

# Rapid Public Health Enlightenment (RPHE) to Curb the Continued Spread Of COVID-19 in Nigeria

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As of Tuesday, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020, the number of confirmed cases of Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Nigeria had risen to 135. A week ago, the total number of confirmed cases as at Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 was 44. The data shows a surge of over 100% of confirmed cases within a week. While on Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the Director General of the World Health Organisation (WHO) stated that African countries must prepare for the worst of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that is ravaging the world. According to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (2020), the current statistics on COVID-19, as of Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> April 2020, show that there are 2, 501, 156 confirmed cases worldwide. All countries in the world have been affected by COVID-19 as confirmed new cases are still on the rise daily and the race for a vaccine continues. As an infectious disease, its rate of infection is faster compared to past infections such as Severe Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). Hence, the need for Rapid Public Health Enlightenment (RPHE) to inform, educate, enlighten, and empower people across the world, especially in Africa, on how best to stay safe in a time like this. In 2014 public health enlightenment (PHE) was deployed in the fight against Ebola (Otu, et al, 2017). But today the use of PHE has become rapid such that in many developed countries, RPHE has led to increased awareness on COVID-19, and in places like China where it originated, the number of new cases has drastically reduced compared to what it stood at in the month of February 2020. The virus spread peaked in China in January, and by February it had begun to rise in other countries such as Italy and Iran. The Chinese deployed RPHE to curtail the continued spread of the virus in ways familiar to their social realities. In Africa, the nature of RPHE will depend largely on the commitment of the government, an understanding of the complex nature of many African societies, and the need to be dynamic and innovative in the approach or use of RPHE. This article discusses the relevance and importance of RPHE to curb the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, despite its weak health system. Deploying RPHE will influence social behaviour, attitudes, philosophies, cultural beliefs and people's perceptions of COVID-19 in the Nigerian society.

RPHE is a very useful and reliable strategy in times of public health emergencies. As Coronavirus (COVID-19) continues to spread globally, adopting RPHE is needful. This is because RPHE can be easily infused into existing national public health campaigns to reinforce why people need to practice basic public health hygiene. That is, RPHE will appear more frequently than the traditional health literacy and advocacy campaigns that occur. The use of RPHE will mean increased campaigns and awareness strategies using diverse mediums to keep people informed on what is at stake. RPHE will help to safeguard people against rumour surveillance using "daily press briefings to clarify the situations and provide useful information for the general public on preventive measures" (Amzat and Razum, 2018:151). Public panic, anxiety and misconceptions about COVID-19 will be addressed using RPHE. During outbreaks, RPHE will provide leverage for all people irrespective of where they live or work in the world to have first-hand information on COVID-19. RPHE will also enable people to learn quickly and fast on preventive measures to take against the continued spread of COVID-19. The need for RPHE in Nigeria cannot be undermined, especially in a country with diverse languages and dialects. More so, RPHE is needful as a strategy in Nigeria to enable the government to spread information fast to all its citizens in all communities. Even in hard-to-reach communities, specific RPHE initiatives will be devised to ensure that they are informed. Hence, RPHE is needful in a time of public health crisis such as the ongoing COVID-19, which is on the rise in Nigeria and across Africa.

RPHE can be beneficial in various ways to curb the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria. First, RPHE will provide people with vital information on how to prevent contracting the virus. That is, RPHE will help people to know the dos and don'ts of COVID-19. Such information will help to limit the spread. RPHE will be used to educate people on the need to engage in frequent handwashing regularly. However, in communities that lack adequate water supply, this practice will become a significant challenge. Nevertheless, handwashing must still be encouraged. Second, RPHE will help to understand why they need to desist from frequently touching their faces and other essential openings in their bodies. With RPHE, people in Nigeria will understand why such limitations are beneficial to reduce the spread of the virus. Third, RPHE will help to enlighten people on the practice of social distancing. Although in a culturally sensitive setting such as Nigeria, this may be a difficult practice, however, when people understand the need for this globally evolving practice and social phenomenon, then it becomes easy for them to engage in the practice. Fourth, RPHE will educate people on how to assist a person suspected to have COVID-19 to seek care. Health seeking behaviour is a significant determinant of health in Nigeria. As such the use of RPHE can impact positively to influence people to seek help when the need arises from an appropriate and designated health service, and not to seek solutions such as harmful traditional concoctions, which may likely worsen their condition. Fifth, RPHE will help to improve the health literacy, health education and health promotion of the larger Nigerian public on COVID-19 and other infectious diseases.

RPHE can be deployed in several ways across Nigeria. First, information on COVID-19 must be widely available in all local languages, especially information on prevention strategies and hotlines to call to report a suspected case of COVID-19. Second, the use of news media is imperative. All news stations must dedicate time to educate people on COVID-19. This medium was highly instrumental during the Ebola crisis of 2014 in West Africa. Third, the use of social media, government channels such as the Nigerian Center for Disease Control (NCDC) and Federal Ministry of Health (Federal, State, and Local) must, through its social media handles, provide regular up-to-date information on COVID-19. Fourth, the use of sponsored posters and handbills by the government at all levels guided by the Federal Ministry of Health and other state health agencies must be readily available immediately. Fifth, engaging celebrities to talk about COVID-19 via their social media handles on television and radio is another useful strategy. This preventive strategy worked during the 2014 Ebola crisis. Sixth, the engagement of community stakeholders through their local government authorities to educate the people on ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Seventh, non-governmental organisations will be required to engage in widespread health advocacy on COVID-19 to reduce its spread in communities and hard-to-reach places. The government must partner with NGOs already located across various communities to talk on COVID-19 and how to stay safe from contracting the virus. Eighth, the government must partner with corporate organisations to support its RPHE campaign in order to get all Nigerians informed on COVID-19 irrespective of where they live or work. Ninth, mobile phone operators such as MTN Nigeria, Airtel Nigeria, Globacom as the major networks must make their caller tunes about COVID-19. Such caller tunes must be available in different local languages. So, each time a person makes a call, an RPHE campaign on COVID-19 is communicated to the caller. These and many more strategies must be put in place immediately if the fight against the spread of COVID-19 must be won in Nigeria.

## Conclusion

Rapid public enlightenment (RPHE) is needed immediately to curb the spread of COVID-19. With a total of 135 confirmed cases as of Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020, the spread appears not under control yet. The current predictions from the WHO could mean an increase in the spread of COVID-19 across Africa of which Nigeria being the most populous country will not be spared. Action from the government using different dimensions of RPHE preventive strategy will save many lives in the country. Adopting RPHE campaign is a major way to safeguard Nigerians from the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure that lives are not lost to this virus in a country whose health system is considered weak by the WHO. The Nigerian government must act fast to implement a fierce RPHE strategy across the country.

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