COMMUNITY BULLETIN #1

15 December 2021 to 15 January 2022

INTRODUCTION TO ROOTED IN TRUST

Rooted in Trust (RiT) is a project run by Internews to support humanitarian and public health agencies combat and manage the spread of rumors and misinformation about COVID-19. The first chapter (RiT1) ran from October 2020 to February 2021 with more than 2774 rumors collected in Lebanon. (1) The project was recently re-launched in September 2021 with its second chapter (RiT2.0) expected to run until end of 2022. In this bulletin, Internews profiles commonly occurring rumors across social media sites in Lebanon between 15 December 2021 and 15 January 2022. In total, 47 rumors were collected, and 3 high risk rumors were selected for this bulletin. The featured rumors fall under the three recurring themes of Treatment/Cure, Transmission, and Vaccine Efficacy. Data was collected in Arabic from Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram, in addition to private groups and accounts that have a relatively high user engagement.

COVID-19 SITUATION & SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT IN LEBANON

Since January 2020, there have been 801,801 cumulative cases of COVID-19 in Lebanon in addition to 9,338 deaths. (2) Assuming every person needs at least 2 vaccine doses, close to 33% of the country's 6m population is fully vaccinated so far. (3) Meanwhile, Syrian refugees represent only 8.5% of those who received at least one vaccine dose, while other non-Lebanese – including migrant workers and Palestinian refugees – represent close to 7%. (4) The number of Syrian refugees who received at least one vaccine dose (396,792) only represents 26.5% of the total population, considering that Lebanon currently hosts over 1.5 million Syrian refugees. During the reporting period, there have been 7,057 new cases and 13 new deaths in Lebanon, while ICU bed capacity has reached 78%. (5) Omicron cases were identified and confirmed in the country since December 2021, with high transmission rates but mild to moderate symptoms being observed so far. According to WHO, Lebanon is currently situated at Level 4 of community transmission – meaning a very high incidence of locally acquired widely dispersed cases – with the prevalence of COVID-19 becoming more dominant among the 20-29 age group. (6) High vigilance continues to be recommended with renewed focus by public health authorities on social distancing measures and increased vaccine coverage. Some promising improvements have been made regarding vaccination, as more than 3,600,000 people have registered on the IMPACT platform with more than 2,492,010 having received the first dose, 2,002,877 having received the second dose and 354,156 having received their third booster shot. (7) The third booster shot is now available to anyone over 12 years of age who has received their second vaccine dose at least five months ago.

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RUMOR #1

"According to a statement by the Ministry of Health, Lebanon has become the first country in the world to perform an autopsy (post-mortem) of a Covid-19 corpse… It was discovered that Covid-19 does not exist as a virus, but rather as a bacterium that has been exposed to radiation and causes human death by causing clotting in the blood. After learning about this research, the Lebanese Ministry of Health immediately changed the Covid-19 treatment protocol and gave aspirin to positive patients… Doctors in Lebanon explained the method of treatment and confirmed that the disease is a global hoax. It is nothing but intravascular coagulation (blood clots) and can be treated with anti-inflammatory antibiotic tablets and anticoagulants such as aspirin. Share this information with your family, neighbors, acquaintances, friends, and colleagues. Only people with very low immunity should be careful…"

Spread in Arabic through multiple WhatsApp groups with an estimated reach of 1000.

Facts:

- COVID-19 is caused by a virus, not a bacterium.
- Blot clots often result from viruses that trigger inflammation such as COVID-19 which can lead to inflammation in the lungs for example. (8)

- Aspirin is used globally to reduce pain and inflammation; however, a UK study suggests that although aspirin was associated with a slight increase in the likelihood of being discharged alive, this does not seem to be sufficient to justify its widespread use for patients hospitalized with COVID-19. (9)

- Although COVID-19 can also impact health people of all ages, people suffering from pre-existing conditions such as non-communicable diseases or compromised immune systems are more likely to develop serious symptoms and require hospitalization.

