

LEARNING NOTE

LESSONS LEARNED: ADAPTING WASH ACTIVITIES TO RESPOND TO COVID-19

SUMMARY

Burkina Faso confirmed its first COVID-19 case on March 9, 2020,¹ and (as of February 06, 2021) there have been 11,285 confirmed cases. In response, the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)-funded [Victory Against Malnutrition Plus \(ViMPlus\)](#) activity rapidly adapted programming to accompany the Burkina Faso government to prepare and respond to this new threat. This learning note describes ViMPlus's adaptations of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) activities during COVID-19, lessons learned, and challenges in supporting vulnerable households when ensuring health and safety.



A woman uses a Tippy Tap to wash hands with soap before visiting the well in Poulale village, Pissila commune. Photo Credit: DICKO Hama Hamidou

ViMPlus supports households in the North-Central region, which is one of the most structurally vulnerable and food insecure regions in Burkina Faso. Interventions in this region are further compounded by changing climate conditions. This results in hotter and drier weather, threatening crop yields and making improving resilience an increasing priority.² In the 11 communes where ViMPlus works, agriculture (including production of sorghum, millet, cowpea, maize, rice, and groundnuts) and livestock are the predominant livelihood activities. Both activities are vulnerable to extreme weather conditions and possible shortages of water for domestic use.

¹ Le Faso.net Coronavirus Burkina, 2021

² USAID Structural Vulnerability PowerPoint: February 2015, p. 18

Official forecasts in November 2019 indicated that over half a million people from rural households in the North Central region would be affected by severe food insecurity during the period June - August 2020.³ In response, ViMPlus developed strategies to promote and sustain good practices to sustainably strengthen the food and nutrition security of households. As drought has limited the availability of water for productive and domestic use and as flooding has affected water quality, ViMPlus focused on water treatment and essential hygiene practices to address pathogen pathways. This complemented the activity's nutrition objectives, as they help ensure the health and well-being of children under two years of age by protecting them from exposure to fecal pathogens. It is with this in mind that ViMPlus modified its health, nutrition, and WASH goals to address the new challenges presented by COVID-19.

ViMPlus is part of the USAID Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced II (RISE II) program, which supports vulnerable communities in Burkina Faso and Niger to prepare for and effectively manage reoccurring crises and to identify sustainable solutions to overcome poverty. Led by ACDI/VOCA, ViMPlus is implemented by a consortium with Save the Children leading the health, nutrition, WASH, and youth components.

KEY WASH ADAPTIONS DURING COVID-19

The activity's behavior change strategy supported the efforts of the government of Burkina Faso in the fight against the spread of COVID-19. Activities were implemented in close collaboration with the Regional Health Directorate of the North Central Region in the health districts of Kaya and Tougouri. Programmatic adaptations included the review of implementation approaches to accelerate and prioritize certain activities to take into account the context of COVID-19, remote technical assistance, the leadership and engagement of community actors, and numerous hand washing station constructions, community mobilization, and radio campaigns.



COVID-19 Small Group Discussion while organizing GASPA Groups of breastfeeding mothers. Photo Credit: Kafando Rissanata

Community actors played an active role in the response to COVID-19, including Community Based Health Workers (CBHWs), youth and women's representatives, Mothers Leaders, Village Development Committee members, and Youth Leaders. Over a half-day session, these community actors were trained and equipped with behavior change tools on the signs and symptoms of COVID-19, the practice of key preventative behaviors, and

³ Cadre Harmonisé d'analyse et d'identification des zones à risque et d'estimation des populations en insécurité alimentaire au Sahel et en Afrique de l'Ouest, Novembre 2019

the importance of early care-seeking. Trainings took place over a two-week period, and handwashing with soap was promoted using basic and locally-accessible handwashing stations. ViMPlus utilized visual aids, including posters, counseling cards, and training guides to support community actors to conduct door-to-door social and behavior change activities. Community actors received personal protective equipment (masks, alcohol-based hand sanitizer, etc.) to protect themselves and community members during behavior change activities. Remote support was also provided to help them pivot activities and to respond to questions, myths, and misconceptions concerning COVID-19.

During COVID-19, ViMPlus reinforced health and hygiene practices through the "Groupe d'Apprentissage et de Suivi des Pratiques d'Alimentation du Nourrisson et du Jeune Enfants" or "GASPA." These community-based groups are led by "Mothers Leaders" who support the health and nutrition of women and children during the first 1000 days of a child's life (from conception to two years of age), which is an important period in ensuring positive health, education, and livelihood outcomes over the short and long-term. With support from ViMPlus and CBHWs, the Mother Leaders support women through handwashing demonstrations and food hygiene/nutrition lessons to develop the skills and confidence to stay healthy during this critical period of growth.

"My name is Ouédraogo Boydouyalma, I am 37 years-old, and I am a restaurateur at the market of Poullalé. My customers washed their hands with the cups and I was always short of water. One month ago, the people from ViMPlus came to my village chief's house to demonstrate how to make a tippy-tap. I took part, I was there, and I followed everything. After the demonstration, I made my tippy-tap and all my customers washed their hands before eating and after eating. They waste less water [and] some passersby also wash their hands because of the coronavirus pandemic. The tippy-tap is really good, it's easy to make, and people like to use it. Thanks to ViMPlus."

During the initial meetings that were designed to identify women interested in participating in GASPA, ViMPlus carried out social behavior change (SBC) activities on symptoms/signs of COVID-19, transmission pathways, prevention measures, and the importance of seeking care. Twenty training sessions with the 648 Mothers Leaders reinforced these key preventative practice. ViMPlus supported 648 GASPA in the project zone to encourage women's nutrition, child feeding, and continued exclusive breastfeeding during COVID-19 as well as new hygiene practices, such as social distancing and mask wearing.

