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CONFIDENCE AT HALF-MAST
Information at the heart
of the COVID-19 crisis in CAR

AN INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT BY INTERNEWS

MARCH 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the socio-political crisis of 2012, the Central African Republic has been facing a complex situation with very serious humanitarian consequences. More than 2.8 million people are in need of humanitarian aid, including 10,000 refugees and asylum seekers and 641,000 internally displaced persons. This political-military crisis was aggravated in 2020 by the COVID-19 health crisis. According to the last figures published on February 28, 2021, the pandemic has affected 5004 people (positive cases), of whom 63 are deceased and 4920 were cured. These figures remain subject to caution given the weakness of information systems. The socio-economic impact of managing COVID-19 is also far more significant than these statistics suggest.

The objective of this report is to propose an analysis of the information environment in the Central African Republic, and to observe how the population interacts with it. This work takes place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, but also extends to past trends.

We will explore the demand for information from targeted communities - access, need and use, information flow - as well as the analysis of trust and influence among the public. The community's requests for information were the subject of qualitative and quantitative fieldwork carried out mainly in the localities of Bangui, Paoua, Bozoum, Berberati, Sibut, Bambari, Ndélé, Kaga-Bandoro and Rafaï. We opted to analyze the people's views and practices based on the data collected during our interviews, rather than a comprehensive analysis of all information channels. We are thus addressing in depth the dissemination of information by the media and other national information providers. More superficially, we are addressing the role of international media and the consumption of information via online media. ●●●

SUPPLY SIDE: SIGNIFICANT GEOGRAPHICAL DISPARITY

Chronic poverty is an obstacle in media development, particularly for the written press and television. In the Central African Republic, the mass media, which is also the least expensive, remains the radio. Access to information is characterized by a significant geographical disparity between the capital, which accommodates nearly all media, and the provinces, which only have access to community radio stations.

The Central African media sector has suffered since the first hours of the socio-political crisis of 2012. Community radio stations, the only formal access to information channels in the provinces, have been the target of looting. Some of them have been reduced to silence; others are struggling to recover. At the date of this report, we can count **30 community radio stations** in total, with **9 in Bangui** and **21 in the provinces.**

> "Besides radio, newspapers do not exist in our provinces, and the internet is not accessible or affordable for everyone"
>
> **KEY MEDIA INFORMANT**

The public national media, fully funded by the state, has all the necessary equipment to collect, process and disseminate information to the population. Private media, funded by partners in the long-term, also have all the means necessary to carry out their mission.

LIMITED ACCESS TO INFORMATION SOURCES FOR JOURNALISTS

However, journalists from both the private and public sectors complain about how difficult it is to interview authorized health care personnel or to invite them into the studio, due to the timidity of institutional and community sector stakeholders towards the media.

The Freedom of Communication Act has just been adopted by the National Assembly, on November 30, 2020, after being developed with the expertise of HCC, the OIF and Internews. As the first Press freedom act in the Central African Republic, this law represents an important step for the national media landscape.

The primary sources of information for statistics on COVID-19 are the Ministry of Health and the WHO. Even though these figures are contested by the vast majority of the population, they have no choice but to accept them. Not being able to verify figures or access medical sources, some media outlets have focused on producing content to mitigate the rumors circulating within the community in order to shed light on the reality of the disease. These include, in particular, RJDH supported by Internews, Radio Ndeke-luka, backed by the Hirondelle Foundation, and ●●●

●●● Le Citoyen (The Citizen), an online newspaper fighting against rumors created by the citizens themselves. More traditional outreach activities were broadcast by radio stations that are part of a collaboration, a group of twenty-five radio stations that work together to produce Pandemic Awareness content (broadcasts fighting against COVID-19, skits, songs, etc.)

Although the media think they are meeting the public's need for information, communities are complaining of being under-informed (see below) in spite of the proposed resources. Too often this is the result of a vertical vision of communication which leads to a lack of two-way listening and communication. Additionally, a very large majority of information is produced in a centralized manner in Bangui, and therefore lacks local relevance for those who live further out from the center.

DEMAND SIDE: A POPULATION THAT CONSIDERS ITSELF UNDER-INFORMED

In general, the Central African population considers itself under-informed: more than half of those surveyed say that the information that they have access to "does not meet any" or "meets very few" of their needs. Less than 10% say that they have all of the information that they need. ●●●

The same is true of the various issues linked to COVID-19, especially the means of infection and prevention measures. According to our studies, 54% of those surveyed say they need more information on the prevention of this disease. Also, aside from information specific to COVID-19, most people interviewed either believe that the information received only meets their needs basically (25%), minimally (32%) or not at all (19%). More than three quarters of respondents therefore don't consider their information needs to be met.

According to the surveys conducted with vulnerable groups, which are mainly internally displaced persons, refugees and ethnic minorities, 58%, 60% and 64% state, respectively, that they are in need of more information about the prevention of COVID-19, while 78% of IDPs complain that the information they receive covers only the most basic aspects of their needs. These shortcomings may be related to a failure to comply with protective measures in the community, especially physical distancing and wearing masks.

UNMET HEALTH INFORMATION NEEDS

Based on the focus groups and various meeting sessions held with our key informants in Bangui and several provincial localities, it would appear that the same areas of significant concern and general information needs are highlighted by various groups in the Central African Republic. We note that the most listed needs are in relation to health (what is the positive case rate? how many patients have recovered? how is the disease treated? how is it prevented naturally?), followed by education (when will classes start again? will exams take place? how will the education system be organized in the years to come?). The other areas fall far behind these two key concerns: employment (an increase in the rate of unemployment after downsizing in the private sector due to COVID-19, cancelling or postponing certain recruitment), local news and problems caused by the lockdown (excessive workload for women, family disputes, debt caused by the head of the household being unemployed) and finally, leisure activities (will sports resume some day?).

ONGOING RUMORS

Radio is still the most used information channel by the public: 60% of respondents use it regularly or frequently to find out about COVID-19. Religious leaders, television, social networks and word of mouth follow. This percentage is slightly higher among internally displaced persons (64%). Despite efforts from the media and fact-checkers to combat disinformation among the public, rumors circulate on an ongoing basis about the treatment of COVID-19 (drinking black coffee or ginger can cure COVID-19) and the vaccine (the vaccine that is ●●●

" We trust more information coming from our religious leaders, because they are men of faith and servants of God ; so they can't lie to us."

DISCUSSION GROUPS

●●● earmarked for Africa will be a deadlier version than COVID-19 and aims to wipe out the African population). These rumors spread very quickly in the community, where a significant proportion has not had access to education.

The fieldwork shows that only 36% of participants are concerned about the level of disinformation in their locality. However, they do recognize the difficulty in distinguishing between the truths and falsehoods surrounding COVID-19: less than half of the respondents feel they are able to make this distinction on a "regular" or "routine" basis. Tests carried out to review rumor detection confirm this feeling: only 44% of respondents were able to identify more than half of the 6 rumors that were shown and 20% thought that all or almost all (five out of 6) were proven facts.

WANING TRUST

The government is the only body authorized, through the Ministry of Health, to broadcast official figures for COVID-19 cases in the Central African territory. However, the people remain wary about these figures, just as they appear to be relatively wary about all channels as a whole. The telephone survey conducted with the Central African people reveals a low level of overall trust: almost 40% of Central Africans say they have no or very little trust in community media, local authorities (38%), community leaders, friends and family (40%) for learning about COVID-19. The mistrust of all sources may be considered a consequence of the various socio-political crises endured by Central African people in recent years. The overall mistrust, even within families, appears to be a foundational element of the country's social and informational landscape.

According to our fieldwork, when it comes to information related to COVID-19, more than half of the population puts its trust in religious leaders first of all (52% has "absolute" or "high" trust in them), followed by healthcare workers (44%) and international media. Despite their closeness, community media and community leaders come in behind them with a trust level of just 31%.

Closeness is therefore not a trust factor in the Central African Republic. The only channel that continues to have the trust of one out of every two Central African people is that of religious leaders, messengers of God, who are regarded as unbiased and in tune with everyone.

THE ROLE OF HUMANITARIAN AID WORKERS IN THE PANDEMIC'S INFORMATIONAL CONTEXT

By already being present on the Central African territory, humanitarian organizations swung into action upon the emergence of the first COVID-19 cases in the country. After an initial period of hesitation, marked by a lack of coordination in its response, the government created a crisis management committee comprising of State officials and government members to begin with, joined then by NGOs and followed by media representatives. It was necessary to strengthen the capacities of journalists and media providers in various ●●●

●●● topics relating to this disease in order for them to effectively fulfill their role in COVID-19 communication. This is how 50 journalists participated in two awareness-raising sessions on the coronavirus disease, which was a joint activity between the Ministry of Health and the United Nations. At the same time, 118 community volunteers or communication focal points were briefed on the key messages for preventing COVID-19 by the crisis committee for communication and community engagement, in collaboration with the NGO Première Urgence. They were subsequently deployed within communities for conducting awareness-raising activities, community engagement and compiling information in the community. To do this, they work in collaboration with local surveillance teams, created to detect and report cases and suspected deaths, to keep an eye on mild and moderate cases, to refer serious cases and track the contacts of infected people.

Despite the efforts of humanitarian actors in their response to COVID-19, messages about the pandemic have not reached all regions of the country, because of a lack of access brought about by the difficult security environment. ●●●

●●●

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

All the actors within the ecosystem have a role to play to improve the quality of information and people's access to this information. The key recommendations from our research are the following. Chapter 7 provides a detailed list for each of the actors as well as concrete ways to implement them. Chapter VII provides a detailed list for each of the actors as well as concrete ways to implement them.

FOR THE MEDIA (AND THEIR FINANCIAL AND TECHNICAL PARTNERS)

■ Improve the availability of COVID-19 information in local languages and/or languages spoken by the targeted audience - particularly by further highlighting shared content and co-produced content

■ Develop formats allowing two-way communication, in order to give communities more of a voice and to collect accounts on their personal experiences but also on their information needs (participative radio programs, street interviews...)

FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

■ The heart of messages on preventative measures should include the daily reality people experience – in particular, take into account the problems of access to soap and water in order to propose realistic preventative measures

■ Collaborate more closely with religious leaders and health care workers, reliable sources of information - particularly providing them with relevant, up-to-date and useful information on COVID-19 so that they can relay this information in their own way to communities

■ Organize better information sharing with the national and local media (via focal persons authorized by the media, or providing them with experts - taking into account language constraints - and by more open sharing than press conferences or pre-prepared messages)

■ Improve the mechanisms of direct exchange with communities (and with more vulnerable people in particular), particularly in order to gain a better understanding of their information needs, while taking advantage of other activities to organize talks

FOR GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES AND ARMED GROUPS

■ Promote the communication of information that is verified and as transparent as possible in order to rebuild the trust lost during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (open access to COVID-19 data and improve and organize access to information for the media at a central, provincial and local level)

■ For armed groups: allow humanitarian actors, the media and development partners free access to the whole country

FOR COMMUNITIES AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

■ Note that young people seem more competent at identifying rumors and verifying information and because of this give them a more central role in sharing information within the community

■ For religious leaders: note the responsibility they have due to the trust placed in them by communities and make a proactive effort to learn about COVID-19 and to share good quality information with communities ●

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

- **ACAP**
Central African Republic Press Agency

- **AFC**
Association of Fact Checking

- **ACF**
Action Against Hunger

- **AFPC**
Association of Women Communication Professionals

- **ARC**
Community Radio Association

- **CHF**
Common Humanitarian Fund

- **COMPCA**
Central African Republic Consortium of Private Media

- **CRS**
Catholic Relief Service

- **GEPPIC**
Central African Republic Association of Private and Independent Press Publishers

- **HCC**
High Council for Communication

- **HCR**
Office of the High Commission for Refugees

- **IRI**
International Republican Institute

- **LNC**
The New Central African Republic

- **MdM**
Doctors of the World

- **MINUSCA**
United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic

- **MSF**
Doctors Without Borders

- **OCHA**
Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

- **OIM**
International Organization for Migration

- **OMCA**
Observatory of Central African Republic Media

- **OMS (WHO)**
World Health Organization

- **NGO**
Non-Governmental Organization

- **RCA (CAR)**
Central African Republic

- **RJDH**
Network of Journalists for Human Rights

- **RMCC**
Network of Community Media in Central African Republic

- **RNT**
Digital Terrestrial Radio

- **SFCG**
Search For Common Ground

- **TNT**
Digital Terrestrial Television

- **TVCA**
Central African Republic Television

- **UJCA**
Union of Central African Republic Journalists

- **UNOPS**
United Nations Office for Project Support Services

I. RESEARCH SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

1.1. RESEARCH SCOPE AND MAIN 'BUILDING BLOCKS' OF THE IEA

LEGEND
- ● Adressed
- ● Partially adressed
- ○ Not adressed in this IEA

IEA

This Analyse de l'Ecosystème d'Information (AEI) (Analysis of the Information Ecosystem) aims to better understand the information environment around the COVID-19 pandemic in the Central African Republic and, in particular, how communities access information, how they perceive this information and whether it influences their beliefs and behavior. It is the result of research work, individual interviews and a community survey, all carried out within the general population, while paying attention to the most vulnerable groups (women, victims of the political crisis and conflicts, displaced persons).

GEOGRAPHIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC COVERAGE

| Full country | Targeted geographic area | Entire population | Focus on specific population group |

RESEARCH THEMATIC SCOPE

INFORMATION SUPPLY

INFORMATION PROVIDERS
- National media
- Digital media and platforms
- Community media
- Non media information providers
- Media capacity and quality assessment
- Environment *(economic, political and regulatory)*

DYNAMICS AND INTERACTIONS
- Trust (trusted channels, key drivers of trust)
- Sharing and gatekeeping
- Influence and impact of information
- Linkages between different actors of the information ecosystem

INFORMATION DEMAND
- Information needs and gaps
- Preferred channels and sources
- Barriers to information access
- Information needs by humanitarians and other stakeolders

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

| Desk research (information supply) | Interviews with key Informants and community members | Listening groups / focus groups in the community | Quantitative survey (sample > 100) | Research led by the community (research assistants from the community) | Continuous feedback by panels of experts and community | Results dissemination and feedback from communities |

1.2. PHILOSOPHY AND METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

nternews works on behalf of communities who often live in complex and varied information environments, sometimes full of risk and confusion, which come with their own set of challenges - and choices - concerning the information that people can access, trust, share with others, and which influences their behavior and decisions. Internews conducts Information Ecosystem Assessments (IEA) in order to better understand information needs and gaps, the most heavily used sources and channels, and the dynamics of information access and usage.

These IEAs offer us an analytical framework to better understand all the different aspects of the relationship between those who consume information and those that produce it. Internews devises unique projects, adapted to the habits, needs and preferences of the communities with whom we work, because of our acute understanding of these interactions.

The research work behind our Information Ecosystem Assessments is based on four main principles:

1- Putting the community at the heart of the research – Internews seeks to be at the heart of the communities with whom we work. When it comes to our IEAs, we ensure that the research work is led by the community wherever possible: we recruit our research assistants and interviewers from the community and we rely on its other members to share the results widely and gather feedback. When circumstances do not allow it (for instance during the COVID-19 pandemic), we increase our efforts to collect feedback from members and representatives of the community as an alternative.

2- Starting with practices and methods and not a theoretical framework - We aim to develop a holistic understanding of communities' information practices. We consider the supply and demand in the broadest terms possible without limiting ourselves to the spheres of media and traditional actors. The scope of our analysis is defined by information consumption habits and not by predefined analytical categories. We strive to understand both commonly shared practices and the needs and practices specific to certain groups within the community, in particular those who are most vulnerable.

3- Combing the use of qualitative and quantitative data – Our research combines different types of data to better understand the supply and demand of information, as well as the interactions between the two that produce a shifting ecosystem. We go beyond traditional audience studies and mapping. Our IEAs rely in particular on a largely qualitative approach: to understand practices related to information, we must develop an intimate understanding of target groups in order to then define how best to support their access to quality information. ●●●

●●● **4- Combining research and action - ** We do not consider an IEA to be an end in itself. More often than not, it represents the first stage for conceiving a new project and it enables us to gain a full contextual understanding and to build a trusting relationship with the communities with whom we want to work. Our Information Ecosystem Assessments always produce concrete recommendations and actions, whether they be our own, those carried out by the community, or those that are implemented by our partners and other stakeholders at the heart of the ecosystem.

