



IN BRIEF 5

COMMUNICATING IN A PANDEMIC:

MESSAGES THAT RESONATE WITH THE U.S. PUBLIC

Jennifer Hudson and David Hudson

28 July 2020

In this In Brief, we share insights from the US public in response to 79 statements from US development organizations. Using organizations' messages and statements from key public figures, we share which messages—relating to the immediate pandemic response, as well as those central to organizations' work—resonate with the American public.

FINDING A VOICE

The coronavirus pandemic presents a significant challenge to development organizations' work and

communications. Worldwide, there is an estimated [14 million cases and nearly 600,000 deaths](#), with the U.S. accounting for a quarter of global infections and almost a quarter of all deaths. As of July 2020, most of the worst-hit countries are wealthier ones, though the virus' disproportionate impact on women, the poor, and racial/ethnic minorities has uncovered endemic flaws in the off-the-shelf policies used by the U.S. and other rich countries to tackle the crisis. As for the U.S. economy, uncertainty is quickly being replaced by a harsh new reality: [unemployment](#) is expected to remain in double digits until the end of 2020, which means that for many, job losses will be permanent.

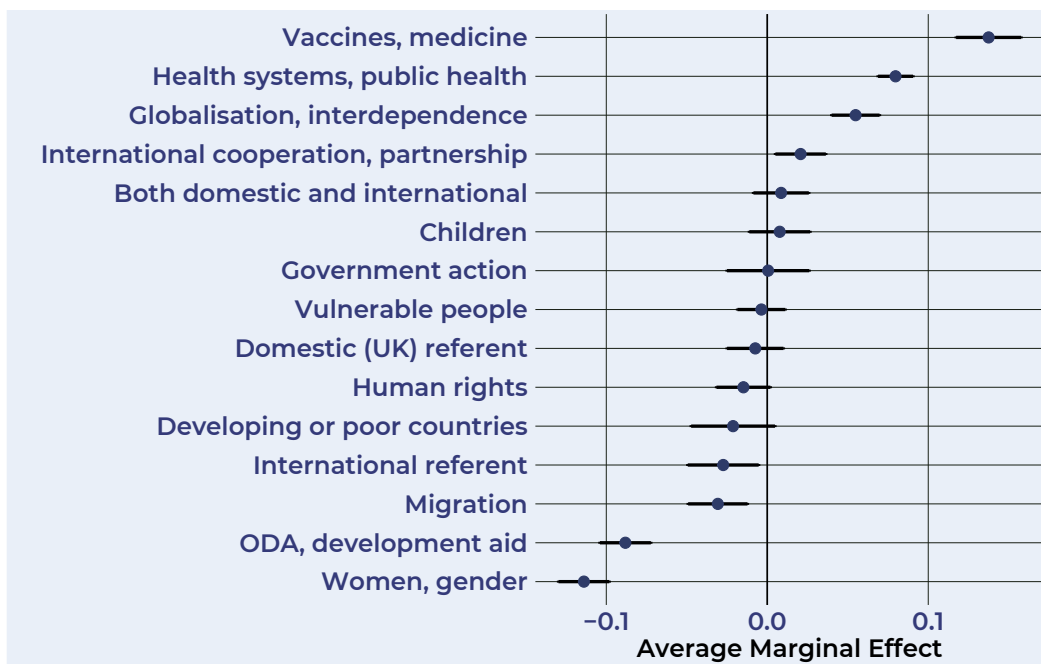
This new reality in the U.S. has undoubtedly played a role in pushing concerns about the pandemic's impact on the world's poorest out of Americans' minds: [Oxfam estimates](#) the global knock-on effects of the pandemic

could push a half a billion more people into poverty. This poses significant challenges for development organizations, not least of which how to sustain and build public and political support for sustainable development, against a backdrop of "America-first" sentiment and an

KEY INSIGHTS

- Avoid singling out specific groups for support—the US public take an inclusive view of the pandemic—so emphasize the universal.
- Organizations should dial into specific fault lines of the health crisis—now is the time to link the public's experience of the pandemic with other global problems, like climate change and inequality.
- Big challenges for building support for foreign aid: Most aid messages scored in the bottom third.

