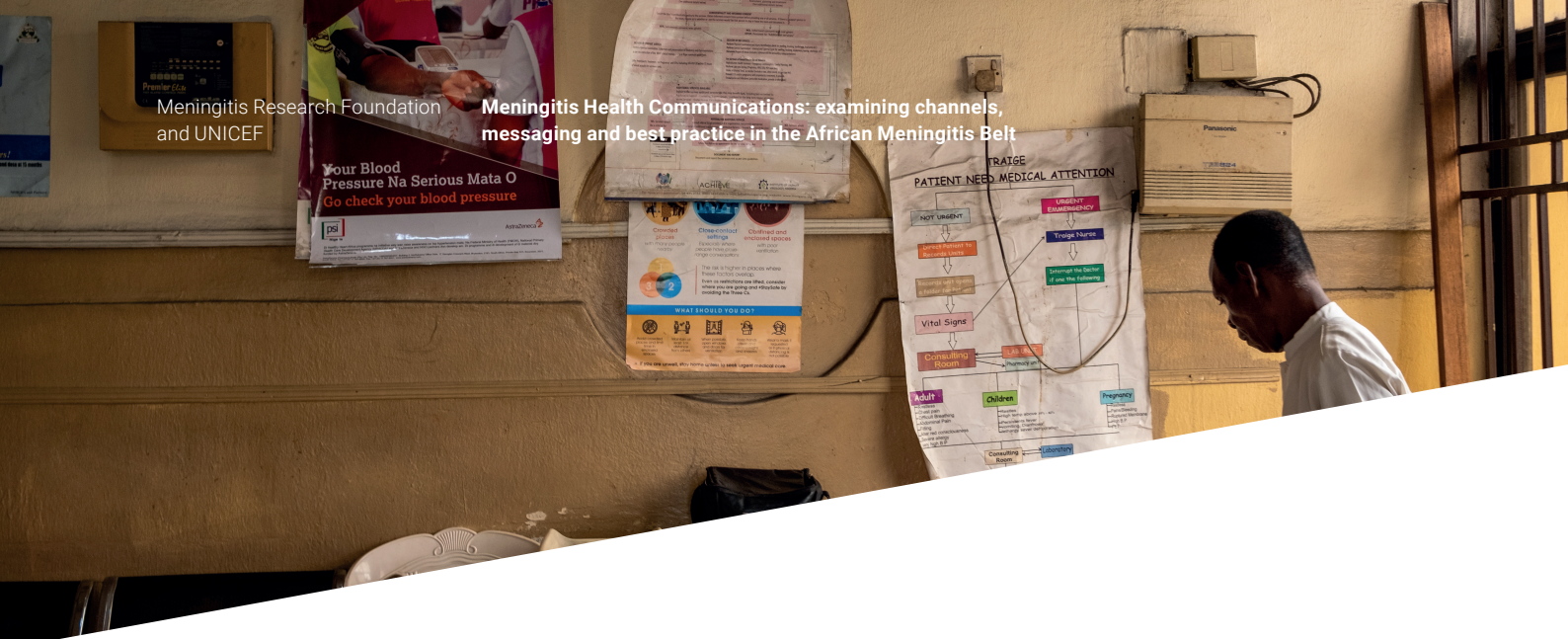




Meningitis Health Communications

Examining channels, messaging and best practice in the African Meningitis Belt



Executive summary

Meningitis is a difficult topic to communicate given its multiple causes, broad impact on many demographics and complex clinical definition. A fast-moving disease, with the potential to cause outbreaks and epidemics, meningitis has devastating effects on families and communities globally. Vaccines can prevent many forms of meningitis, but rapid action is crucial when meningitis is suspected. Therefore, outreach to raise awareness about the signs, symptoms and risks of meningitis – as well as the importance of immunisation - is critical.

To this end, Meningitis Research Foundation and UNICEF conducted this analysis of meningitis communications practices and materials to understand the current landscape and provide strategic recommendations for future meningitis communications. Through an online questionnaire ([Annex 1](#)) and submission of relevant materials, health professionals working in the Meningitis Belt of Africa provided valuable information and insight.