In their perpetual quest to understand the world around them, human beings consume, produce and interact with the production of information in thousands of different ways which create information ecosystems with dynamic and complex internal systems that are sometimes intriguing and hard to predict. ●

1.3 COLLECTION OF DATA AND SAMPLES

Source : Internews qualitative and quantitative survey

INFORMANTS	COLLECTION TOOLS	SAMPLE	SAMPLE DESCRIPTION
International humanitarian actors	Interviews	3 4	UNICEF, Search for Common Ground, OCHA
National authorities	Interviews	1	Ministry of Communications
Regional authorities		n/a	
Media sector	Interviews	5	Réseau des Journalistes pour les Droits de l'Homme (RJDH) (Network for Human Rights Journalists), RMCC, Radio Voix de Mbomou (Voice of Mbomou Radio)
			Radio Centrafrique (Central African Radio) and Radio Voix de la Pende (Voice of the Pende Radio)
Civil Society Organizations	Interviews	4	ICASEES
			Virologist specializing in bacterial virology
			President of the mutual aid group for victims
			Coordinator for the Bambari IDP site Aviation
Community	Quantitative surveys	477	In-person survey of households in Bangui
		460	Telephone survey of households in the Central African Republic (CAR)
	Focus groups	6	4th Arrondissement Widows' Group
			Collective of War Victims' Groups in Central Africa
			5th Arrondissement Local Youth Council
			8th Arrondissement Local Youth Council
			Group for Internally Displaced People (Berberati)
			Youth and Women's Group of Kemo

1.4 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic and socio-economic crisis have considerably limited our work on the ground. The government's message for the whole country to go into lockdown has not, however, been respected by everyone in the Central African Republic. We have been able to hold interviews and discussion groups in the capital and in certain localities, but not in others due to the risk factors involved. Bear in mind that two thirds of Central African territory is currently under the control of, or threatened by, armed groups. For example, of the four discussion groups that should have been held by our partners inside the country, only half could take place. A considerable number of the key informants with whom we have had contact have had trouble expressing themselves freely: due to the country's situation, many fear speaking up and saying what they should not, particularly those involved with government institutions. ●●●

●●● The electoral campaign period has also been an obstacle for our research because a lot of key informers, especially those from information providers, have been preoccupied with the elections to the detriment of COVID-19. This has led to continued postponements of meetings and has considerably slowed down the progress of our work.

Moreover, access to displaced populations for carrying out interviews and focus groups turned out to be more complicated than expected, and these activities could only be partially carried out.

Finally, we also regret the refusal to participate in field surveys on the part of certain populations who either demanded financial compensation in return for their answers, or refused outright, with them feeling that our work was carried out solely to serve our own interests, and not theirs. ●

2.1 COUNTRY PROFILE

Press related index		CAR
	Civil liberties *(including freedom of expression)*	6/60
	Press freedom index 2019 *(out of 180 countries)*	145
	Press freedom index 2020 *(out of 180 countries)*	↑ 132

* Source civil rights: freedom house global freedom status
** Source index ranking: Reporters without borders

Freedom on the net		
	Obstacles to access *(0=Worst; 25=Best)*	No data available
	Limits on content *(0=Worst; 35=Best)*	
	Violation of user rights *(0=Worst; 30=Best)*	
	Freedom on the net score 2018	
	Freedom on the net score 2019	

* Source: Freedom house freedom on the net

ICTs		
	Internet penetration rate	4.3%
	Mobile phone penetration	27.7%

* Source: United Nations Human Development Reports

Key demographic, social and political factors		
	Total population (millions)	4.9
	Population in multidimensional poverty (% headcount)	79.36%
	Human development index (rank)	0.381 (188)
	Rural population (%)	59%
	Illiteracy rate**	63%
	Internally dispaced person (thousands)	641.00
	Elections	2020

* Source: United Nations Human Development Reports
** Literacy is understood as the ability to read and write a short simple statement of everyday life

COVID-19		
	Confirmed cases	5004
	Deaths	63

* Source: https://www.worldmeters.info/coronavirus/country/central-african-republic/

LEGEND

● Not free   ● Partly free

The Central African Republic has been facing a socio-political crisis since 2012. When the COVID-19 outbreak began, the country was just emerging from a long period of civil unrest that resulted in an estimated 10,000 refugees and asylum seekers in CAR, and 641,000 internally displaced persons[1]. The Central African Republic (CAR) is one of the poorest countries in the world, with more than60% of the population living in poverty. For decades the government has been unstable, with repeated military coup d'états. After a temporary decline in violence, conflicts resurfaced in 2016, escalated throughout 2017, and the situation continues to deteriorate. According to OCHA, "over a million Central Africans have fled their homes and 2.8 million people, more than half the population, are in need of urgent humanitarian aid". ●●●

●●● According to the UNHCR, 2019 was marked by a slight decrease in the population of refugees, internally displaced persons and asylum seekers in CAR, with a total of 814,587 people, the vast majority of whom were internally displaced (82.2%). A lot of refugees from Central Africa are fleeing to neighboring countries. OCHA estimates that since 2013, 546,000 refugees from Central Africa have been registered in Chad, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo and Congo.

The presidential and legislative elections of December 27, 2020 could not be held throughout the territory because of a new politico-military crisis in the country following the refusal by the Constitutional Court to validate the candidacy of the former president, François Bozizé. The Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC), made up of former Seleka and ex-anti-Balaka members, was then formed with the aim of destabilizing the electoral process. Despite this, the elections were held on schedule and resulted in the re-election for a new five-year term of sitting president, Faustin Archange Touadera, with 53.92% of the vote. Despite the liberation of some towns in the country occupied by the CPC, under attacks from the national army and its allies, other towns remain under its control.

COVID-19

Endemic poverty, continuous armed violence and weak governance have contributed to a dire health situation, likely to be exacerbated by the additional stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. If the spread were to grow any further, the already weak health system risked being totally destabilized. Long distances to travel to clinics, the lack of clear public health messages in local languages, and continued unrest and population displacement were factors that increased the vulnerabilities of people displaced by the conflicts. In addition to being threatened by the disease, a large portion of the population is also threatened by its social and economic consequences.
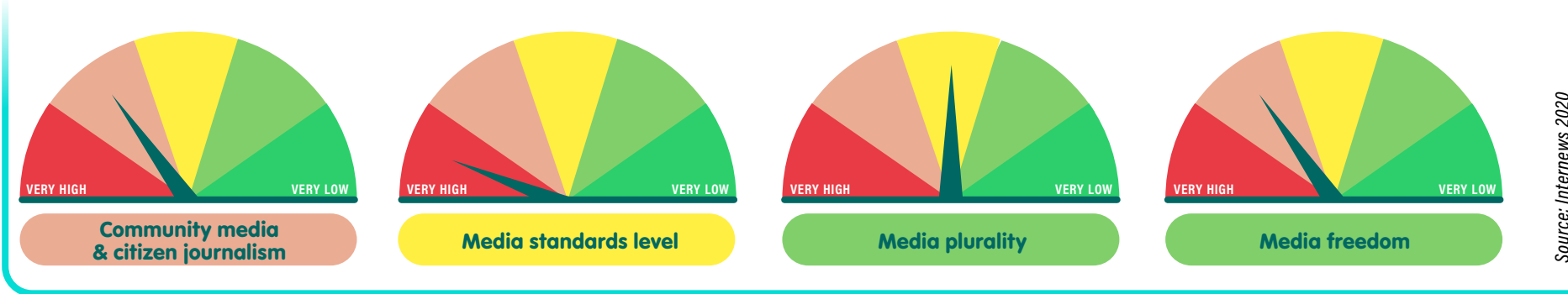
Among the aggravating factors are the limited access to water, the lack of health infrastructure, and the weak presence of national authorities to enforce preventive measures. The extremely limited medical infrastructure and human resources could be overwhelmed if the epidemic were to spread to several regions and, as a result, they would be unable to provide health services and treatment for those who are severely affected. Among those most at risk are the 641,000 internally displaced people, refugees, children, women, people with disabilities and the elderly[2].

The CAR Ministry of Health website published COVID-19 pandemic newsletters summarizing the data on deaths and cases, including categorizing these statistics by sex. **These newsletters have not been published since mid-June and nothing can be found about the disease on the websites belonging to the Prime Minister's Office or the President.** ●

III. INFORMATION SUPPLY: information providers landscape review

(how information is produced and distributed)

| Community media & citizen journalism | Media standards level | Media plurality | Media freedom |

VERY HIGH ... VERY LOW (×4)

Source: Internews 2020

3.1. MEDIA PROVIDERS

The media landscape in Central Africa is characteristic of a poor country. Chronic poverty constrains the development of media and prevents the development of more expensive media, such as the written press (also read little due to illiteracy) and television. In the CAR, the most accessible and cheapest mass medium is radio. Apart from community radio stations in the provinces, all the other media is located in Bangui.

Whether in the provinces or in the capital, the majority of the programs offered are broadcast in Sango or in French. However, in the inland regions, there are some broadcasts in other local languages. There are several types of radio stations in the country, namely community radio, national public radio (owned by the state), confessional (religious) radio and private radio, supported either by international NGOs or by individuals.

MAIN PLAYERS AND SOURCES OF FUNDING

The main players in radio, print, television and online media are as follows[3] :

■ **Radio:** RJDH (100.5 FM), Ndeke-luka (100.9 FM), the national public radio: Radio Centrafrique (106.9 FM), Bangui FM (100.3 FM), Guira FM (93.3 FM), Lengo Songo, radio SEWA, Radio notre dame, the voice of the gospel, as well as 27 community radio stations and 4 international channels such as RFI, BBC WS Africa, China International radio on 97.6 FM in Bangui.

■ **Written Press:** Hirondelle, Sangonet, Centrafrique presse, Journal de Bangui, Le Confident, Le Démocrate, Le Citoyen, Media Plus, Agora...

■ **Television:** TVCA, Vision 4, the Canal+ channels and the Startimes package

■ **Digital Media:** RJDH, ACAP, LNC, Corbeau-news, Radio-Ndeke-luka... and the main social networks as ways to access information. ●●●

●●● Radio Centrafrique, ACAP and TVCA are media that are financed by the state, whereas Radio Ndeke-Luka is financed by Fondation Hirondelle, Guira FM by the United Nations mission, Radio Lengo Songo by Russia, and RJDH by Internews with the support of USAID.

The community radio stations in our provinces were set up by the state, but after the socio-political crises they received a range of donations, aid and financing from NGOs and humanitarian organizations for their restoration. Religious radio stations are financed by individuals or by religious organizations. These include, for example, Voix de l'Evangile radio, Notre Dame radio and Alt life FM radio. All these media also benefit from advertising revenue, at variable levels.

The High Council of Communication allocates spectra and authorization permits to the media. The other equipment (transmitters and energy source) is financed by the state when it comes to national public channels, and by partners, individuals or humanitarian organizations for private and community media.

MOST INFLUENTIAL MEDIA

The opinions of various key informants and the community differ regarding this question. However, in Bangui, the majority tend to mention Ndeke-luka radio, Radio Centrafrique, Bangui FM radio, and Guira FM radio.

In the provinces, we can highlight Guira FM radio, which broadcasts in 12 prefectures, as well as community radio stations, which each broadcast in a specific location by providing or relaying information collected by partner media. Internally displaced persons in Bambari and Berberati have confirmed this during various discussions with them. ●●●

●●● Regarding the audience of various media, data is scarce and unreliable. A recent study[4] carried out by REACH-MSNA suggests some audience estimates and a mapping of influential media. However, several experts agree that these results should be qualified, to underline the difficulties of obtaining reliable figures and to call for a large-scale audience survey. That being said, these results highlight that the influence of radio varies according to location and coverage. These figures serve to underline the variations from one location to the other, and the great diversity of sources favored by communities. For example, in Bangui, 42% of the population are reported to listen to Ndeke-luka radio, a private station financed by Fondation Hirondelle, followed by Bangui-FM (20%) and the national public radio, Radio Centrafrique (15%). In the Haut-Mbomou prefecture, 51% listen to the community radio station Berassa, 32% to the UN station Guira FM and 13% to Nedke-luka radio. In Ouham prefecture, the community station Voix

de l'Ouham is reported to be the most listened to (22%), followed by Ndeke-luka radio (18%) and Guira FM radio (15%). According to experts who took part in this process, certain media have a small audience but a lot of influence because they are followed by important leaders of the country. The reach of the transmitter and the production quality are also important factors in determining the influence of a medium. ●

3.2 DIGITAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The digital media landscape is made up primarily of online media and social networks. Over the last few years online news sites have multiplied. But the Internet network in the Central African Republic is still weak. Internet reach was at 4.3% and mobile phone reach at 27.7% in 2018, according to the United Nations Human Development Report website. Virtually non-existent in provincial towns, this resource rather serves the diaspora, the political and economic elite, the staff of international organizations, and universities. On sites for displaced persons, access to information through online media is very low. Due to lack of financial means, only 12% of internally displaced persons have access to online media and 15% to social networks. In terms of consumption habits, most of the key informants named the RJDH and Ndeke-Luka radio online press. It remains difficult to measure these audiences ●●●

●●●

with precision and very little public data is available on this subject.

ONLINE MEDIA

The telephone survey carried out in the country found that 13% of respondents say that they consult the online press for information regularly or often, while 14% consult it occasionally. In Bangui, where mobile networks are more accessible, almost a quarter of respondents say that they regularly look at online media and 28% use social networks (22% and 24% respectively use them occasionally). It should be kept in mind, however, that the methodology of this telephone survey would tend to overrepresent the most connected people.

Online national media that are available and popular include:

■ **Radio Ndeke-luka** (https://www.radiondekeluka.org/), private media financed by Fondation Hirondelle, which offers dual content: online and live audio from Bangui.

■ **RJDH, Réseau des Journalistes pour les Droits de l'Homme** ●●●

●●● (https://www.rjdhrca.org), private media supported by Internews and several humanitarian partners, which hosts a radio show called Fréquence RJDH and publishes a series of daily dispatches. It is used by many websites and some newspapers.

■ **ACAP, Agence centrafricaine de presse** (https://www.acap.cf), currently inaccessible at this address. According to one of its journalists interviewed in

September 2014 by RSF[5], working for a state press agency influences the coverage of the news, although he says there is less pressure than the national radio or television, due to having a more limited audience.

■ **LNC pour Le Nouveau Centrafrique** (https://lenouveaucentrafrique.info/) is a private media outlet run by the diaspora. The information comes from Bangui but it is not verified on a regular basis.

■ **Corbeau-news** (https://corbeaunews-centrafrique.com) is a private media outlet created in 2014 that is financed solely by its founder.

SOCIAL NETWORKS:

Social networks are used as transmission channels to relay information to the public. Field studies have shown that only 14% of the population use social networks regularly to get information about COVID-19. **We will mention just the most well-known ones,** namely **Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram.** They are used as viral functioning mass distribution channels, in order to reach a wider audience, not only at rural and urban levels, but also regional and national.

There are also lesser-known media outlets, such as: **JusticeInfo-Fondation Hirondelle, Centrafrik-info, Centrafrique presse, Infos Centrafrique, 236 News, Patara 236.** They post directly on social media through personalized pages and discussion groups. There are also many more pages and groups dedicated to posting and sharing information with the general public. Many individuals share or publish information, verified or not, on these social media platforms. ●

3.3 MEDIA AND JOURNALIST ASSOCIATIONS AND REGULATORS

The High Council for Communication issues, on behalf of the state, the publishing permits for the written and online media, the approvals and licenses for television and radio broadcasting. The conditions for issuing and withdrawing the permits, the approvals and licenses are set by regulations. The Council may offer their opinion regarding drafts of legal and regulatory texts that concern the communication bodies.

The journalists in Central Africa have set up a self-regulatory body. Its objective is to reinforce the rules of ethical and professional behavior in an effort to avoid incitement to tribal, religious and racial hatred, and to sanction all journalists in case of any proven professional misconduct. We are talking about the **Observatoire des Médias Centrafricains (OMCA)** (Central African Media Monitoring Center), founded in 2005. In case of significant violations of the Ethics Code, the OMCA media monitoring team will produce a detailed report for the board. The board may then decide to issue a warning or a sanction against the guilty party, or even send the file directly to HCC if there is a clear breach of the Freedom of Communications Act. ●●●

••• The HCC operates all over the world. OMCA faces a lot of difficulties and is struggling to fully perform its self-regulatory role. They can also count on other partners representing the profession and different business sectors. These are the professional media organizations:

■ **Union des Journalistes de Centrafrique (UJCA) (The Union of Central African Journalists)** that brings together the majority of working journalists;

■ **The Groupement des Editeurs de la Presse Privée Indépendante de Centrafrique (GEPPIC) (The Association of Editors of Private and Independent Press in Central Africa)** that advocates for the independence of media outlets and for holding the managers and owners accountable;

■ **The Consortium des Médias privés de Centrafrique (COMPCA) (The Consortium of Private Central African Media Outlets),** an organization created with the objective of reorganizing and revitalizing the private media sector (newspapers, online and audio-visual media) after finding it was dysfunctional and disorganized;

■ **The Association des Radios Communautaires (ARC) (The Association of Community Radios),** created in 2009, that became **Réseau des Médias Communautaires (The Community Media Network)** in 2019, provides technical services and advice, and works towards capacity-building for members;

■ **The Réseau des Journalistes pour les Droits de l'Homme (RJDH) (The Network of Journalists for Human Rights),** created in May 2014, provides specialized content and emphasizes news and information regarding human rights. Since 2017, thanks to support from the ONG Internews and funding from USAID, the RJDH has a radio station;

■ **The Association des Femmes Professionnelles de la Communication (AFPC) (The Association of Professional Women in Communication)** is focused on gender issues in the media sector.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK[6]

On November 30, 2020, the National Assembly approved the law regarding freedom of communication, drafted with the help of experts from **HCC, OIF** and **Internews**. This law is the first legislation on freedom of the press in CAR, and represents a very important step for the media landscape. It allows media personnel to perform their job freely, without the risk of criminal charges, while remaining exposed to administrative sanctions. At the same time, it allows censorship power to the HCC, i.e. it has the power to suppress what a media outlet is publishing, can order the dismissal of a journalist or authorize the termination of a radio program. •••

"**Freedom of the press is threatened by corruption as many media workers, lacking resources, take bribes in exchange for what they publish, which violates the code of ethics of the profession. In order for the freedom of expression to be absolute, media outlets must be financially independent**"

MEDIA EXPERT, BANGUI

●●● Adopting this law makes it possible to fill the legal gap seen in Ordinance No. 05.002 of February 22, 2005 on the Freedom of Communication in CAR[7] including the definition of key concepts of regulation and the role of HCC, the delimitation of the scope of action when compared to the Ministry of Communication, or even the inclusion of community radio and the transition to TNT and RNT.