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Recommendations
for community health workers, volunteers and outreach teams:

- Since the source of this rumor is a WhatsApp chat, remind communities to identify the source of the news outlet and compare the information presented across different sources to ensure that it is based on scientific facts.

- Remind communities not to rely on Facebook groups, Twitter accounts or WhatsApp groups on COVID-19. Instead, make sure any news they acquire from social media is confirmed by a trusted source such as the World Health Organization.

- Advise communities to always consult their doctor before taking any medications to avoid unexpected consequences, especially if they already suffer from pre-existing conditions.

Useful resources for communities:

▶ If a positive case in the community needs medical assistance, you can contact the Medical Consultations and Oxygen Machine Request for COVID-19 Patients Hotline at 1760.

▶ If a positive case is identified in the community and needs hospitalization, you can contact the Lebanese Red Cross Emergency Hotline at 140 to request for an ambulance service.

▶ Anyone can register for the vaccine on the MOPH's Vaccine Registration Website (covax.moph.gov.lb). If you need assistance to register, you can also contact the Vaccine Registration Hotline at 1214.

▶ You can also visit the LRC's Covid-19 Hub for more info (https://covid-19 lebaneseredcross.hub.arcgis.com)

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RUMOR #2

"You can get Covid just by visiting the pharmacy"

Shared with unclear video of crowd thought to be gathered in front of pharmacy in Arabic on Twitter with more than 50 Likes and 10 shares

Facts:

- Pharmacies are obliged to abide by MOPH imposed public health safety measures, which means that both staff and customers would be required to wear a mask when present inside the store.

- If customers take the necessary precautions – wearing a mask and social distancing from other customers in addition to washing hands after visiting any public place – it is unlikely that they would contract the virus.

- Some pharmacies have also implemented drive through or delivery services which minimize contact.

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Recommendations
for community health workers, volunteers and outreach teams:

- When visiting a pharmacy, it is advised to take the same social distancing and preventive measures – such as wearing a mask – that people are recommended to abide by in any public or crowded place.

- Patients should not avoid seeking professional medical advice or delay the purchase of prescribed medications out of fear of contracting COVID-19 as this would negatively impact their health in the long term.

- Make sure communities understand their rights to access health care: According to newly released guidelines, documents accepted at health facilities for Syrian refugees include: Syrian identity card (even if expired), national Syrian passport (even if expired), UNHCR refugee certificate (even if expired), individual civil extract, family booklet, birth certificate registered in Lebanon, or E-document that can be provided by UNHCR if any of the other documents are not available.

Useful resources for communities:

▶ If the MOPH's COVID-19 measures are not being respected at a particular pharmacy, the establishment can be reported to the MOPH's COVID-19 Hotline at 1787.

▶ You can visit this website for more information on health coverage for Syrian refugees (https://refugees-lebanon.org/uploads/poster/poster_ar_161425861739.pdf)

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RUMOR #3

"An anti-vaccine rally is taking place tomorrow in Beirut to protest what is being referred to as "compulsory vaccination". This is likely in reference to the recent decision that requires public sector employees to show proof or vaccination or a negative PCR test twice a week. While PCR test are expensive, vaccines are free and offered in hospitals and medical centers around Lebanon… Despite the fact that the vaccine has not been proven to prevent COVID-19, it has greatly reduced its impact on people's health. Vaccinated individuals who contract COVID-19 are experiencing very mild symptoms in comparison to those who are unvaccinated…"

-- Shared in English on Instagram with 899 Likes

Facts:

- According to WHO, the vaccine has reduced COVID-19 symptoms, hospitalization, and deaths, which also eases the pressure off the healthcare sector. (10)

- The Government of Lebanon has not made COVID-19 vaccination compulsory. Nevertheless, it is requesting public sector workers to provide vaccine certificate or regular PCR tests which can become costly in the long term.

