signpost

# AN EVIDENCE REVIEW OF THE SIGNPOST PROJECT

**Empowering Through Responsive Information**

signpost

# Contents

# Abstract

This white paper reviews the evidence supporting and informing the Signpost project's methods on delivering a digital responsive information service. It corroborates evidence behind Signpost's work and demonstrates that Signpost empowers users to make informed decisions related to their livelihood, safety and wellbeing, in times of crisis. It finds that Signpost meets a critical and often neglected need within the aid sector to provide trusted, timely, accessible, accurate, and context-adapted information. Additionally, with the COVID-19 pandemic underway at the time of publication, one section is dedicated to combating misinformation and building trust in communities affected by crisis.

# 1 Introduction

In complex and tumultuous situations, accurate and timely information are critically important to affected populations. Decisions that people make for themselves and their families - often with little time or under duress - can be a matter of life and death. For example, when facing an epidemic of infectious disease, when considering whether or not to flee one's home in search of asylum or considering how to cope in a situation of violence, at home or in a community. The aid sector often struggles to recognize the agency of affected populations and must actively transition from a charity model towards a model that focuses on empowerment and durable solutions. The active role of populations themselves in shaping their own lives, must be considered throughout the entire arc of a crisis, and is increasingly an objective in the design and delivery of an aid response. The role of information in relation to this objective is broadly recognized, yet information services have not fully embraced the readily available evidence base in academic literature, in gray literature produced by the aid sector, and evidence from practices within the sector.

So, what is Signpost? Signpost is an innovative and simple approach towards digital information services that uses a responsive methodology based on strong evidence from recent years of practice. Signpost is a responsive information service that uses digital information platforms to respond to the information needs of populations affected by crises. The Signpost project is a collaboration between the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Mercy Corps (MC), developed with the support of technology companies including Google, Cisco, Trip Advisor, Twilio, Box, Facebook and Zendesk[1].

Signpost reaches populations on the platforms they already use, focuses on neglected populations, offers content in locally spoken languages, creates dynamic service maps with updated information and responds to questions and information requests from its users directly, via social media channels. Signpost is run by a team of trained, frontline responders and support personnel who use journalistic and humanitarian expertise to ensure the most relevant content and information products are created and delivered in an iterative and accurate manner. These information products are directly derived from the self-expressed information needs of its clients / users. Signpost operates with the belief that the aid sector must learn to listen to, communicate with, and be responsive to the people it endeavors to help. This approach aims to increase agency and empowerment within affected populations.

Signpost is an adaptable program that consists of four components: 1) bespoke information products hosted online on various platforms, 2) connectivity via Wi-Fi hotspots to enable access to digital information, 3) two-way communication facilitated by moderators via social media channels, and 4) regularly updated digital service maps. Since launching its flagship instance, Refugee.Info, in 2015, Signpost has expanded to five countries in Europe, has launched instances in Jordan (Khabrona.Info), El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala (CuéntaNos.org), and most recently in Colombia (Info Pa'lante). In total, Signpost has served more than 1.8 million individuals, providing connectivity and user-focused information through various tools such as websites, Facebook, Whatsapp, blogs, and apps across eight countries. At the time of this publication, Signpost is expanding its operational footprint, as well as its list of global partners in the private sector and the international aid sector[2].

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[1] As of November 2020, Signpost is scaling its operation globally and expanding its consortium of international implementing partners which will be regularly updated on the Signpost website, www.signpost.ngo

[2] Signpost instances in Mexico, Iraq, Kenya, Niger, and Pakistan are scheduled to rollout in 2020, and Bangladesh in early 2021. See www.Signpost.ngo for updated links to new programs as they launch.

## Empowerment

Empowerment refers to an increase of autonomy and/or self-determination possessed by an individual or community. One of Signpost's goals is to empower its users through information, i.e., by providing them with timely, accurate and reliable information about their rights, access to and availability of services they need, and other key identified information needs as expressed by the community or individual. To Signpost, empowerment through information generally consists of three key elements: 1) the ability to access information about one's legal rights in the specific context, 2) the ability to understand and navigate this information, 3) the ability to use this information to exercise individual rights and make informed decisions with agency.

In order to claim and exercise individual rights, first a person must have information about those rights. Signpost delivers on this by ensuring the information on Signpost platforms is verified, triangulated, up to date, and informed by user identified needs. In order for this information to be accessible, we must meet users where they are. This means using tools they are familiar with and leveraging technology to enable content provision on tools they already use. It also means providing information in preferred languages in a format well-suited for the context. This links directly to the second element of empowerment as access to quality, contextualized, information (and the ability to ask and have your questions answered with honesty, sensitivity and in plain language) safeguards and restores one's agency, dignity and sense of control. Signpost moderators aid users in navigating the information concerning their personal rights.

Achieving this outcome involves ensuring that people have the skills, information, opportunity, and individual and collective power to influence decisions that affect their lives. Signpost's goal is not to influence users' decisions, but instead, ensure that our users have access to the information they need in order to make the most informed decisions for themselves and their families in situations of crisis.

# 2 Methods

For the purposes of this white paper, a thorough evidence review was conducted drawing from academic literature in sociology and public health, gray literature from the aid sector, articles from major think tanks dedicated to international affairs and development, as well as articles in the media. This review focused on the themes of building trust in information services, empowering people with information, and combating misinformation. Subsequently, a review of evidence generated practice in the field locations where Signpost works was conducted by topics related to the above themes. Data and metrics generated by the platforms Signpost uses, baseline studies conducted in contexts where Signpost operates, and regular user surveys conducted by the Signpost teams also fed into the conclusions highlighted in this paper.