FIGURE 1: HOW FRAMES AFFECT SUCCESS OF STATEMENTS



solution) a very small number were written with a negative frame (i.e. We should stop all aid to other countries while we deal with coronavirus in America). In the latter case, low agreement with the statement is good news for organizations supporting on foreign aid.

The best performing statement, “Strong health systems not only help countries respond to the COVID-19 outbreak,

overstretched public and private purse.

However, the pandemic may provide an opportunity to better communicate development cooperation. [Recent DEL research](#) has shown that as a result of coronavirus, “64% of Americans believe that international cooperation is more important than ever”, showing there is clear scope for speaking to Americans’ concerns about the pandemic in a global context. And, as many of the winning messages below show, speaking inclusively, positioning an American audience within a global context, resonates well. At the same time, resorting to generic blanket statements like “No one is safe until everyone is safe,” fail to stir the U.S. public’s worldview. Our research shows that now is the time to draw linkages between COVID-19 and the greater tapestry of challenges – like climate change and inequality – that contribute to global health crises.

79 messages were presented to respondents at the top of a survey on public attitudes. Some messages were modified to remove identifying

information, and/or for length or clarity. Respondents were shown 10 pairs of messages, chosen at random. Messages were selected “without replacement” meaning that no respondent saw the same message twice. Respondents were presented with two messages, chosen at random, and asked to indicate which one “they agreed with more, even if neither are exactly right.”

A POSITIVE APPETITE

Table 1 shows the “league table” of winning messages – i.e. messages respondents agreed with more – in descending order. The table number shows the percentage of times that message was chosen over another message; the higher the percentage, the more agreeable the message is to respondents.

Before delving into the messages, two features are worth highlighting. First, the statements vary with respect to their focus: some focus solely on coronavirus, some focus on organizations’ core work, or a mix of both. Second, while most messages are written with a positive frame (i.e. A global problem requires a global

but they ensure people continue to receive quality care for existing life-threatening diseases including HIV, TB, and malaria” was chosen by 70.2% of respondents when compared to other messages. This was followed by “Protecting our health care workers on the front lines protects us all. It’s essential we do all we can to keep them safe.” (69.9%), and “COVID-19 is a critical reminder that health should be treated as a universal human right. Everyone deserves access to essential quality health services.” (69.8%).

The most popular messages were focused on the pandemic, healthcare systems or supporting healthcare workers. In fact, we do not see a non-COVID-19 message in the top 10 and the message, “Human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery and needs to stop now; we all can play a role in making that happen” ranked 14th overall (61.4%) that is the first non-health/coronavirus related message.

Statements supporting global cooperation in response to the pandemic, and finding a vaccine

also feature prominently in the top group. The 5th best performing message, “The US should work with others and do our bit as part of a global movement to develop vaccinations, treatments and testing to tackle coronavirus” (65.7%), and “A global pandemic requires a globally coordinated response. The US needs to work with the global community – like UNICEF and the World Health Organization – rather than use this moment to pick a fight.” (60.4%) are illustrative of the US public’s broad support for international cooperation in responding to the virus.


Moving to the mid-table statements, we observe that while they are largely focused on the pandemic, they are broad statements, moving away from specific language around health systems, vaccines and specific diseases. Examples here include: “Nothing would be worse than declaring victory before the victory is won” (51.2%); “Global hunger doesn’t stop for a pandemic – we must step up for people in need” (51%); “No one is safe until everyone is safe” (50.5%), and “We must care for the neediest, not just the nearest” (50.2%). These messages don’t put readers off, but neither do they win them over. They are largely “soft messages” – general, positive statements, that have in some cases mild moral undertones, that don’t invite disagreement.

At the very bottom of the table, President Trump’s statement, “We have it totally under control. It’s one person coming in from China, and we have it under control. It’s going to be just fine,” is chosen just 19.9% of the time against other messages. Another statement on the detention of immigrant children, “Immigrant children, whether traveling with their parents and guardians or alone, must not be detained under any circumstances” was chosen 29.9% of the time.”

