

Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

A WHO-HOSTED NETWORK



AIRA Infodemic Trends Report

15-22 July 2024

Weekly brief #128

Top concern

[Recurring themes of anti-vaccination narratives follows the launch of R21 malaria vaccine in South Sudan, a continuing pattern by accounts known for spreading disinformation](#)

Anti-Western, anti-vaxx activist with self-proclaimed Pan African vision shares disinformation and unfounded claims about the malaria vaccine after its launch in South Sudan.

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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 15-22 July 2024 in Africa.

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South Sudan

Recurring themes of anti-vaccination narratives follows the launch of R21 malaria vaccine in South Sudan, a continuing pattern by accounts known for spreading disinformation

Engagement: **5 posts, 547 likes , 58 comments**

- An activist identifying as a Pan-Africanist and African revolutionary figure, who has questioned the reliability of the anti-malaria vaccine since its recommendation by WHO, continues to raise doubts. His latest post on [X](#) comes in response to South Sudanese authorities' decision to [introduce](#) the R21/Matrix-M vaccine into the children's vaccination schedule.
- Unfounded claims that the vaccine is a crime against humanity on African children perpetrated by American-European pharmaceutical companies and large health philanthropies which in turn consider the growing number of African children as an existential threat to the planet. Further claims that pharmaceutical companies use extensive disinformation to manipulate African populations in favor of their product. Commentary by online users was deactivated by the activist limiting the knowledge about user engagement.
- On a related note, 20% of users who commented on a Facebook [post](#) by SSBC, a South Sudanese broadcaster focusing on national and regional news, expressed concerns about the vaccine's safety and effectiveness. Here are some examples of their comments:

This same vaccine was disregarded in Kenya and Uganda. I am worried about the safety of our children.

No member of my family will get even a shot of that medically unverified vaccine! Never at all!
This time, if you are a learned individual, kindly protect your family. I say again, protect your family!

Please don't take anything these people give you. NO VACCINE IS SAFE. There's already excess mortality n a rise in chronic illnesses since the covid vaccines. A few years from that malaria vaccine there will be all kinds of autism, mental disorders, d... [See more](#)

Why South Sudan? Cry my beloved Country. Bad news n don't take any of these nonsense.

- Radio Miraya, the United Nations radio station in South Sudan owned and run by UNMISS, also amplified the news about the launch of the R21 malaria vaccine. A total of 9 online users who commented on the post displayed sentiments of hesitancy, skepticism about the vaccine and misinformation about its nature. Below are some comments to note:

We South Sudanese people we should not Rush to get that vaccine and vaccinat our young children with it Am worried that the problem of 2014 tetanus vaccine that was brought into African countries was very dangerous vaccine and knew it and later it was discovered that those age group who was vaccinated at the time developed a lot of problems most of them were unable to conceive that was discovered

Please keep away western vaccines from our people

This Malária vaccines is just a version of Coronavirus vaccines, if you are vaccinated still the chances of you getting Malaria is high. I can say I take full responsibility so, none of my children will take this vaccine for reasons well known to me.

Why is it concerning?

- According to [WHO](#), malaria continues to be a leading cause of illness and death in South Sudan, particularly among young children. In 2022, the country reported an estimated 2.8 million cases and 6,680 deaths. With approximately 7,630 new cases and 18 fatalities daily, making South Sudan to be one of the countries with the highest malaria incidence rates in the region.
- This is a recurring theme of anti-vaccine narratives being spread following the introduction of R21 vaccines in sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, after the R21 malaria vaccine was introduced in Ivory Coast, similar disinformation emerged.
- The introduction of new vaccines into a national immunization schedule is a significant step forward in reducing disease burden, particularly malaria, in the African region. However, social listening reports reveal that accounts known for promoting vaccine hesitancy consistently spread the same disinformation following vaccine launches.
- Several African countries (including Burundi, Ghana, and later Kenya and Malawi) are preparing to introduce the malaria vaccine into their vaccination schedules. Relying on misinformers who lack the necessary knowledge to

correctly interpret scientific information about vaccines can exacerbate vaccine hesitancy especially if their reach is amplified by private users.