# 3 Gaps in Humanitarian Information and Communication

Humanitarian responses to epidemics, natural disasters, mass displacement, migration crises, and armed conflict all require strong community engagement and clear messaging on a range of complex topics. In the current landscape, these issues require more robust solutions at the sector level. Recent humanitarian response activities and gray literature reports have identified the need for a sector-wide focus on better community engagement. Furthermore, in epidemic responses, a prevalence of misinformation can be harmful to the uptake of control measures recommended / enacted by health and state authorities to stem the spread of infectious disease. This is frequently referenced as a problem in major epidemics and has already negatively impacted the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This section explores problems with unidirectional information strategies and the role of misinformation, in order to ground the review of the evidence base for responsive information services as a critical component of the solution to these problems.

## Engagement

In the simplest terms, "engagement" refers to user interactions over an interface, in this case, that interface is Signpost. Signpost defines "engagement" as when, where and how often users interact with Signpost's communication services as well as measuring if users are engaging with Signpost in order to gain access to important information about their rights, services available and other identified key information. While we know that information from Signpost reaches a great many people, we count engagement as interactivity with that information, i.e., when users will react to content on social media, whether by "like" or "share" or follow a link onward from a social media posting to a full-length article hosted on our website. A unique element of Signpost's engagement strategy is its two-way communication model. This essential piece allows users to ask questions specific to their situation, and receive tailored, individualized responses. Signpost consistently measures engagement across its platforms and instances in order to monitor activity, better design engaging content, improve responsiveness and adapt the information to the changing needs of users.

## 3.1 Limits of Information Dissemination Strategies

Information services in the aid sector are frequently driven by those delivering aid, rather than those affected. Methods of delivery of sensitive and complex information depend on face to face interactions which can limit access, or be static and unidirectional, preventing beneficiaries from tailoring their engagement with the information, and restricting opportunities for feedback. This places the power to decide what information is valuable, the format in which it is delivered, the audience for whom it is created, and how it is accessed in the hands of those implementing aid, rather than the hands of those who depend on it for their safety and wellbeing.

Campo and colleagues argue that "by ensuring that humanitarian information activities are designed and delivered based on the needs of affected populations, humanitarians may mitigate a wide range of potential harms, including (...) eroding the trust of affected populations and/or the legitimacy of overall response operations" (2018, 11).

According to the CDAC Network Collective Communication and Community Engagement in Humanitarian Action Guide to Leaders and Responders, key needs for information and

communication remain unmet: "communities do not feel sufficiently involved in decisions that impact their lives; more effort is needed to solicit, hear, and act upon the voices and complaints of people affected by disasters; communities cannot access information to help them make decisions and regain control of their lives; the role of communication and community engagement in helping people psychologically cope with disasters is insufficiently recognized; and people affected by disaster are increasingly reliant on connectivity, and response programmes need to catch up" (CDAC Network 2019).

Frequently, information disseminated in humanitarian contexts is too general, i.e., lacking specific context of targeted clients, especially the most vulnerable among them. Additionally, it is often not delivered in clients' preferred language. Information related to complex matters, such as asylum procedures, can be written in complex, bureaucratic language that is technically accurate, but ill adapted to the primary audience in mind. Communication lag time and lack of feedback loops between high-level policymakers, aid actors operating in the field, and the clients they serve is another major challenge.

## 3.2 Misinformation

The humanitarian sector has not been spared by the spread of misinformation. It can come in many forms (Sell, Hosangadi, and Trotochaud 2020). While misinformation can be defined as lacking support by evidence and expert opinion, the broader category of untrue information includes speculative, unverified, vague, or contradictory information (Bode and Vraga 2017). Unlike misinformation, which is inadvertently false, disinformation "involves false information knowingly being created and shared to cause harm" (Wang et al. 2019, 240). In particular, fake news – which can be described as fabricated information mimicking news media content – are designed with the intent to deceive the public and serve malicious disinformation campaigns (West 2017). The dissemination of misinformation, especially fake news, forms a breeding ground for conspiracy beliefs, fomenting distrust in authorities and experts (Bode and Vraga 2017). As information systems become more polarized and contentious (West 2017), misinformation has been politicized and weaponized in public health events, crisis response activities, and communication efforts that are apolitical in their inception (Sell, Hosangadi, and Trotochaud 2020).

While the potential spread of misinformation can have a detrimental effect on the delivery of aid in crisis situations, it can be combated. Signpost aims to ensure that accurate, reliable, and timely information is delivered to its users in order to avoid disinformation or misinformation that could be harmful. A growing body of evidence, outlined in the subsequent section sheds light on simple and effective ways of operating that, if mainstreamed in the aid sector, would improve information delivery and combat misinformation.

**Deep Dive into Examples of How Misinformation can Spread and Take Shape**

When it comes to information, due to the incredibly nuanced distinction between true, partially true, and false information, it can be difficult for people to determine what is correct. Objectively verifying nuanced half-truths is costly, time-consuming, and people tend to make judgements based on their own knowledge, experiences, and worldview (Sell, Hosangadi, and Trotochaud 2020). Rather than thoroughly evaluating the truth of information through an analytic strategy, such as actively seeking additional information, people often choose an easy mental processing alternative and simply draw conclusions on the basis of what feels right to them (Schwarz, Newman and Leach 2017). This is exacerbated in contexts of information voids, and high uncertainty, like humanitarian crises and disease outbreaks, where misinformation spreads rapidly (Sell, Hosangadi, and Trotochaud 2020).

