

SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

*An Emergency Response to COVID-19
Final Narrative Report*

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	1
Executive Summary	2
Project Activities	3
Challenges	7
Recommendations	7
Annex I - Public Education Campaign and Public Service Announcements	9

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the interventions of the Middle East Consortium for Infectious Diseases (MECIDS) under *An Emergency Response to COVID-19* funded by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF). Since 2002, Search for Common Ground (Search) has facilitated MECIDS, a trilateral, Track II organization formed by leading public health officials from Israel, the Palestinian Territories, and Jordan, with the intention of preventing the spread of infectious diseases throughout the region. Before the onset of SARS-CoV-19 (i.e., COVID-19) in March 2020, MECIDS worked to contain diseases such as H1N1, salmonella, and MERS-CoV (i.e., Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) through information sharing, joint training workshops, collaborative research, and general coordination.

Building on these experiences, MECIDS coordinated a rapid response to COVID-19 by jointly mobilizing, and leveraging the resources, networks, and credibility of public health officials from each of the three countries. This was accomplished through two objectives:

1. To build individual and institutional cooperation among the Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian public health sectors on their emergency COVID-19 response and facilitate problem solving, consensus building and collaboration around issues related to COVID-19; and
2. To improve understanding of prevention and mitigation measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic across Palestinian communities in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem.

Under Objective 1, this project facilitated emergency virtual MECIDS board meetings for Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian health professionals to effectively coordinate on a shared response to the cross-border threat of COVID-19. Through these board meetings, MECIDS was able to seek respective governmental approvals for a public messaging campaign on public messaging campaigns to increase knowledge and awareness on COVID-19 education and prevention. The RBF-supported emergency meetings were crucial in creating a space for cross-border cooperation where

communication and cooperation had recently stalled. Under Objective 1, MECIDS led an educational outreach campaign targeting health professionals and the general public. Under this campaign, nine webinars were held in Israel with virtual links shared with Palestinian colleagues from the health sector. The webinars focused on the epidemiological and clinical aspects of COVID-19 and its implications for prevention and control of the coronavirus. These webinars were aimed to raise awareness and knowledge of students, teachers, and parents regarding COVID-19 and the transmission routes of COVID-19 to help decrease the spread of infection. Additionally, two in-person lectures were held at the Jordanian Ministry of Health for public health professionals to raise awareness among healthcare workers on COVID-19 surveillance, reporting and infection control as well as key public health challenges.

Under Objective 2, MECIDS worked with Ma'an News Agency to design and broadcast 17 public information videos: 13 interviews with health professionals and four short informational videos on preventive methods for COVID-19 which aired throughout Ma'an's daytime programming.

Project Activities

➤ Objective 1

Emergency Virtual Meeting

Between March 2020 and December 2020, MECIDS hosted a total of five virtual meetings. The first three MECIDS board meetings focused uniquely on the Webinar Educational Program under Objective 1 and two virtual meetings that focused on the Public Education Prevention Campaign under Objective 2. MECIDS board members aligned on key prevention measures and messaging (e.g., social distancing guidelines, utilization of personal protective equipment, and sample collection methods) that they considered most important for the public health sector within each country. Israeli members facilitated the sharing of key materials and concepts from the Israeli Ministry of Health to be readapted for use within the Public Educational Program and Public Service Announcements. Members also utilized these meetings to coordinate any necessary approvals and agreements within each

country to conduct the Webinar Educational Program, in addition to both the Public Education Prevention Campaign and Public Service Announcements in the Palestinian Territories.

While MECIDS has been accustomed to meeting semi-regularly over the past 18 years, the RBF-funded Emergency Virtual Meetings facilitated significant impact. Given the deteriorating political context, the Emergency Virtual Meetings played a critical role in fostering unofficial cooperation on COVID-19 response between Israel, the Palestinian Territories, and Jordan in the absence of official talks between the three governments. Due to the challenging nature of peace negotiations within recent years, Palestinian and Jordanian MECIDS board members have been hesitant to engage with their Israeli counterparts, and vice-versa. Despite this, MECIDS was able to successfully facilitate constructive and concrete engagement between the respective countries. For example, Israeli board members worked with the Ministry of Health in Israel to support their counterparts from the Palestinian Ministry of Health in the development of key messages and strategies for the Public Education and Prevention Campaign. Additionally, with the support of Search, MECIDS was able to facilitate several instances of cross border cooperation throughout the life of the project in an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19. This support included MECIDS executive board meetings, updates among MECIDS countries on the current coronavirus pandemic, updates on existing projects, etc.

