

Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

A WHO-HOSTED NETWORK



AIRA Infodemic Trends Report

4-11 May 2023

(Weekly brief #71)

COVID-19 Report

["The pandemic has come to an end"](#)

This week, COVID-19 has been declared an ongoing health issue that no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC).

Monitored reactions from users on African media outlets have brought back misinformation and conspiracy theories originally spread at the height of the pandemic.

Reference Guide

Top concern

["The pandemic has come to an end"](#).....Pg. 3

[Key resources](#)..... Pg. 7

[Methodology](#).....Pg. 8

Public Health Infodemic Trends in the African Region

This weekly report provides key highlights and operational recommendations based on social listening data from May 4-11 in Africa.

For more information, please contact the WHO AIRA team:

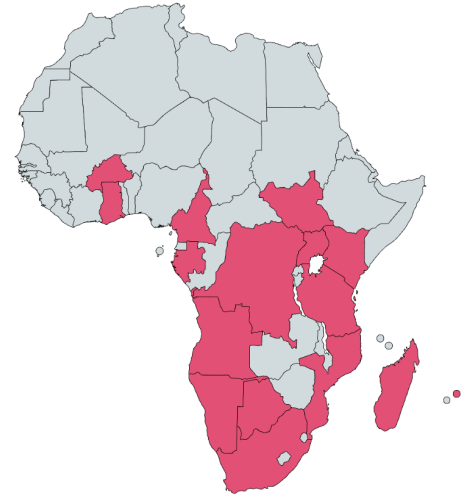
Elsa Maria Karam karame@who.int, Elodie Ho hoelodie@who.int

South Africa, Ghana, Angola, Cameroon, Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania

South Sudan, Mauritius, Botswana, DRC, Namibia, Madagascar, Burkina Faso

“The plandemic has come to an end”

CONTEXT: During the [fifteenth meeting](#) of the International Health Regulations (IHR) Emergency Committee regarding the coronavirus disease pandemic held on May 4th, the committee advised that it is time to transition to long-term management of the COVID-19 pandemic. The WHO Director-General concurs with the advice offered by the Committee and “determines that COVID-19 is now an established and ongoing health issue which no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC)”. Monitored reactions from users on Africa media outlets have brought back misinformation and conspiracy theories originally spread during the pandemic.



Engagement: 49 posts, 13k likes, 3.6k comments

Summary

- News that the COVID-19 pandemic no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) has gained the attention of private users, anti-vax and disinformation groups, across a broad range of social media platforms.
- Various misinformation and conspiracy theories, including claims that the virus is a hoax, vaccines are ineffective and harmful, and that the pandemic is part of a globalist plot to implement a new world order have resurfaced.
- It is essential to emphasize that multiple claims of mis- and disinformation from different users were identified in the comments of every social media post. This underscores the pervasive and widespread nature of online misinformation but also the extent to which misinformation exists in the African region, affecting users across different languages and continents, including lusophone, anglophone, and francophone communities in Africa.
- Aside from social listening updates from African media channels, mis & disinformation about COVID-19 and the WHO have also circulated following posts on the social media accounts of the WHO [\[LINK\]](#), [\[LINK\]](#), [\[LINK\]](#) and on prominent disinformation platforms including Freedom Alliance of South Africa [\[LINK\]](#), a South-African based anti-vax group and the Alex Jones show, a show

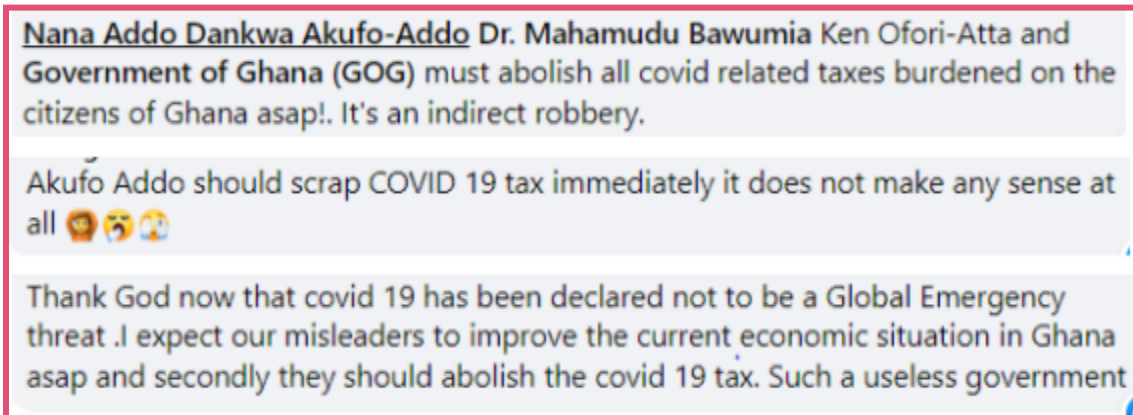
hosted by a prominent American conspiracy theorist promoting a range of conspiracy theories. [\[LINK\]](#).