For organizations campaigning for U.S. foreign aid, the news is not good. Statements on foreign aid scored predominantly in the bottom third of all statements. Three examples, “Foreign assistance is less than 1% of the federal budget and yields impressive returns on investment” (28.4%); “Foreign aid is a powerful tool to support women and girls who are disproportionately affected by the coronavirus” (27.4%); and “Foreign assistance makes America safer” (25.7%), scored in the bottom five. There is, however, some good news. The statement, “We should stop all aid to other countries while we deal with coronavirus in America” was chosen just 36.1% of the time, suggesting US respondents are less intent on ending foreign aid and more uncertain about its efficacy.

Beyond the topline findings, we find that the statements vary significantly among sub-groups or audiences. We have created a downloadable spreadsheet of messages with cuts by age, gender, education, 2016 Presidential vote, religion, race, and support for aid spending [can be found here](#). The spreadsheet allows you to re-rank messages in different groups to see which are more favoured by, say, Hispanic respondents, or aid opponents, or 18 to 24-year-olds, or Trump voters.

For example, Trump voters were most likely to select the statement “China must be held accountable for the spread of the virus.” which was selected 80% of the time compared to 48% across the whole sample. But the statement “Strong health systems not only help countries respond to the COVID-19 outbreak, they ensure people continue to receive quality care for existing life-



Use messages that are inclusive without being so generic as to become meaningless.

threatening diseases including HIV, TB, and malaria” was chosen 76% of the time compared to 70% across the sample as a whole. Meanwhile 18-24 year olds selected the statement “Immigrants and refugees contribute to develop the economy and enrich the culture of the countries that welcome them” 60% of the time, as opposed to only 45% of the larger sample. The spreadsheet reveals many more sub-group variations.

FRAMING & ISSUES

In order to reveal patterns in the data, we manually coded all messages to see whether they were framed in a particular way or touched on particular issues. For example, was the statement about the US, about other countries, or both? Did the statement refer to vulnerable populations in some way? Was development assistance or foreign aid referenced? And if so, which themes were associated with statements being chosen?

The health systems and public health frame was the most common (23 of the 79 messages, 29% of the time). Statements that referenced women or gender issues made up 11 of the statements (14%) and those that used an ODA or development aid frame featured in only three statements (4%).

As shown in in Figure 1, the frame most strongly correlated with successful messages was vaccines or medicine, e.g. “The US should