When Search staff convened recent board members for conference calls prior to this project, some members were hesitant to engage. However, once Emergency Virtual Meetings commenced, the MECIDS board became increasingly engaged and active, to the point where they were requesting Search staff members to either convene additional meetings or facilitate direct contact amongst them. A recent publication in the *British Medical Journal* details this increased level of cooperation as a result of the present project.¹

¹ Ingrid Torjesen, "[Scaling up Cross Border Cooperation to Tackle Climate and Disease Threats.](#)" *The British Medical Journal*, November 2020: 371.

Webinar Educational Program

Building on a webinar scheduled prior to COVID-19, MECIDS designed and hosted a series of educational webinars for health professionals, as well as the general public, in Israel, and Jordan. In Israel, board members worked with the School of Public Health at Tel Aviv University to design and host a series of nine webinars to raise awareness of students, teachers, and parents on COVID-19. There were approximately 50-100 attendees at each lecture; videos of the lectures shared online gained a total of 1,800 views. Some of the webinars were posted onto the Facebook page and on MECIDS [website](#).

Jordanian board members worked alongside the Jordanian Ministry of Health to design and host two in-person training workshops on COVID-19 in September 2020. The workshops were conducted at the offices of the Ministry of Health in Amman, and targeted general public health officials. Their aim was to raise awareness among healthcare workers on surveillance, reporting, and infection prevention control. Fifteen participants attended each session, 30 participants in total.

Due to the overwhelming number of COVID-19 cases within the Palestinian Territories, Palestinian MECIDS board members, in partnership with the Palestinian Ministry of Health, were unable to organize or host webinar sessions specific to Palestinians. In lieu thereof, an Arab-Israeli doctor organized and hosted a series of nine webinars to raise awareness and knowledge for high school and university students, teachers, and parents of school-aged children on COVID-19. The webinars were conducted in Arabic, and mainly targeted Arab-Israelis; however, invitations were extended to Palestinians from both the West Bank and Gaza. These webinars can be found [here](#).

<i>Table 1 - Webinar Educational Program</i>			
No.	Date	Country	Target Group
1	9/15/2020	Israel	Middle school students (8th grade)
2	9/18/2020	Israel	Parents of kindergarten students
3	9/22/2020	Israel	Middle school students (7th grade)

4	9/22/2020	Israel	High school students (9th grade)
5	9/25/2020	Israel	Middle school teachers and staff members
6	9/25/2020	Israel	Parents of kindergarten students
7	9/29/2020	Israel	High school students (11th grade)
8	9/29/2020	Israel	High school students (10th grade)
9	9/29/2020	Israel	College students at Tel Aviv University
10	9/20/2020	Jordan	Healthcare providers and public health professionals
11	9/21/2020	Jordan	Healthcare providers and public health professionals

➤ **Objective 2**

Public Education Prevention Campaign

The MECIDS board members convened five virtual meetings to discuss the media campaign messages on COVID-19 preventive methods to be broadcast to the public. The board determined a project workplan and developed a media campaign in coordination with Ma'an news agency and Palestinian health officials. Board members decided to focus the media campaign on World Health Organization guidelines, in addition to mainstreaming local directives set by the Ministries of Health in both Palestine and Israel.

Public Service Announcements

MECIDS designed, developed, and produced a total of 17 videos featuring interviews and public service announcements by local health experts and leaders. The videos covered important COVID-19 preventive measures: hand washing as a means of preventing COVID-19, the importance of utilizing personal protective equipment and social distancing, symptoms to monitor for, and an interview with a Palestinian public health official explaining the value of lockdowns. The videos were broadcasted at least ten times a day on Ma'an News Network, reaching a large audience in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. Over 40 percent of the Palestinian population watches Ma'an's programming so the public service announcements easily targeted significant segments of the population. Furthermore, the videos were streamed

across the Ma'an Network's Facebook page and social media sites; each video received at least 35,000 views. Videos can be found [here](#).