- Social media accounts from official sources including ministers and ministries of Health in Africa [\[LINK\]](#), [\[LINK\]](#), [\[LINK\]](#) endorsed the declaration issued by the Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO). However, several references to conspiracy theories and misinformation were shared in the comments.

Highlights from various African countries

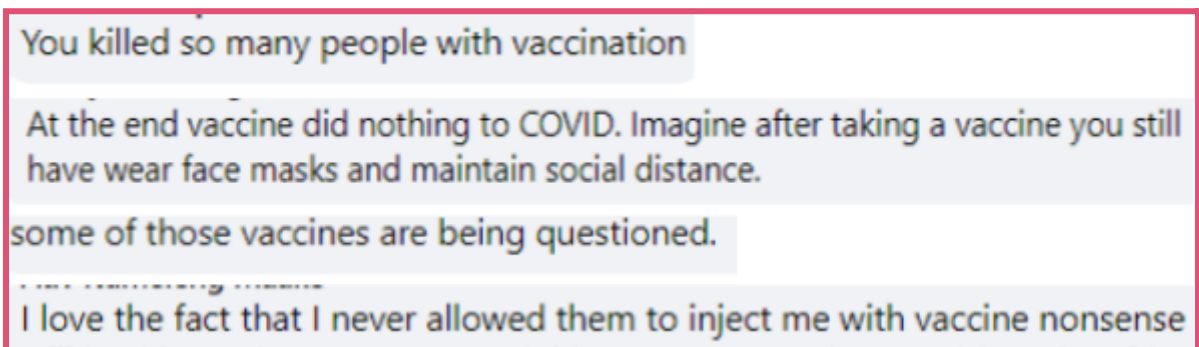
Profit from the pandemic

- Commenters on United Television Ghana's posts [\[LINK\]](#), [\[LINK\]](#) have resurfaced allegations that the current government is profiting from COVID-19 tax money and demanded these to be removed.



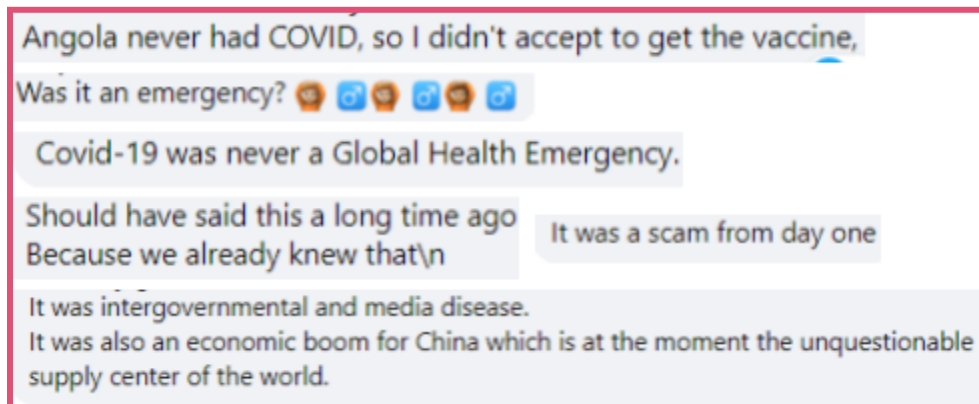
Vaccines are ineffective and harmful

- Online users who commented on a Facebook post by eNCAnews, a South African TV channel, [\[LINK\]](#) referenced concerns about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines. In a similar vein, the Cameroonian national news agency shared a Facebook post [\[LINK\]](#) in which online users expressed complaints about the vaccine's effectiveness and its ability to protect those who have taken it.