Social media facilitates the proliferation of misinformation. Information spreads quickly on social media and is rarely verified by consumers (Bode and Vraga 2017). Social media have allowed users to mingle opinion, facts, and misinformation, effectively clouding perceptions of truth and falseness (Specia and Mozur 2017). The high value of trust in interpersonal relationships means that information shared by friends and family on social media can strongly impact beliefs (Bode and Vraga 2017). This paired with the decline of trust in traditional news media, political authorities, experts, and an increase in information shared on social media, greatly feeds into the spread of misinformation (West 2017).

It is extremely challenging to correct misinformation that is emotionally arousing (Lee 2019), considered plausibly true, or is deeply ingrained among the public consciousness (Bode and Vraga 2017). Additionally, motivated reasoning makes it harder to correct misinformation because people tend to accept confirmatory information and reject that which contradicts existing beliefs (Bode and Vraga 2017). Corrective methods that repeat misinformation can unwittingly cause suspicion and reduce the overall knowledge about factual matters (Carey et al. 2020). In particular, the myth-versus-fact article format reinforces the myth by repeating or illustrating it with anecdotes and pictures, increasing the spread and acceptance of misinformation (Schwarz, Newman and Leach 2017).

# 4 Effectiveness of Responsive Information Strategies

Scientific and practice-based evidence testifies to the effectiveness of responsive information and communication with affected communities in delivering the information they need in the most appropriate format. This approach further provides the necessary resources for people to empower themselves, support them to regain control over their lives, and prevent and combat misinformation. This section reviews information services and crisis response for the Rohingya population in Bangladesh, the case of refugees and asylum seekers in Greece, the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Zika and yellow fever epidemics in Brazil, and various measles vaccination campaigns worldwide.

## 4.1 Inclusive and Relevant Information Serves Needs at the Community Level

Information that is accurate, but does not reflect the desires of the community, is less likely to be accepted, trusted, and used by people to empower themselves (Susman-Peña 2014, 25). Effective information disseminators are able to provide specific, tailored information, that includes the needs and feedback of affected communities (Campbell 2018, 3).

**Information Services and Crisis Response for the Rohingya Population in Bangladesh**

The humanitarian sector has advanced a Communicating with Communities (CwC) approach that aims at improving assistance delivery to disaster-affected communities through predictable, coordinated, and resourced two-way communication. The collective model for communication and community engagement implemented in the Rohingya response offers important lessons (Buchanan-Smith and Casey-Maslen 2018, 28). It established multi-sectoral Info Hubs operated by local staff of national (and occasionally international) NGOs and Rohingya volunteers who offered a face-to-face service. They provided advice and information, made referrals to service providers, and recorded complaints. Additionally, the model included networks of volunteers carrying out community outreach. Furthermore, monthly bulletins provide a snapshot of feedback collected through conversations with Rohingya refugees and nationals, community-focused discussion groups, and radio phone-in programs, to analyze feedback, track rumours, check facts, and provide responses. Yet, there is some room for improvement. This model was established as a response to the crisis, rather than in preparation ahead of the crisis. A major takeaway is that communication and community engagement work best when instituted before a crisis. Evidence from other humanitarian and health response contexts support the idea that community needs, and local practices must be addressed before the crisis and continued after it ends (Rugarabamu et al. 2020, 8).

Scholarly research suggests that communicating effectively with communities remains one of the most challenging issues in both humanitarian response and development intervention in urban and rural settings. Zetter and Deikun (2011) argue that two-way communication methods, and a system for relevant information dissemination which addresses the needs of the target population, should be integrated into preparedness planning and community resilience strategies. Similarly, Barker (2001) maintains that the development sector also needs to improve communication with the

communities it serves. A range of diversified and customized development communication methods and media should be applied at the various stages of communication to reach the different target audiences. Responsive and participatory approaches that integrate development communication methods, as well as media with development communication programs and strategies, are key to effective community communication.

> **The Ebola Outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**
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> Practice-based evidence shows that language is paramount to delivering responsive information effectively in humanitarian and health responses. Content presented in non-preferred languages limits the success of health communication (Ascuntar 2020; Kemp 2020; Marzotto 2019). A 2019 study on health communication in the Ebola outbreak in the DRC conducted by Translators without Borders (TWB) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), showed three main challenges involved in providing clear and accessible information on the disease and the response: 1) the language responders used, 2) the content responders delivered, and 3) the way responders delivered it (Kemp 2020, 21).
> Rumours and false information persisted in the initial Ebola response in the DRC, and forced a transition from a system-wide scale-up approach to a community-centered approach. This approach favored more effective community engagement and mobilization to solve challenges such as mistrust and increased resistance from the community. Mercy Corps established information centers that, in addition to providing information to the community, gathered feedback about response actions, helping adaptation and adjustment to combat misinformation. This risk communication and community engagement work must continue even after an epidemic ends, in order to support the post-Ebola approach and increase community resilience to prevent future outbreaks (Ascuntar 2020, 12).
> Ways to improve community engagement include providing information in the languages people understand; supporting communicators to translate key concepts into accessible and accurate explanations in local languages, as well as developing tools and training that draw on their cultural expertise; and using more accessible and beneficiary-centered language, i.e., avoiding technical terminology, foreign loanwords and culturally insensitive vocabulary (Kemp 2020, 24).

