

Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

A WHO-HOSTED NETWORK



AIRA Infodemic Trends Report

1-7 August 2023

(Weekly brief #83)

Top concerns

[COVID-19 variant announcement echoes vaccine hesitancy and conspiracy theories](#)

The World Health Organization added EG.5 as another severe acute respiratory coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) variant on its variant under monitoring (VUM) list.

Online users who reacted to the announcement voiced feelings of weariness and fatigue, comments about vaccine hesitancy as attitudes and perceptions toward the COVID-19 pandemic resurface.

Reference Guide

COVID-19 variant announcement echoes vaccine hesitancy and conspiracy theories	Pg. 3
--	-------

Persistent trend

Vaccination concerns during cholera immunization campaign in Kenya	Pg. 5
--	-------

Trends to watch

Mumps outbreak in Harare, Zimbabwe	Pg. 7
Ongoing polio vaccination campaign in the DRC	Pg. 8

Key resources

COVID-19	Pg. 10
Cholera	Pg. 10
Polio	Pg. 10
Mumps	Pg. 10
Methodology	Pg. 11

Public Health Infodemic Trends in the African Region

This weekly report provides key highlights and operational recommendations based on social listening data from August 1-7 in Africa.

For more information, please contact the WHO AIRA team:

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

South Africa, Mauritius, Cameroon

COVID-19 variant announcement echoes vaccine hesitancy and conspiracy theories

Engagements : 2 posts, 436 likes, 441 comments

- According to the [Weekly Epidemiological Update on COVID-19](#) as of August 3, 2023, the WHO added COVID-19 variant EG.5, “Eris”, to its variant under monitoring list. The variant has shown an increase in prevalence in different regions around the world including the [UK](#) and the [US](#), excluding Africa where its presence remains under observation.
- However, South African Afrikaans-language daily newspaper “[Beeld](#)” and Mauritius radio station “[Top FM Mauritius](#)” have amplified the news about a “COVID-19 new variant causing infections in Britain.”
- During the monitoring period (1-7 August), a **total of 434 online users** engaged with Beeld's Facebook post. These interactions can be categorized into distinct categories: **recurring expressions of pandemic-induced fatigue**, comments spotlighting **financial conspiracy theories** involving local authorities and the pandemic, remarks concerning **vaccine hesitancy** that garnered substantial engagement from other users, and **queries about distinguishing between cold, flu, and COVID-19**. Below are some comments translated from Afrikaans:

I am so over this covid story

Is just another Flu Virus, and is normal for Aug/Sept.
It's just a money-making story, I'm not going to take vaccines again

What did you expect when you get vaccinated. This was all lies and the injection given to people have made them sick. Seriously the Bible speaks of nothing like this. The

Ivermectin and Hydroxychloroquine destroy the scamdemic/plandemic/covid19 in 48hrs!

Didn't go for the first or second or third had covid 3 times still alive still won't now my life is in my GODS hands

- TOP FM's Facebook [post](#) received 7 comments, with two users suggesting the development and distribution of a new vaccine will be introduced in response to the new strain.
- Several Twitter users from Cameroon [[LINK](#),[LINK](#),[LINK](#)] reshared a tweet from French politician Florian Philippot from the French far-right party “the Patriots”, discussing the increase in cases of COVID-19 attributed to the new variant, Eris, in France. In particular, the tweet propagates disinformation stories about the origins of Eris, with the supposed aim of installing fear among the population.
- Another Twitter [user](#) in Cameroon retweeted a post from Silvano Trotta, a social media influencer with 140.6K followers who promotes disinformation about COVID19 and shares conspiracy theories. In response to the emergence of the new variant, the user questioned its similarity to a "common cold". Mr. Trotta, expressed his belief that "the media have endeavored to spread fear under the guise of this "cold", with the help of doctors to promote their vaccine, which he described as "poison".

Why is it concerning?

- Even though the COVID-19 Eris variant did not impact the African continent until now, online reactions about COVID-19 announcements of new variants continue to exhibit negative comments containing disinformation and misinformation about COVID-19, health authorities, COVID-19 treatments, and the COVID-19 vaccine. Conspiracy posts from public figures and influencers from Western countries have found an audience in Africa, with their posts being shared on social media (including whatsapp).
- Staying updated on COVID-19 variants can prove challenging to online users who can face a continual flow of news about the disease and its developments, leading them to a sense of fatigue and potentially making them more susceptible to resharing known conspiracy theories about the pandemic through confirmation bias or social media echo chambers.

