

HAMRO PALO (IT'S OUR TIME NOW!): A SOCIAL BEHAVIOR CHANGE COMMUNICATION (SBCC) MODEL CAPSULE RADIO PROGRAM FOR THE CHILDREN OF NEPAL



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on children around the world, and Nepal is no exception. Available literature shows that children faced poverty, learning deprivation, abuse, mental and psychological stress, compounded by the lack of right information or availability of misinformation, rumors and disinformation on the nature of COVID-19, vaccination, and the safety measures. According to the representative survey conducted by Save the Children in Nepal in 2020, only five percent of children felt they were earn-

ing as much as at school during the lockdown and school closure. Likewise, more than 80 percent children reported that they learned little or nothing. One in 10 children did not have access to any learning materials at home, 83 percent of parents lost their access to healthcare, medicine, or medical supplies, nine in 10 households lost their income making it difficult, if not impossible, to provide for their needs, including the education and wellbeing needs of the children.



COVID-19 has had huge toll on safety and mental wellbeing of children as well. Eleven percent of households, in the Save the Children’s representative survey, reported that violence, including physical and emotional abuse took place at home. Almost two thirds of the girls reported increase in household chores, 74 percent children reported increase in negative feelings, 62 percent were worried and 44 percent experienced acute boredom.

As children and adolescents were facing multiple problems due to lockdown, school closure and the COVID-19 pandemic, little attention was being paid towards their needs and welfare. The efforts by the government were largely focused on enforcing prohibitory measures and ensuring the compliance of COVID-19 protocols. During the first wave, the voices of the children went largely unheard, their issues and needs did not become the higher priorities for the stakeholders and, as such, there was information and accountability vacuum to address their genuine needs and concerns.

But the children had to be heard, their voices had to be passed to the government actors to make them more accountable toward the children, and their manifold issues.

‘Hamro Palo’ (It’s our time NOW!), Save the Children’s capsule model radio program produced in collaboration with National Health Education Information and Communication Center (NHEICC) of the Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) of the Government of Nepal, and Community Information Network (CIN), has this imperative at its core.

The capsule model radio show (or bite-size radio capsule) was designed to address the concerns of children and adolescents related to the abovementioned problems. This radio program, based on Social Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) approach, aimed to leverage the voices and