It was never an emergency, but a hoax/scam

- In Kenya [[LINK](#), [LINK](#), [LINK](#)], some online users have denied that COVID-19 was ever an emergency, suggesting instead that it was a scam from the beginning.
- Similarly, an Angolan [user](#) who commented on a Facebook post by Angola 24 Horas, mentioned it had never existed in Angola from the outset, and therefore refused to take any vaccine. The comment was translated from Portuguese.

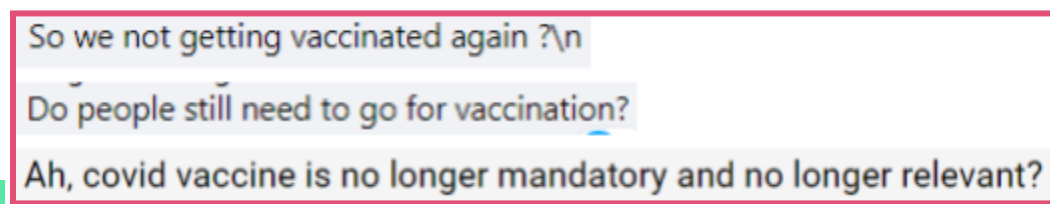


What is planned next?

- In Mozambique, O Pais, A Maputo-based online media website, amplified the news on Facebook on May 5th [[LINK](#)]. Some online users asked about the post-emergency phase of the COVID-19 pandemic including speculations of a future pandemic.
- A Facebook user included references to a TikTok video on a Facebook [post](#) by South African Algoa FM news about the “catastrophic contagion of global gems in two Latin American countries and the outbreak of a new infectious disease called the Severe Epidemic Enterovirus Respiratory Syndrome, SEERS”.
- Similarly, a Facebook [post](#) by the Namibian Sun Newspaper included disinformation about the introduction of a new disease in 2025 by Bill Gates.

Information gaps about the future of COVID-19 vaccination

- A Tanzanian user commented on a Facebook [post](#) by Azam TV asking about the future of vaccination efforts.
- A user from Mauritius posed a similar question about the relevance of COVID-19 vaccines on a Facebook [post](#) by Defimedia.info, a prominent media website in Mauritius highlighted during last week’s AIRA report.



Ukraine war halted COVID-19 emergency outbreak

- A journalist from Burkina Faso, Ismael Ouedraogo, garnered the attention of his 397k followers via a Facebook [update](#). Some online users said that the focus has now shifted to the war in Ukraine instead of COVID-19.
- Another user thanked Russia for stopping COVID-19 during the war in Ukraine. These comments might be related to the reported growing pro-Russia sentiment after the military coup in January 2022 [[LINK](#)].

Putin killed COVID in his war

It is the war in Ukraine that concerns us at the moment

Why is it concerning?

- While the emergency phase of the COVID-19 pandemic is no longer a concern, the threat is still ongoing worldwide as there is no predictability of the seriousness of new sub-variant infections.
- In the absence of clear and harmonized guidance from the health authorities at the country level, there may be concerns or speculations raised regarding the continued recommendation of COVID vaccines and vaccination efforts at the country levels. The lack of clear guidance might result in confusion and make room for misinformation to arise.
- There is a risk that guidance around preventive measures may be disregarded and no longer considered an important consideration going forward (including PCR tests, wearing masks, social distancing, coronavirus certificate, etc) and a risk that reporting of COVID-19 cases might decrease.
- The announcement of the end of the emergency phase may trigger disinformation groups to remind online users of conspiracy theories that were relevant during the height of the pandemic, and suggest that these theories may still be relevant to other outbreaks in the region.
- Mis & disinformation about the post-emergency phase might be amplified, including conspiracy theories about what's next for pharmaceutical companies and the WHO, as well as whether there would be a new biological threat or future pandemic of which to be wary.
- The [WHO African region](#) accounts for 71.6% of cases of COVID-19 (8.9 million) and 67.6% of deaths (174,234 deaths) on the African continent according to the Update on the COVID-19 Epidemiological situation in the African Region.