As highlighted in earlier AIRA reports [#75](#), [#77](#), African social media users can be influenced by international narratives and disinformation groups which may disseminate COVID-19 conspiracy theories pertaining to the new variant.

What can we do?

- Amplify fact-based information explaining the [virus evolution](#) and the different [COVID-19 variants](#) in the African region so far.

- Share fact-checking pieces that debunk COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation and provide more accurate content through the Viral Facts Africa social media toolkit on [COVID-19](#).

Persistent trend

Vaccination concerns during cholera immunization campaign

Engagements: **11 posts, 1.4k likes, 154 comments**

- Following the launch of the [cholera vaccination exercise](#) by the Kenyan Ministry of Health which will span from August 3 to 12, we have monitored and analyzed **11 Facebook posts** to gauge the sentiment of online users towards the vaccination campaign.
- In a [post](#) by Citizen TV Kenya, which garnered 69 comments from online users, three predominant sentiments have emerged. First, some users are dissatisfied with the **inadequate availability of safe water and high food prices**.
- Secondly, some individuals believe that cholera is not a primary societal concern, **suggesting that the government should prioritize addressing issues like police brutality** and inflation.
- Lastly, there are comments labeling the cholera vaccination campaign as a fraudulent scheme, and describing **the vaccines as "demonic."** Below are some comments:

I think the government should create public awareness on Environmental hygiene measures on how to curb the waterborne diseases. Its a matter of personal hygiene we have to be of self-reliance.

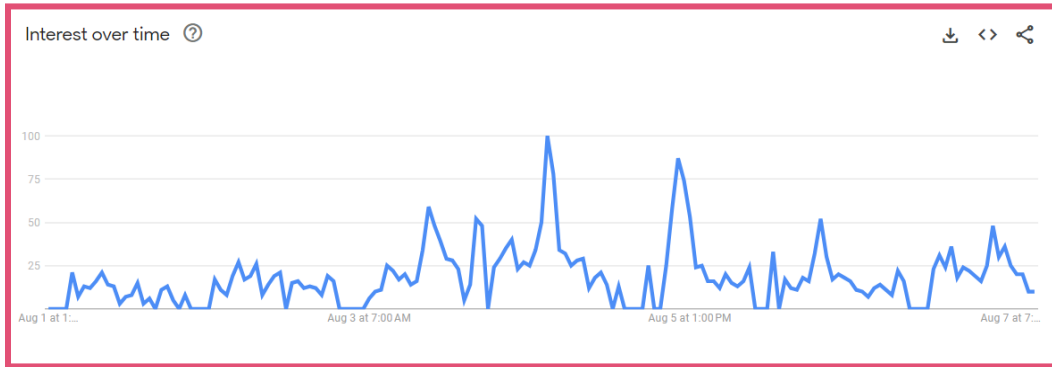
Let them start giving food countywide , many people are hungry

It would be very wise for the government to begin countrywide police brutality vaccination ...so that innocent Kenyans dont die of that dangerous disease 🙄

vaccinations with hidden motives

The vaccines are demonic

- In the wake of the Oral cholera vaccine campaign (OCV) launch on August 3rd, there has been a noticeable **surge in interest surrounding cholera among Kenyan online users**. Google Trends data reveals that **"UNICEF"** and **"Side effects of cholera vaccine"** emerged as prominent search topics when investigating "cholera."



- In the Ministry of Health's latest [situation report](#) for epidemiological week twenty-nine, a total of twenty cholera cases were documented. Notably, Mandera reported 17 cases, attracting **the greatest attention among all subregions as evident in the analysis of Google Trends data**.
- While Kenya is witnessing a **sustained decline** in cholera cases, it's essential to note that the majority of **reported cases involve children under the age of 10**. This underscores the vulnerability of children to cholera.

