

Case
study

COVID-19: From physical distancing to community approach

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The outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was first reported on the 31st of December 2019, in Wuhan, China. In response to the worldwide increase in infections, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. In Mexico, the first cases were confirmed in February, with Phase 1 of the pandemic announced at the end of the same month.

In March, the WHO reported 754,000 people infected and more than 36,000 deaths from COVID-19, while in Mexico 316 cases and 2 deaths were confirmed due to the disease. Given the evolution of the pandemic in Mexico, Phase 2 of the epidemic was announced at the end of March as the country reached 1,215 infections and 29 deaths. This marked the start of the National Campaign of Healthy Distancing, decreed by the Ministry of Health. This program consisted of:

- ◆ Social distancing
- ◆ Increasing basic prevention measures
- ◆ Suspension of schools and non-essential activities
- ◆ Family lockdown at home
- ◆ Rescheduling of mass gathering events
- ◆ Protection and care of the elderly



Louderspeaker that transmitted the audio through the community Vicente Guerrero “Las Nieves”, Teapa Tabasco.

Photo: PRAIM, 2020

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In response to Phase 2 and in concordance with the National Campaign, from March 19, 2020 the Flood Resilience Program in Mexico ¹, (PRAIM, for its initials in Spanish) part of the Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance (ZFRA) stopped community activities, but began the “COVID-19 Community Awareness Strategy” in the state of Tabasco, covering the municipality of Teapa and 18 communities within the municipality of Jonuta, following the implementation of the National Traffic Light System for epidemiological risk established by the Ministry of Health (Table 1).

On March 30, the state of Tabasco reported 39 confirmed cases. On April 21, Phase 3 of the pandemic was declared with 9,501 positive cases and 857 deaths and by July 27, 432,572 positive cases and 45,587 deaths had been reported at the national level. During this phase, cases of infection in Tabasco increased significantly (Table 2).

Table 1 Traffic Light System for epidemiological risk

RED	Essential economic activities are permitted, people can walk in the area surrounding their homes during the day.
ORANGE	Essential economic activities are permitted and non-essential activities can operate with 30% of staff, public spaces are opened with a reduced capacity.
YELLOW	Work activities are permitted. Outdoor public spaces are open under regular conditions and closed spaces have a reduced capacity.
GREEN	All activities are permitted, including school activities.

Table 2 Cases of COVID-19 infections in Tabasco during Phase 3 of the pandemic

Date	Positive cases	Fatalities	Traffic light system for epidemiological risk Tabasco
21-04-2020	218	55	
24-05-2020	3148	395	
28-06-2020	10,221	1,016	
26-07-2020	19,556	1,831	

Created using PRAIM with data from the Ministry of Health 2020 (<https://coronavirus.gob.mx/datos/>) and community reports from the field team.

Source: Gobierno de México (s/f). Semáforo COVID-19. <https://coronavirus.gob.mx/semaforo/>

¹ The Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance (ZFRA) is a multi-sectorial partnership focused on helping communities in developed and developing countries to strengthen their resilience to floods through the implementation of practical techniques, preparedness and protection of their environment. With a presence in 20 countries and the participation of 9 organizations, the Alliance has become a network that allows the exchange of experiences and the improvement of practices in different contexts.

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Given the state’s situation, and provided the limitations of face-to-face activities in community, the PRAIM team developed a community awareness strategy with the aim of preventing the spread of the virus and contributing positively to the transmission of clear information from official sources.

This mechanism also helped to communicate to the population that, despite the physical distance, the team’s intention was to maintain links and closeness to the communities.

COVID-19 community awareness strategy in Tabasco

Communication with people in the communities in Teapa was fundamental for encouraging the sharing of information related to the vulnerability and risks of COVID-19 infection. Since there were no recorded cases in the Program communities at the beginning of the pandemic in Mexico, focusing efforts on informing the population about susceptibility to infection, prevention and protection measures, and the existence of the virus, was essential, especially given the myths and mistrust that surrounded the topic.

CRUZ ROJA MEXICANA PROGRAMA DE RESILIENCIA ANTE INUNDACIONES EN MÉXICO Flood Resilience Alliance

**¿Sabías qué...
...lavarse las manos salva vidas?**

El virus **COVID-19** como todos los virus, tiene una capa que lo ayuda a fijarse a la piel de las personas.

El jabón, que ayuda a quitarnos hasta una gota de aceite, atrae y desintegra la capa del **COVID-19** y se va con el agua al lavarnos las manos.

