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## Raising Community Awareness on COVID-19

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This case study is based on an interview with Rev. Madhupotha Saranattissa Thero of Sri Nagarukkharamaya, Boralesgamuwa, Sri Lanka.

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### Abstract

This case study is based on the experiences of Rev. Madhupotha Saranattissa Thero from Sri Nagarukkharamaya, Boralesgamuwa, Sri Lanka fulfilling the second desired role of “Health Promoter” using awareness raising as the key strategy.

#### Best practices:

1. Religious leaders and places of worship could amplify health education messages during the pandemic.
2. Residential religious educational institutions such as Pirivenas need to continue operations while adhering to the health guidelines during the pandemic.
3. Continuity of residential religious educational institutions can be enhanced through capacity building of teachers the use of virtual learning platforms during the pandemics.

**Key words:** COVID-19, CORRECT-19, Health Promoter

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The COVID-19 Pandemic had serious repercussions other than its health consequences. People were in households for extended periods, and their livelihoods were lost with resultant significant social, economic, and psychological effects on communities. For many years, in Sri Lankan society, communities are much connected with religious institutions. Though they were much involved in communicating religious messages to the community, their engagement for the dissemination of health messages have been limited. In contrast, this case study showcases the efforts of a Buddhist Religious Leader in promoting health education messages during the Pandemic.

Community awareness is a critical aspect of COVID-19 prevention. Lack of community awareness on the essential element of COVID-19 could lead to poor adherence to health guidelines on COVID-19. Therefore, everybody, including Buddhist monks had a responsibility to embark on COVID-19 awareness. Rev. Madhupotha Saranatissa Thero contributed to community awareness on COVID-19 among the community that his temple served and among the Pirivena that he supervised.

The community awareness targeting the drainage population of the Sri Nagarukkaramaya, Boralessgamuwa started in January 2020. An emergency meeting of the duty bearers of the Temple Trustees was called. Rev. Thero discussed with them the need for adherence to health guidance, including consuming an immunity-boosting diet. The information for the awareness campaign was gathered from the media and local health authorities.

A series of education sessions were carried out targeting the drainage population of the area by

volunteers, dhamma school teachers, parents, and children. In addition, local health authorities and police officers supported these sessions at all times. Approved health education material obtained from the health authorities was used for awareness-raising. Since the Pandemic was evolving, people faced dynamic social and economic challenges. Therefore, the messages delivered to the community had to be modified to these changing socio-economic needs. For example, at the initial stages, key health behaviors such as social distancing, hand-washing, and cough etiquette were promoted. At later stages, the material's content focused on economic recovery and moving life forwards with COVID-19.

The public address system of the temple, which is usually used to broadcast the Pirith was used to disseminate health education materials. Giving a Buddhist touch to the health education process, the Rathana Sutta, which narrates the story of a Pandemic and how Buddha has helped to make an end to the Pandemic through his blessings (Refer Text Box 1).

The routine religious activities in the temple were restricted to sessions in small groups. Participation was limited to a maximum of 40 individuals, and most of the sessions' average participation was 20-25 individuals. Physical distance was always maintained during the sessions. Health education activities were conducted during these small group sessions until the quarantine curfew was discontinued. The group meetings re-started after releasing the curfew and continue to the date of the interview.

### Text Box 1

#### Background Story of Ratana Sutta

“The city of Vesali was afflicted by a famine, causing death, especially to the poor folks. Due to the presence of decaying corpses the evil spirits began to haunt the city; this was followed by a pestilence. Plagued by these three fears of famine, non-human beings and pestilence, the citizens sought the help of the Buddha who was then living at Rajagaha.

Followed by a large number of monks including the Venerable Ananda, his attendant disciple, the Buddha came to the city of Vesali. With the arrival of the Buddha, there were torrential rains which swept away the putrefying corpses. The atmosphere became purified, the city was clean.

Thereupon the Buddha delivered this Discourse on the Jewels (Ratana Sutta) to the Venerable Ananda, and gave him instructions as to how he should tour the city with the Licchavi citizens reciting the discourse as a mark of protection to the people of Vesali. The Venerable Ananda followed the instructions, and sprinkled the sanctified water from the Buddha’s own alms bowl. As a consequence, the evil spirits were exorcised, the pestilence subsided. Thereafter the Venerable Ananda returned with the citizens of Vesali to the Public Hall where the Buddha and his disciples had assembled awaiting his arrival. There the Buddha recited the same Discourse on the Jewels to the gathering.”

Source: E-Library, Nalanda Institute, Malaysia

Pirivena is a system of Buddhist education that serves the Buddhist Monks and the lay students. Therefore, raising the awareness of COVID-19 among the student community of the Pirivena was an area that needed attention.

Twenty-three principals of the *Pirivens* (Pariwenadhipathi) in the Kalutara District were summoned through a virtual meeting in the Kaluthara educational zone, to whom Rev. Madhupotha Saranatissa Thero provided leadership. The Kaluthara district was a critical area since it reported many COVID-19 patients. The mission objective was to protect the students of Piriwena from COVID-19. Printed health education material by the Ministry of Health was used for the awareness programs.

When in-person education resumed in Piriwena, Rev. Thero ensured that adequate supplies of hand-washing facilities, hand sanitizers, digital thermometers, and face masks were available on the premises. In addition, Rev. Madhupotha Saranatissa Thero conducted monitoring visits to assess if safety has been ensured in the Piriwena.

These health education campaigns have reached not only Buddhists but also Muslim communities in the neighborhood as well.

One key challenge that has to be faced was equipping the relatively older monks, both teachers and principals at the Piriwena, on the use of online learning platforms for the Piriwena education administration. However, with continuous training and guidance, it was possible to overcome this challenge.

The Rev. Thero reflects that even though he did not have previous experience supporting communities during an outbreak of this nature, he believes his contributions have made a difference in the communities he serves. He is sure that he will continue to assist communities whenever the need arises in the future.

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