- The expression of hesitancy by some online users in their comments suggests a lack of sufficient trust about the vaccine.

What can we do?

- Work with trusted community leaders to share and emphasize verifiable sources of information about the new malaria vaccine, its safety, and its approval process at both global and national levels. Address any fears and distrust about the vaccine through direct community engagement..
- Highlight the [WHO's advice on trusting healthcare workers as a reliable source for the successful implementation of the malaria vaccine program in African countries](#). Acknowledge that community health workers are change agents for improving children's health and strengthening the fight against malaria. Community health workers can share concise and engaging talking points on malaria prevention with parents visiting health facilities. Framing these points as conversational messages that not only address their queries but also prompt them to ensure the immunization of their children from around 5 months of age, as recommended by [WHO](#), to protect children from malaria as early as possible when they are most vulnerable to severe illness, Adapting local [resources on the malaria vaccine for VFA](#) that explain the malaria vaccine can also be shared with parents on WhatsApp.
- With the introduction of the malaria vaccine in many African countries, prebunking and inoculation strategies are essential to counteract and prepare for response to any potential dis/misinformation. Uncovering tactics used by known disinformation groups and individuals can contribute to warn the population against disinformation and limit its spread. This also enhances public acceptance of the vaccine.
- Continue monitoring of malaria discussions across both online and offline platforms to ensure timely and accurate dissemination of expert-debunked information to counter misinformation and promote a more informed public understanding of the subject.
- Engage with South Sudanese based scientific experts who possess the expertise to amplify accurate messaging and debunk mis/disinformation.

Persistent trends

Ghana

Information gaps emerge as online users ask questions about dengue fever as it's new to Ghanians. Users also express sentiments of skepticism and distrust in local authorities.

Engagement: 16 posts, 2350 likes, 221 comments

- According to the [situation report on Dengue Fever](#) in Ghana dated July 15, dengue fever is relatively new to the population in Ghana. This unfamiliarity is leading to numerous questions that highlight significant information gaps about the disease. For example, in a video interview by [Joy News](#), an online media channel, four interviewees displayed little knowledge about dengue, stating they had heard of malaria but not dengue fever. On a Facebook [post](#) by GTV Ghana, three online users also enquired more information about the disease and its symptoms.
- Another narrative among online users is the belief that local authorities financially benefit from new diseases, which underscores a distrust in local authorities. In fact, on a Facebook [post](#) by Radio 3FM 92.7, over 10 users expressed this sentiment.
- Dengue fever has been confirmed in the Eastern Region of Ghana with a total of eleven (11) cases confirmed via PCR according to the same situation report.

Nigeria

Popular Ile Epo Market, the second biggest food market in Lagos, was sealed for unsanitary conditions. Traders complain of financial hardships.

Engagement: 14 posts, 9563 likes, 317 comments

- According to [Sahara TV](#), many traders and buyers were surprised and frustrated to find the popular Ile Epo Market, locked upon arrival. The Lagos State government sealed the market, the state's [second-largest food market](#), to contain a cholera outbreak and resulting deaths. This action, carried out by the Lagos State Waste Management Authority (LAWMA) on Sunday, marks the second closure in less than a year due to environmental concerns.
- An online user commented on Sahara Reporters' Facebook [post](#), stating that the market closure is a good step due to its unsanitary conditions. Another user expressed concerns about the hardships people are facing, including famine, while yet another user called for protests against local authorities.

- According to the [Cholera Situation Report Epidemiological week 27: \(01 July 2024 – 07 July 2024\)](#), as of 7th July 2024, a total of 2,809 suspected cases including 82 deaths (CFR 2.9%) have been reported from 33 states. Of the suspected cases since the beginning of the year, age groups <5 years are mostly affected, followed by the age groups 25 - 34 years in aggregate of both males and females.
- In a response to a [tweet](#) by Tokunbo Wahab, Honorary commissioner, Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, Lagos State, the majority of online users expressed their disgust towards the uncleanness of the market.