Members of the Water Users Associations (WUAs) took a proactive role in implementing preventative measures to slow COVID-19 transmission. WUAs set up at least one hand-washing station at each water point (a total of 83 handwashing stations) and empowered members to increase access to water and soap/ash⁴ and to require all water collection users to wash their hands with water and soap/ash before handling the pump and at water points. Users were requested to maintain at least one (1) meter between users at the water point. The water points also offer an opportunity to reach community members through demonstration sessions on the construction and use of simple handwashing stations.

Recognizing that access to products and water services needed to practice key COVID-19 preventative behaviors remained a challenge for vulnerable households, 722 hand washing kits (soap, jerry cans, etc.) followed by a

⁴ In Burkina Faso, the Minister of Health advised that, if soap is not available, ash can be used for hand washing.

training/demonstration session on how to make handwashing stations were provided. Following the demonstrations, community members (using their own materials and funds) made at least 1,000 local handwashing stations. The 722 tippy-taps installed in the promotion area (four communes) enabled 11% of households to have access to handwashing stations. ViMPlus's emergency interventions were carried out with the contribution of communities (supply of wood, gravel, digging of holes) for the installation of the tippy-tap kits. This reflected the communities' commitment to prevent COVID-19 and other hygiene-related diseases. Access to water services will be improved over the longer-term through the infrastructure improvements happening under ViMPlus.

ViMPlus also reached a wider audience by collaborating with TerreEauVivres (TEV) on radio campaigns around handwashing with soap, the importance of continuing breastfeeding during COVID-19, and question and answer sessions to help dispel common misconceptions related to the disease. Two hundred radio broadcasts, aired five times daily, have reached 942,000 people in the implementation area.

ViMPlus also focused on the safety and protection of staff, volunteers, and community members during activities. CBHWs, community leaders, youth, and women representatives received protection kits (alcohol-based hand sanitizer and masks). Hygiene guidance (such as wearing masks, social distancing, and hand washing during activities) was ensured.

RESULTS AND TAKEAWAYS

Six months after the handwashing demonstrations, monitoring of 443 tippy-taps indicated use of 94% by the communities for regular handwashing with soap and water. Because of the behavior change activities conducted in the GASPA on COVID-19 prevention, handwashing with soap is becoming a common practice in the communities. According to ViMPlus's annual survey conducted in September 2020, among households that have soap and water at a handwashing station, 76% are from the area covered by the health, nutrition, and WASH interventions. Annual monitoring survey results also indicate that the percentage of households with water and soap in a handwashing station commonly used by family members increased from 2.9% to 7.7%.⁵

LESSONS LEARNED AND CHALLENGES

The ViMPlus activity adaptations made it possible to promote good practices, such as remote assistance/support to community actors and ViMPlus staff and hygiene-related practices. The use of a network of community actors (ASBC, Mothers Leaders, etc.) who already had skills in epidemiological surveillance at the community-level allowed for the knowledge transfer of WASH practices. Using visual aids was an effective means of transmitting knowledge, and remotely supporting partners through coaching/distanced technical assistance was an effective means of improving the use of counseling cards by community actors during SBC activities. Providing community actors with protective equipment facilitated rapid deployment for door-to-door sensitization on disease prevention.

However, some challenges remain, including:

⁵ The proportion of households with a functional handwashing station is statistically different from 2019 to 2020. This was an increase by 4.24 percent point the availability of functional handwashing.

- Sustaining good hygiene practices (wearing masks, social distancing, and hand washing with soap) long-term, especially given that risk perceptions are low. Yet, participation and mobilization among some community members has changed, given concerns around this new disease and its transmission.
- Differing approaches between emergency responses that require household contributions through labor and market-based approaches, including sales and marketing of sanitation materials and Aquatabs. This challenge is exacerbated by the limited availability of certain products (such as Aquatabs) on the national, communal, and community levels.
- Technical and financial capacity of communities to renew WASH infrastructure.
- Sharing of experience and knowledge decreased due to COVID-19 and national/international travel restrictions.
- Poor internet connectivity, which led to disruptions and time lost during distanced training sessions conducted by remote trainers. It is preferable that the trainers be physically present, if possible.
- Sustaining dynamic interactions by the CBHWs and Mothers Leaders in the SBC platforms.
- Ensuring that households maintain and improve handwashing stations over time.

CONCLUSIONS

ViMPlus supported the government and communities to rapidly undertake measures to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. However, long-term follow-up is important to ensure sustainability of these essential behaviors. Providing handwashing facilities at all activity sites can serve as “nudges” and reinforce hygiene messages and practices. Given access issues related to COVID-19, it is important to continue to support communities remotely through telephone calls and the use of community radios, while leveraging community actors for disease surveillance and continuity of programming. Checklists could strengthen the monitoring of compliance with COVID-19 preventative behaviors during program activities. In addition, leveraging market systems to supply Aquatabs (drinking water treatment) might increase access to safe drinking water in the long-term. Given the current rise in cases (or second wave of COVID-19), ViMPlus continues to reinforce COVID-19 behavior change activities as well as ensure physical distancing, hand washing with soap, and mask wearing during activity implementation.⁶

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⁶ Mednick, S. (2021). Burkina Faso hospitals struggle with new wave of COVID-19. February 7, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/ouagadougou-coronavirus-pandemic-africa-west-africa-burkina-faso-548bbb5d254b3ddc247e733d8ae605fa>