Recuerda los siguientes **#ResiTips** para el lavado de manos:

Lávate las manos por **20 segundos** como mínimo.
Puedes usar **jabón líquido** o, si es uno de **barra**, podrás irlo cortando en trozos pequeños.
Cuando no hay jabón, podemos utilizar **gel antibacterial**.

Si te subiste al **pochimóvil**, a la **moto**, **saliste de tu casa** o **fuiste de compras** **lávate las manos** en cuanto regreses.

RESILIENCIA ES CUIDARNOS

Fuente: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México., Gaceta Universitaria OMS (2009). Manual Técnico de referencia para la higiene de las shorturl.at/cvzW2manos

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In order to establish the awareness strategy, the team worked through a matrix that identified the messages, community actors, strategic sites, communication channels and types of receivers to which the dissemination material would be directed. In this way, the team used means of communication such as telephone calls and WhatsApp messages to contact Community Representatives (local authorities) and some members of the community brigades that had already been formed by the PRAIM team.

How was this done?

After identifying the information that had already been distributed by other governmental bodies responsible for the prevention and mitigation of health emergencies, three general themes were established to address the needs of the communities:

- Maintaining physical distance
- Basic prevention measures
- Differences between Dengue and COVID-19

The resources and capacities of each community were identified to establish the most appropriate methods of dissemination, including:

- Video and audio messages shared via WhatsApp
- Audio messages transmitted via loudspeakers
- Banners in strategic locations

Key Messages	Existing products developed by the National Society
Proper use of facemasks	Infographic Video
Hand washing	
Basic recommendations for preventing coronavirus	Video
We're in this together. And we'll get through it together	Infographic
Sending a socially-distanced hug	
Hygiene habits at home	
Healthy habits	

Key Messages	Products developed by the Program
Difference between signs and symptoms Dengue-COVID	Infographic
Why wash our hands?	
Healthy distance	
Let's stay home	
Family pandemic action plan	
Hygiene habits outside of home	Audio
Hygiene habits at home	
Dengue prevention	
COVID-19 myths	
Healthy life	
Diabetes and hypertension prevention	
COVID-19 infection prevention measures	Video
We're in this together. And we'll get through it together	
Why wash our hands?	Infographic Video
Hygiene habits outside of home	Videos made in collaboration with Zurich Mx
Hygiene habits at home	
Risks and prevention of dengue	

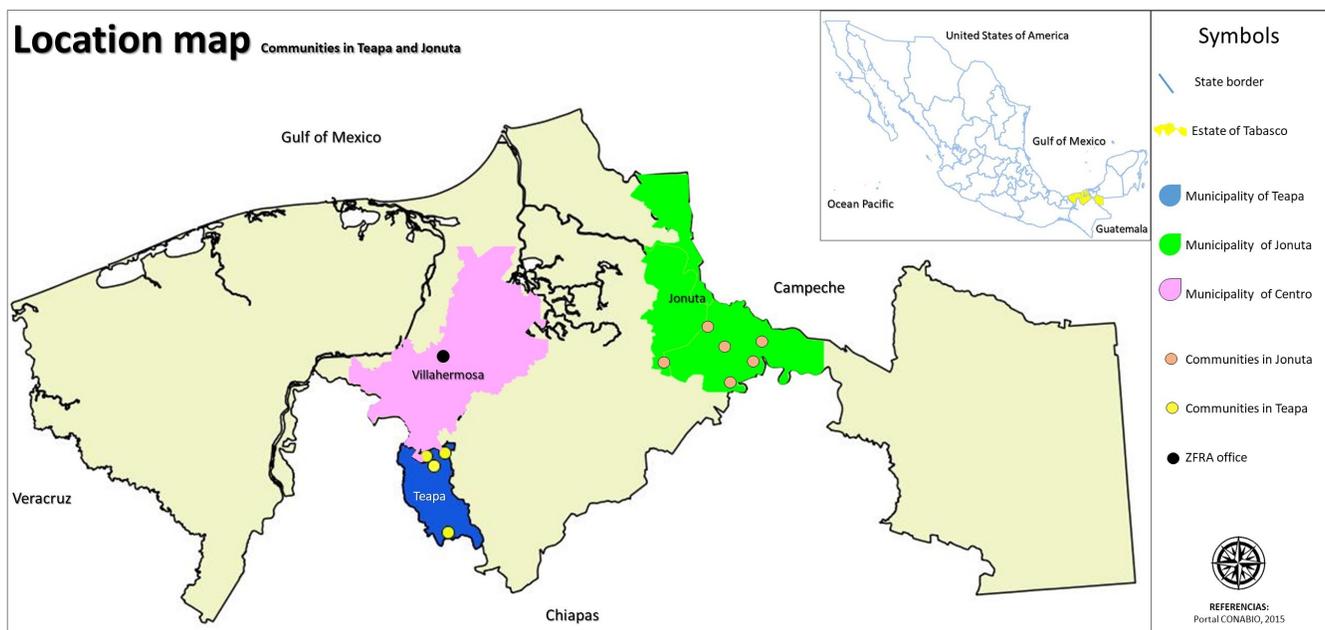
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- ➡ The virtual and physical places where audio and video messages could be shared, as well as the locations where banners could be safely placed, were determined.
- ➡ A mapping activity was completed to identify the key actors who could support the dissemination of the information.
- ➡ Materials produced by the Mexican Red Cross and the IFRC were identified, some of which were selected for local dissemination.
- ➡ Infographics were designed and original audio and video messages were produced, which were adapted to the regional language (*idioms*) so that all inhabitants could access and take ownership of the health information.
- ➡ In collaboration with Zurich Mexico, three audios were converted into video animations.