Recommendations
for community health workers, volunteers and outreach teams:

- Show communities examples of countries reaching herd immunity and demonstrate how vaccines for COVID-19 are needed to slow down and eventually halt the spread of the virus, when combined with effective testing and continuation of prevention measures such as social distancing.

- The Lebanese Constitution guarantees freedom of expression "within the limits established by law" and in turn, the right to protest should also be respected. Nevertheless, it is important to also speak out when misinformation is being spread in protest movements by relying on scientific facts and findings that are accurate instead, or referring protestors/anyone affected by vaccine hesitancy to health care professionals and awareness actors.

Useful resources for communities:

- The COVID-19 vaccine is not mandatory in Lebanon for any group; however it IS available to most residents in the country:

Vaccine Eligibility in Lebanon as of January 2022	
Pfizer first and second doses:	
• DoB 1976 and under (45 years old and above) *Also eligible for walk-in	• DoB Between 1992 and 2003 (between 12 and 18 years old) within 48hours from registering on Impact platform *Not yet eligible for walk-in
AstraZeneca first and second doses:	
• DoB Between 1977 and 2002 (between 19 and 44 years old), in addition to workers of the educational and press sectors. *Also eligible for walk-in	
The third booster shot is now available to anyone above 12 years of age who received their second dose at least 5 months ago. Registering on the Impact platform is needed in advance.	

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How Do We Define Risk at Internews

Risk is measured by Rooted In Trust (RiT) data analysts, information managers, and social media monitors based on a range of factors including:

a) Cultural relevance

b) Timing

c) Online engagement

d) The "believability" of a rumor, and most importantly...

e) The potential negative impact a rumor may have on the health,

well-being, and safety of local communities or service providers.

High Risk

A rumor that is very likely be believed among the larger community with potentially severe impacts resulting in serious harm to an individual or group such as inciting violence or creating widespread fear or panic. High risk rumors may encourage avoidance of testing and treatment, or even harm towards health workers and other service providers.

Medium Risk

A rumor that has the potential to be believed among the larger community which poses moderate negative impacts to a community or an individual's health, well-being, or safety. Medium risk rumors may also have a moderate impact on health-seeking behaviors.

Low Risk

A rumor that is either unlikely to be believed among the community or which would cause very minimal negative repercussions if it is spread.

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Where can I find the facts

For fact-checked information about the COVID-19 vaccine please refer to the official FAQ published by the MOPH, MOI, WHO and UNICEF. (11) Keep in mind that social media platforms – such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp – allow anyone to publish their thoughts or share their stories with the world. This has led to a flood of fake news and the spread of rumors and misinformation.

Always take into consideration the below when reading news or any type of information on social media:

✅ Identify the source;

✅ Check if other credible and trustworthy news outlets are reporting on the same story;

✅ Double check if the WHO, MOPH or other credible health authorities have corroborated the information;

✅ Compare the information presented across different sources to ensure the story is based on scientific facts;

✅ Do not rely solely on Facebook groups, Twitter accounts or WhatsApp groups for news on COVID-19. Instead, make sure any news you hear on social media is confirmed by trusted sources such as the WHO;

✅ Keep in mind that videos and photos can be easily manipulated and would need to be fact-checked too;

✅ Pay attention to the date and origin of the story in order to identify whether it is still valid at this point in time.

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Sources

1. https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/RiT_Findings_Recommendations_Lebanon-English.pdf

2. WHO Daily COVID-19 Update of 14 January 2022

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5. WHO Daily COVID-19 Update of 14 January 2022

6. WHO Daily COVID-19 Update of 14 January 2022

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8. https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/what-does-covid-do-to-your-blood

9. https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/aspirin-does-not-improve-survival-covid-19-patients-uk-study-2021-06-08/

10. https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

11. https://www.moph.gov.lb/userfiles/files/Prevention/COVID-19%20Vaccine/COVID-19%20Vaccine%20FAQ%20-%20EN%20-22-3-%202021.pdf

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