

# Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

A WHO-HOSTED NETWORK



**AIRA Infodemic Trends Report**

**3-10 October 2023**

**(Weekly brief #92)**

## Top concerns

### [Unknown illness in Kenyan high school sparks extensive concerns](#)

Heightened anxiety and widespread speculations emerged following videos of high school girls affected by an unknown disease in Western Kenya

### [Mixed reactions over malaria vaccine announcement in African francophone countries](#)

While low engagement on the majority of posts by users in Francophone African countries, Facebook posts featuring local researchers' work on malaria gained more traction.

### [Reactions about the dengue fever outbreak in Burkina Faso highlight lack of trust in health authorities](#)

Conversations about dengue in Burkina Faso portray a low trust towards local health authorities. One factor mentioned by online users is the release of Genetically Modified mosquitoes in the country in 2019.

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## Public Health Infodemic Trends in the African Region

This weekly report provides key highlights and operational recommendations based on social listening data from October 3-10 in Africa.

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## Unknown illness in Kenyan high school sparks extensive concerns

Engagement: **96 posts, 33k likes, 12k comments**

### Media narrative:

- An [unknown disease](#) that affected at least 90 students at St. Therese's Eregi Girls High school, Kakamega was reported in the media on October 4th. Social media monitoring has revealed **extensive engagement and viewership** across different social media platforms. Sources included [local](#), [regional](#), and [international](#) online news agencies.
- A [distressing video about the children impacted by the unidentified illness](#) has been repeatedly shared on [Instagram](#) by many anti-vaxx accounts, and on TikTok, where most comments assume this is "hysteria", which was [later supported by an article in the Daily Nation quoting some local public health representatives](#).
- [Parents have expressed their concerns and frustration](#) regarding the situation and are seeking clear explanations for what transpired. Videos depicting [children screaming](#) have also been circulating.
- Comments extracted from a WHO post [shed light on online users connecting the news to the COVID vaccine administered to students in 2022](#).
- As per NewsWhip, the media coverage of the topic reached its peak on October 4th and has since been gradually subsiding. The keywords in use since October 1st have included "unknown," "mysterious," and "Eregi."



## What can we do?

- Continuous monitoring of online conversations and the media coverage about the situation in Eregi High school would shed light on the remaining concerns before and after an official statement is issued by local authorities.
- A crisis communication specialist and an infodemic manager could provide support on the communication strategy to manage the infodemic when “unknown illnesses” are reported. That could include communication materials to explain the reporting and investigation process before a diagnosis can be made.
- Debunk the historical association of “hysteria” as a sex-selective disorder and the stigma that might be associated with women as “predisposed to mental and behavioral conditions”.
- Collaboration with journalists and media specialists working in healthcare organizations to train them on how to identify mis and disinformation and how to respond to it can help mitigate the negative impacts for this crisis and future ones.

## Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Ivory Coast

### Reactions over malaria announcement in francophone African countries

Engagement: **30 posts, 2k likes, 137 comments**

#### Social media commentary:

- After the [World Health Organization \(WHO\) released updated guidance on immunization recommending the R21/Matrix-M vaccine for malaria prevention on October 2nd](#), various French African online news agencies disseminated the information through their social media platforms.
- The overall online engagement was limited in [Ivory Coast](#), and [Senegal](#). In Chad, a commentator revealed a prevalent [sense of distrust towards the WHO](#) and in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a commentator voiced his disbelief in the vaccine and that the news is tightly linked to [western interests](#).
- On Facebook, RTB "Radiodiffusion-Télévision Burkina", the national radio and television broadcaster in Burkina Faso with 1.5M followers shared a video titled [“Malaria prevention: WHO validates a new vaccine from Burkinabè researchers.”](#)This was based on [the high efficacy levels demonstrated in trials conducted in Burkina Faso](#).

- Around 80 users from Burkina Faso [extended their congratulations to Professor Halidou Tinto](#), the Principal Investigator of the R21 Phase IIb and III malaria trials in Nanoro in 2019.

### Why is it concerning?

- The Facebook post highlighting the contribution of local African researchers got more traction than other posts. In fact, the focus on African researchers and support for the local production of vaccines in Africa has been a recurring sentiment in [AIRA reports](#), underlining the congratulatory comments and the need to see more focus on African driven advancements.
- While comments from online users are minimal, distrust and conspiracy theories are prevalent among comments.
- Emphasize the burden of malaria in the African continent: according to the [WHO fact sheet on malaria](#), the WHO African Region carries a “disproportionately high share of the global malaria burden. In 2021, the Region was home to 95% of malaria cases and 96% of malaria deaths.” The death prevalence for children under 5 accounted for about 80% of all malaria deaths in the Region which is worrisome.