Despite the unrest in the country, we are ranked 132nd in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index, and according to Journalists without Borders, no assassination of a journalist was reported in the Central African Republic in 2019. ●

3.4 LOCAL RELEVANCE OF INFORMATION

The Central African media sector suffered greatly from the very beginning of the 2012 socio-politic crisis. The community radio stations, which are often the only means of accessing information in the provinces, have been the target of looting and some of them are struggling to return after being taken off air. Among the provincial community radio stations, 3 are in the process of being restored (La Voix de la Kaga, Rejina and Mbari FM) and at least one radio station, Berassa, is completely out of service after being vandalized during the political crisis. The persistent lack of security means that some radio stations, even those established recently, still suffer acts of vandalism orchestrated by armed groups.

We can identify about 30 community **radio stations,** including **9 in Bangui** and **21 in the provinces.** In urban areas, especially in Bangui, the variety of available media allows the population to choose the channel or station that provides them with the information best adapted to their needs. In rural areas, available media and the choice of information sources are limited.

The development partners, aware of the importance of community radio stations in the context of a high level of illiteracy, have been actively investing in the rehabilitation of pillaged radio stations since 2014 and in the installation of new radio stations in the most isolated areas and those most affected by the crisis. ●●●

●●● Among these partners, we can highlight the **Fondation Hirondelle, supported by the European Union,** the **CRS** and **SFCG** supported by **USAID, FPU** supported by the European Union and the **Dutch government** via the **Informorac** project, **Internews** via the **CHF** for setting up **Radio *Lego Ti la Ouaka*.** Thanks to the support of **USAID** and **IRI, Internews** has invested in the strengthening of media skills through education aimed at improving content in the media and humanitarian information, as well as providing essential equipment to certain community media outlets. The RMCC strongly supports its members in providing and sharing information. Thanks to this mechanism of sharing content, some programs are broadcast in Sango or a language understood by most listeners in the area. For example, the radio station Voix de la Pende broadcasts its content in Kaba, Talé, Sango and French. The RMCC, in collaboration with its partners, also supports training for community journalists.

Beyond the linguistic issue, it appears from our interviews that despite the existence of a significant number of community radio stations, the news produced and broadcast by them does not really correspond to the needs of the population, especially at a local level. This can be explained in part by the centralization of a large part of news production in Bangui by national or international operators based in the capital and, because of this, it is out of step with local needs. Regarding COVID-19 specifically, many respondents interviewed or responding to our surveys highlighted the discrepancy between local realities and a large part of the information provided about the illness, including the required prevention measures. ●

3.5 MEDIA CAPACITY AND INFORMATION QUALITY

The national public media, financed entirely by the state, have the necessary equipment to collect, verify and broadcast information to the population. The private media that have been financed by registered partners also have this advantage. But the majority of community media outlets lack equipment and means of transportation. As a result, they have difficulty in reaching all areas of the territory they are supposed to cover, in collecting information, in guaranteeing content production and editing, and sometimes in broadcasting their programs to the community.

Regarding journalism training, a university education of three years is provided by the Department of Information Science and Communication (DSIC) at the University of Bangui for those who aspire to become professional journalists. Created in 2007 as a result of discussions among Central African media, this qualification has lost its primary partners (UNESCO and the University of Yaoundé) and has seen the level of education reduced over time. To try and overcome this problem, training sessions and workshops to strengthen skills are held once or multiple times a year with the help and support of humanitarian partners and organizations like the HCC, the NGO Internews, MINUSCA, Fondation Hirondelle, the French Embassy and the Special Criminal Court.

The themes of these training sessions vary. The following are some examples:
■ The fight against hate speech and the spread of rumors (by HCC - 2018)
■ Managing rumors in the media (by Search For Common Ground - 2019)
■ Different journalistic genres, the search for information, writing for written press, sound recording and field reporting (Embassy of France - 2019 - 2020)
■ Coverage of judicial activities for Central African journalists from the interior of the country (Special Criminal Court 2018-2019)

> **"At our radio station, we only have two recorders and one computer to collect and edit news stories. We are forced to wait for other colleagues to return from the field before going out again on another assignment"**
>
> **KEY MEDIA INFORMANT**

• • •

■ Water security and climate resilience by the Partenariat National des Eaux (PNE - 2019)
■ Covering elections and reporting during pre and post-election periods, training supported particularly by Internews as part of the CONNECT project
■ The production of programs about COVID-19, especially as part of Internews' project Rooted in Trust. •

3.6 COVID-19 INFORMATION COORDINATION MECHANISMS

The Central African Government[8], with the leadership of the Ministry of Health and Population has put in place coordination mechanisms involving various partners at a strategic level (crisis committee), a technical level (technical sub-committee) and an operational level (seven commissions).

Initially the crisis committee was limited to government officials and doctors. Given the difficulties encountered, it was later opened up to members of the press. Thanks to the media involvement, messages on prevention were developed by the communication commission and were made available to the press and all other organizations involved in prevention. Based on these facts, a network of six radio stations and television channels have been leading a campaign since 14 March to educate the population with daily broadcasts including in the provinces/rural areas. 20,000 leaflets, 200 posters and banners have also been distributed throughout the country and continue to be produced. Many actors however, have pointed out the commission's vertical and unilateral approach which tends to secure the information provided and to concentrate on providing pre-formatted messages. The communication commission also organized two awareness presentations on COVID-19 for 50 journalists. The NGO Première Urgence Internationale worked with the communication commission to train 118 community liaisons who are responsible for relaying prevention messages to the communities.

The primary sources of information for statistics on COVID-19 are the Ministry of Health and the WHO. Even if these figures have been disputed by the vast majority of the population, there aren't really any other sources of information or means by which they can check them. The media receive information on COVID-19 via the sub-commission • • •

●●● for communication or by directly collecting information (from the community) or through humanitarian workers.

Some media, knowing that they are unable to verify these figures, have focused on discovering the rumors circulating within the community in order to create content to try to dispel them and to shed light on the reality of the disease. These are the Réseau des Journalistes pour les Droits de l'Homme (a network of media professionals operating in Central Africa) supported by Internews, and Radio Ndekeluka, which is funded by the Fondation Hirondelle as well as an anti-rumor online newspaper created by the newspaper Le Citoyen. From March 24-28, the NGO Internews

organized a training session for media professionals on the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. The main goal of the workshop was to allow journalists to access all the available information on the virus in order to stop unfounded rumors from spreading that could undermine the fight against the pandemic.

In the same vein, on the March 28, 12 radio stations who are partners of the NGO broadcast the first program of awareness-raising on the virus, with help from an expert from the Institut Pasteur in Bangui. Since then, radio stations have worked together to share news stories on COVID-19. This consists of 11 radio stations from Bangui and 16 community radio stations which are members of the Réseau des Médias Communautaires de

Centrafrique who meet every week to coordinate their news items and produce a program called **"E Tiri Bira Na Covid" Let's fight COVID-19!,** which is then broadcast on all the partner channels. More common awareness-raising activities have been broadcast by these radio stations (programs to address COVID-19, skits, songs, etc.)

According to the media workers interviewed, the news meets the public's expectations, since it covers many topics that pique their interest, namely messages on health, education, lockdown, entertainment and local news. The public, however, feels differently because most consider themselves under-informed, as explained below. This discrepancy between the media and their audience can probably be interpreted as the result of a failure on behalf of the media to listen. Bi-directional communication efforts on their part would allow them to make shared observations and would therefore better respond to the needs of the community. ●●●

> **"We are doing our best to provide all the information necessary to help the community prevent the spread of the pandemic and to fight against it"** KEY MEDIA INFORMANT

Table 1. Media outlets COVID-19 principal interaction nodes

		AVG MEDIA
UN agencies	INTERNATIONAL	3.75
Multilateral organisations (other than UN)	INTERNATIONAL	2.25
Countries (other States donors)	INTERNATIONAL	1.00
Other international	INTERNATIONAL	3.75
Ministry of information/ Communication	NATIONAL	2.25
Ministry of Health	NATIONAL	3.75
Ministry of Disaster Management (or similar)	NATIONAL	1.00
Other Ministries or executive bodies	NATIONAL	1.75
Regional/local level authorities	NATIONAL	1.75
Media regulatory authorities	NATIONAL	2.50
Other public bodies	NATIONAL	1.75
Community media representatives	MEDIA	2.75
Media associations	MEDIA	2.50
Public media	MEDIA	1.25
Commercial media	MEDIA	2.50
Community leaders	CIVIL SOCIETY	2.50
Religious leaders	CIVIL SOCIETY	3.00
Online platforms (private sector) – search engines	CIVIL SOCIETY	1.25
Key constituencies (women, youth)	CIVIL SOCIETY	3.50
Other private	CIVIL SOCIETY	1.00

VERY HIGH — INTENSITY OF INTERACTION — VERY LOW

Source: Internews 2020

●●● The table to the right based on a preliminary analysis of the network (network mapping) shows the interactions between the media and stakeholders. On a scale of 1 to 5, the interaction between the central African media and the agencies of the United Nations is 3.75. Indications are the same between the media and the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Communication. In addition, we note that there is little interaction between the media and the Ministry of Regional Planning as well as partner countries. Following the groundwork which had been done with the media, the Ministries of Health and Communication often asked them to broadcast information about COVID-19. ●●●

Table 2. Visual stakeholder map of media outlets
(nodes with scored interaction over 3 in a scale from 1 to 5)

RESPONDENT   INTERNATIONAL   NATIONAL   MEDIA   CIVIL SOCIETY

Source: Internews 2020

●●● This graph shows the highest nodes of interaction (starting from 3) in existing communication about COVID-19, here we can see that the state radio station, radio Centrafrique, is well connected with other forms of media, agencies and the government while other players in the media environment seem much more isolated. ●
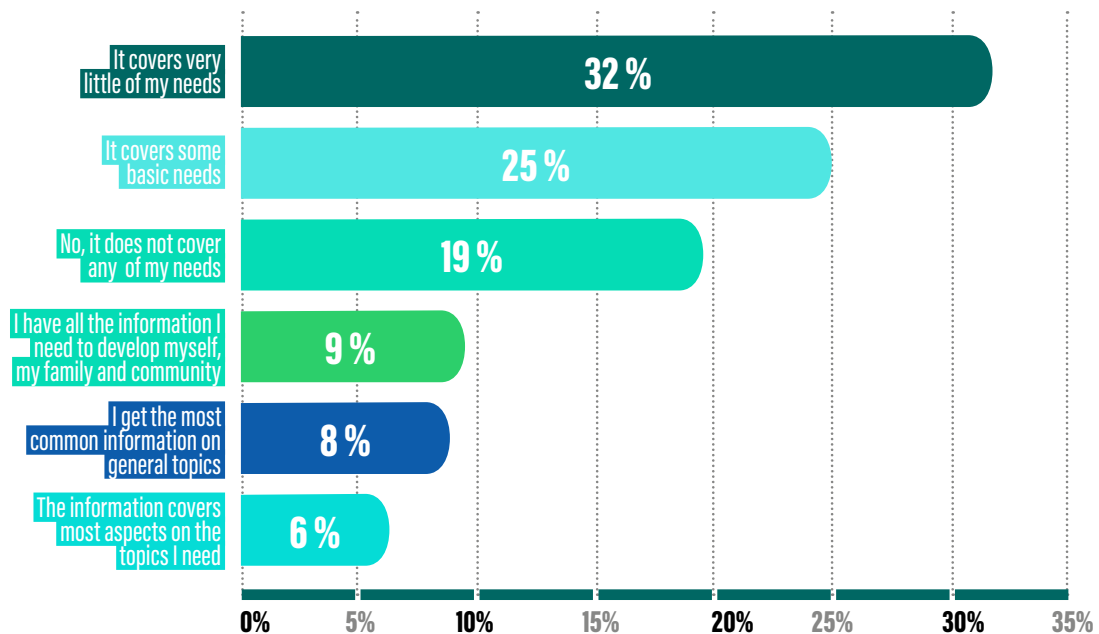
IV. INFORMATION DEMAND

(information communities needs most and how they access it)

4.1. INFORMATION NEEDS AND GAPS

In general, information needs, according to the Aperçu des besoins humanitaires 2020 (Overview of Humanitarian Needs 2020)12, concern mostly local news (60%), then, much further behind, information about food (19%) and health (13%). The vast majority of those surveyed during our investigation expressed a feeling of being under-informed. People felt that the information they received did not respond at all (19%) or responded very little (32%) to their needs or only to basic information needs (25%). In other words, just under a quarter (23%) of the population consider themselves well or reasonably well informed.

Table 3. Do you receive the necessary information to meet your needs?

Source: Internews 2020

Category	Percentage
It covers very little of my needs	32 %
It covers some basic needs	25 %
No, it does not cover any of my needs	19 %
I have all the information I need to develop myself, my family and community	9 %
I get the most common information on general topics	8 %
The information covers most aspects on the topics I need	6 %

Qualitative work undertaken with a few groups of individuals shows that information needs concerning COVID-19, and therefore health, have become essential compared to general needs during the pandemic. Most of the participants say they are in urgent need
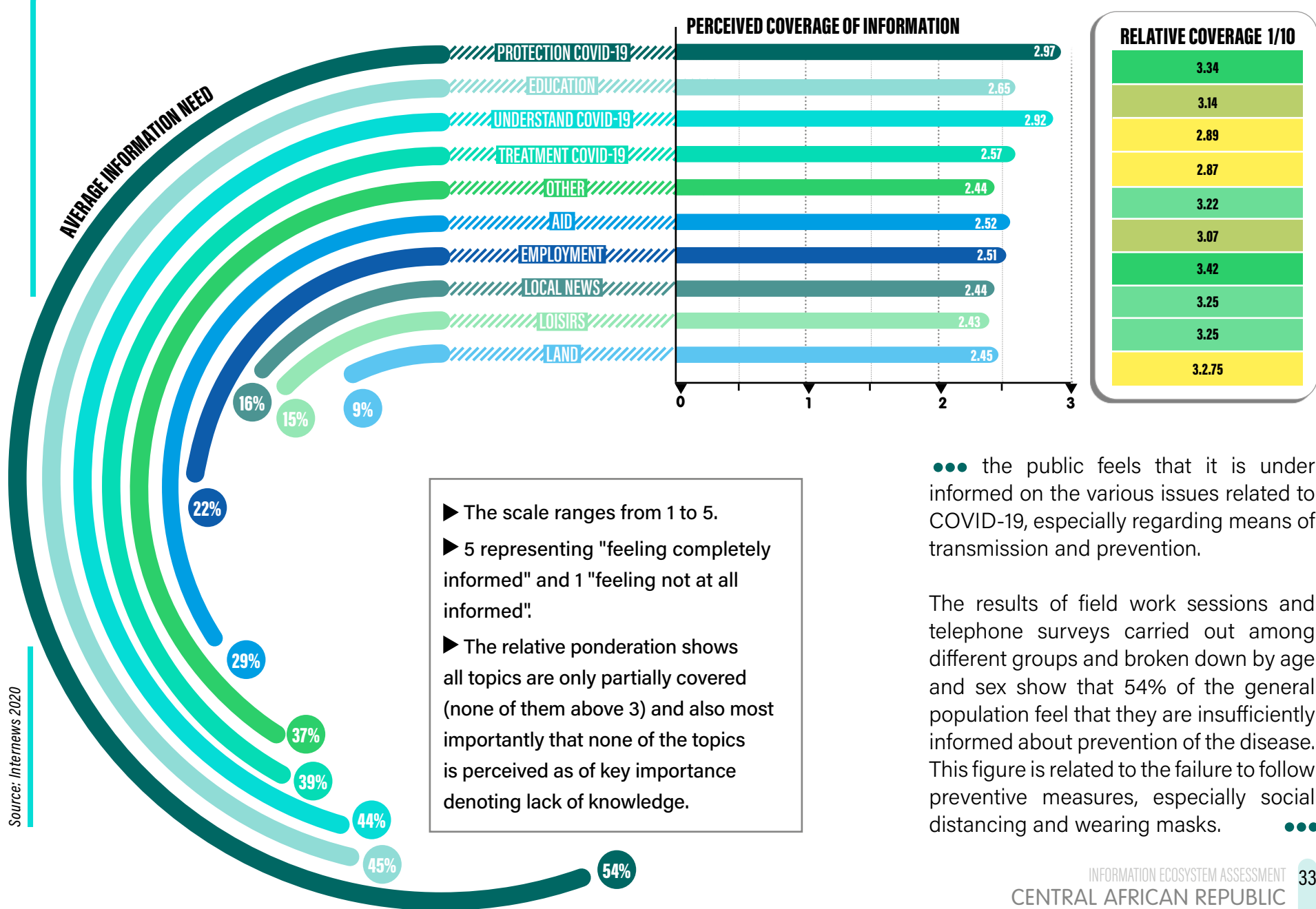
of information on COVID-19 treatment and prevention, and also the education situation (the education sector is one of the few areas where the lockdown measures decreed by the government have had a real effect).

