

# Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

A WHO-HOSTED NETWORK



**AIRA Infodemic Trends Report**

**4-11 March 2024**

**Weekly brief #110**

# Top concerns

[Burkina Faso: disinformation spreads on social media and media platforms about Genetically-Modified mosquitoes, the malaria vaccine and dengue](#)

Disinformation figures linked to Russian groups spread conspiracies that GM mosquitoes are part of a Western plot to monetize the malaria vaccine.

[Misinformation and concerns over rise of hemorrhagic conjunctivitis in Angola and Mozambique](#)

Misinformation that urine mixed with soap can treat conjunctivitis is amplified on social media echo chambers.

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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 March 4-11 in Africa.

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## Burkina Faso

### Burkina Faso: disinformation spreads on social media and media platforms about Genetically-Modified mosquitoes, the malaria vaccine and dengue

Engagement: **3 posts, 227 likes, 12 comments**

- According to leFaso.net, the [Coalition for Health Sovereignty \(COSOUSA\)](#) [demanded an "immediate halt" to ongoing experiments with genetically modified mosquitoes](#) during a press conference on Saturday, 9 March. The coalition views these experiments as "risky and irresponsible" and asserts that they have no relevance to the fight against malaria.
- Among the members of COSOUSA is Ali Tapsoba, the president of the NGO "[Terre à Vie](#)" [1.1k followers], a self-described agro-ecological association advocating for food sovereignty, promoting endogenous development initiatives while opposing the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). [Tapsoba advocates for the fight against malaria and believes gene edited technology is part of a western conspiracy to monetise malaria.](#) Bobo Dioulasso Afferage [483K followers] [published the coalition's speech on Facebook.](#)
- According to an article by Koaci, the [COSOUSA's president, Nestor Podassé was arrested and detained](#) on 9 February 2023 after making threats against a "foreign community" in October 2022 during a public demonstration calling for the departure of the french army from Burkina Faso. [This resulted in the ransacking of the front of the french institute in Bobo Dioulasso.](#)
- Prominent social media influencers known for spreading disinformation have [voiced support for Podassé and condemned the threats and intimidation directed towards him.](#) They have also voiced their criticism against the [Target Malaria](#) project attributing it to the rise in dengue fever cases in Burkina Faso.
- Health conspiracies and disinformation regarding initiatives like Target Malaria and the involvement of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are common especially concerning mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria. This exacerbates false claims that the genetic modifications carried out to control malaria-carrying mosquitoes inadvertently leads to the proliferation of dengue-carrying mosquitoes. [However, scientific evidence does not support these claims.](#) Dengue fever is primarily spread by Aedes mosquitoes, whereas malaria is transmitted by Anopheles mosquitoes.

Target Malaria and similar projects specifically target Anopheles mosquitoes to reduce malaria transmission, which should not have a direct impact on dengue transmission.

- [Gene drive](#) is a genetic engineering technique that promotes the inheritance of a particular gene throughout a population by biasing its transmission during reproduction.

### Why is it concerning?

- The coalition's conference coincides with African health officials from countries heavily affected by malaria, including Burkina Faso, [making a commitment to end malaria-related deaths at a ministerial conference in Douala, Cameroon](#).
- Russia has been involved in [documented disinformation campaigns](#) aimed at fostering [mistrust in Western health initiatives in Africa](#). These efforts include recruiting [local African political figures and influencers to shape and legitimise false narratives](#).
- Burkina Faso's national mainstream media are hosting figures known for spreading disinformation about the malaria vaccine and public health authorities [[LINK](#)].

### What can we do?

- Collaborate closely with the media (such as Faso.net or RTB) to ensure accurate and contextualised information is conveyed, thereby mitigating the spread of mis and disinformation.
- Support journalists in giving more context about the political agenda behind conferences when reporting an event, such as ["Health and sovereignty 2023"](#), and help them refer back to published scientific health facts to dispel disinformation.
- Work closely with organisations promoting media health literacy and fact-checking to provide techniques to encourage critical thinking skills among the population to discern and evaluate media content effectively.
- Clarify that the mosquitoes responsible for malaria and dengue are different species. Collaborate with the media, researchers and public health agencies to develop messages that will help the population untangle mis/disinformation narratives around GM mosquitoes, malaria vaccine and dengue.
- Explain the process of approval in Burkina Faso of the research and release of GM mosquitoes in the country, how risk is assessed and mitigated. [Viral Facts](#)

[Africa videos](#) about the genetically modified mosquitoes can be a resource to address concerns and misinformation circulating.

- Closely monitor conversations online/offline regarding the upcoming malaria vaccine RTS,S launch in Benin and Sierra Leone before its scheduled introduction in April. Additionally, work closely and reinforce the capacity of local media about potential disinformation campaigns that may arise surrounding the malaria vaccine and how to respond to it.

## Mozambique, Angola

### Misinformation and concerns over rise of hemorrhagic conjunctivitis in Angola and Mozambique

Engagement: **16 posts, 11k likes, 985 comments**

#### Angola

- Luanda Sul Line, an Angolan online news media agency, has reported that Minister of Health Silvia Lutucuta, during her official visit to the province of Cuanza-Norte, [alerted families nationwide about the dangers associated with home remedies of hemorrhagic conjunctivitis](#). She pointed out that engaging in home treatment practices may exacerbate complications linked to the disease, particularly noteworthy in the capital, Luanda.
- Lutucuta drew attention to the fact that health units in Luanda have documented severe cases of complications stemming from the use of home remedies. These include substances such as urine and soap, known to induce irritation in the eyes.
- A total of 12 commentators expressed their scepticism towards the Minister of Health's statements, citing [concerns about financial corruption](#). Their distrust encompasses a broader [lack of faith in the healthcare systems](#) within the country.
- In response to a post by [Radio Nacional de Angola](#), the national radio station, the majority of 35 commentators affirmed the efficacy of treating hemorrhagic conjunctivitis with urine. They also indicated that it was a traditional recipe passed down through grandmothers.