TABLE 1: HOW MESSAGES LAND

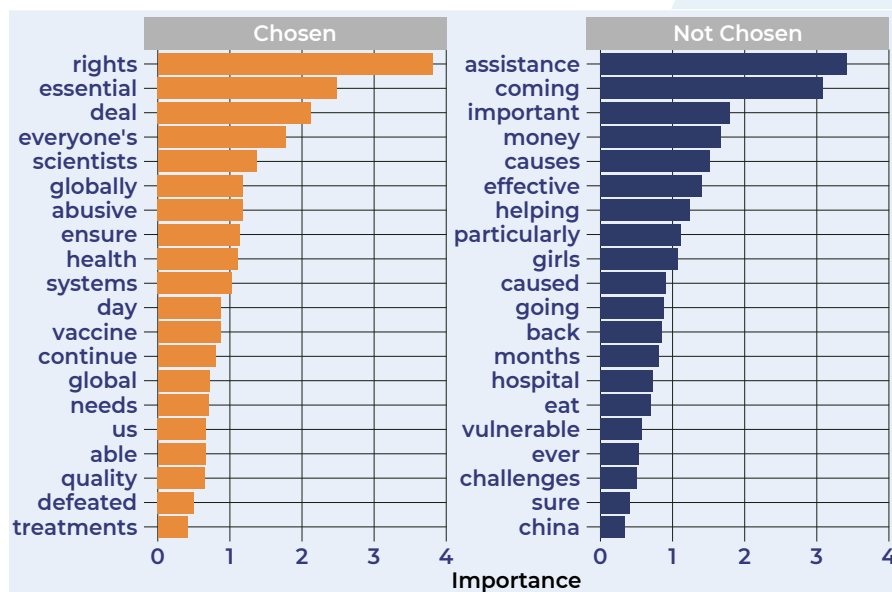
		95% confidence Lower	Percentage time chosen	95% confidence upper
1	Strong health systems not only help countries respond to the COVID-19 outbreak, but they ensure people continue to receive quality care for existing life-threatening diseases including HIV, TB, and malaria.	65.2	70.2	75.2
2	Protecting our health care workers on the front lines protects us all. It's essential we do all we can to keep them safe.	65.1	69.9	74.7
3	COVID-19 is a critical reminder that health should be treated as a universal human right. Everyone deserves access to essential quality health services.	65.4	69.8	74.1
4	COVID-19 highlights the need for strong, resilient health systems everywhere to deal effectively with global health security crises. We are only as strong as our weakest health system.	62.7	67.2	71.7
5	The US should work with others and do our bit as part of a global movement to develop vaccinations, treatments and testing to tackle coronavirus.-†	60.8	65.7	70.7
6	I want our government to work with other governments to ensure scientists have the funding they need to find the treatments and vaccines that can help end this crisis.	59.4	64.6	69.7
7	Doctors and nurses across the globe need water, sanitation, and handwashing facilities to be able to fight COVID-19.	58.9	63.7	68.5
8	As we respond to the current crisis, we must maintain other essential public health programs, including investments to fight today's biggest infectious disease killers: HIV, TB, and malaria.	57.9	62.9	67.9
9	Defeating COVID-19 in America will remain a short-lived success if the virus is not defeated globally.	57.7	62.6	67.6
10	The only way to stop the coronavirus crisis is to test, treat and prevent future infections with a vaccine - we need to support the world's scientists to do that.	57.7	62.5	67.4
11	It is in everyone's interest to stop the virus from spreading unchecked, destroying lives and economies, and continuing to circle around the world.	57.5	62.5	67.5
12	When a COVID-19 vaccine is available, we must ensure everyone across the globe has equal access to it.	57.5	62.4	67.2
13	We must guarantee the equal rights of people with disabilities to access healthcare and lifesaving procedures during the pandemic.	57.1	61.9	66.7
14	Human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery and needs to stop now; we all can play a role in making that happen.	56.7	61.4	66.1
15	We're seeing and showing that we can act together to limit harm - even though it's hard. We face tough choices as we move through and out of the pandemic. But we do get to choose. We can choose to rebuild a future that meets everyone's needs.	55.5	60.5	65.4
16	A global pandemic requires a globally coordinated response. The US needs to work with the global community - like UNICEF and the World Health Organization - rather than use this moment to pick a fight.	55.4	60.4	65.3
17	Access to clean water is foundational for global health.	54.7	59.8	64.9
18	Women face a greater risk of domestic violence from being at home with abusive husbands / partners as a result of the COVID-19/coronavirus lockdown.	54.7	59.7	64.7
19	No individual, community or country can deal with the COVID-19 pandemic alone.	54.4	59.3	64.2
20	Every public health challenge that we face in the US - e.g. adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), ventilators, number of hospital beds - will be far worse in the developing world.	53.7	58.6	63.6
21	We are lucky to be able to practice social distancing and good hygiene in this country. Many people in other countries aren't able to do so.	53.0	58.1	63.2
22	Ensuring every child has access to education is the best investment in our future.	52.5	57.5	62.5
23	Without access to water, soap and basic sanitation, we cannot contain the coronavirus.	52.3	57.3	62.2
24	The best use of foreign aid to fight the coronavirus, is to support a country-led effort, and help strengthen local public health systems at the front lines of care.	52.0	56.8	61.6
25	A global problem requires a global solution.	51.0	55.9	60.8
26	The U.S. must act now and make a serious commitment for additional emergency resources to confront COVID-19 around the world in order to prevent a rebound here at home.	50.6	55.7	60.7
27	The US should lead the world in developing vaccinations, treatments and testing to help tackle coronavirus.	50.2	55.3	60.3
28	Everyone on the planet should be able to wash their hands with water and soap, especially during the COVID pandemic.	49.7	54.7	59.7
29	The COVID-19 pandemic is having a catastrophic impact on the most vulnerable communities worldwide and threatens progress against today's deadliest infectious diseases: HIV, TB, and malaria.	49.3	54.4	59.6
30	The response to COVID-19 just shows that so many improvements to accommodate people with diverse needs and for people living with disabilities could have been done already and quite easily.	48.3	53.3	58.4
31	Feeding people, domestically or internationally, should be our top priority. If people don't have food to survive, nothing else matters.	48.3	53.3	58.4
32	Global hunger doesn't stop for a pandemic - it's our moral responsibility to help people in need.	48.3	53.3	58.4
33	The coronavirus is a significant threat to public health; it does not need to be a significant threat to civic freedom.	47.7	52.8	57.8
34	Assuring access to safe water and sanitation around the world helps protect the U.S. from global health threats.	47.7	52.6	57.5
35	If healthcare facilities around the world do not have water, sanitation, and hygiene this must become a leading global priority.	47.4	52.3	57.3
36	If the US doesn't contribute to the COVID-19 response, it is robbing the world of its talents that can help save people from the coronavirus.	46.7	51.9	57.1
37	Many households need debt relief right now. So do many countries. We need a "stay at home" order for all debt payments.	46.7	51.9	57.1