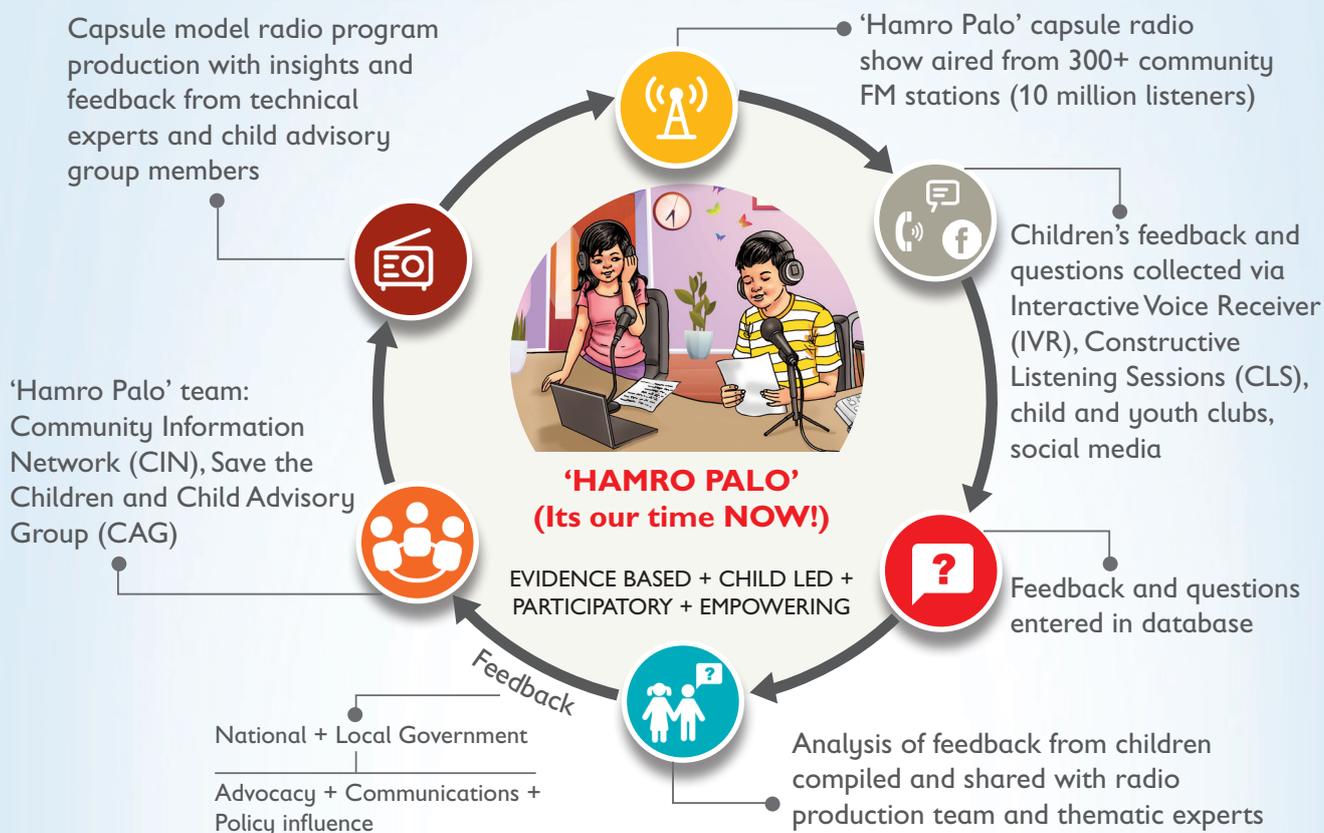
concerns of children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Children and adolescents participated in the program using the Interactive Voice Receiver (IVR) and asked questions about the issues that directly and indirectly affected their well-being to influential policymakers and stakeholders. The questions of the children and the responses from the concerned stakeholders were broken down into a series of radio capsules—of around five to 10 minutes each. Each radio capsule was inserted in between Sajha Khabar—a flagship news program produced by CIN—which was aired through more than 300 community radio stations across the country during the news hours to ensure wider listenership. The program would be recorded beforehand and aired at 7:30 in the evening every Sunday.

In ‘Hamro Palo,’ the children asked questions about the issues related to COVID-19 and its impact and the concerned stakeholders—government ministers, officials, experts, and public health professionals—answered these questions to address their concerns related to education, health, safety measures, mental health, mis/information regarding COVID-19, vaccination for children, rumors and misinformation surrounding vaccination, safety of children, abuse, violence, and overall wellbeing.

As a result, since June 29, 2021, when the first episode of ‘Hamro Palo’ was aired through CIN and which aired total of 19 episodes as of October 25, 2021, millions of children and their parents have found an opportunity to communicate their concerns to the related stakeholders, the redressal of which is going to contribute to the behavior change of children, parents as well as the stakeholders, who are in a position to address their problems. In the process, children and adolescents also have found an opportunity to get their voices and messages across to the stakeholders, while also holding the policymakers and the government actors accountable towards their needs and concerns.

RADIO CAPSULE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

'HAMRO PALO' SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR CHANGE COMMUNICATIONS (SBCC) MODEL CAPSULE RADIO PROGRAM

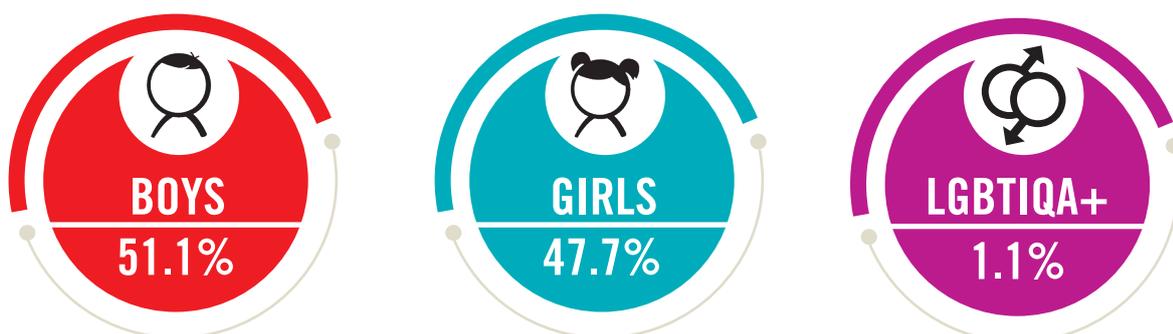


AUDIENCE PROFILE

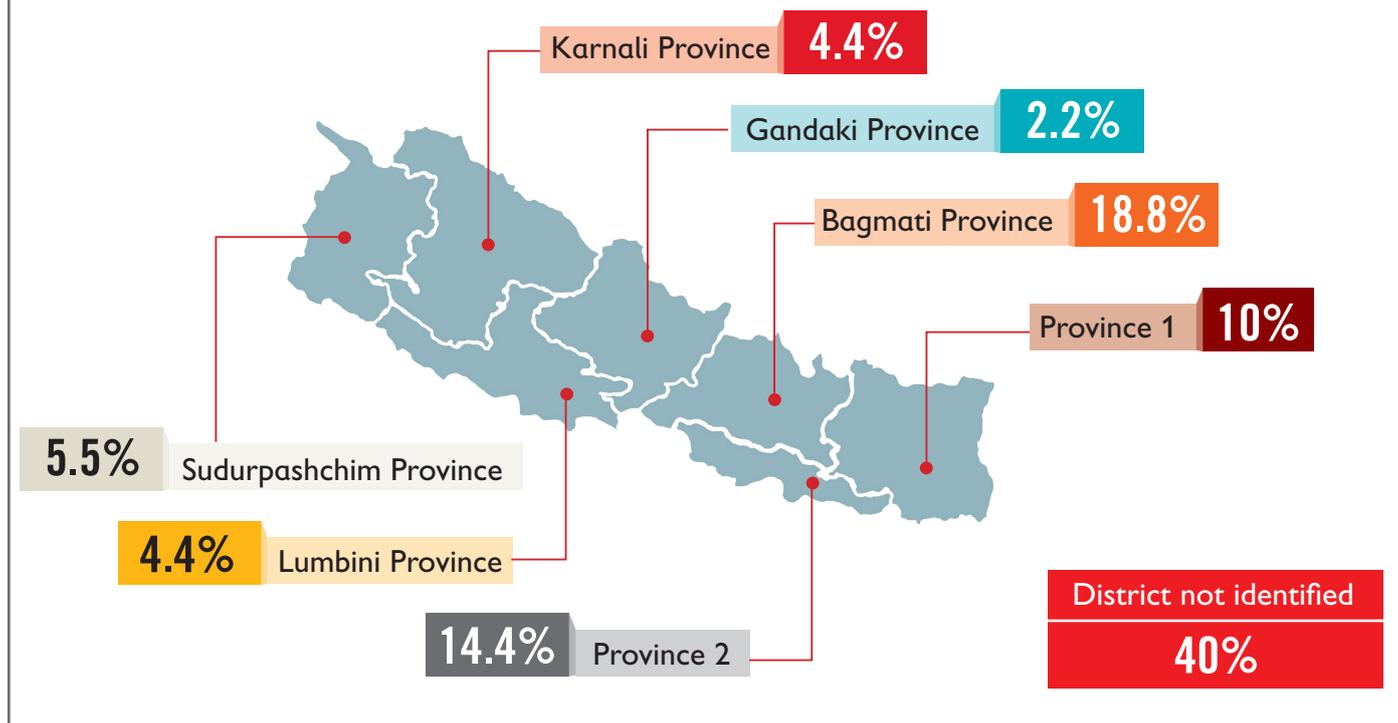
The radio show has been successful in ensuring the meaningful participation of a nation-wide audience, as children and adolescents, along with their parents, participate in weekly radio program by recording their questions, views, and opinions. Questioners covered the diverse geographical locations—from as far as Jumla and Doti to Bardiya to Sarlahi and Dhanusha of Province 2 to Sindhupalchok and Kathmandu.