#### Mozambique

- According to [radio Mozambique](#), the outbreak of hemorrhagic conjunctivitis worsens in Sofala province and the number of cases now exceeds 150. The

radio segment describes that the city of Beira leads the way in terms of the prevalence of hemorrhagic conjunctivitis.

- The most recent epidemiological data accessible online is from February 27th. According to a Facebook post by the Ministry of Health, the province of Nampula has [reported](#) a total of 1407 cases distributed across three districts: Napula, Angoche, and Nacala Porto.
- According to [Tv Susesso Moz](#), a Mozambican online news agency, as cases of hemorrhagic conjunctivitis surge, so does the demand for eye drops and sunglasses.
- Some argue that hospitals are experiencing a scarcity of medication due to the overwhelming demand driven by the influx of patients. In response to this challenge, healthcare professionals are advising patients to procure their medications from private pharmacies.

### Why is it concerning?

- As per the [Angolan Ministry of Health](#), conjunctivitis is characterised by the inflammation of the transparent membrane that typically covers the eye. Symptoms may manifest as redness, soreness, and heightened sensitivity to light. Conjunctivitis is known to be highly contagious.
- Despite [international scientists debunking the notion that urine cures conjunctivitis](#), some individuals believe in its efficacy and share their testimonials. This echo chamber effect can perpetuate the usage and acceptance of urine as a treatment despite scientific evidence to the contrary.
- Mozambican online users complained of no availability of medication, which implies that some individuals may resort to alternative remedies or unproven treatments, such as the use of urine. This also underscores the challenges people face in accessing affordable and effective healthcare solutions.
- Distrust in local health authorities might impact the adherence to preventive measures. The fragile political environments in [Mozambique](#) including election-related violence and violence in Northern Mozambique affect healthcare systems delivery. [News of corruption in Angola](#) is also deepening distrust in local authorities.

### What can we do?

- Highlighting the dangers associated with using unproven treatments through radio segments, Facebook posts of medical centres and flyers is crucial. [Liquids such as urine or breast milk can pose significant risks due to the high likelihood](#)

[of bacterial contamination](#). Introducing these substances into the eye, particularly in children, can lead to severe eye complications, including serious infections like gonorrhoea. [More information on conjunctivitis is detailed in the fact sheet of the CDC.](#)

- Select trusted health sources including health expert influencers or medical doctors or community leaders to disseminate the right information.
- Educate street vendors who are monetizing sunglasses sales on spreading awareness messages about conjunctivitis, consider the following:  
Provide street vendors with informative flyers or pamphlets detailing the causes, symptoms, and preventive measures for conjunctivitis.

## Persistent trend

### Nigeria first country to receive new meningitis vaccine

Engagement: **7 posts, 160 likes, 9 comments**

- On 7 March, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, announced on X that [Nigeria has become the first country](#) to receive the new MenFive vaccine from the Gavi-funded stockpile.
- We've monitored low engagement and attention regarding this news on Facebook and X thus far.

### Malawians arrested over selling gentamicin injection as a cure for HIV/AIDS

Engagement: **3 posts, 2851 likes, 2591 comments**

#### Woman selling gentamicin injection as an HIV/AIDS cure on her TikTok page

- On 5 March, [Times 360 Malawi](#) reported that police in Mangochi arrested a 25-year-old woman. She is accused of selling gentamicin injection as a cure for HIV/AIDS through her TikTok page.
- [Gentamicin](#) is an antibiotic used to treat several types of bacterial infections. This may include meningitis, pneumonia among others.
- On 7 March, Times 360 Malawi reported that three additional people have been arrested in relation to the sale of counterfeit HIV and AIDS medications in Mangochi.
- About 2,500 commentators suggested that these individuals were just hustlers trying to make a living.

## National measles and rubella vaccination campaign in Burkina Faso

- The Ministry of Health and Public Hygiene is organising [a national measles and rubella vaccination campaign](#) from 15 to 23 March 2024.
- The Ministry had previously carried out a [vaccination campaign](#) in nine districts affected by measles and rubella.
- While social media engagement remains low, there's a positive trend in the conversation, with wishes for a successful vaccination campaign and advocacy for expanding vaccine distribution to reach numerous districts.

## Key resources

### Malaria

- [WHO](#), Q&A on malaria vaccines (RTS,S and R21) (English and French)
- [WHO Infographic](#): the RTS,S Malaria Vaccine (English)
- [WHO Infographic](#): the RTS,S Malaria Vaccine (French)
- [WHO](#), annual world malaria report 2023
- [VFA](#), malaria social media toolkit
- [Gavi](#), briefing on start of routine malaria vaccinations in Africa 19 January
- [WHO](#), Malaria: The malaria vaccine implementation programme (MVIP)

### Gene edited mosquitoes

- [WHO](#), guidance framework for testing of genetically modified mosquitoes, second edition
- [WHO](#), summary of new interventions for vector control (genetic manipulation)
- [SciDev.Net Afrique](#), Burkina Faso: the dengue epidemic is not due to GMO mosquitoes

## Methodology

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

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.