This analysis reviews several aspects of communications and outreach in detail, including the effectiveness of various channels and messages for different audiences. The findings and recommendations in this report aim to inform strategies to implement the [World Health Organization's \(WHO\) Global Road Map to Defeat Meningitis by 2030](#), as well as the Regional Strategic Plan to Defeat Meningitis by 2030 in Africa. Sections 2 and 3 offer practical guidance for practitioners and organisations planning audience outreach and developing key messages.

General trends of this research revealed that overall understanding of meningitis is low amongst the general population, particularly when compared to knowledge of other vaccine-preventable diseases. Strategic communications about meningitis are essential to close this gap. However, most respondents also reported that funding for meningitis awareness-raising is non-existent.

Resources do exist that can inform future planning and engagement. Many respondents submitted outreach materials that can be tailored and re-purposed to incorporate best practices. Context documents such as surveys, strategic plans and clinical guidelines can also be useful resources for identifying knowledge gaps and compiling key messages. Collaborative efforts through voluntary bodies such as the [Confederation of Meningitis Organisations \(CoMO\)](#) can be a vehicle for sharing tools and knowledge internationally.

This research is not comprehensive and leads the way for further exploration into health communications, both in the Meningitis Belt and in other regions. But this report does set out a clear and usable path for effective and impactful communications through its assessment of existing tools used in the Meningitis Belt, as well as highlighting the need for strategic, funded communications mechanisms to reduce the devastating impacts of meningitis.

Key findings and recommendations



Consistent funding gaps for meningitis communications and limited outreach materials specific to meningitis.

Recommendations:

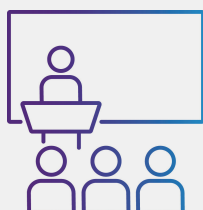
- National and local governments should dedicate funding for meningitis communications, including strategic planning and risk communications planning, within national budgets, as should global and regional civil society organisations (CSOs) and multilateral partners.
- Context documents, such as surveys, strategic plans and clinical guidelines, should be used to identify knowledge gaps, so meningitis is incorporated within broader programming and in compiling key messages.
- Global meningitis materials should be easily available and adaptable to local contexts. Civil society partners should continue to create standardised guidance and materials that can be tailored at a local level.
- Countries should document and share materials and best practices across the region.



Limited messaging on signs and symptoms, risk factors, awareness, treatment, impact, aftercare and support.

Recommendations:

- Country communicators should develop meningitis messaging appropriate to their local context. This includes addressing vaccine introduction, new vaccines, campaigns and outbreak response.
- See section 3 for suggested messages.



Low awareness of meningitis and vaccines among several key audiences.

Recommendations:

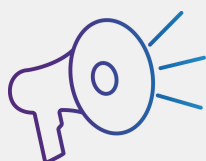
- Ministries of Health and partners should apply a conceptual framework (such as the UNICEF Behavioural Drivers Model³) to understand influences on awareness of meningitis and meningitis vaccines; investigate social norms regarding meningitis prevention, treatment and immunisation; and inform behaviour change strategies.
- Communications to parents/guardians should be reviewed to ensure that they not only exist but are having the intended effect amongst this key audience.



International health observance days are popular outreach channels.

Recommendations:

- International health observance days, such as World Meningitis Day (5 October), World Immunization Week (annually in April) or International Day of Persons with Disabilities (3 December) should be used by civil society organisations, governments and health practitioners as opportunities for broader messages. Resources should be widely used to create a unified message. For example, toolkits are routinely provided by organisers of these days (e.g., CoMO develops the World Meningitis Day toolkit).



Radio and television are the most popular channels for meningitis communications.

Recommendations:

- Further research should request and review video and audio scripts, presentations or advertisements related to meningitis, particularly during vaccination campaigns and outbreaks.



Social media policies are not universally developed and applied.

Recommendations:

- A social media outreach policy, focused on meningitis and that includes areas for measurement, should be established for each organisation and incorporated within communications planning.
- Training of local communications staff should be undertaken to build long-term capacity, strengthening local strategies to raise awareness about meningitis and expand vaccine coverage.



Many countries do not have risk communications plans.

Recommendations:

- Risk communications plans should be developed to supplement general social mobilisation strategies for meningitis.