Indeed, effective communication with communities is not only part of response strategies, but also a crucial component of prevention and preparedness programs. A review of the scientific evidence-based literature on Ebola outbreaks in Sub-Saharan Africa (see pop out box) shows that effective communication is one of the major areas that needs to be addressed to prevent future outbreaks (other areas include building a community-based, one-health approach; furthering social mobilization; and strengthening health systems) (Rugarabamu et al. 2020). In particular, the review emphasizes that responsive information and effective community engagement can ameliorate the distrust in health-seeking behavior. Engaging with communities includes taking action on beneficiary insight, which means an ability for the response to be adaptable and enhanced delivery of information and services that the meet community needs.

## 4.2 Responsiveness Builds Trust

Trust is critical to information use, and absolutely essential in order for information to have an influence on the lives of communities and individuals. Reflecting on the challenges of the Ebola

response in the DRC, Kemp (2020) argues that tailored, credible information that meets the changing people's changing is a crucial component of trust and effective response communication. Evidence from other studies on the Ebola response corroborates that sustained engagement and communication with the community both help to build trust and confidence in response efforts, while enabling community participation and actions (Rugarabamu et al. 2020, 8-9). Particularly, increase in consumer/provider-generated information, communication technology, and mobile applications can enhance communication in emergency response. Drawing from lessons learned in humanitarian response cases, the CDAC Network guide suggests that using an easily accessible feedback mechanism to share information with affected communities can address complaints and improve the system from the client's perspective. This feedback mechanism can also serve as a tool to generate information for planning, performance evaluation, and decision making by all actors. By doing so, it helps build trust with, and among the affected population. All the while, enhancing the credibility of humanitarian responders among stakeholders including potential partners and donors (CDAC Network 2019).

On the other hand, inefficient information and communication systems cause mistrust, and undermine effective crisis response. For example, a study on asylum seekers and rumors in Greece suggests that information dissemination mismanagement can lead people to develop deep distrust in governments and organizations, as well as hinder policy compliance (Carlson, Jakli, and Linos 2018, 671). Damage to trust caused by misinformation and disinformation can also be detrimental to public health response efforts such as in the case of Ebola and COVID-19, as it widens the gap between effective public health interventions and public willingness to support them (Sell, Hosangadi, and Trotochaud 2020).

### Trust

In order for Signpost to be effective as a responsive information delivery service, its users must trust the information they are getting from the platform. Trust is generally defined as having confident expectations in a person, organization, or thing. Three categories of trust that are relevant to digital community engagement include: 1) Trust in information, 2) Interpersonal Trust and 3) Trust in Institutions. From it's etymological roots, trust and confidence are tightly interlinked. Trust is formed through belief in a person or thing's integrity, strength, and ability. It is the conviction that a person or organization will "support words with actions," and follow through with what they say. Instead of a static intellectual construct, trust can be viewed as an active state and a dynamic process. Furthermore, responsiveness and accessibility are a feature of trust. For example, if an information source is difficult to access it could be seen as less reliable or trustworthy.

Building and maintaining trust is one of Signpost's key objectives as a responsive information service. Signpost's goal is not to create behavior change, but instead to ensure that users are provided with comprehensive, contextualized and accurate information resources in order to ensure that people feel confident to make and act upon informed decisions with a maximum of data points / options.

Interacting and/or sharing information is measurement of trust. Trust is developed through reciprocity, relatability and respect, with a commitment to response, mutual recognition, and transparent two-way communication. These are all guiding principles in the Signpost methodology.

The role of intermediaries who disseminate information locally and virtually, while also facilitating two-way communication is another responsiveness factor that deeply influences trust in

both information and source. On-site and digital influencers act as information bridges and strive to build trust with the community. Recruiting and collaborating with them is essential for establishing effective communication with communities. A study on how information helps in constructing resilience, suggests that building trust in information sources is critical for ensuring that information flows are healthy and can adapt to function during change or disruption (Susman-Peña 2014, 17). Another study suggests that information is social, and that the meaning people attach to it is shaped by the groups they belong to, with leaders and authorities having the ability to frame how information is interpreted (Campbell 2018, 1). Practice-based evidence from humanitarian and health responses suggests that trust in communicators, and the way they relay information, affects how accurately people understand the information, and how firmly they believe it (Kemp 2020, 23).

With regards to trust in websites, there is evidence that appropriate and useful content for the target audience is an important component of trustworthiness (Corritore et al. 2005, 2421). A major factor promoting the perception of trustworthiness is credibility, which includes honesty, expertise, predictability, reputation, comprehensive information, lack of bias, transparency, and shared values between the website and the user. Other factors are ease of use (how simple the website is to use) and risk (the likelihood of an undesirable outcome).

## 4.3 Community Ownership Empowers and Gives Agency

When communities take ownership and drive information, they are more likely to be empowered by that information as they activate social and emotional factors which induce people to act (Campbell 2018, 1). That is, only information that resonates with people's needs and interests foster agency and action (Susman-Peña 2014, 27).

Information promotes community resilience. Healthy information systems are a vital component of ensuring that resilience strategies engage all individuals and communities, and are essential for preparedness, response, and recovery from shocks and stressors. As Susman-Peña argues, "information fosters the capabilities and aspirations of individuals and communities: it empowers people to take an active role in their own resilience in a sustained, systemic manner, while reducing dependency on external intervention that is typically only available for traumatic, large-scale events" (2014, 18). By expanding the reach of communication and creating new spaces of engagement, new technologies and digital tools can help communities become more informed and self-reliant, especially if they build capacity for two-way communication and inclusive decision making.