With regard to COVID-19, which has given rise to new information needs, the trend is the same. Results from Geopoll's telephone survey for Internews concerning information needs during this COVID-19 period show that ●●●

Table 4. Relative coverage of information needs according to importance

AVERAGE INFORMATION NEED

PERCEIVED COVERAGE OF INFORMATION

Topic	Value
PROTECTION COVID-19	2.97
EDUCATION	2.65
UNDERSTAND COVID-19	2.92
TREATMENT COVID-19	2.57
OTHER	2.44
AID	2.52
EMPLOYMENT	2.51
LOCAL NEWS	2.44
LOISIRS	2.43
LAND	2.45

0   1   2   3

RELATIVE COVERAGE 1/10

Value
3.34
3.14
2.89
2.87
3.22
3.07
3.42
3.25
3.25
3.2.75

16%   15%   9%

22%

29%

37%

39%

44%

45%   54%

▶ The scale ranges from 1 to 5.

▶ 5 representing "feeling completely informed" and 1 "feeling not at all informed".

▶ The relative ponderation shows all topics are only partially covered (none of them above 3) and also most importantly that none of the topics is perceived as of key importance denoting lack of knowledge.

●●● the public feels that it is under informed on the various issues related to COVID-19, especially regarding means of transmission and prevention.

The results of field work sessions and telephone surveys carried out among different groups and broken down by age and sex show that 54% of the general population feel that they are insufficiently informed about prevention of the disease. This figure is related to the failure to follow preventive measures, especially social distancing and wearing masks. ●●●

Source: Internews 2020

●●● The need for information on treatments is also very strong, with 39% of the general population expressing a need. However, it should be noted that in Nana Gribizi prefecture, where community radio has been destroyed and where only Guira FM radio still broadcasts, only 14% of the population say they need information about treatment, in contrast to Bangui and other prefectures, where this figure ranges from 45% to 67%. This low figure in Nana Gribizi can be interpreted as a lack of interest in the subject, faced with limited availability of information, whereas the best-informed people, for example those in Bangui, are demanding more information on COVID-19 treatments because they are more aware of the risks the disease poses.
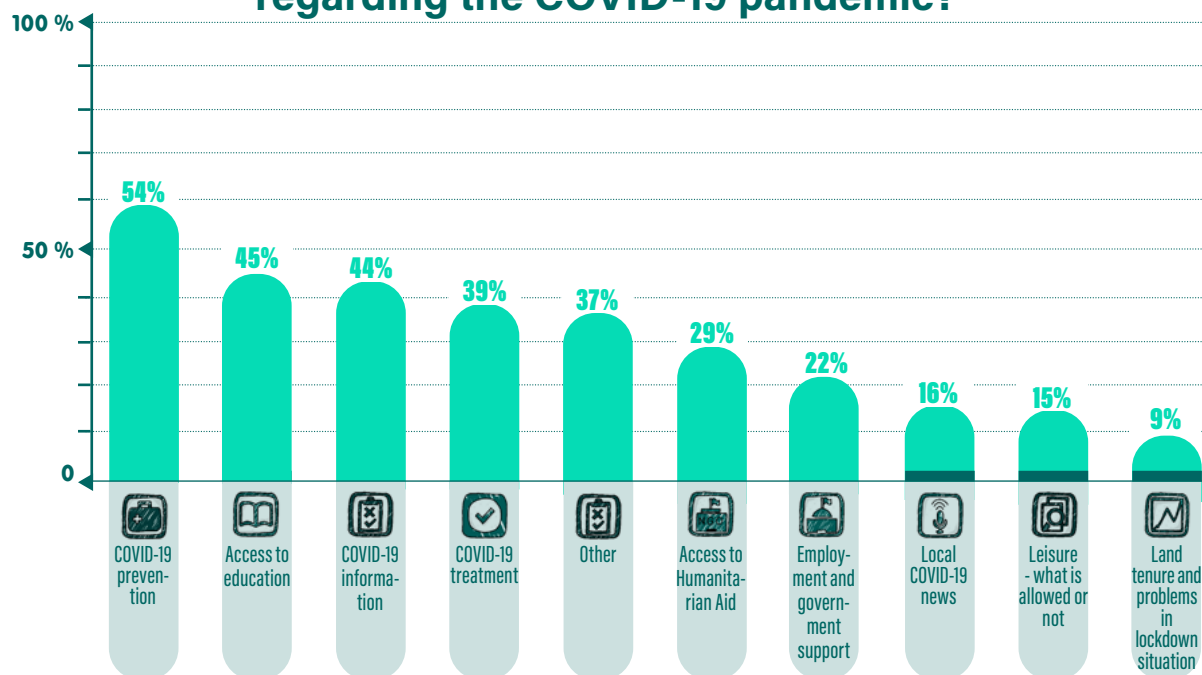
In the Central African Republic, 44% of the population express a need for general information on the pandemic, while 45% indicate a need for information on its impact on education, particularly the resumption of classes which have been suspended due to lockdown measures.

The diagram to the left summarizes the COVID-19 information needs of the general CAR population according to the results of a telephone survey conducted by Geopoll.

Information channels have been modified or even created from scratch during the COVID-19 crisis. In Bangui, for example, drawings designed to raise awareness of such things as mask-wearing, social distancing, hand-washing and coughing in the palm of one's hand have made their appearance on some walls and billboards in the capital, as well as in radio and television sketches. In the provinces, signs ●●●

Table 5. What information do you need more of regarding the COVID-19 pandemic?

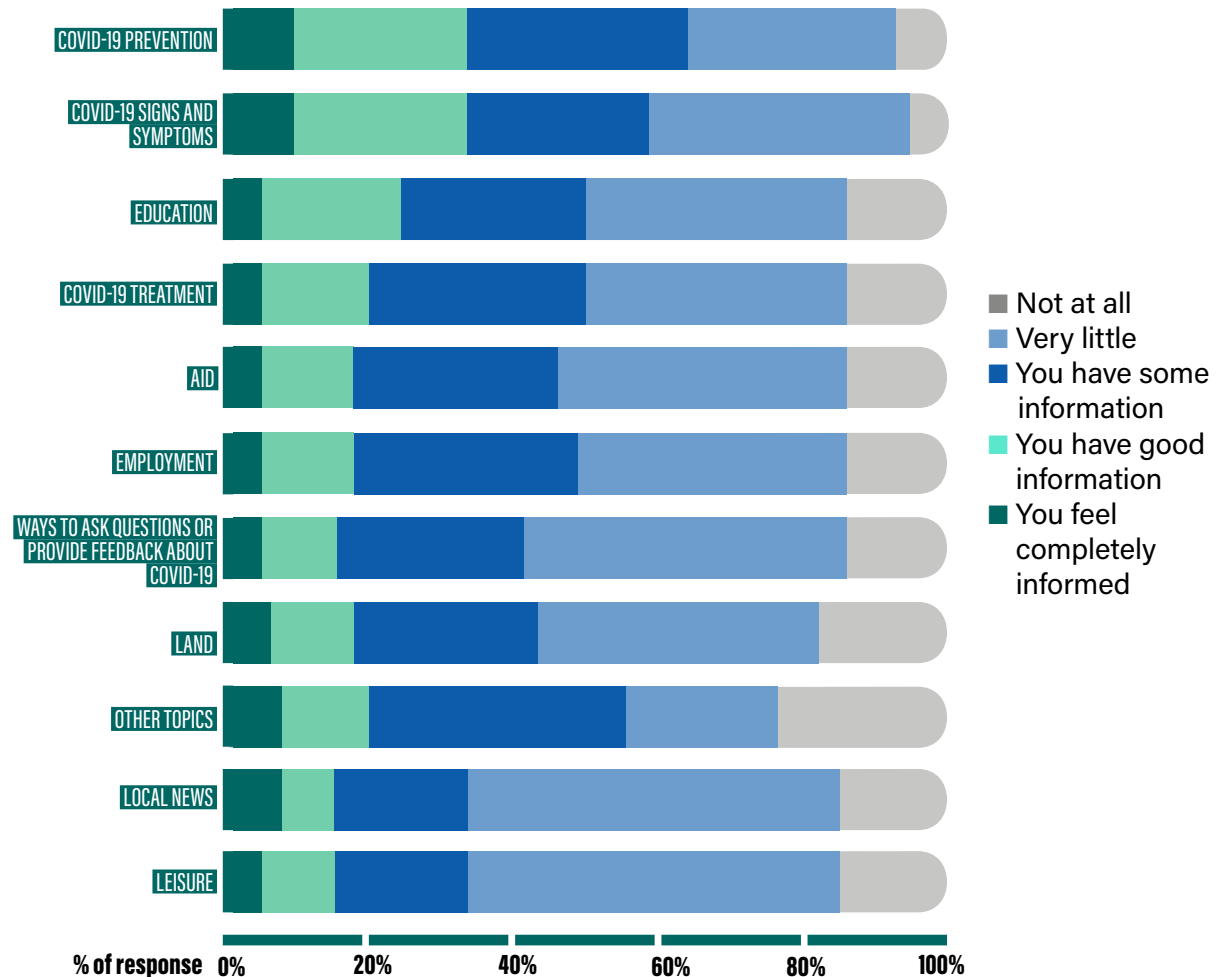| Category	Percentage
COVID-19 prevention	54%
Access to education	45%
COVID-19 information	44%
COVID-19 treatment	39%
Other	37%
Access to Humanitarian Aid	29%
Employment and government support	22%
Local COVID-19 news	16%
Leisure - what is allowed or not	15%
Land tenure and problems in lockdown situation	9%

> **"We are constantly receiving awareness-raising messages to fight COVID-19, either from NGO agents who visit our site or from our community radio stations."**
>
> **IDP KEY INFORMANT**

●●● to raise awareness of preventive measures have appeared on the doors of places of worship, public places or NGOs.

New radio programmes have been launched. Sports activities have been suspended, so this form of information exchange has been stopped. ●

Table 6. What topics do you feel most informed about in relation to COVID-19?

Legend:
- ■ Not at all
- ■ Very little
- ■ You have some information
- ■ You have good information
- ■ You feel completely informed

Categories (top to bottom):
- COVID-19 PREVENTION
- COVID-19 SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS
- EDUCATION
- COVID-19 TREATMENT
- AID
- EMPLOYMENT
- WAYS TO ASK QUESTIONS OR PROVIDE FEEDBACK ABOUT COVID-19
- LAND
- OTHER TOPICS
- LOCAL NEWS
- LEISURE

% of response 0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

4.2 ACCESS - CHANNELS AND SOURCES

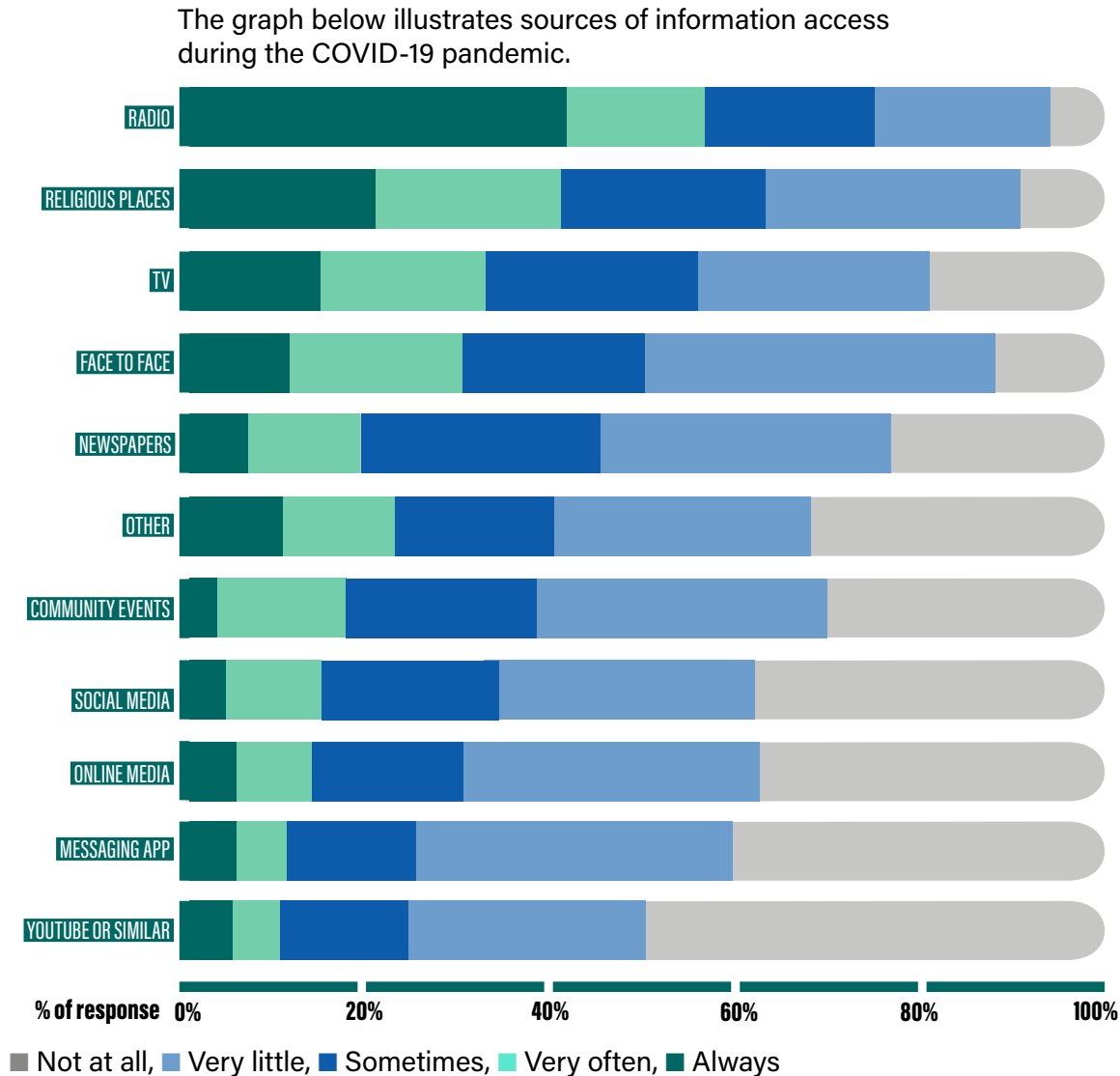Information providers to the CAR community during this COVID-19 period differ according to the key informants. However, almost everyone agrees that radio remains the main provider of information in this time of crisis. There is also a significant involvement on the part of mobile phone companies in delivering text and voice messages to raise awareness about the disease from either NGOs, toll-free numbers or the government. However, due to its very low internet penetration rate (4.3% according to the United Nations Human Development Report site), the use of social media and online media in the CAR to access information is very limited.

Information providers to the CAR community during this COVID-19 period differ according to the key informants.

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These two charts, (page 37) created from surveys conducted locally and online, show that radio is the preferred source of information for Central Africans, both in Bangui and in the rest of the country. This is followed by religious leaders, referred to as reliable communication channels by the community, then social media, mainly mentioned by young people, and finally television.
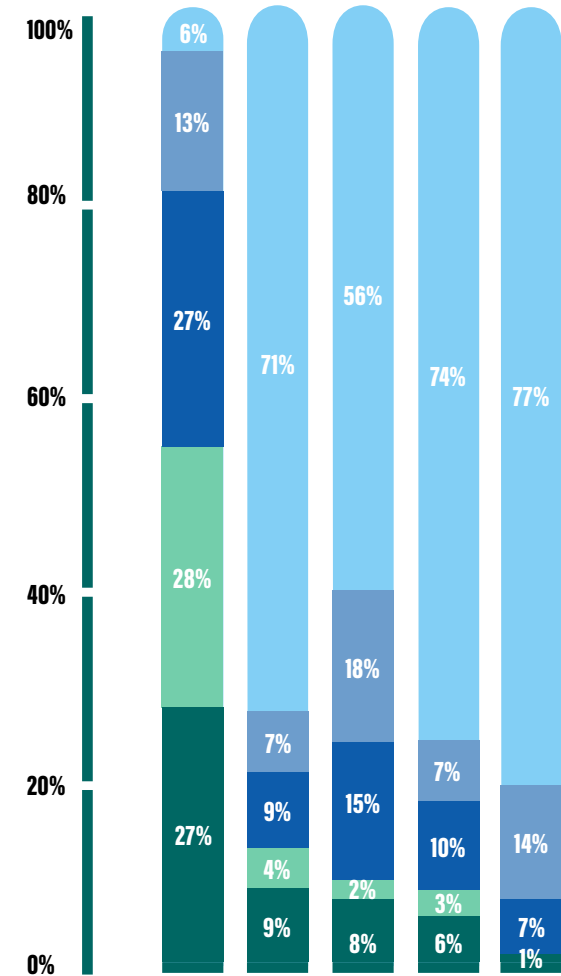
●●●

Table 7. How do you access information related to COVID-19 ?

The graph below illustrates sources of information access during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: Internews 2020

% of response

Legend: ■ Not at all, ■ Very little, ■ Sometimes, ■ Very often, ■ Always

Table 8. Information sources most used by the Bangui population

●●● Before COVID-19, news covered all areas, such as sport, leisure, education, local and international news, religion, world conflicts, etc. With the outbreak of COVID-19, the pandemic has taken on a dominant role in the news, with information suppliers producing content aimed at raising awareness of the disease and compliance with preventative measures. In addition, information on leisure activities and job opportunities has decreased as these activities have slowed down or stopped. However, information on local and international news still remains important for the community. Information on the country's COVID-19 situation comes mainly from the authorities, NGOs or United Nations agencies based in the Central African Republic, community and religious leaders, door-to-door campaigns, family, neighbors and national public media, while the global pandemic situation is mainly reported in foreign media. ●

4.3 MAIN DETERMINANTS AND BARRIERS TO ACCESSING INFORMATION

According to the fieldwork, there are few external factors preventing the urban population from accessing information, as nearly everyone has access to radio, the most widely used channel. However, in rural areas, not everyone owns a radio and when they do, paying for batteries or electricity to recharge them remains a problem. Community radio followed by mass or door-to-door outreach activities are the main access channels for this population. Lack of electricity is another obstacle to regular access to information from television.

Access to online information remains a major challenge for the country and its people. To date, the country does not have access to fiber optics. Only a very small minority have Internet access.

> **"We only get electricity every 24 hours, and when it finally arrives, it only lasts for 8 hours. With our activities, it is impossible to follow TV regularly."**
>
> **DISCUSSION GROUPS**

The price of newspapers and poor distribution within the country prevent people from buying them. Education level is an additional internal obstacle.

Language is also still a major barrier as one third of those interviewed say they never or very rarely receive information in their preferred language. This figure increases to 41% amongst internally displaced persons, often outside their original geographical and linguistic area.

Sango and French are the main languages in which information is received, regardless of the source or channel. In

focus group discussions in Bangui, Sibut and Berberati, all participants confirmed that they had received information about COVID-19 in their preferred language, namely Sango first, then French. In the provinces, programs are in Sango and

> **"People are not well educated to understand the information provided. So they believe rumors."**
>
> **KEY INFORMANT- CIVIL SOCIETY**

sometimes in local languages. Some community radio stations make an effort to produce news content in the local language that is understood and spoken by the majority of listeners. For example, in Ouham-Pendé, the radio station Voix de la Pendé produces contents in Kaba and in Tale so that information about the fight against COVID-19 is understood by everyone.

According to the national survey, 8% of respondents always receive information in their preferred language and 55% occasionally receive it in their preferred language. These figures contrast with the findings of the Bangui fieldwork, which showed that 100% of the groups interviewed said that they received information in their preferred languages (Sango and French). The results from households surveyed in the capital lead to somewhat similar results with only 12% of respondents saying they do not receive all information in their preferred language. The results are illustrated in the diagrams on the following page. ●●●

> **"Messages via radio or door-to-door sessions are in Sango as it's our national language and everybody understands it"**
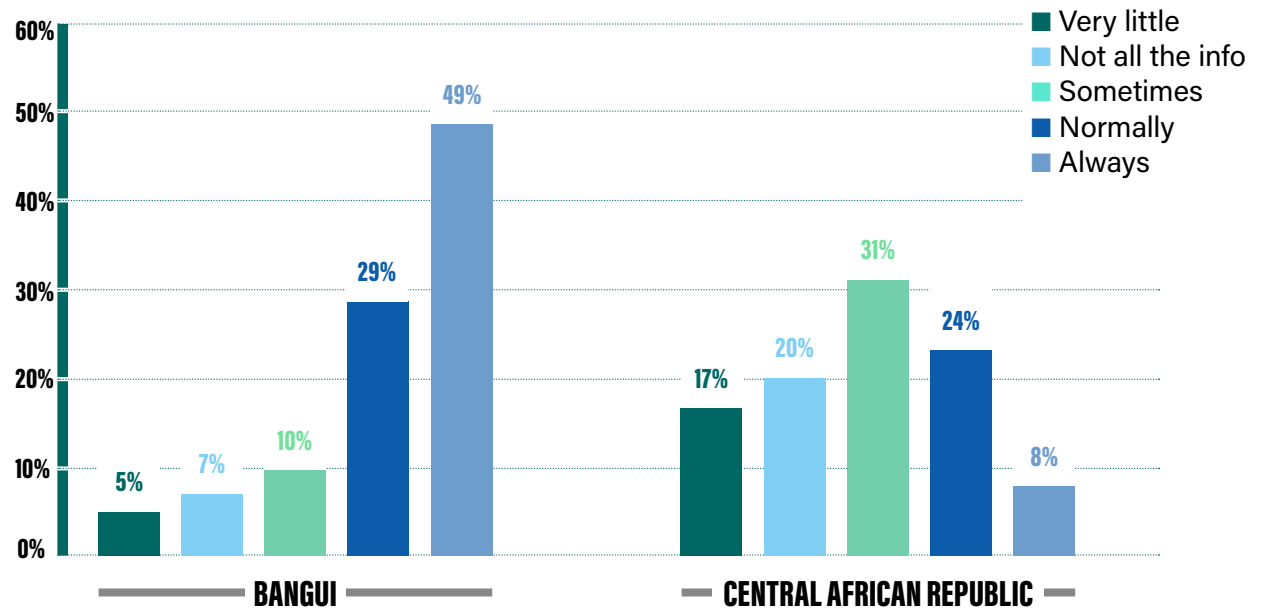>
> DISCUSSION GROUP

●●● In addition, respondents say that they are sometimes worried about the amount of disinformation within their community because, according to them, many people are unable to tell the difference between true and false information. To check the credibility of information received, people search on the Internet or other media channels or discuss freely with friends and/or family. ●

4.4 FOCUS ON VULNERABLE GROUPS

nternally displaced persons (IDP), who represent about 12% of the Central African population, are considered to be very vulnerable in terms of accessing information. During our fieldwork, we were able to interview IDPs, who represented 17% of respondents, as well as people belonging to ethnic minorities, who made up 7% of respondents. According to the data collected, 58% of IDPs express the need to be more informed about the COVID-19 pandemic, due to their geographic mobility and the linguistic challenges they encounter. In addition, more than two thirds of them (78%) complain that the information they receive only covers their most basic needs. ●●●
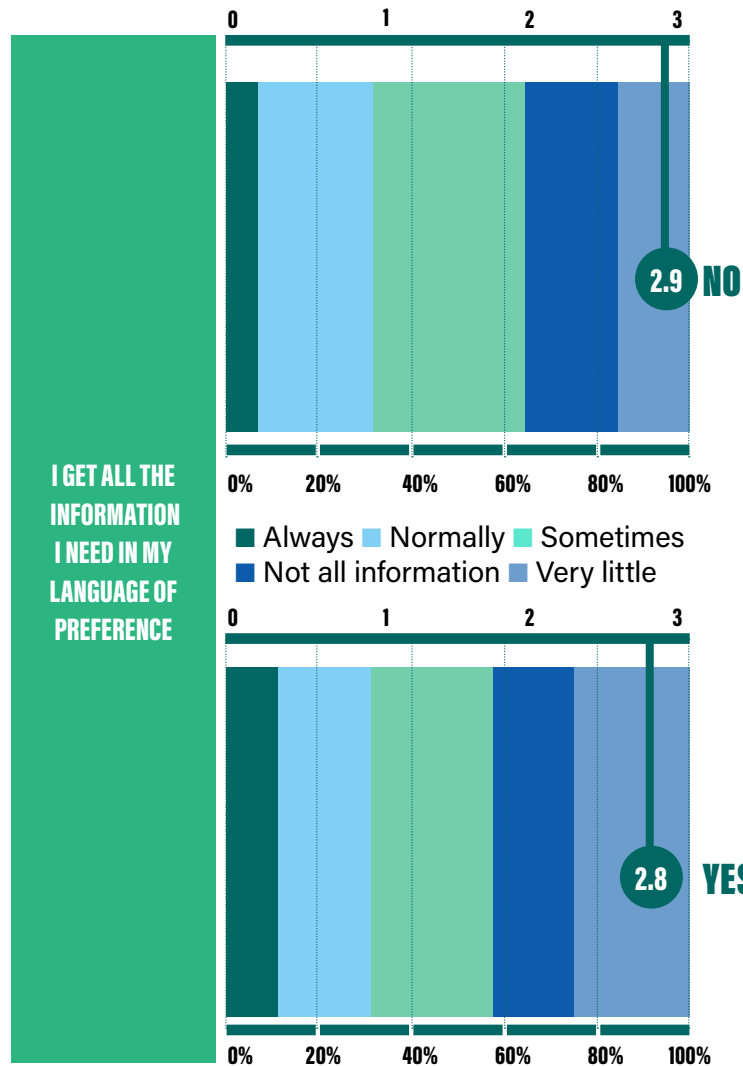
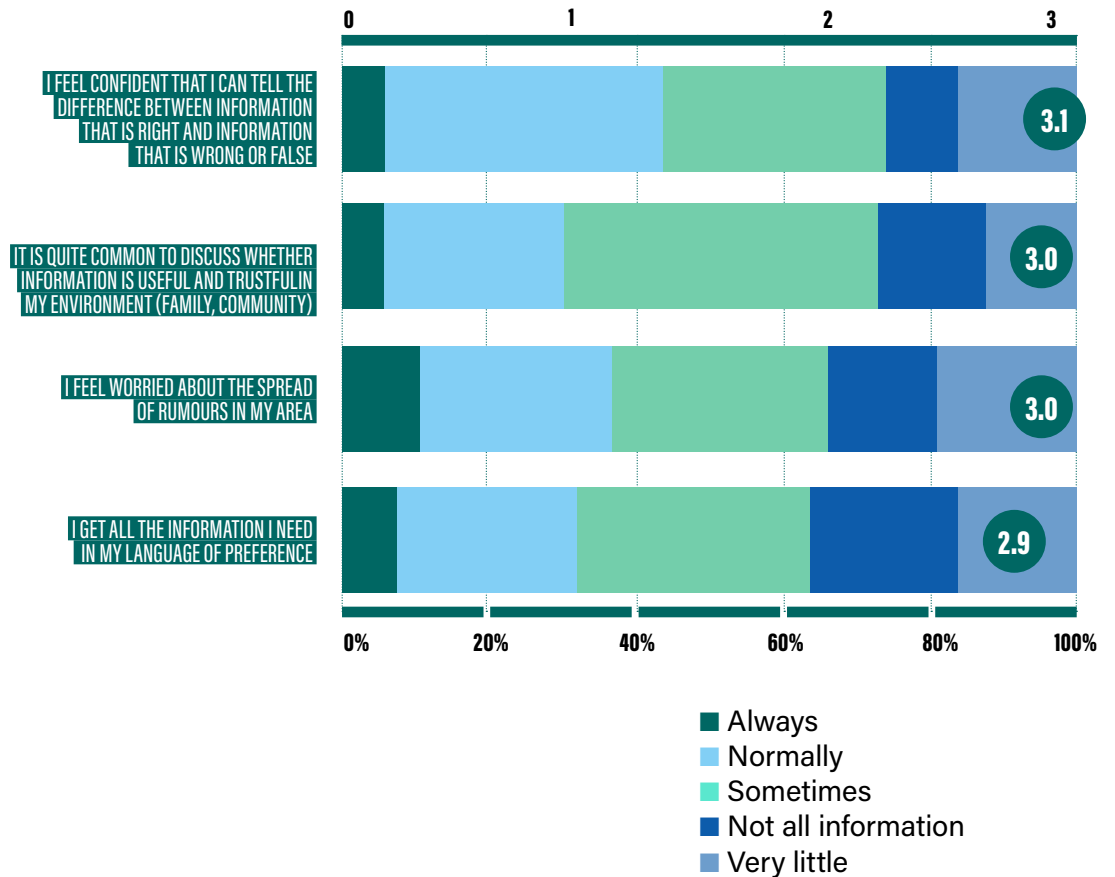## Table 9. Is information available in your preferred language?

Legend:
- Very little
- Not all the info
- Sometimes
- Normally
- Always

BANGUI: Very little 5%, Not all the info 7%, Sometimes 10%, Normally 29%, Always 49%

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: Very little 17%, Not all the info 20%, Sometimes 31%, Normally 24%, Always 8%

Table 10. Drivers and barriers to information

Do you receive information in your preferred language?

I GET ALL THE INFORMATION I NEED IN MY LANGUAGE OF PREFERENCE

2.9 NO

2.8 YES

■ Always ■ Normally ■ Sometimes
■ Not all information ■ Very little

Please give us your scoring from 1 (not at all) to 5 (always) to the following statements

I FEEL CONFIDENT THAT I CAN TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INFORMATION THAT IS RIGHT AND INFORMATION THAT IS WRONG OR FALSE — **3.1**

IT IS QUITE COMMON TO DISCUSS WHETHER INFORMATION IS USEFUL AND TRUSTFUL IN MY ENVIRONMENT (FAMILY, COMMUNITY) — **3.0**

I FEEL WORRIED ABOUT THE SPREAD OF RUMOURS IN MY AREA — **3.0**

I GET ALL THE INFORMATION I NEED IN MY LANGUAGE OF PREFERENCE — **2.9**

■ Always
■ Normally
■ Sometimes
■ Not all information
■ Very little

Table 11. Does the information available in your community meet your needs?

In general, do you feel you have enough information to meet your needs?

	NO	YES
NO, IT DOES NOT COVER ANY OF MY NEEDS	17%	29%
IT COVERS SOME BASIC NEEDS	27%	18%
I GET THE MOST COMMON INFORMATION ON GENERAL TOPICS	6%	16%
THE INFORMATION COVERS MOST ASPECTS ON THE TOPICS I NEED	7%	4%
I HAVE ALL THE INFORMATION I NEED	11%	3%
IT COVERS VERY LITTLE OF MY NEEDS	32%	31%

●●● According to the qualitative work done with women, war victims and young people in Bangui, those who are less educated, illiterate, women, children and people who are deaf are overwhelmingly cited as being the most vulnerable in terms of access to information. According to these respondents, most women need to focus on daily house chores and activities without having time to research information on particular topics. Most often, women get information from their immediate family members including their children or their spouse. ●

V. INFORMATION DYNAMICS

(how individual and communities interact with the information ecosystem and what do they do with the information they access)

5.1 TRUST

As mentioned above, the surveys and our discussions with various key informants reveal that the most accessible channel for the general population remains the radio.

Before COVID-19, people trusted information coming from the government, especially for matters concerning the socio-political crisis and other general issues.

But ever since the first cases of COVID-19, in March 2020, people began to doubt the data coming from the Ministry of Health. They even thought that these figures (number of positive cases and deaths) were not true because only the government is able to verify them. Where are the people who tested positive? Where are they being cared for? Can

we see them? These questions remain unanswered and cause the community to doubt the existence and reality of COVID-19 in Central Africa. A few people who have recovered from COVID-19 and who are in government or are health workers have occasionally shared their stories in the media. The respondents also complain that the authorities don't share all the information about the funds allocated to managing the crisis and how they are being spent. Even information about the project to set up a COVID-19 patient care center is no longer being mentioned.

44% of those surveyed think they can tell the difference between true and false information. This figure peaks at 61% for young people aged 15 to 24 and 40% for adults. 36% worry, all the time or often, about the spread of rumors and 30% worry about this occasionally. ●●●

●●● As for questions about the reliability of and trust in the information received, opinions differ from one group to another. Based on discussions among focus groups of women, young people, IDPs and war victims, only the women and IDPs trust information coming from national leaders. Young people and war victims are quite skeptical about the reliability of the information they receive about COVID-19. According to them, *"the information was altered to serve political interests"*. On the other hand, everyone says they trust information they receive from their religious leaders because for them, they are people who speak on earth in God's name, and therefore they can't lie to them. Next come private radio stations, like RJDH and Ndeke-luka, followed by community leaders and a few international sources. The results of the quantitative survey conducted in Bangui households confirm in part the qualitative data from the discussion groups. In fact, 80% of the respondents have "complete"

trust in the information they get from health workers, followed by religious leaders (76%), national public media (60%), international organizations and government (58%). Community leaders are in last position (43%) in terms of trust.