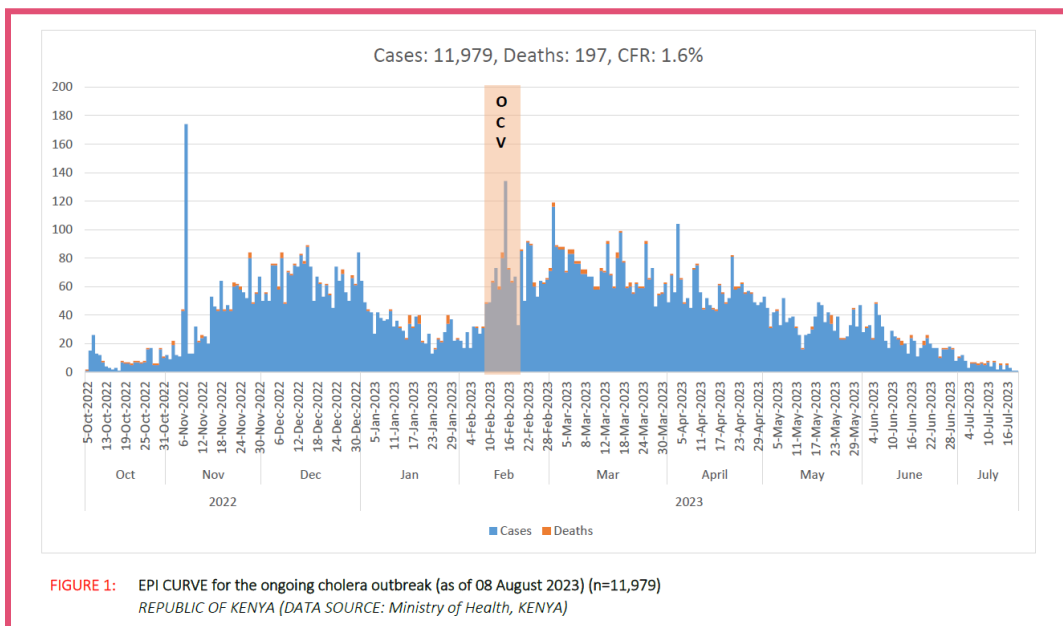


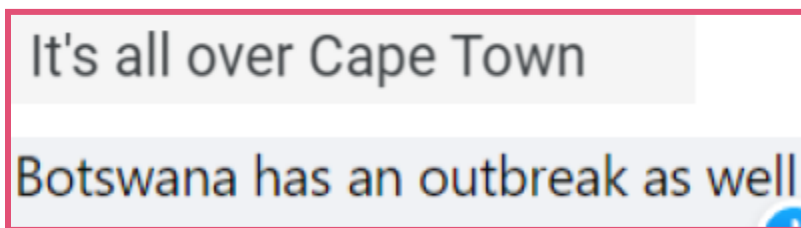
FIGURE 1: EPI CURVE for the ongoing cholera outbreak (as of 08 August 2023) (n=11,979)
 REPUBLIC OF KENYA (DATA SOURCE: Ministry of Health, KENYA)

- During the last OCV campaign in Kenya in February 2023, barriers to the OCV vaccine acceptance were highlighted in the AIRA report [#60](#). This included distrust and concerns about the credibility of information about vaccines and misinformation around vaccines and fertility.

Trend to watch

Mumps outbreak in Harare, Zimbabwe

- On August 6th, Zimbabwean journalist Hopewell Chin'ono, a Zimbabwean International Television journalist awarded the Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University, with 341k followers on his Facebook page, shared a Facebook [post](#) that referenced a press release from the City of Harare. It detailed an outbreak of mumps, locally known as Mahumunya, which has been recorded in health centers and schools throughout the Harare Metropolitan Province.
- The news was also reported by [H-Metro](#), a prominent daily tabloid newspaper headquartered in Harare, Zimbabwe, and [Star FM](#), a prominent commercial radio station rooted in Zimbabwe.
- Online users engaging with the Facebook post from Star FM, have highlighted the presence of mumps in neighboring countries such as [South Africa](#), and [Botswana](#). Below are some comments translated from Shona



- As outlined in the [WHO](#) Vaccination schedule for Zimbabwe, the measles and rubella vaccine is administered at 9 months, but notably, it does not include immunization against mumps.
- According to the [WHO](#) position paper on mumps vaccination, “routine mumps vaccination is recommended in countries with a well established, effective childhood vaccination programme and the capacity to maintain high level vaccination coverage with measles and rubella vaccination (that is, coverage that is >80%) and where the reduction of mumps incidence is a public health priority.”