38	During this time, we must remember that responses to public health threats are stronger and more effective when they respect human rights.	46.1	51.2	56.3
39	Nothing would be worse than declaring victory before the victory is won.	46.0	51.2	56.3
40	Global hunger doesn't stop for a pandemic - we must step up for people in need.-†	45.9	51.0	56.0
41	To stop the coronavirus pandemic, America must take a global approach.	45.6	50.6	55.7
42	No one is safe until everyone is safe.	45.4	50.5	55.5
43	We must care for the neediest, not just the nearest.	45.2	50.2	55.2
44	Immigrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees are human beings just like you and me; we all share the same dignity.	45.0	50.1	55.2
45	The coronavirus is the 'great equalizer' - everyone has an equal chance being infected.	44.6	49.8	54.9
46	Children are our future. Protecting the world's most marginalized children should be our top priority.	44.7	49.6	54.5
47	This health crisis knows no borders, and funding programs to help vulnerable girls and communities around the world to effectively prepare for and respond to COVID-19 must remain a top priority because it's the right thing to do.	43.9	49.2	54.4
48	Protecting the most vulnerable around the world should be a priority for all of us.	44.0	49.1	54.2
49	The coronavirus pandemic is this century's most urgent challenge to humanity.	43.9	48.9	54.0
50	The coronavirus discriminates - poor and vulnerable people society are at higher risk of infection.	42.9	48.0	53.1
51	China must be held accountable for the spread of the virus.	42.4	47.5	52.6
52	This health crisis knows no borders, and funding programs to help vulnerable girls and communities around the world to effectively prepare for and respond to COVID-19 must remain a top priority because it keeps Americans safe.	41.7	46.8	52.0
53	Big international organisations (e.g. World Health Organisation, the United Nations) are important for making sure that we can tackle coronavirus across the world and at home.	41.5	46.6	51.6
54	Spending US foreign aid to prevent the spread of coronavirus abroad will help us tackle the virus at home as well.	41.6	46.5	51.5
55	Immigrants and refugees contribute to develop the economy and enrich the culture of the countries that welcome them.	40.2	45.4	50.5
56	Children here in the U.S. are going hungry, we can't afford to help people overseas.	39.8	44.9	50.1
57	America will again, and soon, be open for business, very soon, a lot sooner than three or four months that somebody was suggesting. We cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself.	39.8	44.7	49.7
58	Whether at a hospital or at home, women's role in taking care of others increases their risk of infection from COVID-19/coronavirus.	39.0	43.9	48.8
59	Even before COVID-19, human traffickers used social media to target vulnerable children and teens; now they have more access than ever.	38.7	43.8	48.8
60	East Africa has faced several crises over the past few months: prolonged drought, followed by extreme flooding. Then locusts descended by the billions, devouring crops and pasture. And now COVID-19.	38.1	43.1	48.2
61	Because women are more likely to work in insecure and low-paying jobs, they are especially vulnerable to the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19/coronavirus pandemic.	35.9	41.0	46.1
62	Social isolation can make already vulnerable girls even more susceptible to gender-based violence. We must remain even more vigilant.	35.2	40.1	45.0
63	Women and girls face serious challenges related to discrimination, violence and exploitation that limit their freedom to learn, thrive and live on their own terms.	35.1	40.1	45.0
64	This pandemic is a global challenge, and our response must include efforts to safeguard the most at-risk populations around the world, particularly girls and children.	34.9	39.9	45.0
65	Immigrants and refugees, particularly minors, should have access to visas for family reunification in countries where they have relatives.	34.6	39.6	44.7
66	Because women make up more than 70% of the world's health and social sector workforce, they are at higher risk of infection from COVID-19/coronavirus.	34.7	39.4	44.1
67	Helping poor and sick children overseas does not neglect children here at home.	34.2	39.2	44.1
68	U.S. leadership and engagement overseas has never been more important.	34.0	38.9	43.7
69	We can donate the money we are saving on our daily commute to help deliver oxygen and ventilators to families in some of the hardest to reach places on earth.	33.4	38.4	43.4
70	By supporting causes I care about, I can be part of the healing.	32.7	37.7	42.6
71	Too much money is leaving poor countries through illicit financial flows, debt payments and profits that end up in rich countries like the US. Too little going back. US development efforts need to reverse this trend and invest more in a locally led response.	31.3	36.2	41.0
72	We should stop all aid to other countries while we deal with coronavirus in America.	31.1	36.1	41.1
73	It's more important to make sure people have enough to eat than have water and toilets.	27.4	32.0	36.6
74	Immigrant children, whether traveling with their parents and guardians or alone, must not be detained under any circumstances.	25.7	29.9	34.2
75	Foreign assistance is less than 1% of the federal budget and yields impressive Returns on Investment.	24.0	28.4	32.8
76	Foreign aid is a powerful tool to support women and girls who are disproportionately affected by the coronavirus.	22.8	27.4	32.1
77	Foreign assistance makes America safer.	21.5	25.7	29.9
78	I don't care about women's rights when the US has coronavirus.	16.1	20.2	24.2
79	We have it totally under control. It's one person coming in from China, and we have it under control. It's going to be just fine.	15.5	19.9	24.3