AUDIENCE PROFILE BY GENDER

Total number of children and adolescents who asked questions in 19 episodes



AUDIENCE PROFILE BY PROVINCE



Questions posed by the audience are answered by the government officials, influential stakeholders, and experts with evidence-based information, dealing with rumors on a real-time and weekly basis. The radio show has featured the Minister of Health and Population, high-level officials from Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, government spokesperson, mental and well-being experts, and prominent researchers and experts to address the questions posed by the listeners.

KEY ISSUES RAISED BY CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN THE RADIO SHOW

COVID-19 VACCINATION FOR CHILDREN



A great majority of children and adolescents, 18.8 percent of the total, raised questions about the lack of vaccines for children. They asked why the government has not brought out vaccines for the children. In the earlier episodes, the stakeholders responded by saying that children are not vaccinated because vaccines suitable for children are yet to be developed and certified by the WHO. After the government made the decision to purchase vaccines, the stakeholders reassured the children that they will soon get the jabs.

“Is it because the government thinks we children have greater immunity to fight against the corona virus that the children have not been given Covid vaccines? When will the children be inoculated against COVID-19?”

Ashok, Sindhupalchok (Episode 2)

“Without trial, no vaccines are administered on children. Covid vaccines were tested on people above 18 and certified for people above 18. It should be trialed on children below 18 first and only then it will be established whether those below 18 can also be administered Covid vaccines.”

Dr. Sagar Prasai
Senior Public Health Administrator
Ministry of Health and Population

Similarly, listeners also posed questions related to the brand and efficacy of the available vaccines, and concerns related to vaccines procured and used by the government. Answering the questions, the Minister of Health and Population, Birodh Khaitwada, in Episode 18, stressed that children were being prioritized as part of the government’s vaccination campaign, and the government was procuring 10 million doses of vaccines for children, and all children across the country would be vaccinated.



DIGITAL DIVIDE AND EDUCATION

Nearly equal majority of children and adolescents, 16.6 percent of the total, raised questions related to education and students being deprived of learning opportunities. They also raised the issue of safety when the schools reopen. They were particularly concerned about whether the schools would be able to ensure COVID-19 safety compliance, and provide them with masks, hand sanitizers and water to wash hands frequently.

One of the listeners studying in Grade 10 raised the concern in these words:

“Millions of students like me have been deprived of the opportunity to learn due to the lockdown. This could lead to school dropout, depression and stress on many students. Nobody seems to have paid attention toward this reality. Online class has served only for the urban rich. Majority of students are deprived of learning from online means as well. Concerned authorities need to pay attention to this subject.”

This question was answered by the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Deepak Sharma, who stressed on the government’s effort to address digital divide in education, and discussed the introduction of radio remedial classes, introduction of self-learning books and resources. Furthermore, he requested children and adolescents to be vigilant of the government’s effort, and to reach out to elected representatives and ministry officials to ensure equitable distribution of education materials, and to make government officials accountable towards children’s education, and their rights.

Similarly, a majority of listeners also shared their concern over the rampant increase of COVID-19 cases, and the government’s plans to reopen school amidst the pandemic. Addressing the fear in listeners, the spokesperson of MoEST stated:

“We have formulated school operation guidelines and action plan to reopen schools after the lockdown. All schools have to abide by those guidelines. This has been sent to the local levels and all schools. It can also be downloaded from the website of Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. This provides directives regarding how to follow the code of conduct, how to use mask, sanitizer, how to isolate when the students are found infected and how to access the health facilities if they are infected. All the details are provided. I request the students to read that action plan.”

Children and young people with disability have also engaged and participated in the radio show. A visually impaired listener from Nuwakot shared his concern related to the government's apathy towards children with disability in these words:

“I am a visually impaired student. The government has facilitated learning for the students without visual disability by providing them with books, learning materials and even through alternative virtual platforms. Why has the government ignored the children with disability, especially those with visual impaired children?”