Where was it implemented?

This awareness strategy was aimed at various rural communities located in the municipalities of Teapa, which has a population of 1,998, and Jonuta, which has a population of 6,718 (Table 3).



Communities in Tabasco-ZFRA Phase 1 (Jonuta) and Phase 2 (Teapa) where the COVID-19 awareness strategy was implemented | Created by Gabriel Reyes, Mexican Red Cross

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Communities	
Teapa	Jonuta
1. Mariano Pedrero 3ra sección	5. Monte Grande
2. José María Morelos y Pavón “Santa Rita”	6. El Pastal
3. Manuel Buelta y Rayón	7. Güiro Arrancado
4. Vicente Guerrero “Las Nieves”	8. Nuevo Mundo
	9. Chinal
	10. El Güiral
	11. Tomás Garrido
	12. Torno Largo 1ra Sección B
	13. Torno Largo 1ra Sección A
	14. Torno Largo 2da Sección
	15. Torno Largo 3era Sección
	16. El Piñal
	17. 15 de mayo
	18. Boca de San Antonio
	19. El Bejucal
	20. Poblado Chanero
	21. Pueblo Nuevo
	22. Constitución de 1917

Key Messages #ResiTips

The strategy delivered key messages including:

1) Maintaining physical distance

- **Healthy distance:** promoting the importance of staying one and a half meters away from each other to avoid contagion.
- **Sending a socially-distanced hug:** emphasizing the importance of staying home.
- **Let's stay home:** urging people to stay home to avoid contagion.
- **We're in this together. And we'll get through it together:** sharing a message of encouragement to invite the community to stay home.



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2) Basic prevention measures

- **COVID-19 infection prevention measures:** sharing specific measures to avoid contagion. Message to Jonuta's community brigades.
- **Proper use of facemasks:** providing information regarding the correct steps for putting on and taking off facemasks.
- **Hand washing:** highlighting the importance of using soap to remove bacteria from the hands.
- **Healthy habits:** encouraging healthy habits while staying at home such as eating healthily, exercising and listening to music.
- **Hygiene habits at home:** promoting personal hygiene and care practices within the home.
- **Hygiene habits outside of home:** promoting actions to take when leaving home, such as avoiding crowded places, adjusting physical greetings, and not touching your face, eyes or nose when your hands are not clean.
- **Basic recommendations for preventing coronavirus:** communicating basic prevention measures in sign language.

3) Differences between Dengue and COVID

Dengue fever is a viral infection that is transmitted from mosquitoes to humans and is characterized by a febrile condition. Its main vector is the *Aedes aegypti* species, which mostly reproduces in stagnant waters and commonly appears during the rainy season (Jimenez, 2014). According to the *Panorama Epidemiológico de Dengue de la Secretaría de Salud*, in the 27th epidemiological week of 2020, 382 cases of dengue were reported in the state of Tabasco, making it the state with the second highest incidence of confirmed cases nationwide (15.29) (Secretaría de Salud, 2020). In response to this information, the awareness strategy addresses the issue of dengue fever to prevent the population from confusing the symptoms of this infection with those of COVID-19, and to act according to the virus in question.

