalists themselves.

The "JOURNALISTS AGAINST POLIO" forum is one such initiative which will be creating narratives around Polio Eradication by the journalists themselves. The initiative will also be dove-tailed with a year-long calendar of other important media activities in Pakistan. In each of the trainings the forum of "Journalists Against Polio" will identify key players to look after the knowledge resources to be shared by all the journalists representing the Health Journalists' Clusters in their respective city/region.

The "Journalists Against Polio" initiative will be launched by each of the press clubs with an objective to create platforms through which journalists can interact with health delivery providers and experts. This effort should be the first of its attempts in closing the information gap between the health journalists and the UNICEF/WHO.

- In this regard frequent meetings and interactions would be required between journalist clusters and UNICEF/WHO.
- The interactions would consist of formal and informal activities between media and knowledge resources.
- These interactions would result in improving the level of understanding of media on issues related to Polio but would also create a better relationship between media and UNICEF/WHO as the right source on polio related information.

The key output of engaging "Journalists Against Polio" forum is to have clusters become the Ambassadors to the cause of eradicating polio in Pakistan. Their efforts should be recognized from all

stakeholders to the programme such as; UNICEF, WHO, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Rotary International, CDC. Without a holistic outreach plan for the initiative, this like many other such engagement programmes will be a failure on part of each of the stakeholders.

Therefore, it is recommended without a shadow of doubt, that a thoroughly designed Media and Outreach programme for the "Journalists Against Polio" Forum is created and implemented keeping in view of the above mentioned arguments.

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