Challenges

- **The urgency surrounding COVID-19 made it difficult for public health officials to meet.** Beginning in March 2020, public health officials, including MECIDS board members, were inundated by various requests for support from their local governments as experts throughout the public health sector strived to respond to the devolving situations across the three countries. Compounded by relevant government restrictions and lockdowns, it was difficult for the Search project staff to coordinate some meetings with the MECIDS board members. As a result, Search oftentimes would consult each member individually before convening group meetings so as to simplify and hasten meetings.
- **The political situation between the Israeli and Palestinian governments posed challenges to inter-country communication.** MECIDS is most comfortable working together “under the radar” with minimum exposure so as to avoid being an object of politicization. And although MECIDS board members have been working together for multiple years, the political situation between the Israeli and Palestinian governments has continued to deteriorate, making it more difficult for them to communicate openly. However, over the course of the project, the pandemic's gravity forced members to bridge these challenges. This was ultimately possible due to the relationships built upon 14 years of collaboration and communication. Through this project, MECIDS continued to build upon a solid foundation among these health professionals across the three countries.

Recommendations

- **MECIDS could benefit from greater outreach and awareness raising surrounding key public health issues beyond COVID-19.** In hosting the Webinar Educational Campaign, the MECIDS board members, in partnership

with Tel Aviv University, were able to engage Arab-Israeli communities to promote key messages and information surrounding the prevention of COVID-19's spread. Some of the webinar participants would have not normally had access to such opportunities to engage with public health officials and identify key strategies to counter the pandemic within their communities. Similar challenges exist for large segments of the Palestinian public, especially as they pertain to issues like mental health and psychosocial support. MECIDS board members and Search therefore should expand efforts to strategize engagement with the public in Israel, Palestine, Jordan, especially including marginalized communities.

- **Search and MECIDS board members should coordinate research efforts across the three countries.** Throughout the life of the project, several MECIDS board members expressed appreciation in sharing lessons learned and datasets between country health agencies, as well as other public health institutions. In doing so, board members have identified gaps in knowledge and therefore possible opportunities for cooperative research. However, resources and funds for research are limited, oftentimes due to the regulations and policies of donors. Furthermore, considering the costs of such large-scale research projects are rather high, Search and MECIDS must therefore work together to identify potential avenues to make cross-border, collaborative research possible.

Annex I - Public Education Campaign and Public Service Announcements

<i>Table 2 - Public Service Announcements (Video Interviews)</i>		
No.	Title	Date
1	To what extent citizens adhere to personal prevention measures against COVID-19?	06/08/2020
2	"Social Stigma" during the Coronavirus Pandemic	06/09/2020
3	The Importance of Prevention Measures for Coronavirus	06/15/2020
4	Continued Registration of Coronavirus Cases (locally and internationally)	06/16/2020
5	Why is Coronavirus coming back so badly? Awareness of Coronavirus' Second-Wave	06/21/2020
6	What is the reason behind people's fear of Coronavirus?	06/25/2020
7	Why is there an increase in deaths and critical cases in Palestine?	06/30/2020
8	Why do people think that Coronavirus is a conspiracy?	07/01/2020
9	The Importance of Home Quarantine	07/02/2020
10	200 Cases Recorded in Jerusalem in 2 Weeks: Reasons and Prevention for Coronavirus	07/03/2020
11	High School Students Return to Schools in light of Coronavirus	08/10/2020
12	The World Health Organization's New Recommendations for COVID-19	08/12/2020
13	What do experts say about the epidemiological situation in Palestine?	08/17/2020

Table 3 - Public Service Announcements (Short Videos)

No.	Title
1	Hand washing as a means of preventing COVID-19
2	The importance of utilizing personal protective equipments, and social distancing
3	The symptoms of COVID-19
4	An interview with a Palestinian public health official explaining the value of lockdowns and social distancing