Debunks

Ivorian online influencer debunks disinformation about the malaria vaccine and a Burkinabe online news agencies debunk misinformation about the relationship between Target Malaria project and the increase of dengue fever cases in Burkina Faso

Ivory Coast

- Stoni is an influencer with 2.1 million followers on Facebook. He provides updates on global news, with a particular focus on societal issues in Ivory Coast.
- On 18 July, Stoni addressed the malaria burden in Ivory Coast and the various discussions surrounding it. He also debunked a conspiracy theory suggesting that the fight against malaria is a covert attempt to depopulate Africa and that Bill Gates, due to his funding of malaria initiatives, has ulterior motives to harm the African population.[\[LINK\]](#)
- He based himself on scientific reports about the malaria vaccine, rather than relying on content from pseudo-pan-Africanists. He mentions that these reports, authored by organizations like Gavi, provide credible information. He advises online users to consult reputable sources for vaccine information rather than relying on social media platforms.
- The Ministry of Health in Ivory Coast endorsed his video. However, out of 156 comments, around 80 online users have amplified conspiracy theories and expressed vaccine hesitancy in their comments. Below are some examples in French:

Je crois que tu a une fille non, quand la vaccination va commencer, va la fait vacciner et ramène nous les images.

Merci !!!

Toto ne comprend rien... tu veux vraiment nous faire croire que Bill Gates qui n'a jamais caché qu'il est contre l'explosion démographique du continent Africain qu'il juge dangereux pour l'humanité veut désormais sauver nos enfants? Ils t'ont donné combien? 😞 c'est vraiment suffisant pour faire ça?

Djo mon enfant ne prendra pas ce vaccin après dix ans peut-être

Burkina Faso

- [Burkina on Line](#) and [Minute.bf](#), two online news agencies from Burkina Faso clarified that there is no relationship between the Target malaria project and the dengue fever outbreak in Burkina Faso.
- Social listening in Burkina Faso had previously shown that, in the wake of a dengue outbreak in Bobo-Dioulasso in September 2023, there was a prevalent belief attributing the outbreak to [genetically modified mosquitoes](#) released by the Target Malaria project in 2019 in Bana, which is situated approximately twenty kilometers away from Bobo-Dioulasso. It's noteworthy to mention that social media users in Burkina Faso opposed the [introduction of genetically modified mosquitoes](#) in the country in efforts to combat malaria.
- Upon monitoring comments on Facebook posts by "Burkina On Line" and "Minute BF," we observed recurring themes of skepticism. Many users have questions about the project including, "Why release mosquitoes into the wild?" and "What impact have these mosquitoes had on nature?" Additionally, there is a common sentiment of distrust toward the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Below are some comments in French:

La fondation Bill et Mélina Gates ne m'a jamais inspiré confiance.

Pourquoi lâcher des moustiques dans la nature ? Quel impact ces moustiques ont eu sur les naturels ?

La dengue est apparue après que vous avez lâché vos moustiques, donc difficile de nous convaincre.. Créer vos propres labos, au lieu de vous baser sur celles d'extérieurs et leurs financements pour anéantir votre population..

Nous ne sommes pas les cobayes de l'OMS ni des laboratoires

- Health conspiracies and disinformation regarding initiatives like Target Malaria and the involvement of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have been monitored in the past by AIRA. 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.

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)
- [UNICEF](#), Malaria Vaccines: Question and Answers on Supply, Price and Market Shaping by UNICEF's Supply Division
- [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)

- [The United States President's Malaria Initiative, in partnership with Breakthrough ACTION](#), Malaria SBC toolkit for community and faith leaders
- [WHO](#), new vaccine introduction Checklist for planning communication and advocacy
- [WHO](#), a field guide to qualitative research for new vaccine introduction: step-by-step instructions to help immunization programmes understand their target audiences before communicating about the introduction of a new vaccine

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 and monitoring conducted by only one person for the entire African region, to a combined one based on 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.

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.