What can we do?

- Consider clarifying the difference between a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) and a pandemic, as they represent different levels of global health risks and have different implications for public health responses.
- It's important to rebuild trust in routine vaccination including COVID-19 vaccination and other routine immunizations. From an infodemic perspective, rebuilding trust can address the underlying factors that contribute to vaccine hesitancy and promote transparency with health systems.
- WHO issued temporary recommendations in the 2023-2025 COVID-19 Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan [\[LINK\]](#) including
 - The sustainment of the national capacity gains during the pandemic for future outbreaks.
 - The integration of COVID-19 vaccination into life course vaccination programmes while actively addressing vaccine acceptance and demand issues with affected communities.
 - The continued reporting of mortality, and morbidity data as well as variant surveillance information to WHO.
 - The continued work with communities and leaders to achieve strong, resilient, and inclusive risk communications and community engagement and infodemic management programmes. Engaging RCCE and infodemic managers on country levels can support the monitoring of COVID-19 misinformation and the acceptance of COVID-19 vaccines.

Key resources

COVID-19

- [Social media toolkit](#) with all recent Viral Facts videos on COVID-19 (ENG, FR).
- [WHO](#), 2023-2025 COVID-19 Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan.
- [WHO](#), Preparedness and Resilience for emerging threats.
- [WHO](#), SAGE Roadmap for prioritizing uses of COVID-19 vaccines
- [WHO](#), behavioral and social drivers of vaccination: tools and practical guidance for achieving high uptake
- [Q&A](#) on ending COVID-19 as a global health emergency
- [WHO's Science in 5](#), COVID-19 variants and how to stay safe
- [WHO](#), What's the difference between Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) and pandemic?

- [WHO's Science in 5](#) : Public Health Emergency of International Concern
- [WHO](#), What's a public health emergency of international concern?

Methodology

The social media listening process relies on a combination of social media analyses conducted for French, English, and Lusophone-speaking countries.

The social media analysis for French-speaking countries is conducted by the AIRA Infodemic Manager Consultant based in Guinea, the one for Lusophone-speaking countries by the AIRA Infodemic Manager Consultant based in Angola, and the one for English-speaking countries by a WHO AFRO social media officer.

The final report is a combination of the three analyses and recommendations.

The shift from a social media listening monitoring conducted by only one person for the whole African region into a combined one based on the analysis conducted by three different people may result in a less detailed and exhaustive report.

Engagements, otherwise known as interactions, **refer to the number of likes, comments, reactions, and re-shares on a post.**

This is not a perfect measure of engagement:

- Some may have seen the post and chosen not to interact with it;
- Commenting on or re-sharing a post may constitute a more meaningful form of engagement than simply reacting to it;

- We are not systematically distinguishing between the types of responses that each engagement generates (e.g. while a post may contain misinformation, people may be countering/ debunking it in the comments).

We seek to mitigate these limitations by:

- Scanning comments and monitoring reactions to qualitatively evaluate responses to each post;
- Assessing the velocity of a post (i.e. how fast is it obtaining reactions, likes, and shares) and the re-emergence of specific themes;
- Identifying whether the post is shared across a variety of platforms and sources (broad engagement), or simply soliciting a high level of attention within a given community/ platform (siloes engagement).

The monitoring reports are produced using NewsWhip Analytics, Crowdtangle, Google Trends, and UNICEF Talkwalker dashboards as well as the WHO EPI-WIN weekly infodemic insight reports and the WHO EARS platform.

As a result, data may be biased towards data emerging from formal news outlets/ official social media pages and does not incorporate content circulating on closed platforms (e.g. Whatsapp) or groups (e.g. private Facebook groups).

We also rely on our fact-checking partners, who provide invaluable insights into relevant national and regional trends or content, as well as country-level reports, including the South Africa Social Listening Weekly Report and the Mali Social Listening Weekly Report.

In producing these summaries and recommendations, we have consulted community feedback survey reports, as well as monitoring and recommendations from AIRA partners. We also draw from WHO EPI-WIN weekly reports and UNICEF monthly reports to formulate recommendations. As we produce more content, we seek to triangulate and corroborate information across these groups to strengthen our infodemic response.