work with others and do our bit as part of a global movement to develop vaccinations, treatments and testing to tackle coronavirus.” The x-axis shows that vaccine or medicine themed statements were 14% more likely to be chosen. Others positively associated with being chosen are health systems and public health (+8%), global interdependence (+5%), international cooperation (+2%). Meanwhile, four frames or themes are associated with being chosen less. Most strongly were women or gender issues (-11%) followed by foreign aid (-9%). Migration and references to other countries’ experiences were also negatively associated with being selected (both -3%).

These results—especially the findings that reference foreign aid or women and gender issues—present acute challenges to organizations campaigning against inequality and poverty in developing countries. It’s worth noting that in a similar test of statements and messages in the UK there was a similar result, so this does appear to be a general phenomenon. What we believe the results suggest is that—from a communications perspective—it’s wiser for organizations to use messages that are inclusive without being so generic as to become meaningless. For example, rather than focussing on children in other countries, use an inclusive frame of families here and

FIGURE 2: WORD-CHOICE AND COVID-19



there. This reinforces the idea that resonant messages tend to be “we not they.” If people are asked to care for others without having their own suffering or sacrifice acknowledged, it risks short-circuiting empathy.

WORDS MATTER

In our final approach, we looked to identify words associated with statements being selected. We reduced each statement to constituent words and ran a lasso regression model to understand whether certain words were systematically more common in relatively successful statements. Figure 2 shows the top 20 words associated with successful messages. In the second column are words associated with bottom

performers, ordered by relative likelihood of the word to predict success or failure. All told, this does not mean that constructing a message by numbers is necessarily possible or desirable, but it provides some clues about how language does or does not resonate with the public. The valence of the words in the two columns suggests that people would prefer to see messages that use inclusive language such as “we,” “everyone,” “globally.” The language of the “not chosen” column suggests that people shy away from “saviour” language of “assistance,” “money,” and “helping.”

DATA:

The data for this In Brief was generated using YouGov’s online panel of adults (18+) in the United States. Fieldwork was conducted between 28 May–1 June 2020 with a sample size of n= 2,425. The data are weighted to be nationally representative.

You can find out more information about DEL research at developmentcompass.org by following us on Twitter @DevEngageLab or by contacting del@ucl.ac.uk

This brief is brought to you by the Development Engagement Lab (DEL) based at UCL and University of Birmingham. DEL is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The views expressed in this publication are the authors’ alone and are not necessarily the views of the Gates Foundation, UCL, University of Birmingham or partner organisations.

© Copyright Development Engagement Lab 2018-2023. London: University College London and University of Birmingham.



UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM