

Empowering Communities to Fight Zika

CAPACITY STRENGTHENING DURING THE ZIKA OUTBREAK RESPONSE



“It’s not just going to their homes and telling them what they have to do, but having a conversation and listening to what they have to say... [and] based on that providing recommendations.”

–Fatima, Frontline Community Volunteer USAID-Funded Zika Response in El Salvador

Using Interpersonal Communication to Make a Difference

Faced with a growing Zika outbreak, ministries of health (MOHs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) throughout Latin America and the Caribbean mobilized hundreds of frontline community volunteers and health promoters to knock on doors with the hope of empowering their neighbors to prevent the negative consequences of the virus. These motivated individuals

typically walked countless kilometers from home to home to give their neighbors information about how to prevent Zika. Despite these efforts, they struggled to get people to change their behavior. What else was needed? Effective interpersonal communication (IPC) skills can help make the difference. Breakthrough ACTION workshops throughout the region aimed to support frontline workers like Fatima and highlight that merely telling people what they need to do was not enough (see *Figure 1*).



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Strengthening Household Visits

Household visits from frontline community workers were a cornerstone activity in the USAID-funded Zika response. They provided a unique opportunity for individuals to express their concerns and doubts about Zika, clarify myths, and observe their fellow community members correctly performing prevention behaviors. IPC, defined as effective communication between two or more people, requires a deep understanding of how we share messages and emotions, both verbally and with our gestures. This strategy was viewed as essential to enable household members to take appropriate actions to prevent Zika.

To strengthen the IPC abilities of frontline workers, Breakthrough ACTION developed a curriculum that adapted the [GATHER](#) approach—designed to improve health provider counseling—to the context of a household visit. Field tests, in collaboration with Save the Children’s Community Action Against Zika project, ensured that the methodology and curriculum worked for the target audience. The final package of tools included a [job aid](#) and a [facilitation guide for IPC training](#) that combined new [technical specifications](#) on the behaviors with the most potential to prevent Zika and the GATHER model to organize and improve household visits to achieve change.

GATHER Approach

Greet the person in a friendly and respectful way—break the ice/resistance, arrange the visit with the family, make the person feel comfortable.

Ask the person about their needs—listen, do not lecture; practice empathy, ask open-ended questions.

Tell them about what they can do—convey the new information using simple words.

Help them to find a solution—search for solutions, identify motivations, make a commitment.

Explain by demonstrating how the practice should be done, step-by-step.

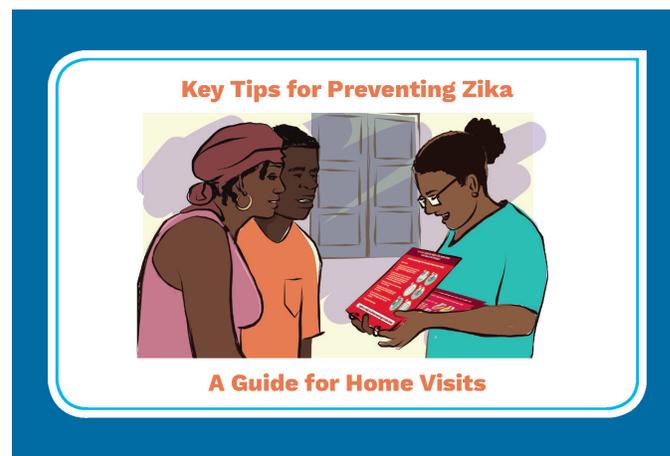
Review what was discussed and return.

“...[The training provided a] way to organize the [household] visit so it is more structured and useful for the household members to get the messages more easily [according to their needs].”

—Carolina, Health Promoter, Dominican Republic

Interpersonal Communication: A Game Changer

From 2018 to 2019, Breakthrough ACTION trained nearly 1,000 frontline community volunteers, health promoters, trainers, and program coordinators in Latin America and the Caribbean on how to share technical information, while also fostering a sincere rapport with households (see [Table 1](#)). These trainings emphasized **two-way communication** to facilitate the exchange of information, **active listening** to learn what families know and do not know, and **household motivation to take action**.