## 4.4 Responsive Information is Effective to Combat Misinformation

A number of strategies to combat misinformation can be effective if tailored for and informed by the target audience. Regarding misinformation correction strategies, research shows that simple, brief, and strong retractions are effective in correcting information (Bode and Vraga 2017), Making true information as easy to process as possible is key to an effective correction strategy (Schwarz, Newman and Leach 2017). However, as debunking misinformation can be difficult, one of the most effective practices to combat misinformation is "pre-bunking," that is, consistently exposing people to factual information before misinformation is disseminated (Arguedas Ortiz 2018). Like a "vaccine against misinformation," people who have been exposed to factual and scientific evidence-based information are less likely to believe in inaccurate information (Arguedas Ortiz 2018).

Credible information, from a trusted source, is vital to a healthy information service that pre-bunks and debunks misinformation. While government agencies, news media, and INGOs are found to be more successful in improving belief accuracy compared to social peers (Meer and Jin 2020), they need to build trust by consistently delivering responsive information and actively communicating with communities (Ascuntar 2020; Carlson, Jakli, and Linos 2018, 671; Kemp 2020; Rugarabamu et al. 2020, 8-9). In fact, the credibility of the information source is one of the key criteria people employ as they evaluate the truth of a statement. That, together with the acceptance by others, supporting evidence, compatibility with their beliefs, and coherence of the statement (Schwarz, Newman and Leach 2017). When credible information sources share and promote evidence-based information, polarization surrounding contentious topics is diminished between social groups (Campbell 2018).

Sometimes social media has the potential to correct misinformation. Evidence from a scientific experiment on health misinformation on Facebook singles out three major reasons for this: 1) the sheer scale social media networks offer; 2) the fact that correction occurs in proximity (temporally and spatially) to the original misinformation, increasing the likelihood that people had not had a chance to absorb the misinformation; and 3) observational correction, that is, correction that occurs on social media where people can observe other people being corrected, may be less threatening than being corrected directly, but with all the same benefits (Bode and Vraga 2017). The same study further shows that both algorithmic correction (correction by platform via related stories) and social corrections (correction by peer users), are effective in limiting misperceptions, and that correction occurs for both high- and low-conspiracy belief individuals. Corrective information by credible sources and influencers supports correction by peers on social media and mitigates the use of motivated reasoning to discredit lack of expertise. However, trust remains a key factor, especially as the weak ties that predominate on social media entail that such corrections often occur from largely unknown others, which may not produce the same level of trust as other social relationships. Bode and Vraga (2017), recommend social media campaigns to correct health misinformation, including encouraging users to refute false or misleading health information, and provide them with sources and evidence-based alternative accounts to accompany their refutation.

Vivid narratives 'unstick' misinformation – facts alone are not enough. As Campbell explains, "changing people's interpretation of events and facts by replacing one dominant explanation of cause and effect with another was effective in that it reduced and mitigated the innuendo's reputational effect" (2018, 25). Research on corrective health information types shows that the exposure to a narrative based on facts is more effective than a simple rebuttal in increasing the willingness to take protective actions (Meer and Jin 2020). A controlled experiment on misinformation correction methods on social media, used by health organizations for the measles vaccination, suggested that a corrective narrative communicating evidence-based information transparently, and addressing the public's concerns, had higher levels of reliability and satisfaction among both pro-vaccination and hesitant groups (Gesser-Edelsburg et al. 2018). At the same time, the experiment revealed that common information correction (the simple and often judgmental fact-versus-myth approach) helped spread misinformation and increased the belief in false information. Similarly, a study on belief in disinformation and intentions to spread disinformation on social media during a health crisis caused by the spread of an unknown virus showed that simple corrective information backfired when fear-arousing disinformation was presented, and that social media usage was a significant factor in deciding disinformation and corrective information processing (Lee 2019).

A corrective narrative must resonate with the information needs and concerns of the affected community. Lessons learned from disease outbreaks in humanitarian contexts suggest that responsive information will be key to the COVID-19 response. An analysis of the Ebola outbreak in

the DRC (2018-2020) conducted by the Social Sciences Analysis Cell suggests investing in clear, adaptive, and responsive communication in COVID-19 program development (CASS 2020). Some key recommendations on how to incorporate clear communication into the COVID-19 response are: "provide information on the disease as soon as possible before rumours start to spread; engage with any rumours rather than dismiss them, to try to understand their origins and undermine them with improved messaging; consolidate and streamline messaging to avoid contradictory information from multiple sources; provide detailed information in accessible language on all symptoms in the appropriate local languages, making comparisons with other symptoms and illnesses to facilitate understanding, in methods that communities prefer; set up mechanisms to adapt and change communication based on needs (feedback mechanisms); and (xi) field-test communication tools before dissemination to avoid unintended confusion or misunderstanding" (CASS 2020). These are just a handful of helpful recommendations; the exhaustive list can be found in the Social Science Support for COVID-19: Lessons Learned Brief (CASS 2020).

# 5 Signpost

Signpost has developed a human-centered approach focused on communicating with communities and individuals. Each Signpost instance is designed in collaboration with members of the target population and based on a rigorous assessment of their information needs, habits and preferences. At the heart of Signpost instances is a team of moderators who respond to comments and answer messages on social media. These moderators follow established principles related to confidentiality, informed consent, escalation of acute protection needs, digital security and dignified communication approaches.