The government officials responded by saying that the government has developed alternative learning platforms and that the federal government has authorized the local governments to take decisions to reopen schools after ensuring safety protocols. Responding to the listener, Madhav Prasad Dahal, Information Officer, Center for Education and Human Resource Development shared:

“Curriculum based radio programs are aired from Radio Nepal for grade 9 and 10 students. Community radios in Nuwakot have also been airing subject-wise lessons. I would like to request the listener to listen to those learning materials. Textbooks in Braille scripts have also been prepared. Schools can coordinate with the local governments to make such textbooks, even if they are few, available to children with visual disability.”

Children and adolescents also drew the government's attention on the rampant digital divide faced by children from the hardest to reach and rural communities and stressed on the need for more inclusive alternative education methods to ensure learning and education continuity.

The stakeholders asked the questioners to listen to the radio or watch TV, consult headmasters, demand textbooks from their respective schools and stay in touch with their respective teachers to ensure continued learning. The stakeholders, who responded to such questions, asked the children to consult their teachers, demand books from respective schools, not to worry and keep calm. They said the schools as well as the students will have to ensure compliance of safety protocols when the schools reopen.

RUMORS, MISINFORMATION ABOUT VACCINES



Considerable number of children and adolescents, 8.8 percent, asked questions related with rumors and disinformation about the vaccine. The concerned stakeholders—the government officials as well as public health experts—debunked the myths about the virus, busted the rumors about the vaccines by citing the evidence from the studies of the World Health Organization (WHO).

Q
I want to know whether Covid vaccine causes allergy or not.?

Managya (Grade VI student, Episode 10)

A
It's very rare that Covid vaccine causes allergy. Such cases have not been found so far. Thus, one can rest assured and get vaccinated.

Dr Sujan Bhusal Neupane
Public Health Expert (Episode 10)

I have heard that after being vaccinated, the illness goes even worse and one falls ill and has fever. Is that true?"

Q

Prenisha (from Lalitpur, Episode 10)

A

Some people may experience muscle pain and some fever, but it does not really have severe effects. Vaccines are safe. It does more good than bad. If you are in 'immunocompromised' state, or have fever already, you should receive vaccines after you recover.

Dr Sujan Bhusal Neupane
Public Health Expert (Episode 10)

I have heard that after being vaccinated some people have heart attack. I have also heard that vaccinated people develop magnet-like effect in their bodies. Is that true?

Q

Sabu (from Gaighat, Episode 10)

A

This is completely false. Many people have been vaccinated and such problems have not been detected in Nepal so far. One should not be afraid. There's no evidence of people getting heart attack after vaccination. You can be rest assured and go for vaccination."

Dr Sujan Bhusal Neupane
Public Health Expert (Episode 10)

I have heard that one cannot be safe even after being vaccinated and one can even be infected again. I have heard that Vero Cell can also result in paralysis. Is that true?

Q

Sneha (from Gaighat, Episode 10)

A

Some people have higher immunity, others do not. So, some people may be infected again. Since new variants are emerging vaccines might not be so effective for some of the variants. But largely vaccines ensure protection. Paralysis is the rarest of rare complications. No such case has been found among the vaccinated people in Nepal.

Dr Sujan Bhusal Neupane
Public Health Expert (Episode 10)

While some asked whether Covid-19 vaccine causes allergy, others asked about the side effects—muscle pain, fever etc. One listener from Gaighat (Udayapur) asked if the rumor that Covid-19 vaccines cause heart attack is true, another listener (Sneha from Udayapur) asked if Vero Cell can result in paralysis, yet another (Bibisha from Parbat district) shared the hearsay that only Vero Cell can treat Covid-19 better since it is a Chinese vaccine, and Corona was first detected in China. Another listener (Yunisha from Lagankhel) asked about the rumor that vaccinated people can live only up to five years after vaccination.

Government officials such as Dr Sagar Dahal, the chief of Immunization Division under Department of Health Services of Ministry of Health and Population, and other experts responded by saying that all such rumors about the vaccines are completely false and that all vaccines—Vero Cell, Covishield, Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson and Johnson—are effective. They encouraged the children to be vaccinated.

I have heard that Verocell can cure Covid better because Corona started in China, and the vaccine made by China would be more effective. My parents and teachers say the same thing.

Q

Bibisha from Parbat (Episode 15)

A

WHO tests the efficacy of the vaccines and does not recommend any vaccines with lower than 50 percent efficacy rate. All the vaccines brought in Nepal are equally effective. Those rumors are not true.

Dr Sagar Dahal, Chief

Immunization Division, Department of Health Services, Ministry of Health and Education Vaccine Department Chief of MoHP

I was happy to learn that vaccines are being brought for children as well. But from school learnt that the vaccinated people can live only up to 5 years. I am really scared. Is that true?

Q

Unisha, Lagankhel (Episode 15)

A

This is completely untrue. The vaccine is for helping us live much longer. It is for keeping us safe, preventing us from falling ill and having to be hospitalized.

Dr Sagar Dahal, Chief

Immunization Division, Department of Health Services, Ministry of Health and Education Vaccine Department Chief of MoHP

A majority of children also posed concerns related to rumors that only elderly people are affected by COVID, and whether children below five need to wear a mask or not. Similarly, questions such as, the third wave is more dangerous for children than the first and second wave, and how the children can be safe from it were also asked in the radio show.

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN, ABUSE, BULLYING AND OTHERS



Children also posed questions about the increasing trend of violence against children during the COVID-19 pandemic. 8.8 percent raised the issues of violence and abuse and mental health and bullying. Similarly, 7.7 percent children asked questions related to how to stay safe during isolation, expressed the urge to go out of home and play with friends, raised the need for separate space for children to play, and asked about the factors to consider while staying in isolation, including the type of exercise to do and diet to be taken.

At least five children, 5.5 percent, raised the need for psychological counselling for the children suffering from mental health problems during the pandemic.

Questions related to mental health and mental wellbeing included how to keep mind fresh while staying at home and learning virtually, frustration arising from not being able to meet friends and so on.

An adolescent from Province 2 raised the issue of children becoming the victims of addiction due to school closure.

An adolescent, who identified oneself as LGBTIQA category, reported the incident of being bullied on social media and its direct impact on mental health.

“I am active in social media but I have faced a lot of torture from social media such as social bullying, being sent messages from fake accounts. I have been expressing myself freely. Now I learn that people have problem with that. It has deeply affected me.”

Anmol, LGBTQI community (Episode 12)

Children and adolescents also asked questions on child labour and the preparedness of the provincial government to ensure safety of children when the schools reopen by calling for greater accountability from the government's side.

One adolescent girl from Kathmandu demanded low-cost or free availability of sanitary pads for girls, to which the official from Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens promised to take up the matter with the Ministry of Finance.

COMMITMENT FROM THE STAKEHOLDERS

Stakeholders representing the government agencies promised to address all the vital concerns raised by the children and adolescents—especially regarding ensuring continuity of learning through alternative means or by ensuring that every child gets the books. The stakeholders not affiliated with government agencies and independent experts encouraged the children to keep raising their concerns thereby pressuring the government to address their genuine needs. The government stakeholders even ensured that those not addressing children's concerns will be held to task. Ministers—from the federal as well as the provincial governments—shared their commitment to address the questions raised by the children, and further work to create a safe and enabling environment for children.

MOST FREQUENTLY RAISED ISSUES/ QUESTIONS



Demanding vaccines for children



Education and digital divide



Effectiveness of masks and mask wearing



Rumors and disinformation about the vaccine



Violence against children, mental health and bullying



Safety during isolation/quarantine



Psychological counselling for children suffering from mental health

An adolescent girl raised the question of safety for girls and women and yet another demanded that the government provide sanitary pads for free, or at nominal costs to the girls. A listener from Province 2 raised the issue of adolescent boys falling into drug addiction due to school closure. Notably, the children and adolescents to raise the question of violence against children and the cases of abuse have invariably been girls.