### What can we do?

- Continuous monitoring of vaccine narratives ahead of the roll-out of the R21 Matrix M vaccine to address potential concerns, questions from individuals around the vaccine, its side effects, availability in health facilities and efficacy in protecting from disease.
- Foster collaboration with researchers in Africa to create informative materials (including videos, explainers, etc) highlighting the importance of the malaria vaccine in Burkina Faso.
- It is also important to work closely with local media agencies (including broadcast media) to respond to any information gaps that might arise and highlight the contribution of African researchers to the production of the malaria vaccine. Training journalists on spotting mis/disinformation can also be important in case of wide circulations that need immediate action.
- Using [VFA social media toolkit on malaria](#) to answer why is the malaria vaccine a breakthrough in mitigating the spread of the disease.

## Dengue fever outbreak in Burkina Faso highlights lack of trust in health authorities

Engagement: **23 posts, 10k likes, 1291 comments**

- On October 7th, the Government Information Service in Burkina Faso issued a press release to debunk false claims, clarifying that the facilities and research developed by the Burkina Faso Institute for Health Science Research (IRSS) is [not linked to the spread and increase of diseases, including dengue and malaria, within the country.](#)
- The primary concern among online users revolved around the release of genetically modified (GM) mosquitoes in 2019, [a topic previously highlighted in the AIRA report #89.](#) It has been approximately two years since this experiment took place, and [online users remain unaware of the outcomes, questioning the high number of cases in certain areas. The topic has raised doubts and skepticism within the population](#) but also [fear that GM mosquitoes might harm humans.](#)
- On posts by local online news agencies including LeFaso.net [727k followers], [lack of trust in local authorities' handling of the outbreak](#) is prevalent among 20 commentators. La voix du peuple [109k followers] also [questioned the link between GM mosquitoes and the outbreak of malaria/dengue](#) in the country.
- Burkina On Line [525k followers] addressed public concerns in a Facebook post but nearly 146 online users [challenged the debunking and expressed their apprehensions about vaccine testing in Africa and the rising incidence of malaria and dengue cases in the country.](#)
- It's worth mentioning that RTB (Radiodiffusion-Télévision Burkina) featured an interview with Dr. Sanou, [shedding light on the public health risks associated with self-medication using papaya leaves.](#)

### Why is it concerning?

- The displayed lack of trust in local health authorities is concerning as it might erode confidence in evidence-based decision-making and hamper the success of disease prevention efforts, and effective responses to dengue. This can also result in public resistance to policies aimed at addressing dengue, malaria and other diseases in the country.

- Roughly 90 percent of commentators on the post of official and online news media agencies were male. [Social media statistics for Burkina Faso in 2023 indicate that while 70.0 percent of Burkina Faso's social media users were male there are 30.0 percent of female online users.](#) The gender gap may not capture the full spectrum of the conversation and exclude women's thoughts about the topic.
- According to the [WHO dengue and severe dengue fact sheet](#), "the disease risks may change and shift with climate change in tropical and subtropical areas, and vectors might adapt to the new environment and climate." Therefore, it is worth considering that the burden of the disease might increase with climate change affecting African countries.

### What can we do?

- Reassuring public opinion about the release of GM mosquitoes through a two-way communication between the scientific community and the general public might bridge this gap and foster understanding of scientific findings and their implications in Burkina Faso. This might be incorporated through interviews with subject-matter experts on national TV.
- Collaborate with journalists covering science subjects to convey easy-to-digest messages about dengue, the release of GM mosquitoes and the current steps health authorities are undertaking to mitigate the spread of the disease (destruction of larval breeding sites, seasonal malaria chemoprevention campaign, mobilization of health community volunteers).
- In previous [AIRA reports we highlighted positive engagement on posts by health influencer Good health 226](#), therefore leveraging influencers to share evidence-based decisions taken by health authorities might reinforce trust with the audience.

## Persistent Trend

### Diphtheria in Nigeria

- The outbreak of diphtheria in Nigeria remains of pressing concern to local health authorities.
- Dr. Ifedayo Adeyifa, Director General of the NDCD (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control and Prevention) highlighted in an interview with Arise News [711k subscribers] shared on YouTube challenges [in vaccination confidence in Kano which impede population to accept vaccination](#). This included historical challenges in northern Nigeria in 2003, where local and religious leaders of



Kano, Zamfara, and Kaduna states brought [the immunization campaign to a halt by calling on parents not to allow their children to be immunized](#).

## Key resources

### Diphtheria

- [WHO](#) Diphtheria fact sheet
- [VFA](#), diphtheria social media toolkit

### Malaria

- WHO [initiative](#) to stop the spread of *Anopheles stephensi* in Africa
- [VFA](#), Malaria social media toolkit
- WHO malaria fact [sheet](#)
- Malaria threat [map](#)
- Malaria Social & Behavior Change Communication National [Strategies](#)

### Dengue

- [WHO](#), Dengue fact sheet
- [WHO](#), Dengue Q&A

## 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.