Ongoing polio vaccination campaign in the DRC

- As conveyed in a recent Facebook [post](#) by UNICEF in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the National Polio Vaccination Days are extending from August 10th to 12th, spanning 15 provinces throughout the country. These dates follow the earlier round of national polio vaccination days held from July 27th to 29th.
- Approximately 35% of the individuals engaging with UNICEF's Facebook post conveyed positive sentiments in response to the polio vaccination campaign announcement. Other commentators underscored the necessity for heightened diligence among field workers who might not cover every household during their vaccination efforts, leading to occasional lapses in service quality.
- Furthermore, two additional comments emphasized the imperative of directing attention towards measles vaccination, as this ailment poses a substantial threat to the lives of children. Notably, one of these comments drew attention to the Kasai area as a specific concern. Below are some comments translated from French:

UNICEF. NO VACCINATOR passed unfortunately today is the last day.
What can we do ?

In Kasai it is measles that kills children and we do not send the polio vaccine.

We denounce the irresponsible behavior of agents who do not enter everywhere and expose our children.

Keep your vaccines there for your children and yourself

- An [article](#) from Radio Okapi, a prominent radio station in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) established through joint efforts of the United Nations Mission in Congo (MONUC) and the Swiss NGO Fondation Hirondelle, highlighted the emergence of three cases of acute flaccid paralysis in the Bokoro region.

- In the article from Radio Okapi, Chief Medical Officer of the Bokoro health zone, Yves Mpia Mbembe, said that the samples confirmed the presence of poliomyelitis in all three cases. He disclosed the news on Wednesday, August 2nd, during the inauguration of the polio vaccination campaign in Bokoro city according to the article.
- Two online users [emphasized](#) the crucial need for disseminating awareness messages to "combat this significant ailment,," suggesting a low awareness about the severity of the disease and its health impact on children. Below are the comments translated from French:

Raising awareness to fight this disease
Let's raise awareness and help the community to have a good eye on vaccination, because it is mandatory and efficient for the good health of our little ones...

- The ongoing and upcoming national polio campaigns in the coming months can play a crucial role in addressing immunization gaps resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.**
- The AIRA report [#78](#) from early July underscored the rising concerns, particularly the refusal of polio vaccines, often rooted in religious beliefs, compounded by the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 vaccination and its potential adverse effects.
- As outlined in the [latest](#) weekly update from the Global Polio Eradication Initiative regarding the polio situation in the DRC, occurrences of cVDPV1 and cVDPV2 cases persist this week across several regions within the nation.
- In accordance with the [WHO Statement from the thirty-fifth Polio IHR Emergency Committee](#), the persistent outbreaks of cVDPV1 and cVDPV2 in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, leading to cross-border transmission to neighboring nations, continue to be of utmost concern.

Key resources

COVID-19

- [WHO](#), Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) Weekly Epidemiological Updates and Monthly Operational Updates
- [WHO](#), Tracking SARS-CoV-2 variants
- [WHO](#), Q&A, Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Variants of SARS-COV-2
- [WHO](#), Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Virus evolution
- [WHO](#), Standing recommendations for COVID-19 issued by the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) in accordance with the International Health Regulations (2005) (IHR)
- [VFA](#), COVID-19 social media toolkit
- [WHO](#), SARS COV2 variant EG.5: Initial Risk Evaluation

Cholera

- [WHO](#), Multi-country outbreak of cholera, External situation report #5
- [WHO](#), cholera outbreaks, W&A
- [WHO](#), Cholera fact sheet
- [VFA](#), cholera social media toolkit

Polio

- [WHO](#), Polio fact sheet
- [Global Polio Eradication Initiative](#), Polio-Eradication-Strategy-2022-2026
- [VFA](#) polio social media toolkit
- [Global Polio Eradication Initiative](#) communication toolkit and technical guidance in French and English

Mumps

- [WHO](#), Mumps fact sheet
- [WHO](#) position paper on Mumps vaccination
- [WHO](#), Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety - Committee reports on Mumps Vaccines

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 (siloe 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.