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Partnerships against the pandemic

Effective collaboration between Posts, government agencies, NGOs and the private sector.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Effective partnerships can be vital for Posts seeking to diversify into the provision of new social services. The pressure for Posts to react quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic in support of citizens and governments further highlights the value of collaboration, where stakeholders share their resources for a common cause. Here we explore the role of partnerships in the provision of medical deliveries, mapping solutions and food parcels by Correos de Costa Rica, Vietnam Post, and Azerpost (Azerbaijan). Establishing clear responsibilities, channels of coordination and operating procedures appears to have been key to the success of these projects.

Correos de Costa Rica, Vietnam Post, and Azerpost have each implemented numerous services to protect the vulnerable and support the wellbeing of citizens during COVID-19. While each initiative and each local context is unique, a common theme has been the need for the Post to quickly establish and develop effective partnerships. The purpose of this commentary is to explore how these Posts have collaborated to deliver different types of social services, the challenges working across sectors, and lessons that other Posts may find useful.

Correos de Costa Rica appears to have been particularly quick in its response to the pandemic. It has supplied the UPU with numerous examples, including changes to the operation of post offices that prioritize safe access for seniors and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It has also partnered with a governmental network (CEN-CINAI) that connects NGOs and private sector, to increase the delivery of food parcels to children with nutritional deficiencies. However, in this commentary we are focussing on two initiatives: working with private car-rental companies to deliver medicines to the doorstep; and an online platform to supply antiseptic alcohol handwash to the public.

Correos de Costa Rica expanded the capacity of its existing doorstep **medicine delivery** service to reduce the need for high-risk people to visit medical centres. However, the Post took the unusual step of working with private car-rental companies to increase its delivery vehicle fleet. These companies provided the vehicles, gasoline and drivers for free. The Post managed the logistics by collecting the drugs at the medical centre, classifying the packages, and organizing the routes for the new distribution team to deliver to patients at their doorstep.

The idea originated from Correos de Costa Rica and the Costa Rican Social Security Fund (CCSS), and **partners** included: the CNE Emergency Commission; private car-rental companies Economy, Enterprise, and Budget Rent a Car; Topofarma; and the Veinsa car sales company.

Challenges included persuading the heads of the pharmacies to participate, defining working relationships with each pharmacy, and implementing clear procedures, controls, coordination and communication channels. Some flexibility was also required in order to satisfy citizens' demands and expectations, especially as the

volume of orders grew. New drivers were trained in the agreed delivery procedures, and the heads of each distribution centre were made responsible for the safety and security of medicines.

Correos de Costa Rica also developed an initiative to make **antiseptic alcohol handwash** available to the entire population, partnering with the FANAL National Alcohol and Liqueur Factory. Its aims were to meet the huge demand for this important safety product and to ensure its equitable distribution. **In coordination** with the National Economic Council, an agreement was signed with the Ministry of Public Health and the National Production Council, following which the Post created the online platform www.cpreviene.com.

Correos de Costa Rica has been responsible for the entire fulfilment process, which includes the management of product inventories, the orders generated through the online platform, and product distribution.

Key challenges included sourcing sufficient supplies of the product during the first few days, securing regulatory permits for the transportation of an alcohol-based solution, and organizing order-processing locations.

Correos de Costa Rica advises other Posts implementing similar services to: understand the needs of their stakeholders; establish clear responsibilities and channels of communications and coordination; and develop clear operational and administrative controls.

José Alexis Jiménez, President of the Costa Rican Postal Board, commented, “we are making our national network available so as to join this extraordinary effort by institutions to strengthen prevention.”

Vietnam Post is also providing a range of delivery services in response to the pandemic, such as social security allowances to people’s homes, computers to students in need, and medical supplies to regions with high rates of infection. Here, we focus on how the Post developed a **digital mapping application** (NCOVI map) to support the campaign to prevent and control COVID-19 infections.

Citizens are invited to download the app and report their health status according to certain defined categories. This information is then used to generate maps that show areas with a high number of infections, quarantine zones, and patterns of movement of people diagnosed with COVID-19. These functions are intended to help people to modify their behaviour to reduce infection rates (e.g. by avoiding high-risk regions), or to assess whether they may have already been exposed. The maps display locations where people can be tested for COVID-19 and hospitals treating COVID-19 patients. This app is not only useful for citizens, but is proving vital to the broader government response. It supports the decision-making of the COVID-19 National Steering Committee by generating summary data on the health status, age, and travel history of users.



The NCOVI map was developed at the request of the COVID-19 National Steering Committee in **partnership** with the Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC), the Ministry of Health (MOH) and Hanoi University of Engineering and Technology. Vietnam Post technical officers are responsible for providing support to ensure the stable operation of the system, updating information supplied by the public, and providing users with information on prevention and control.

Vietnam Post was in an advantageous position to develop and maintain this mapping system as it had previously been tasked by the government with implementing a new digital map of Vietnam (Vmap). The NCOVI map was developed based on this Vmap platform. However, a major technological challenge was to enable large numbers of citizens to access this map through the MOH website and mobile apps. Collaboration with Hanoi University of Engineering and Technology was therefore hugely beneficial.

Another important goal was to ensure user data security. Vietnam Post worked closely with the MIC and MOH to better understand what information qualified as sensitive and the most appropriate way of restricting access to such information.



Vu Duc Dam, Deputy Prime Minister, and Nguyen Manh Hung, Minister of Information and Communications, both called for businesses to offer support in upgrading and expanding these applications, which indicates a strong collaborative approach to fighting the pandemic.

Azerpost has implemented a collection of initiatives to deliver social assistance to older people and low-income families, including the delivery of **food parcels**. The need for this assistance results from many citizens remaining at home, especially people over 65, who were obliged to do so. In addition, numerous people have lost their source of income, which results in a demand for deliveries of food and essential products that Azerpost is aiming to meet. In general, the role of Azerpost was to receive aid packages from senders, process those packages and deliver them to people's homes.

The project was the result of joint decisions. As a state-owned operator, the Post took the initiative of providing social services during the pandemic. The initiative received the support of the government and relevant organizations reached out to Azerpost to request or offer help.

The main project **partners** were the Heydar Aliyev Charity Fund, Republican Youth Fund, Azercell Telecom (the country's leading mobile operator) and Bravo (a supermarket chain). As an example, Azercell Telecom conducted a special SMS campaign under the motto "we are strong together" that promoted an initiative whereby perishable food products were received directly from nearby local warehouses and quickly delivered by local branches of Azerpost to the homes of those in need.

Azerpost advises other postal organizations to ensure clear coordination of actions and to encourage all partners to work together for the common good.

CONCLUSIONS

For Posts responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, working across sectors at speed can be particularly challenging and risky. The development of partnerships can reduce this stress and open up access to new knowledge and other resources. The UPU encourages effective postal partnerships at all levels through its consultative committee, development projects, guidance and outreach activities. This commentary is intended to illustrate how designated operators are promoting, establishing and benefitting from new collaborations in practice. Key factors for successful postal partnerships in response to COVID-19 include:

- Leveraging existing services and relationships;
- Communicating that the Post is open to partnering, including with private businesses;
- Working to understand the needs of key stakeholders;
- Establishing clear responsibilities, channels of coordination and operating procedures.