The established two-way communication with Signpost audiences creates a feedback mechanism, which enables Signpost to be responsive to dynamic community needs. As digital cultural mediators, Signpost moderators help people find the information they need, and lend a sympathetic ear. All moderators are recruited for their high emotional intelligence and exceptional communication skills. They communicate in a way that empowers users to make their own choices. They are also equipped to help users guard against risks they might face online. Furthermore, they are trained in methods to identify gender-based violence, mental health crises, and other situations that require expert guidance from protection or mental health professionals.

Another essential element of this human-centered approach is the protection of users' personal information and communications. Signpost looks to the Signal Code as a powerful overarching ethical framework related to the use of information and human rights and applies guidance on safeguarding personal identifiable information (PII) in compliance with various internationally respected standards such as GDPR. All Signpost instances conduct a rigorous digital risk assessment and create guidelines on a basis of various risk factors that could impact clients, personal or institutions affiliated with the program.

Since its inception, Signpost has evolved with each new instance, drawing from the evidence cited above and updating methodologies progressively over its lifecycle. Each instance looks unique in terms of its branding and the ensemble of digital tools and platforms it uses, but the outcomes remain similarly successful. Beyond a basic understanding of the number of people Signpost teams reach, and how people engage with content on Signpost's platforms, Signpost personnel also examine the impact of its service on vulnerable populations. Through an analysis of back-end analytics of the various platforms chosen for information delivery, responsive moderated engagements, end user surveys, and unsolicited stories posted by Signpost users, the program has proven to be an effective solution.

Signpost has reached over 1.8 million individuals in seven languages across twelve countries, including target groups such as women and youth. In Greece and the Balkans, Refugee-Info has reached 1.7 million users. In Jordan, Khabrona.Info provided curated, trusted information to 31,373 people between November 2017 and August 31, 2020. In El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, CuéntaNos has reached 125,185 users since its official launch in August 2018. Other Signpost instances in Iraq, Colombia, and the USA have reached over 2,000 individuals. As new Signpost instances arise, these numbers continue to grow and so too does community engagement. Signpost continues to focus on the key goals of providing accurate information from a place of trust, coordinating with other actors to streamline service mapping, and provide connectivity to crisis affected populations.

## 5.1 Providing Accurate Information from a Place of Trust

One of the biggest impacts of Signpost is building the trust of its audience in the information provided. Each instance utilizes a team of skilled frontline responders and support personnel who use journalistic and humanitarian expertise to ensure the right information products are created and adapted to the lived realities of Signpost clients. Signpost teams work with rigorous methodologies to find, verify, and produce accurate information and support users in a context where trust is limited. As highlighted above, misinformation can spread rapidly in crises. In each instance, through a process of triangulation and verification, the Signpost team ensures they are not contributing to the spread of misinformation and are instead a source of factual knowledge for users to access in order to make informed decisions. The information provided by Signpost is taken from a combination of facts and updates from government officials, trusted news sources, other humanitarian actors and clients themselves.

**How is trust defined and measured?**

Trust is generally defined as having confident expectations in a person, organization, or thing. To enable trust, people must know what to expect from one another, which requires a level of mutual understanding. From its etymological roots, trust and confidence are tightly interlinked. Trust is formed through belief in a person or thing's integrity, strength, and ability. It is the conviction that a person or organization will "support words with actions," and follow through with what they say. A certain amount of hope is thus also key to trust. Instead of a static intellectual construct, trust can be viewed as an active state and dynamic process composed of several dimensions (Airbel Impact Lab 2020).

In a digital setting, interacting or sharing information on a digital platform is a signal of trust. Trust is one of Signpost's core values and utilizes it as a proxy for measurement, rather than behavior change. Signpost's goal is not to create behavior change, but instead to ensure that users are provided with accurate information in order to make informed decisions. Trust is developed through reciprocity, relatability and respect, with a commitment to response, mutual recognition, and transparent two-way communication. These are all guiding principles in the Signpost methodology.

During a July 2018 assessment in Athens, Greece, survey data found that users not only engaged with information on Signpost, but also shared information. From interacting with, and studies conducted with Signpost clients in this region, the Signpost team has learned that many migrants depend on word of mouth for information, primarily from their friends and family. During the assessment, evidence indicated that 78% of survey respondents shared the information they found on Refugee.Info with their family members. The study also found that 62% of the respondents have shared information with someone not on Facebook, which highlights the extent of Signpost's reach and the level of trust extending beyond social media. terminology, foreign loanwords and culturally insensitive vocabulary (Kemp 2020, 24).

In July 2019, Refugee.Info conducted a Facebook survey of 243 users in Greece and the Balkans. The survey respondents represented the five language groups of users and 12% of respondents were women. Despite the complexity of this environment, 88% of users said they trusted the information they saw on the Refugee.Info Facebook page. Of English speakers, 75% strongly agreed with the statement. Of users who identified as Iranian, 100% said they either

somewhat or strongly agreed and of users who identified as Pakistani, the number was 89%. This is particularly significant because based on previous surveys, focus groups, and regular conversations with the identified audience, it is clear that the populations with whom Signpost works are typically distrustful of information on social media when it does not come from peers.

Similarly, in Jordan, users trust Khabrona. After eight months of programming, when asked if they trusted the tool, 89% of users on Facebook said they trusted it, and had used the tool multiple times. This evidence highlights the trust from all of Signpost users but is especially important that new arrivals to a country trust the information they find. In Greece and the Balkans, evidence gathered showed that 89% of respondents who had been in the country for less than one year trusted information from Signpost and of respondents who had been in the country for more than two years, the number was 86%.

Through the moderator teams, Signpost is able to provide personalized support to refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants in Europe and Jordan. In a July 2018 Facebook survey, 87% of users in Greece and the Balkans agreed that "Refugee.Info cares about refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants and wants to help them solve their problems." In Jordan, 90% of Khabrona.Info users agreed with this statement. Users are primarily focused on documentation, and in a complex environment, people are able to receive the attention and information they need. Additionally, 89% of the respondents in Greece and the Balkans said, "I know that if I message Refugee.Info, I will get a friendly answer from someone who wants to help." This highlights the value of the two-way communication with the Refugee.Info team of moderators. It also emphasizes the importance of creating a relationship, or personal touch, with the clients.

Signpost delivers accurate, relevant, actionable, and timely information. Of users on Refugee.Info, 85% said that the platform hosts topics and issues that are most important to refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants. Khabrona.Info Facebook users also agreed (85%) with this statement. In Greece and Italy, 76% of respondents believe they are better informed after using Refugee.Info. More than half (60%) of survey respondents said that Refugee.Info is the only information source they have. This held particularly true for some language groups, like Urdu speakers, 76% of whom said it was their only source of information.

### 5.1.1 Rights

Information related to human rights and policies are always assessed as a component of essential information needed for a Signpost program design, as Signpost is committed to providing users with accurate and up to date information about rights and legal services. Before launching each instance, a legal partner or focal point is engaged to advise on legal content in the specific context.

According to the results of a 2019 Refugee.Info survey, 61% of respondents said that Refugee.Info helped them resolve problems or issues they were facing. In Europe, 73% of all respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, "The information on Refugee.Info (website, Facebook, or blog) has helped me exercise my rights." Khabrona.Info also focused many posts on rights, particularly around education enrollment and registration. The Khabrona.Info team's most popular post asked users what they wanted to know, generating more than 200 comments and 2,000 reactions and clicks. The team also posted numerous times about enrollment into education programs and added supporting phone numbers and forms. The education enrollment form had 130 clicks.

### 5.1.2 Safety

Signpost programs act as a repository for information about safety issues, as well as an information site used by clients in order to make decisions about their own security. For example, Refugee.Info delivers information that people use to make decisions about their safety. In February 2019, when the Refugee.Info team read that a caravan of migrants were en route towards the Greek border through a message on its Facebook page, the team fact-checked all the information at hand. The team came up with two clarifying Facebook posts in April 2019, listing possible legal implications for the people participating in the march and the stance of international organizations like UNHCR, as well as the Greek Government. The posts garnered 25,600 clicks by people who were reading the information in them. In addition to the posts, the team responded to numerous questions from people who wanted to know what was happening, who was organizing the caravan, if it was true that the borders would open, etc. The Signpost team responded with accurate, and unbiased information and facts which allowed users to make their own informed decisions.

Similarly, when deportations from the United States expanded in 2018, CuéntaNos posted "informativos," informational articles to provide information for users about safety and security topics they cared about. Informativos for caravans had 1,585 pageviews in 2019. Since then CuéntaNos has expanded to provide information about other essential services, as well as safety and rights.

### 5.1.3 Services

Signpost also creates information products and conducts moderation sessions that help its clients access essential services. In one Refugee.Info survey, 60% of respondents said they accessed information about services. For most users, legal and administrative support was the highest sought information. In Jordan, the results of an endline survey found that 53% users said they could access services because of information they found at Khabrona.Info.

Signpost's content production is iterative and based on news that is relevant to its target populations, as well as being responsive to the information needs of users, based on the questions they ask and self-expressed information needs. At Refugee.Info in Greece, an average of 955 users communicated through messenger every month with the Facebook moderators in 2018. The monthly average number of messages received reached 6,345 messages, 85% of which came from users located in Greece, and the Facebook moderators sent on average 3,795 messages per month. In Jordan, the Khabrona.Info team has received more than 10,000 messages on topics concerning legal assistance, cash/ATM card, and registration, among others. In 2019 alone, the Khabrona team responded to the 600 people who posted or sent messages to the Facebook page.

The results of the 2018 survey conducted with users on Facebook showed that 81% of respondents in Greece and the Balkans strongly agreed, or somewhat agreed that Refugee.Info provided them with a better understanding of their situation. Similarly, 84% of Khabrona users agreed with the statement that they had a better understanding about their situations because of information they found on the platform. Furthermore, this information helped users make informed decisions. Overall, 81% of Refugee.Info users and 79% of Khabrona.Info users said they could make decisions based on the information they found on the platform.

## 5.2 Coordination

Signpost provides a means to synchronize information with other aid agencies and actors in crises through a public-facing service map and content management tool that enables real time updates. One of the primary impacts of the service map is that it naturally acts as a coordination mechanism. The Refugee.Info map tool has become a key component of consortiums, working groups, and a widely-used tool for volunteer groups in key locations. While refugees are the primary target audience, the service map is also a tool for service providers, who can use it for coordination purposes or share it as a resource with their beneficiaries.

The Refugee.Info platform features an interactive map of services available for refugees in five urban locations: Belgrade, Athens, Thessaloniki, Lesvos and. CuéntaNos features an interactive map of services available for target groups across El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Based on its success in Europe, CuéntaNos first launched to primarily serve this mapping and coordination role. In El Salvador, CuéntaNos enables organizations, and now individuals, to search for services within their same location or within their same thematic area. Thus, service providers can better connect their beneficiaries to services they previously did not have access to. In addition, being a part of the CuéntaNos network allows for communication and coordination with the CuéntaNos information team, opening referral pathways and linkages between organizations through direct contact and outreach.