> **"The number of cases of COVID-19 reported by the Ministry of Health are not reliable, but unfortunately we have no way to verify them."**
>
> **DISCUSSION GROUP**

A telephone survey of the Central African population reveals a low level of trust in general. More than one in three Central Africans say they have no trust or very little trust in community media

and local authorities (38%), community leaders, friends and family (40%), for getting information about COVID-19. On the other hand, we see that 52% of the respondents consider information from their religious leaders to be reliable, followed by health service workers (43%), then international organizations (35%), followed by national public media and international media.
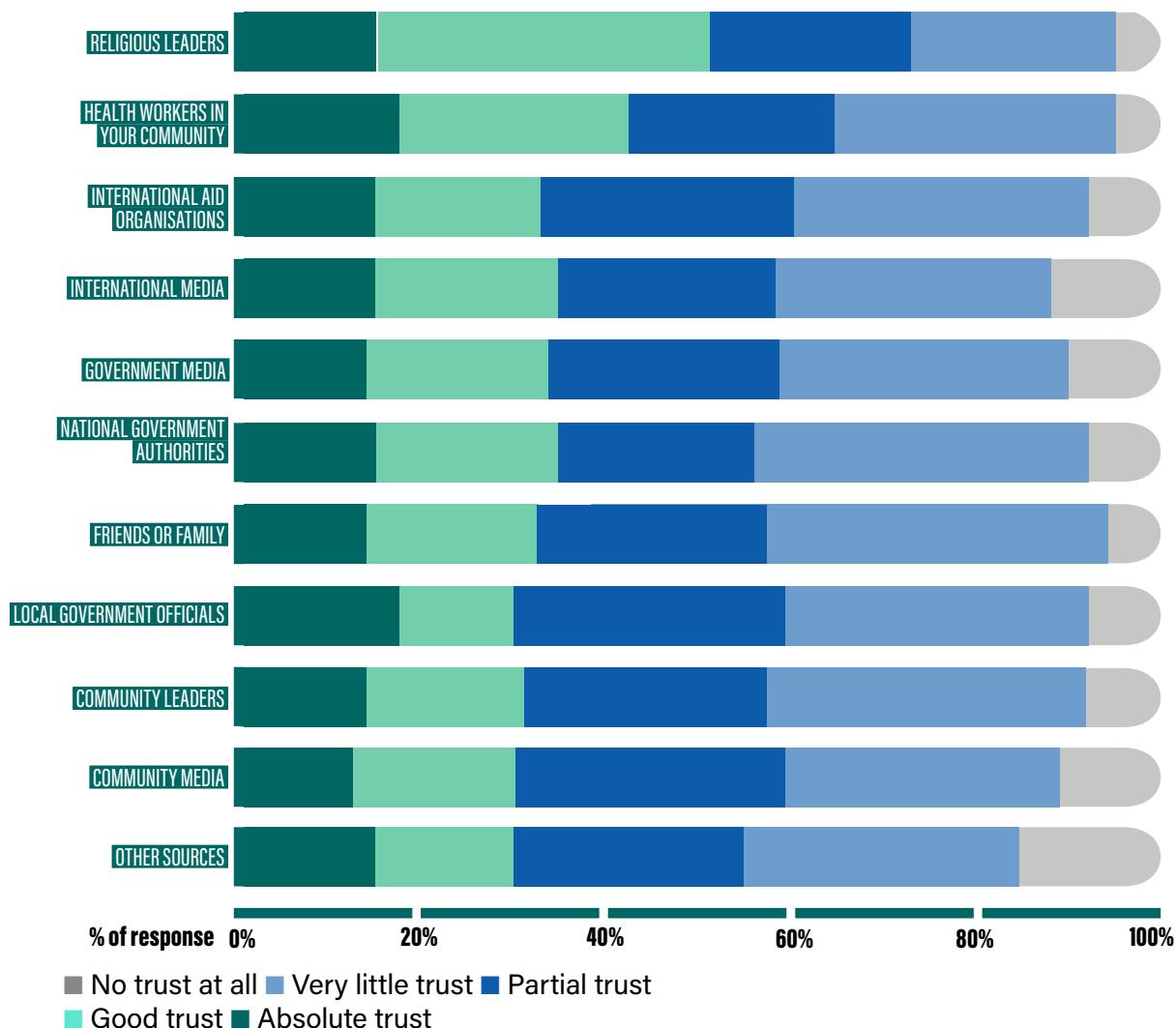
Proximity does not seem to be a criterion of trust since relatives, leaders and community radio stations are not given particular trustworthiness. Conversely, at a national level, 34% of respondents trust the information provided by their friends and relatives, 29% information coming from community radio and 30% that coming from community leaders.

The chart on the following page shows the trusted sources of information as well as the factors which influence the population to trust them. ●

Table 12. How do you obtain information on COVID-19?

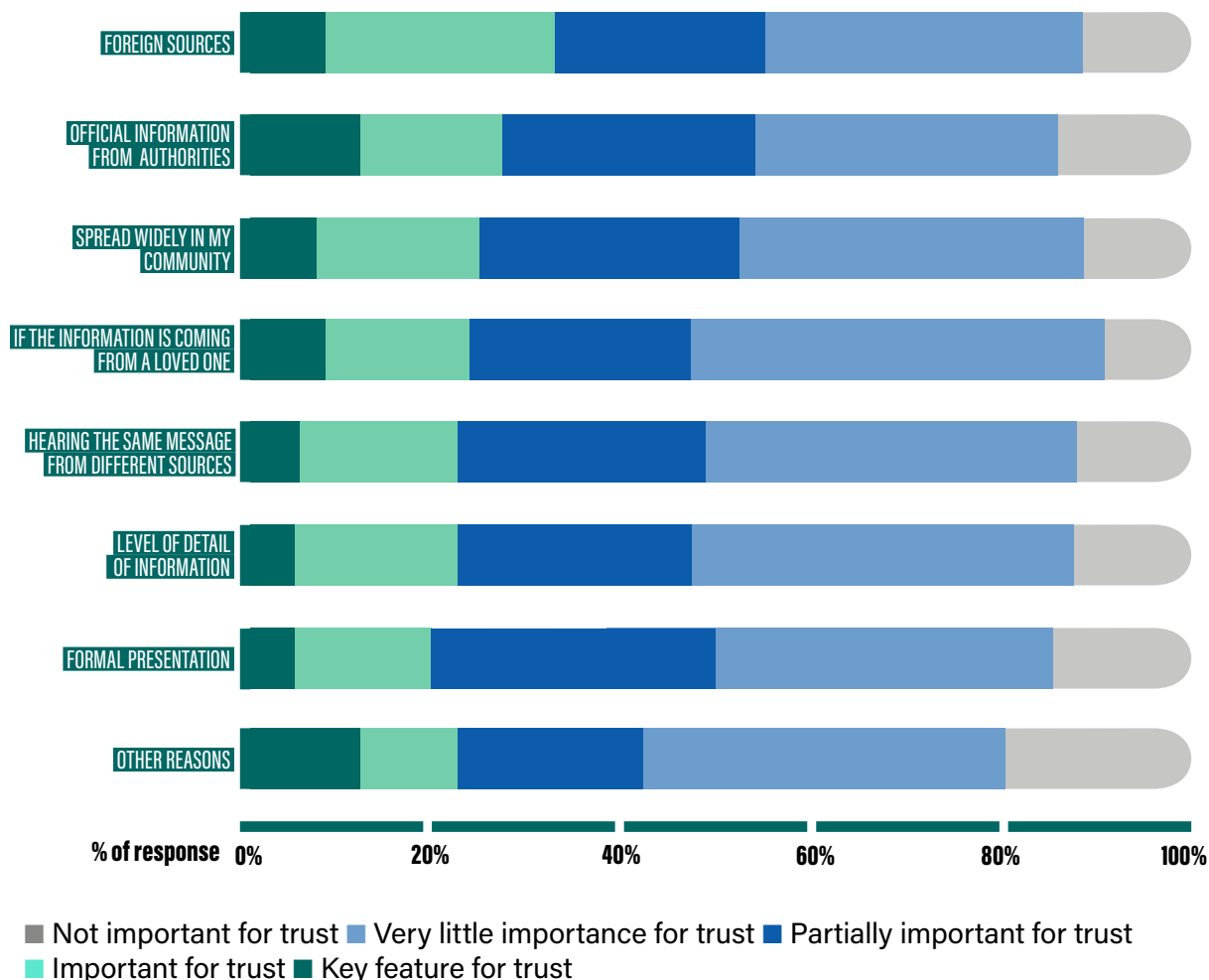Can you tell me which sources of information do you trust more to get information about Covid-19?

Source: Internews 2020

% of response

RELIGIOUS LEADERS						
HEALTH WORKERS IN YOUR COMMUNITY						
INTERNATIONAL AID ORGANISATIONS						
INTERNATIONAL MEDIA						
GOVERNMENT MEDIA						
NATIONAL GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES						
FRIENDS OR FAMILY						
LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS						
COMMUNITY LEADERS						
COMMUNITY MEDIA						
OTHER SOURCES						

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

■ No trust at all   ■ Very little trust   ■ Partial trust
■ Good trust   ■ Absolute trust

> "The population has no confidence whatsoever in the information about COVID-19 in Central Africa, since many of our leaders appeared without masks and gathered large crowds in disregard of protective measures during the election campaign. We saw that information posters were replaced by election posters in the city. Humanitarian activists, the media and government were focused exclusively on the elections and completely forgot about COVID-19."

MEMBER OF THE PANEL OF EXPERTS

Table 13. What makes a source trustworthy for you?

Source: Internews 2020

FOREIGN SOURCES

OFFICIAL INFORMATION FROM AUTHORITIES

SPREAD WIDELY IN MY COMMUNITY

IF THE INFORMATION IS COMING FROM A LOVED ONE

HEARING THE SAME MESSAGE FROM DIFFERENT SOURCES

LEVEL OF DETAIL OF INFORMATION

FORMAL PRESENTATION

OTHER REASONS

% of response   0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

■ Not important for trust ■ Very little importance for trust ■ Partially important for trust
■ Important for trust ■ Key feature for trust

5.2 TRANSMISSION

Paradoxically, despite the lack of trust of one in three people in local sources, fieldwork has revealed that, in the heart of the community, there exists a genuine habit of sharing information, whether that be between friends, within the family or even with neighbors. The information shared comes from all accessible sources and channels: radio stations (private, public, community, international), the Internet, the press, television. All focus group participants stated that they instinctively always pass around information that they deem important and beneficial for collective welfare. Data collected among the population of Bangui reveal that only 7.5% of respondents never share the information received with those around them, while 31.7% share it occasionally and 20.3% always. National data show convergences and divergences with these results: 8.5% of respondents say that they never share the information received, but the number of respondents who always share the information received is, at the national level, only 11.4%. These two data sets are merged in the table on the following page. ●●●

●●● According to the results of telephone surveys, 76% of the population shares information with the community always, regularly or sometimes. The reliability of the information shared is discussed always or most of the time by 30% of respondents, a figure at 40% for those aged 15-24, sometimes by 43%, and rarely or never by 27%.

The information most frequently shared relates to various subjects and depends on current events. During this period of COVID-19 and of elections, the subjects of choice concern the COVID-19 pandemic, politics, education and local news. Information is shared face to face, by telephone or via social media.

IS IT COMMON TO DISCUSS WHETHER INFORMATION IS USEFUL AND TRUSTFULL IN MY ENVIRONMENT (FAMILY, COMMUNITY)

The information received is shared word for word if circulated on social media or via SMS, but in the case of word-of-mouth transmission, its translation influences the content of the message shared.

The community does not produce the information. It can receive false information and share it without having verified it. But in an interview with one of the key informants working in the field of statistics, he claimed to have the

means to collect and verify information from the community before sharing it with the general public and the media, via an online and freely accessible information sharing platform.

In the case of COVID-19, although the public does not particularly trust information coming from the government, it is still shared among family and friends with regard to compliance with protective measures. Information about the suspension or resumption of school classes in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is also shared. At the beginning of the pandemic in the Central African Republic, the correct information did not circulate enough, which gave way to rumors that quickly spread. ●

"When I get home, I share important topics with my family, especially those dealing with health, safety and education, in order to know whether this information has been received and understood." KEY INFORMANTS-CSO

5.3 INFLUENCE

The various participants consider information broadcast by the international media and a few other national channels (the radio stations Ndéké Luka, Bangui FM, Guira FM and RJDH) to be more reliable than others, because of their production quality.

Information provided by religious leaders has a significant influence on people's daily lives, because not only is the information influential, but so is the person or the source transmitting it and the trust placed in this source.

For instance, messages related to prevention through protective measures have greatly influenced the daily behavior of those living in the Central African Republic: saying hello by shaking hands or by hugging a friend or relative has almost disappeared from practice. In front of entrances to some private facilities, many people have also set up a bucket of water and soap for all visitors to wash their hands.

The information best retained by the public concerns protective measures, the first signs of the disease and the lack of the effective treatment of the pandemic in our country. In addition to this is the question of the educational level of children following the suspension of classes due to the pandemic. Inhabitants of the Central African Republic fear a drop in the level of its students due to the noncompletion of school curricula. In the interviews, participants pointed out that, in other countries, classes were able to be delivered online, on the radio or on television, but in the Central African Republic, leaders had simply suspended classes from kindergarten to university without suggesting an alternative. The last subject remembered by the public concerns the impact of the pandemic on employment, through workforce reductions in several lines of business, resulting in unemployment for part of the population. ●●●

●●●

At the end of the surveys, we tested participants' ability to relay key information about COVID-19 that they have retained over the past two months. According to our results, 72% were able to state some information that they had learned about COVID-19 and 96% could state several protection measures against COVID-19. In the focus groups and individual interviews conducted mostly in Bangui, almost all participants were able to answer these questions.

MISINFORMATION AND ABILITY TO IDENTIFY RUMORS

The work conducted by Internews in partnership with several local media outlets on the identification of rumors, their spread, and the associated risks to communities highlighted the prevalence of rumors and other false information about COVID-19.

In our investigations, we cited claims to respondents, some true, others based on rumors, and asked them to evaluate

Table 14. COVID-19 Information Verification Test received and memorized by the population

If the interviewee can name at least two characteristics of COVID-19, check yes

CAN YOU PLEASE TELL US ONE OR TWO THINGS YOU HAVE LEARNT IN THE LAST MONTH ABOUT COVID-19?	NO 28%	YES 72%
CAN YOU PLEASE TELL US TWO OR THREE WAYS YOU CAN PROTECT YOURSELF AND FAMILY FROM GETTING COVID-19?	NO 4%	YES 96%

them. Only 44% of respondents were able to identify more than half of the rumors cited. Around 1 in 10 correctly identified all of the rumors. The importance and the degree of trust given to a person or a source of information is the key factor enabling someone to believe information or not.

This ability to distinguish rumors is about the same between men and women as well as among IDPs. However, it should be noted that the displaced are almost twice as likely as the general population to not recognize any rumor (18%). It varies by region: in particular, it is better in Bangui but not by much (only a 10% increase), in line with much better access to information (53% identified more than
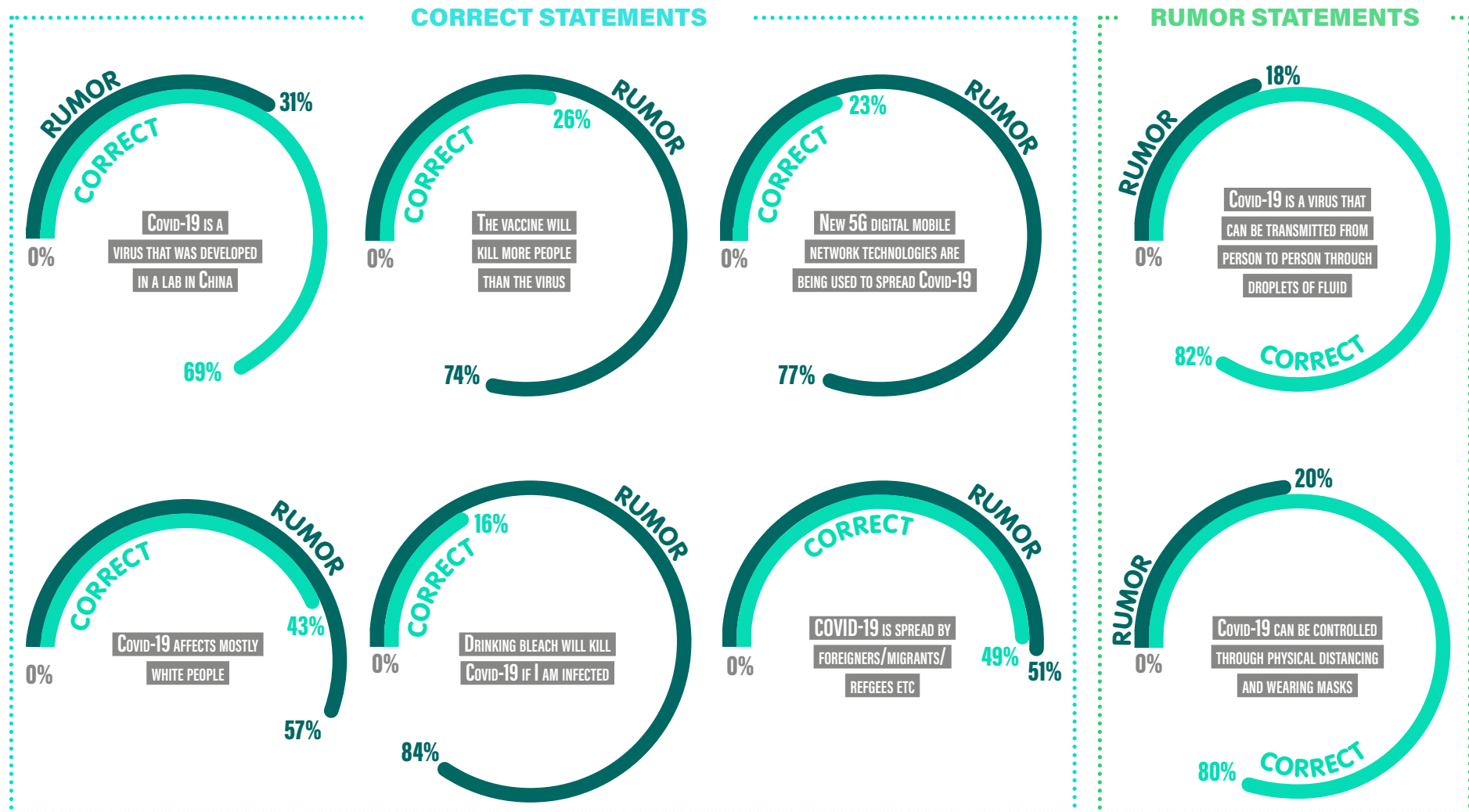
half of the rumors). Through the qualitative work, however, we see a trend among women, who often get their information through word of mouth from their young children, spouse or immediate family, to not recognize rumors as well as the men. But this trend is not reflected in the quantitative study.