Empowering frontline workers like Fatima with the skills and tools to build a connection with households was part of the broader social and behavior change (SBC) capacity-strengthening assistance that Breakthrough ACTION provided to USAID implementing partners and local governments during the Zika response. Capacity-strengthening activities are traditionally an integral part of long-term development projects rather than rapid responses in which key stakeholders must make decisions quickly to reduce the impact of an outbreak. However, Breakthrough ACTION found that capacity-strengthening activities during the Zika outbreak

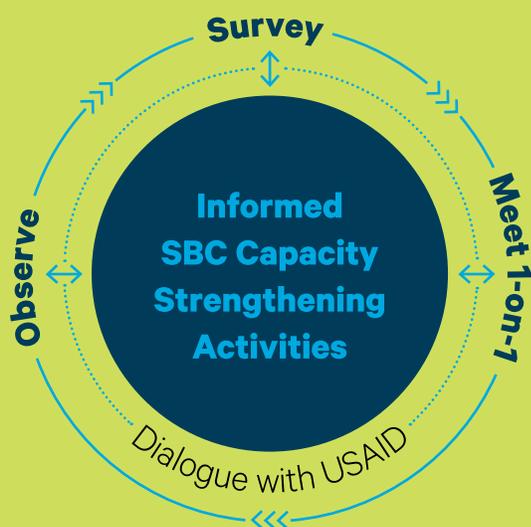
worked well when responding to the immediate needs of key actors, taking the time to build trust, providing accurate information, inspiring change and remaining nimble as the context changed.

“The lessons learned have been how to reach people, how to say things, how to educate, how to clear up the incorrect information they have without making them feel bad.”

–Yuris, Health Promoter, Dominican Republic

To determine which capacities to strengthen, Breakthrough ACTION, USAID, MOHs, and implementing partners gathered insights through online surveys, one-on-one meetings, and direct observation (see Figure 2). Direct observation in the field revealed that improving IPC would be a game changer for communities fighting Zika. IPC also became a priority because it met the needs of implementing partners and MOHs that had hundreds of frontline health workers conducting household visits. In addition, building the capacity of community actors would reinforce the resiliency of communities and health systems for future outbreaks.

Figure 2. Continuous feedback allowed Breakthrough ACTION to meet capacity-strengthening needs



Using Next-Generation Social and Behavior Change to Tackle Zika

In response to the needs expressed by MOHs and implementing partners, Breakthrough ACTION took on other capacity-strengthening activities. Stakeholder workshops in Latin America covered the use of behavioral data to make midcourse adjustments and utilize innovative SBC approaches. Workshops in the Caribbean focused on strengthening capacity for strategic and innovative SBC for Zika prevention. During these workshops, Breakthrough ACTION trained participants in the SBC Flow Chart—an innovative, systematic process that combines the principles of communication, behavioral economics, community engagement, and human-centered design—to strengthen programs and activities. Participants of the Caribbean workshops walked away with a new and deeper understanding of SBC, hands-on experience listening to stakeholders before designing programs, practice developing indicators and a theory of change, and a roadmap for designing programs more systematically.

An Empowering Approach

Working to strengthen capacity among frontline community workers during an outbreak was a unique and unusual approach. By tailoring workshops based on country needs, Breakthrough ACTION worked to improve IPC skills during home visits and successfully introduced SBC into the USAID Zika response to assure change at the household and community levels. This approach was made possible thanks to continuous stakeholder feedback, which built trust and fostered collaboration and a clear focus to address the needs that would precipitate change and have an immediate impact.

Table 1. Breakthrough ACTION Customized Capacity Strengthening by Country, Content, and Participant Type

COUNTRY	WORKSHOP CONTENT	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS		TOTAL
		MOH/LOCAL GOVERNMENT	USAID IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS/NGOs	
Latin America				
Dominican Republic	Behavioral Data Analysis	3	22	25
	IPC for Zika Prevention	204	104	308
El Salvador	Behavioral Data Analysis	—	14	14
	IPC for Zika Prevention	2	205	207
Guatemala	Behavioral Data Analysis	5	11	16
	Community Radio for Zika Prevention	8	9	17
	IPC for Zika Prevention	195	14	209
Honduras	Behavioral Data Analysis	10	22	32
	IPC for Zika Prevention	180	61	241
Subtotal		607	462	1,069
Caribbean				
Regional Workshop	Strategic and Innovative SBC	17	9	15
Barbados	IPC for Zika Prevention	28	2	30
Guyana	Strategic and Innovative SBC	22	8	30
Jamaica	Strategic and Innovative SBC	33	—	33
Saint Lucia	Strategic and Innovative SBC	17	19	36
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	Strategic and Innovative SBC	22	5	27
Subtotal		139	43	182
Total for Latin America and the Caribbean		746	505	1,251

This publication is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of Breakthrough ACTION and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

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