Additionally, Signpost continues to explore ways to coordinate with country nationals in the various instances as a sustainable source of information delivery. In 2019, Refugee.Info Italy launched a private Facebook group with restricted access that includes Italians as well as migrants. Here, refugees and migrants can ask questions and crowdsource answers, in a slightly different approach to information than the traditional Refugee.Info page. Signpost teams have seen high engagement among Italians who support migrants with information and general advice through this unique digital space. This collaboration between Refugee.Info, migrants, and Italians in one space has helped to develop a community that can help support itself, with only a small amount of moderation and facilitation from the Refugee.Info.Italy team.

## 5.3 Connectivity

Signpost often provides or coordinates with other agencies to supply free access to WiFi in key locations. Consistently, when asked about primary needs, refugees and people on the move identify access to the internet as one of the top priorities. The Internet is a lifeline: it provides access to information, the ability to track and sign up for registration and asylum appointments, connection to family and friends, as well as a general link to the outside world for hundreds of thousands of displaced refugees and migrants. WiFi can be provided in community centers, public squares, camps, and even vehicles. Signpost works with partners to support this provision. This model works because it promotes an atmosphere of accountability, creating responsibility for deliverables, and ensuring collaborative work among partners. Between July 2019 and October 2020, more than 140,000 people utilized free WIFI services provided by Signpost instances.

These WiFi hotspots directly link users to the specific Signpost website, for example, Refugee.Info, before they can begin browsing. Wifi is deployed in refugee camps as well as community centers in target locations that are accessible and free to users, both migrants as well as hosting locations. This helps service providers better do their own work as well as provide a way for vulnerable populations to connect to information or contact family back home, or even just relax and

browse the internet. In addition to Signpost instances in Europe, Signpost has also set up WiFi options in the Colombia instance in collaboration with NetHope and plans to do so in Mexico and Kenya in late 2020.

# 6 COVID-19

Signpost's contextualized information at the community level prevents and combats misinformation. The coronavirus pandemic necessitates digital access to vital information services. While advice on COVID-19 is available, and information overload may be impossible to avoid, there remains a gap in contextualized information at the community level, especially for vulnerable populations. The challenges which vulnerable communities face during a pandemic are compounded by new restrictions on movement, decreased services in both private and public sector and control measures to slow the spread of the virus. The ability to build trust with the populations with whom the program works is further compromised in a context where community engagement cannot be implemented face to face.

## Italy, COVID-19 and Signpost

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Italy's response quickly escalated from cautious and muted to full-on containment, forcing all residents to remain in their houses unless they had an urgent reason to leave. On February 23, the Italian government began quarantining cities, and by March, the entire country was on lock-down. As cases rapidly rose, so too did misinformation. In order to combat this misinformation, the Refugee.info team wrote a blog post and shared it across Facebook, quickly disseminating verified information to their followers. In an unprecedented level of engagement, the posts reached more than 100,000 people in 3 weeks. More than 18,000 people read the post and nearly 7,000 people used the Facebook post to navigate to the full blog article.

# 7 Conclusion: Towards a Paradigm Shift in Information Services

Responsive information services, exemplified in the methods, tools and performance of the Signpost project present a clear and proven solution to the problems surrounding information and community engagement in the aid sector where digital solutions are possible, even in the face of complex and rapidly evolving crises.

Scalability of the Signpost project is possible at little cost from a technology perspective, as Signpost uses an ensemble of private sector and open-source technology tools that are ready for rapid deployment and have already been developed. The strong partnerships with technology companies who have long supported and shaped the project continue to improve those tools and their functionality to further adapt the program when necessary. With a sensitive approach towards partnering and working with communities, Signpost works in partnership with local CSOs and other agencies to support long-term sustainability and shifting ownership to local actors. When face to face communication is not possible, like in the case of COVID-19, this approach provides a readymade solution to a digital transition of community engagement.

There remain obstacles for optimal success, particularly environments where people have yet to broadly benefit from wifi or 2-5G connectivity, and populations who are less technologically literate, as well as specific subsets of people who are less empowered to use technology safely or lack digital literacy. Inclusion strategies will require further collaboration and effort, and programming to develop stronger digital literacy skills and access to devices are being further explored. Given the nature of information flows through digital platforms, further investments in core capacities to develop guidelines and training for marketing on social media for quicker uptake of Signpost instances is also required in order to optimize reach and rapidly expand its user base when possible. Additional innovation is required for new technology approaches in translating minority languages on digital platforms.

The impact of the Signpost project will become increasingly evident as scaling continues and the project delivers on communication and empowerment objectives, and as the technology landscape of affected communities continues to improve. With crosscutting information services following an evidence based method, the project offers an opportunity to increase efficiency in the sector as services are better linked with those who need them. With a more decentralized feeling of ownership, through inclusion and respect of those affected in crisis situations, aid deployment will achieve better results that will sustain over time.

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Signpost is a responsive information service that uses digital information platforms to respond to the information needs of populations affected by crises. The Signpost project is a collaboration between the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Mercy Corps (MC), developed with the support of technology companies including Google, Cisco, Trip Advisor, Twilio, Box, Facebook and Zendesk. Signpost reaches populations on the platforms they already use, focuses on neglected populations, offers content in locally spoken languages, creates dynamic service maps with updated information and responds to questions and information requests from its users directly, via social media channels.

For more information: Signpost.ngo