While a great majority of children are worried about education, health and mental health, a significant number of questioners are also worried about safety. Notably, misinformation and rumors about the vaccine and, even the nature of the COVID-19, seem to be rampant among many children as well as their parents. The children expect the government to take care of their educational, health and other needs. They are more demanding of the government and want the government to address their concerns as soon as possible.

COMMITMENT FROM THE STAKEHOLDERS

“ We have signed the agreement to bring 10 million doses of Moderna and Pfizer vaccines for children (12-18 ages) from America. Within a month at the latest we will bring all 10 million doses and vaccinate the children in all provinces. ”

Birodh Khatiwada
Minister of Health and Population (Episode 19)

“ We have formulated school operation guidelines and action plan to reopen schools after the lockdown. All schools have to abide by those guidelines. This has been sent to the local levels and all schools. It can also be downloaded from the website of Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. This provides directives regarding how to follow the code of conduct, how to use masks, sanitizer, how to isolate when the students are found infected and how to access the health facilities if they are infected. All the details are provided. I request the students to read that action plan. ”

Deepak Sharma
Spokesperson of Ministry of Education and Science and Technology (Episode 4)

“ The government has set a criteria for the schools to follow Covid-19 protocols while reopening classes. Physical distancing, not more than two students on a single bench, facility for hand washing, ensuring water supply for frequent handwashing, providing sanitizers, compliance to health protocols set by the Ministry of Health. The headmasters of respective schools will make sure that such things are in place. ”

Madhav Prasad Dahal, Information Officer
Center for Education and Human Resource Development (Episode 7)

“ The provincial and local governments both need to work together to address child labor. Child labor is prohibited. We will formulate a special program for the protection of children. We will carry out a survey of children in labor and we will make arrangement to ensure they have food, shelter and education. ”

Kul Prasad KC
Chief Minister, Lumbini Province (Episode 14)

“ We have informed all the schools to run classes only after following safety protocols—using masks, sanitizers and hand washing. We are thinking about going for monitoring to check if the schools are complying with those protocols. We will implement that. Schools have been strictly asked to operate only after ensuring compliance of safety measures. In case the students are infected, even after adopting safety measures, then we have provincial hospital, and covid hospital in every district of the province with ICU and ventilators. The government will treat such patients in these hospitals. ”

Birendra Prasad Singh
Minister of Women, Children, Youth and Sports, Province 2 (Episode 14)

WHAT WORKS?



SBCC programming to strengthen voice and agency of children:

The radio show has provided a safe platform for children to discuss their concerns related to Covid-19 and vaccination and hold government stakeholders accountable towards their issues. Children not only share their problems and issues, but also share solutions to inspire stakeholders, demanding for immediate action and collaborative problem-solving mechanism. The introduction of feedback loops utilizing Interactive Voice Receiver (IVR) has proven to be successful, as the 'call to listen' feature empowers children and adolescents to record their questions without hesitation. The IVR service receives more than 100 + calls a week and is a trusted source of information to understand trends, issues, and challenges faced by children and adolescents during the pandemic.



'Real time' addressal of rumors and misinformation:

SBCC based radio programs are effective to debunk the myths and rumors related to Covid-19 and vaccines. Questions posed by the listeners related to misinformation regarding Covid-19 and vaccines, are dealt with by experts. Further reinforcing the need for evidence-based information sharing during a pandemic situation. There is also evidence that suggests that 'real time' discussion of rumors supports with building vaccine uptake, and sensitizing communities on the importance of Covid-19 safe behavior and vaccination, strengthening trust and ownership of communities towards the vaccination process, and government entry points.



Dialogue between service provider and service seekers:

Building dialogues between service providers and service seekers can create an enabling environment to address needs and gaps through a non-adversarial approach. The radio capsule program serves as a medium to hold the government accountable towards their duties and sensitize them about the need of children and adolescents. Similarly, anecdotal evidence suggests that the interface model of the radio show has empowered children and adolescents to ask hard-hitting questions to stakeholders and have provided them with a safe space to voice in their concerns and questions thereby supporting in building their voice and agency.

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