In a perhaps counter-intuitive manner, young people are much better at identifying rumors: 57% of 15-24-year-olds identified more than half of the rumors versus 41% of over-24-year-olds. The fieldwork interviews confirmed this ability of young people to recognize many more rumors than their elders. ●●●

Table 15. Ability to identify rumors by the community

CORRECT STATEMENTS

RUMOR STATEMENTS

RUMOR
CORRECT
31%
0%
69%
Covid-19 is a virus that was developed in a lab in China

RUMOR
CORRECT
26%
0%
74%
The vaccine will kill more people than the virus

RUMOR
CORRECT
23%
0%
77%
New 5G digital mobile network technologies are being used to spread Covid-19

RUMOR
CORRECT
18%
0%
82%
Covid-19 is a virus that can be transmitted from person to person through droplets of fluid

RUMOR
CORRECT
43%
0%
57%
Covid-19 affects mostly white people

RUMOR
CORRECT
16%
0%
84%
Drinking bleach will kill Covid-19 if I am infected

RUMOR
CORRECT
49%
51%
0%
COVID-19 is spread by foreigners/migrants/refgees etc

RUMOR
CORRECT
20%
0%
80%
Covid-19 can be controlled through physical distancing and wearing masks

●●● The ability to identify rumors is directly linked to the level of information needs satisfaction. In general (not only connected with COVID-19): among respondents declaring that the information they had access to did not cover, covered very little, or only covered their needs in a basic sense, only 40% identified more than half of the rumors, while it was 52% for those who said their needs were well or quite well met. This trend remains the same if the effects of the respondents' age are isolated. On the other hand, the declared ability to identify rumors does not exactly correlate to the true ability: a quarter of the surveyed population who said they had low ability did indeed have more difficulty in identifying the rumors (only 38% identified more than half); but almost half of those who said they felt completely or generally capable barely did better (42% identified more than half) while those who said their ability was average actually did the best in our survey tests (52% identified more than half). ●

Table 16. Number of rumors identified (of 6) by age
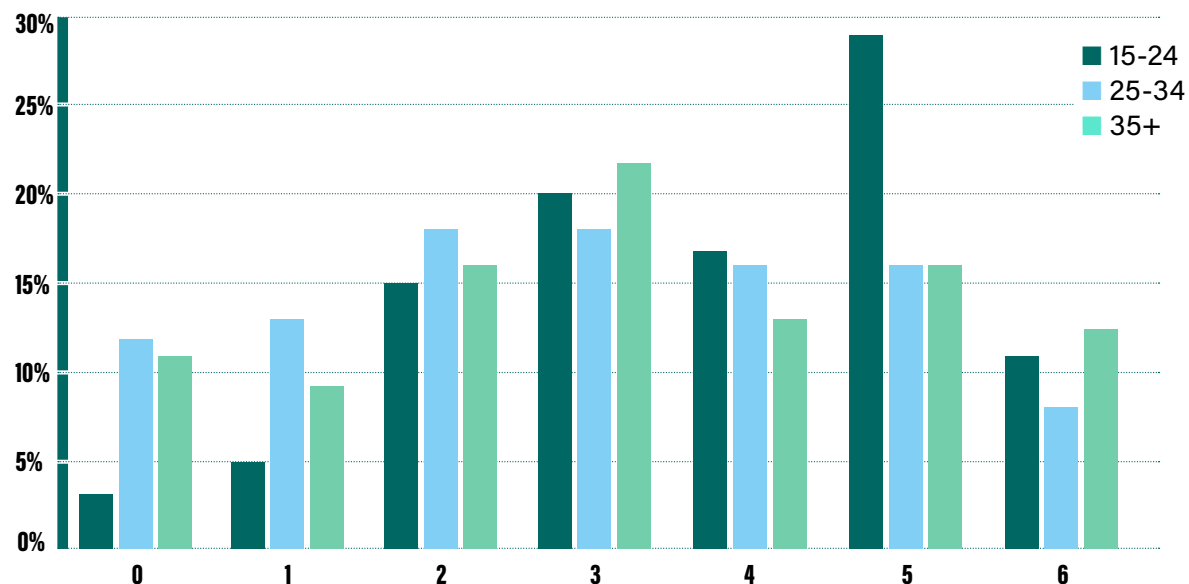
5.4 IMPACT ON KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, AND PRACTICES

nformation received on a daily basis greatly influences the lives of the general population, according to the qualitative data.

New information concerning COVID-19 greatly affects day-to-day life of the community. Protective measures such as handwashing and wearing masks have become new habits to integrate into our lives. According to the quantitative data, 42% of those surveyed said that new information received from various sources had impacted their habits in some way. ●●●

●●● At the beginning of the pandemic in Central Africa, restrictive measures were implemented by the government, such as a reduction in the number of passengers on public transport, mandatory wearing of masks and hand washing before entering banks, offices or supermarkets. Given the number of victims in developed countries, who, despite the medical infrastructure at their disposal, were unable to cope with the pandemic, a sense of fear arose in the subconscious of Central Africans. The rules were respected by the population even if they resulted in higher costs, for example for transportation. But after seeing that COVID-19 had fewer victims in the country, the community has seemed to relax in its application of protective measures since the pre-election period. Another phenomenon contributed to this: denials from the parents of so-called "fatal victims" of COVID-19 published by the media, claiming that the deceased did not die of COVID-19 but from other illnesses.

It is interesting to note that young people,

> **"The information I have received in the last few years has changed my life; I understand what's going in my society and in the world better; I have gained a lot of knowledge; I have become more stimulated and that helps guide my decision making."** KEY INFORMANTS-CSO

who seem better informed and more capable of recognizing rumors than their elders, thanks to their social network skills and their appetite for comparing and discussing information received, are also those who say they have most changed their behavior: 56% versus 42% of those surveyed.●

6.1 NATIONAL COVID-19 RESPONSE PLAN

Following the discovery of the first case, restrictive measures were prescribed by the Central African government as part of a speech given by the head of state on March 19, 2020. Since they were already present in a significant part of the Central African territory, NGOs very quickly mobilized funds and added communication actions for the fight against COVID-19 to their previous activities.

The government's rollout of preventive measures such as hand washing, social distancing and quarantine, essential to contain COVID-19, came up against several challenges, among them the low level of access to basic social services (water, healthcare, education) and the means of survival of largely poor populations in an insecure context.

The Pasteur Institute, with the support of the World Health Organization (WHO) and in conjunction with the Ministry of Health and of Population, organizes testing of suspected cases. A special treatment unit for confirmed cases has been set up in the Hôpital de l'Amitié with the support of the WHO. The humanitarian community is also conforming to the measures put in place by the government and the WHO.

The Ministry[9] of Public Health and Population, supported by the United Nations, organized two sessions to raise awareness on the Coronavirus pandemic for Central African media professionals (38 people). The objective was to strengthen the knowledge and capacity of Central African journalists, the writers of articles and reports on COVID-19, with the aim of information being treated in an objective, professional and responsible manner. Speaking on behalf of Central African media, the president of GEPPIC (Association of Private Independent Press Editors of Central Africa), Albert Mbaya, reaffirmed their availability to support the efforts of the government and its partners to slow the spread of this pandemic. *"We would like to see the establishment of a working framework between the Ministry of Public Health, its partners, and us. We are ready to provide our expertise and our communication tools. But the content of the messages must be drafted with health experts."* ●

6.2 HUMANITARIAN ACTORS ACTIVE ON COVID-19 RESPONSE

n May and June, when the number of positive cases skyrocketed, the government and the humanitarian team committed to a list of 20 priority locations for the decentralization of the COVID-19 response. In each of these towns, humanitarian participants are working to provide a multi-sectoral response in isolation and treatment centers, and to reduce the risk of the virus spreading in communities[10].

In summary, four strategic pillars of the multi-sectoral response have been put in place by humanitarian organizations to create a comprehensive response:
■ **medical care for infected persons**
■ **nutritional and dietary care in suspected cases**
■ **access to potable water and hygiene facilities (toilets, showers)**
■ **clear communication about different forms of COVID-19**

To save lives through their regular emergency response programs, humanitarians are now supporting the establishment and operation of these isolation and treatment units. Tents are erected or buildings repurposed, beds ordered, medical professionals trained, medicines transported and protective equipment made available. We will list a few participants to be aware of:

** PARTICIPANTS IN THE MEDICAL RESPONSE
■ **The WHO,** which has greatly supported the government in the prevention, screening and monitoring of positively diagnosed cases in Central African territory; it has also provided resources (including 26 oxygen concentrators) and trained laboratory assistants in the regions where screening is available;

■ **MSF,** which supports the health centers and hospitals by providing screening kits and training nursing staff;

■ **The CICR,** which supports treatment centers at the rural level, with both staff and equipment.

**PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION
■ **The NGO Internews,** which supports the media in training and the provision of reliable information surrounding COVID-19 to the population, by subsidizing the collaboration of radio stations for the production and broadcast of programs; it has organized training for media professional on coverage of the COVID-19 epidemic, to allow journalists to have all the available information on the virus in order to avoid the spread of unfounded rumors that could damage the fight against the pandemic;

■ **MINUSCA,** which raises awareness among the population, supports Central African Media staff in COVID-19 training and information, and offers prevention kits;   ●●●

●●● ■ **OCHA,** which coordinates (comes up with illustrations and message content related to COVID-19 on behalf of the humanitarian community) and disseminates the data collected related to COVID-19 as well as the security context, through humanitarian bulletins. It also financially supports local NGOs so that they can work in the fight against COVID-19 in their various sectors of activity;

■ **Humanity & Inclusion, BIOFORCE and CICR,** which have developed advertising commercials, in partnership with Internews, to raise awareness among the population to protect themselves against COVID-19. ●

6.3 RISK COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In the decentralizing strategy of the COVID-19 response,[11] the Ministry of Health and Population has implemented a community surveillance strategy. Communication was not part of it initially, as this committee was made up only of health experts and members of the government.

But after several meetings with members of the media and community and religious leaders, they realized that diversifying the sources of transmission was the best way for information to reach more of the public. This is how members of the media were integrated into the communication commission to serve as a mass transmission channel within the community, through radio stations and awareness-raising activities. The NGO Coordination Committee (CCO) and INSO (International NGO Safety Organization) are working in close collaboration, to coordinate information and share it with NGOs on the ground in Central African territory.

This work was made possible thanks to the establishment of communication focal points in certain towns, in order to transmit reliable information in the communities and to report the views of the communities to the NGO partners. For its part, as a coordinating body, OCHA collects the information available from other NGOs and, after consultation with the committee, publishes it on its website in order to make it accessible to all. Prevention messages developed by the communication committee were made available to the press and to all organizations involved in prevention.

Note that the communication committee is made up of two sub-committees, namely: the rumor monitoring sub-committee managed by a team from RJDH and UNICEF and the feedback sub-committee which works in direct partnership with the focal points responsible for collecting the opinions of the community and to collect certain information before relaying it to the commission.

The organizations set up a program to fight disinformation and rumors managed by the subcommittee responsible for monitoring rumors.[12] This strategy aims to strengthen community participation in intervention activities, monitor epidemiological trends in the community and better guide interventions. ●●●

6.4 RUMORS COLLECTION AND MONITORING, AND COMMUNITY FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

When COVID-19 arrived in the Central African Republic, the communication disseminated by the first crisis committee was not satisfactory, according to the group of experts who participated in the development of this document. ●●●

●●● Community-level surveillance teams are trained to conduct outreach activities to displaced and host communities around COVID-19 to prevent, detect and report suspicious cases and deaths in communities, monitor mild and moderate cases, refer severe cases and monitor contacts of infected people.

UNICEF and its partners are training more than 400 people in risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) activities, including regional health directors, district health leaders, health workers and community workers. Humanitarian agencies and the United Nations broadcast COVID-19 awareness messages over the radio. ●

"The more corrupt the production of information upstream, the more rumors gained ground downstream"

GROUP OF EXPERTS

●●● But since the integration of the media into the committee, a fact checking team funded by UNICEF is especially responsible for collecting and processing disinformation within the committee before it can reach the population.

Long before COVID-19, humanitarian actors invested in training communication actors in rumor management. In June 2018 in particular, the communication section of the MINUSCA, in collaboration with Internews, supported the HCC in the organization of a workshop called "Campaign for the prevention of hate speech and the spread of rumors" for journalists. Further training on media rumor management took place in 2019 and 2020, led by Search For Common Ground or Internews.

In March 2020, a workshop on rumor management initiated by the strategic communication and information section of MINUSCA brought together 120 participants from all social groups (young people, local authorities, community leaders and law enforcement). The aim

of this workshop was both to help these actors to engage in dialog, to better understand their communities in order to combat rumors, false information and incitement to hatred and, moreover, to identify leaders with real influence in their community.

COVID-19: RUMORS AND COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

In order to take an effective part in the communication around COVID-19, it is imperative that journalists and media actors be informed on the various themes related to this disease. To this end, 50 journalists participated in two awareness sessions on COVID-19, a joint activity of the Ministry of Health and the United Nations. At the same time, 118 community relays or communication focal points were briefed on key COVID-19 prevention messages by the communication and community engagement committee, in collaboration with the NGO Première Urgence. Subsequently, they were deployed within the communities to carry out awareness-raising, community mobilization and information-gathering

activities in the community, within the framework of the same communication committee. To do this, they work in conjunction with surveillance teams, trained to detect and report suspected cases and deaths within communities, monitor mild and moderate cases, refer severe cases and monitor contacts of infected people.

Despite the motivation of humanitarian actors in their response to COVID-19, messages related to this pandemic have not reached all regions of the country, due to lack of access everywhere in a context of instability.

To date, a fact checking association (AFC) bringing together several journalists and media representatives carries out activities within the RJDH. With support from **UNICEF, USAID** and **Internews,** these fact-checkers focus on verifying information (true or false) before it is broadcast to listeners. A weekly bulletin entitled **"Ekè Sioni Sango" (No to false information!)** is produced and distributed free of ●●●

●●● charge to listeners via networks social and media partners. A group of fact-checkers also exists at the Ndéké-luka radio station, where they produce an anti-rumor program called "Stop àtènè" meaning "Stop defamation". With the COVID-19 pandemic, many rumors are circulating[13] by word of mouth or via social networks, creating panic among the population, but thanks to the work of the AFC, people can verify these rumors and behave accordingly. *"When tracking a rumor, we take a two-step approach. First, we analyze the degree of risk the rumor could generate, then, we fact check it with our sources. For example, in early March, there was a rumor going round that coronavirus did not exist in the Central African Republic. We understood that this message was harmful to the public and threw ourselves into research. We worked together with specialists (virologists, healthcare professionals, and government authorities) to prove that the COVID-19 pandemic was real and does, of course, exist in the Central African Republic, so that the public would acknowledge the risks. After this verification, we started to target the untruths on members' and partners' pages, and even on the radio."* AFC Member.

Despite efforts from the media and fact checkers to successfully stop this misinformation from being spread among the population, there are still rumors regarding treatments for COVID-19 (e.g., drinking coffee or ginger can cure COVID-19) and the vaccine (e.g., the vaccine destined for Africa is, in fact, a deadlier version of COVID-19 intended to wipe out the African people). These kinds of rumors spread extremely quickly throughout the community, many of whom have not received any formal education. The fieldwork shows that only 36% of participants are concerned about the level of disinformation in their locality. ●

6.5 IDENTIFIED GAPS IN INFORMATION NEEDS AND PROGRAMMING

While humanitarian workers, the government, and the media are working together to spread messages on COVID-19 in French and Sango, they are not reaching the whole population, particularly those who live in remote regions not covered by radio broadcasts, people who do not have the financial means to buy batteries for their radios, and those do not understand French or Sango.

These are the information gaps in a nutshell:

▶ Not all areas of the Central African territory are covered by radio or mobile networks, which prevents regular feedback from trained and deployed focal points.

▶ While some members of the community receive the messages broadcast, not all have the financial means to obtain water, soap, or protective masks. This means that some members of the community receive the messages, but are unable to apply them in their daily lives, which creates a sense of frustration or indifference, as the messages have not been adapted to their reality. In more general terms, this lack of attention from the community and the lack of two-way communication undermines the trust the general public has in humanitarian workers.

▶ Frequent displacement linked to conflict also prevents some groups from accessing this information.

▶ Messages and radio programs are not always broadcast in every language found in the country, which deprives certain audiences from being able to understand them.

▶ Some religious leaders choose to ignore government and humanitarian watchwords regarding the use of protective measures.

▶ Humanitarian workers who wish to carry out an activity in conflict zones where the government is inexistent must approach the group leader (regarded as the leader of the specific location) to inform them about the project to be put into operation in their zone, and to seek their approval. This also applies to awareness-raising campaigns, distribution, and humanitarian aid. Without this armed leader's approval, humanitarian organizations could potentially be unable to act.

▶ Community radio stations in specific parts of the country have been the target of looting during the various crises the country has witnessed, thus depriving the surrounding community access to information. ●

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VII. KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS –
Towards a healthier information ecosystem

7.1 KEY FINDINGS ON THE INFORMATION LANDSCAPE AND THE COMMUNITIES' INFORMATION PRACTICES

The health and informational response to COVID-19 has weakened over time and scarcely reaches the most vulnerable, remote groups

In the Central African Republic, communications made in response to the pandemic have been aimed at raising awareness, prevention, and monitoring people who have arrived in the area from zones where the disease is transmitted locally. The Central African Republic's governmental COVID-19 crisis management committee was swiftly supported thanks to the mobilization of humanitarian workers present in the country.

Nonetheless, the World Health Organization's recommendations to protect against the virus are not feasible for all, since water and soap are in short supply. This discrepancy is a weakening factor when it comes to gaining the public's interest in the messages being communicated. Moreover, most of the communication attempts are based on a vertical approach that is centered on communicating preformatted key messages with little dialogue or engagement with the targeted groups. The inability that humanitarian workers encounter to carry out their role in certain areas has also prevented the right information from being spread. Community mobilizers and traditional town criers that spread information among the public are not able to ensure that information is reported back (to humanitarian workers and public authorities). ●●●

●●● The combined efforts in the fight against COVID-19 have lost intensity and were even overshadowed during the electoral campaign, breeding a sense of laxity in the public towards even the most basic protective measures, such as wearing a mask and social distancing. People gather in public transport, public places, and places of worship, and many believe that the epidemic is over.

In sites for the internally displaced, living conditions threaten to create a breeding ground for the disease, as shelters are unclean, very close to one another, and protective measures are often forgotten. Those tasked with communicating with the people living in these sites must work with these communities to find fitting solutions.

SOME STRONG FOUNDATIONS WITHIN THE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

In urban areas, information is accessible all the time and through various channels, via radio, online media, television and face-to-face communication. In the provinces, community radio stations are accessible at certain hours of the day, door-to-door campaigns and information exchanges between relatives allow the community to keep itself informed at all levels, without however being enough to quell rumors.

Young people in the community seem to be more adept at informing themselves, detecting rumors and other elements of misinformation, mainly because it is more common to have access to multiple sources, notably through online media and social networks. These skills are a resource upon which communities can rely.

The humanitarian sector plays an important role as an information provider and a financial partner for several media outlets. The preexisting presence of humanitarian agencies in CAR has enabled them to quickly launch, in partnership with the media, mass awareness campaigns through radio stations, field awareness officers in accessible neighborhoods and villages as well as text messaging campaigns (see for example the messages from MdM, INSO and from the government). At the beginning of the pandemic, close cooperation between international NGOs and local NGOs in the process of mass awareness-raising and the distribution of essential kits to the population and to IDPs made it possible to reach many communities.

A CENTRAL CHALLENGE: WIDESPREAD DISTRUST

After decades of crisis, distrust seems to be a generalized phenomenon in Central Africa, not only a distrust toward institutions but also beyond, toward information coming from sources close to the community, such as community leaders and other informal officials, and even with regard to information from relatives.

Almost 40% of Central Africans say they have no confidence or very little confidence in community media and the local authorities (38%), community ●●●

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leaders, and friends and family (40%), to learn about COVID-19. The overall mistrust, even within families, appears to be a foundational element of the country's social and informational landscape.

The sources of information that partially escape this lack of confidence are religious leaders (52% of those surveyed trust them "absolutely" or "highly") and health workers active in the community (44% trust "absolutely" or "highly").

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES THROUGHOUT THE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM WHICH LARGELY EXPLAIN WHY PEOPLE'S INFORMATION NEEDS ARE NOT MET

Generally speaking, the Central African population considers itself under-informed: over half of those surveyed say that the information to which they have access "does not meet" or "hardly meets" their needs and less than 10% say they have all the necessary information. The same is true of the various issues linked to COVID-19, especially the means of infection and prevention measures.

Beyond the language question, and despite the existence of a significant number of community radio stations, the production and broadcast of information does not really meet people's expectations in terms of local information. Little content about COVID-19 broadcast in the media (particularly radio) is developed and produced outside Bangui. Content heard on community radio stations in the provinces doesn't reflect local reality and listeners don't recognize themselves in what they hear.

Many challenges explain the difficulties encountered by the various actors in the ecosystem, notably:

▶ The basic difficulty faced by the media when it comes to accessing information sources and experts, because of the reluctance of the institutions and organizations to which these people belong, who prefer to decline offers to speak;

▶ A great disparity which limits the activity of the media and humanitarian workers in large cities and accessible villages. The limited reach or even total absence of media in isolated areas limits the offering of information in awareness presentations conducted by humanitarian agents and religious leaders;

▶ The systematic unavailability of information in the languages most spoken in the community outside of Bangui and especially within the IDPs who migrate from one place to another;

▶ The low level of basic education in the population which complicates their understanding of the information received and their ability to fight effectively against the disease;

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▶ The high cost and low quality of Internet connection which hinders access to online information, particularly for young people;

▶ The persistence of very serious security problems and the influence of militias over a part of the territory. Insecurity prevents the installation of media in certain areas and excludes humanitarian workers as well, thus denying people access to information. In 2020, 424 incidents directly affecting humanitarian goods or personnel were reported compared to 309 in 2019, which is 39% more.

The electoral period (before, during and after the elections) can also be seen as a threat to communication about COVID-19, posters to promote awareness about the pandemic were replaced by those of the candidates for the presidential and legislative elections, communication about COVID-19 was neglected and people, particularly young people, were encouraged to gather for candidates' meetings without respecting social distancing measures.

HUMANITARIAN WORKERS WITH AN ESSENTIAL ROLE BUT WHO TOO OFTEN REMAIN IN A VERY TOP-DOWN APPROACH LIMITING THEIR IMPACT

As mentioned above, humanitarians play an important role in providing information (directly and through their support of the media). With 37% of those polled in our survey saying they have high or absolute trust in humanitarian workers, they do not however enjoy greater trust from the population than many other sources such as state media or friends and family.

Humanitarian workers often seek support from local resources. For example, certain members of IDP groups, especially the directors or block delegates, have received training from humanitarian workers in preventing COVID-19 and social cohesion so that they can learn how to raise awareness among their peers by going door to door or by moving through the refugee camps with megaphones.

However, the inadequacy of bidirectional communication mechanisms and, more generally, mechanisms for feedback from the community, in particular those who are most vulnerable, remain a major obstacle. The community's inability to listen has created a discrepancy between the recommended actions and people's ability to follow them. This discrepancy plays a part in discouraging the community, and sometimes even turning them away from the information and the channels that provide it. The inadequacy of the mechanism for following up on feedback is another weak point. Even if rural personnel have been trained for this role, the fragile security situation, the lack of mobile network coverage, and other reasons have prevented these community representatives from submitting reports in real time.●

7.2 KEY FINDINGS ON HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND INFORMATION DYNAMICS

As a result of this research on the information ecosystem, and based on the various results, recommendations for key actions are suggested for the various players involved in the response to COVID-19. The recommendations are grouped by types of players and prioritized in order of importance.

For the media (and their partners)

■ **Increase information about COVID-19 in local languages and in languages spoken in targeted populations** (including internally displaced populations) -- in particular by emphasizing more shared content and co-produced content, given the constraints in terms of resources;

■ **Develop formats for bidirectional communication,** in order to give the communities more opportunities to speak, and to gather testimonies of their experiences and also about their needs in terms of information -- for example participatory radio broadcasts or street interviews produced locally with members of the community/audience from the same radio station.

■ **Improve the technical quality of broadcast content** in order to improve the listening quality and therefore increase the audience and media impact-- in particular for radio where the poor sound quality (quiet voice, disturbances from interfering wavelengths...) and the interruption of the broadcast due to frequent electricity outages;

■ **Pursue efforts to strengthen the professional abilities of journalists** -- in particular local media -- especially with regard to techniques for verifying information and dealing with rumors.

For humanitarian actors

■ **Put the lived reality of the populations in the field at the center of communication about preventative measures** -- especially taking into account the difficulties in accessing water and soap -- in order to recommend realistic protective measures;

■ **Collaborate more closely with religious leaders and health workers, both trusted sources of information** - in particular make pertinent and useful information about COVID-19 available to them so they can pass along this information in their own way to the people;

■ **Train youth, women, and community representative leaders on communication and the fight against rumors within the community.** Despite limited trust, these local players often remain essential sources of information and improving their ability to discern and verify could contribute to limiting disinformation as well as help bolster their trusted status within the community;

■ **Improve mechanisms of direct exchange with communities (and especially those with the most vulnerable members),** including better understanding their informational needs - in particular using other directed activities to combine them with awareness-raising activities and dialogue especially, and better share the information gathered and improve its inclusion in programming;

■ **Organize the sharing of information with national and local media outlets** -- through authorized media hubs, making their expertise available and opening up our sharing practices to include more than press conferences or pre-formatted messages;

■ **Explore the possibility of distributing solar-powered radios,** especially in the most remote locations and within the most vulnerable groups, since buying batteries seems to be a hindrance to listening to the radio.

For government authorities and armed groups

■ **Promote the spread of verified information with as much transparency as possible** in an attempt to regain the trust that was lost during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic - in particular make COVID-19 related data available (number of people tested, positive cases, how many have recovered and how many deaths per locality, etc.); improve and organize the access to information (in particular though those who have been trained and authorized to speak) for both central and regional media; facilitate access for the families of victims and those who have recovered from COVID-19 in order to broadcast their testimonies;

■ **Prioritize information about raising awareness about COVID-19,** especially during the election cycle or when any other particular issue is flooding the information networks, which risks reinforcing the feeling that the COVID-19 epidemic is over in CAR;

■ For armed groups: allow humanitarian workers, journalists, and development partners to freely access the entire country

For communities and community leaders

■ **Take note that young people seem to be the most competent at identifying rumors and verifying information, and give them a more central role** in the sharing of information within the community;

■ **Be more sharply aware of the rumors and disinformation at work regarding COVID-19 and expand the avenues of seeking trusted and verified information** via radio, online media, or face to face conversations with trusted sources;

■ For religious leaders: take note of the responsibility associated with having the community's trust and make **a proactive effort to learn about COVID-19 and share high-quality information with the communities.** ●

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND CREDITS

ANNEXES

List of Key Informants

	Names
Focus Groups	Local youth council for the 8th arrondissement
	Local youth council for the 5th Arrondissement
	Widows' Association for the 4th Arrondissement
	Collective of Crisis Victims in Central Africa
	Groups of Internally Displaced Persons in Berberati
	Kemo Youth and Women's Group
Humanitarian workers	Francis BATALINGAYA, OCHA Office Manager
	Maxime NAMA, Communications Officer for OCHA
	Maxin TATA, MERL Search for Common Ground
	Franklin Moliba-Sese, Head of COVID-19 Communications in CAR - UNICEF
CSO	Bertin Botto, President of the AEVI Association
	OUAKOUMA Tanguy, Head of Study and Research / ICASEES
	Christian Diamant MOSSORO-KPINDE, virologist specializing in bacterial virology, Biologist et Lecturer at Bangui University
	Marie POUNEMATI, Coordinator / IDP Aviation Site, Bambari
Ministry of Communication	Omer SAMBIA, Representative for the Ministry of Communication on the COVID-19 crisis committee
Press	Heritier NDOUYE MBATA, Secretary General to the Administrative Council / radio Voice of Mbomou, Bangassou
	Gael MOKOM, Journalist / radio Voix de la Pende de Paoua
	Auguste GBOGBO, RMCC Coordinator
	George Vernier KPIZINGO, Director of communication / Radio Centrafrique
	Sylvestre SOKAMBI, President of RJDH

KEY INFORMANTS MAP AND METHODOLOGY

PROJET ROOTED IN TRUST

La confiance en berne – l'information sur la COVID-19 au cœur d'une crise multiple en Centrafrique

Carte des informateurs clés et des enquêtés

SITUATION OF LOCAL BROADCAST RADIO STATIONS (AS OF 15 OCTOBER 2019)
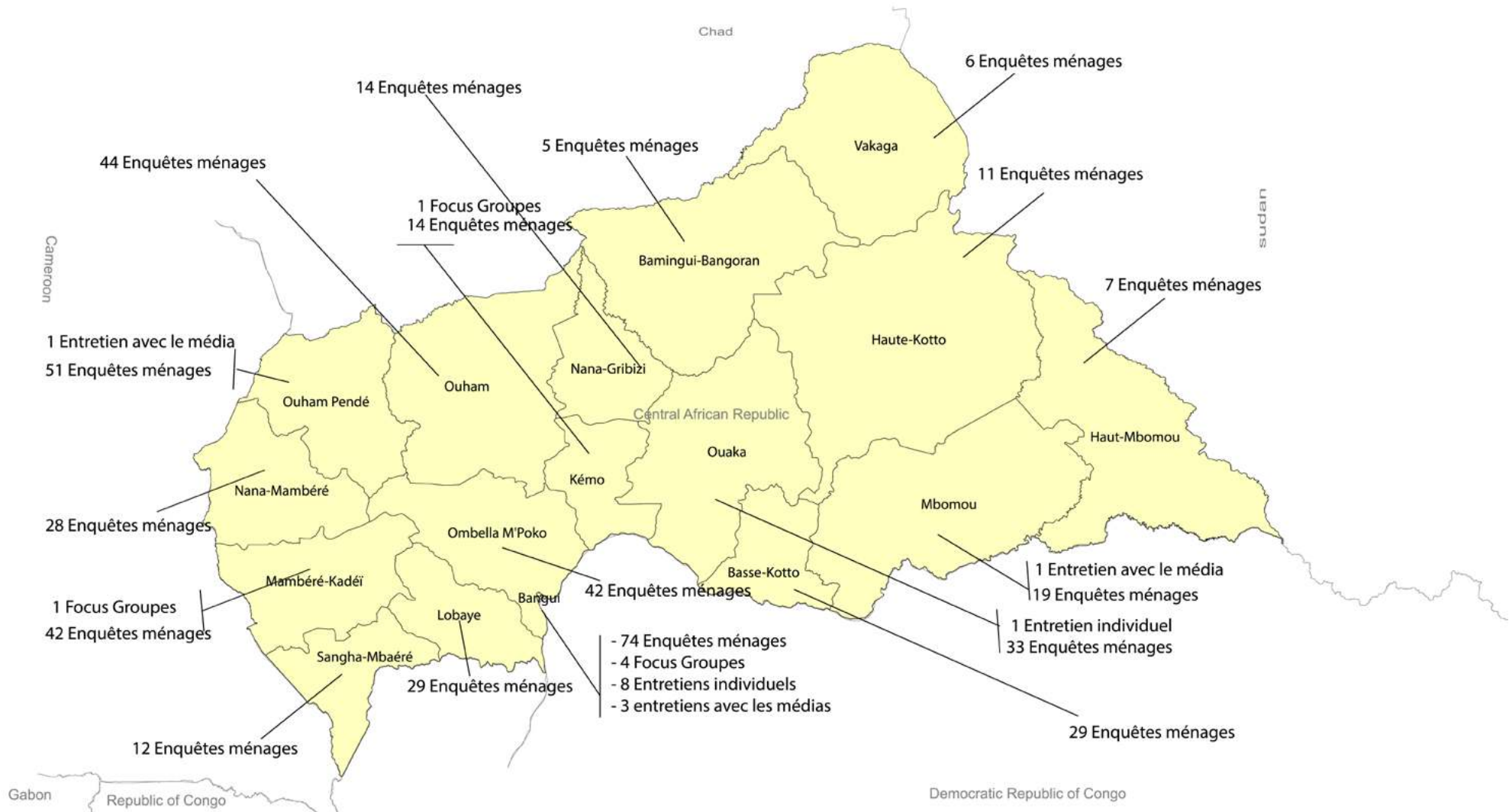
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ROOTED IN **TRUST**

CONFIDENCE AT HALF-MAST
Information at the heart
of the COVID-19 crisis in CAR