PROGRAMA DE RESILIENCIA ANTE INUNDACIONES EN MÉXICO

DIFERENCIAS ENTRE LOS SÍNTOMAS Y LOS SIGNOS DEL:

DENGUE	COVID-19
SIGNOS Y SÍNTOMAS COMUNES	
Dolor de cabeza	Tos
Dolor muscular / articulaciones	Escurrecimiento nasal
Nauseas y/o vómito	Dolor de garganta
Fiebre	Fiebre
Ronchas en la piel	Dolor de cabeza
Pérdida del apetito	Los síntomas suelen presentarse a los 14 días
Los síntomas suelen durar de 2 a 7 días	
CASOS GRAVES	
Hemorragias y moretones en diversas partes del cuerpo	Neumonía
Piel fría y húmeda	Dificultad para respirar

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- **Difference between signs and symptoms Dengue-COVID:** avoiding confusion by communicating the distinct signs and symptoms of dengue compared to COVID-19.
- **COVID-19 myths:** sharing five myths about COVID-19 that have been refuted by the World Health Organization.
- **Dengue prevention:** highlighting the presence of dengue fever in the region and promoting hygiene measures such as removing stagnant water to prevent the spread of the mosquito.

The Program has used the #ResiTips hashtag to disseminate key messages to strengthen community resilience against flooding in a way that is easily identifiable by families living in the Program communities, local governments, Civil Protection authorities, Mexican Red Cross volunteers in Tabasco and by the communications team at the Mexican Red Cross National Headquarters.

Receivers and channels of dissemination

Informative materials have been delivered consistently to the population via social networks. Resources have been shared with the communities via WhatsApp and it has been the communities themselves who, once they have received information, have transmitted it through loudspeakers located within their communities. Likewise, printed material has been developed covering relevant health information and has been placed in strategic sites throughout the communities.

Municipality	Communities	Channels of dissemination	Direct receivers	Messages scope
Teapa	Mariano Pedrero 3ra sección, José María Morelos y Pavón “Santa Rita”, Manuel Buelta y Rayón, Vicente Guerrero “Las Nieves”	Loudspeaker at a store in the “Las Nieves” community. For the four communities, a supplier of loudspeakers was hired to broadcast the messages in strategic locations throughout the communities.	Total: 35 Representatives Community brigade members Community leaders Community volunteers Academic staff Students	100% of the population
Jonuta	Monte Grande, El Pastal, Güiro Arrancado, Nuevo Mundo, Chinal El Güiral, Tomás Garrido, Torno Largo 1ra Sección B Torno Largo 1ra Sección A, Torno Largo 2da Sección, Torno Largo 3era Sección, El Piñal, 15 de Mayo, Boca de San Antonio, El Bejuca, Poblado Chanero, Pueblo Nuevo Constitución de 1917	Loudspeaker at a local Internet café in the center of the Monte Grande community.	Total: 40 Main contacts from the community brigades	50% of the population

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Main results

- ◆ People from the communities have been receptive to the information and have replicated the messages within their communities.
- ◆ People from the Program communities report that they have adopted extra measures, which could perhaps explain the low number of infections in these four communities.
- ◆ Networks between Representatives and local authorities have been created to facilitate the sharing of information.
- ◆ Issues that were already being addressed in the community and that are relevant to the context of COVID-19, such as Dengue and the presence of rain, among other threats and risks, have been identified.
- ◆ The Mexican Red Cross is becoming a reliable source of information for the community.

Some challenges

- ◇ Although the periodicity for sending messages was programmed on a weekly basis, sometimes it could not be carried out due to the absence of or limited cell phone signal that exists in some areas, which lack infrastructure and sometimes remain completely isolated as a result of the weather conditions specific to the region (presence of rain).
- ◇ The myths around COVID-19, particularly about its existence, form of transmission and home remedies. Changing these ways of thinking is a challenge, as many of them are rooted in the beliefs of rural communities.
- ◇ Using strategies to ensure that the information provided by the government and others is not repetitive.
- ◇ The tropical cyclone season increased the rate of communication and established new recommendations. In addition, the threat factor represented by the COVID-19 phenomenon had to be considered when providing such recommendations.

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What is next?

It is important to continue to develop messages tailored to each phase of the emergency. At the time of writing, Tabasco has the highest peak of infection at the national level, so it will be necessary to reinforce not only prevention measures, but also how to care for the sick, hygiene and sanitation measures, prioritization of activities outside the home, among others, as well as to go beyond the limits of community coverage and extend the measures to the municipalities with the highest levels of infection.

Although this pandemic has left innumerable lessons learned around the world, as a community program, it is clear to us that we must strengthen and work on adapting to the new working conditions. This is a challenge for the Red Cross, as many of the methodologies it works with require physical presence and congregation of people. We also have the task of finding optimal means of communication that result in innovative and low-cost solutions that can be adopted and applied by communities. This will mean technologically transforming community work without losing the essence of the Movement, which is characterized by community relations, accompaniment, organization, trust and social cohesion.



FLOOD RESILIENCE PROGRAM MEXICO

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<https://floodresilience.net/>

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