Chipatala cha pa Foni for COVID-19 Response: Background

As the COVID-19 virus has spread quickly across the globe, it is has now been detected in almost 90 locations internationally, including sub-Saharan African countries. The effects of the pandemic are expected to disproportionately affect those living in low-income countries like Malawi.

Though no cases have been identified yet in Malawi, the Ministry of Health (MoH) is proactively seeking surge support to create public awareness about the symptoms, spread and prevention of the coronavirus and to prepare their health workforce. At the request of the MoH, VillageReach and our partners will quickly implement an effective awareness-raising strategy that will address fears, rumors, myths while disseminating complete and accurate messages for preventing the spread of COVID – 19 to the public.

We are immediately seeking approximately $200,000 in funding to implement this rapid response to a quickly spreading disease, in order to minimize the impact on Malawi’s health system.

Mobilizing for Preparedness:

The Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) has asked for VillageReach’s help mobilizing support to ensure that Chipatala cha pa Foni (CCPF), their national primary health care hotline, is ready for COVID-19 response. The MoHP, VillageReach, and our technology partner Viamo have three primary objectives: 1.) Build awareness and provide accurate information about COVID-19 nationwide; 2.) Empower health workers with information about prevention and treatment; 3.) Provide government with visibility about outbreak locations so they can make quick, smart responses. We will use a variety of channels to ensure that more Malawians have regular access to health information.

1. MoHP, VillageReach, and Viamo will work together to quickly develop protocol and accurate messaging about COVID-19. We will use three channels to distribute information nationwide:

   - Message blasts will provide early information about how to prevent or slow the spread of the virus. Messages can address community behavior change, provide information about healthcare services, or be used to provide accurate updates on the outbreak to the community while correcting false information and rumors.

   - Information will be available 24 hours a day through Chipatala cha pa Foni (CCPF) Health Center by Phone, a free health hotline which was developed by VillageReach and the MoH. Mobile phone users will be able to speak to trained nurses or access voice messages about COVID-19, available in local languages.

   - Viamo’s toll free 3-2-1 National Information Service uses Interactive Voice Response technology to allow users to access voice messages on various health topics available in local languages. Both CCPF and the 321 service can play a vital role in a targeted message campaign and behavior change messaging on Covid-19 to push information to callers/subscribers in high-risk areas. The two services will be cross-promoted so that callers/subscribers have access to multiple platforms for Covid-19 information. Where possible, Viamo will support linking of the two services so that callers/subscribers can switch between the two services to access information with ease.
2. We will train hotline workers to use the protocol so they can provide early and effective information about COVID-19 to the public. Hotline workers will receive training about making referrals. For health workers who are working in remote locations, we will provide ongoing mobile-based remote training through SMS, IVR or chatbots. Health workers can also call CCPF Health Center by Phone to receive up-to-date information and recommendations about response.

3. Finally, VillageReach and Viamo will work together to provide the government with data to improve visibility under short timelines and tailor response plans. Using the call data from CCPF, Viamo can develop a custom dashboard and create a heat map that indicates the origin of most inquiries. The information compiled on the dashboard can be utilized for rapid decision-making and regular monitoring of activities at all levels, and the ability to stream the same data into third party systems.

This solution focuses on rapid implementation of an effective awareness-raising strategy to address fears, rumors, myths and disseminate complete and accurate messages for preventing the spread of COVID – 19 to the public. It does not address other aspects of handling COVID-19 such as treatment, quarantine control, logistics or epidemiology. It also does not include how to plan for potential social, economic and security disruptions, although the decisions made by technical experts on how to handle many of these issues can be addressed through the awareness-raising platform proposed below.

If we are successful in implementing this response early enough, we can help limit misinformation and rumors that could contribute to confusion, fear and further spread. Empathetic and contextually relevant communication will convey concern and reassurance, and reduce emotional turmoil associated with uncertainty. Accurate information will provide the facts about what the public can do and is being done, empowering people to take appropriate action.

Proposed Activities:

Phase 1 (immediate):

1. Develop protocol for key questions/messages so that hotline workers can provide early, empathetic, accurate and effective information about novel coronavirus to the public
2. Train hotline workers and health workers to use protocol and provide referral where necessary.
3. Develop COVID-19 voice messages in multiple languages and make available on the IVR platform and through 3-2-1
4. Promote the hotline as a source of information for Covid-19 via radio, WhatsApp and SMS blasts
5. Cross promote MoHP’s CCPF and Viamo’s 321 services as platforms to access Covid 19 information (and where possible develop links between the services to allow callers/subscribers to navigate between the two services).

Phase 2 (as funding allows):

6. Use data and visual reporting to inform the MoH about the origins of COVID-19 inquiries and calls to support response plans
7. Integrate AI/machine learning messaging through Turn/WhatsApp as an alternate platform for information (working with Praekelt on scoping for Malawi – not yet confirmed)
8. Provide direct messaging and mobile based remote training to health care workers to support them in their response