



LUGARA

Humanitarian Bulletin # 1

March 2022

Introduction to the project

Internews' Rooted in Trust (RiT) 2.0 is a global pandemic information response project aimed at countering the unprecedented scale and speed of the spread of rumors and misinformation. The RiT 2.0 project is funded by the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID-BHA).

For more information about the project, please visit: <https://tinyurl.com/tvtjsvb7>

This Humanitarian Bulletin has been reviewed and approved by the South Sudan, Ministry of Health

This is Rooted in Trust

Internews' Rooted in Trust (RiT) 2.0 in South Sudan aims to respond to rumors, misinformation, and fake news that can shape negative public perceptions and be critical risk to the COVID-19 response in the country. The RiT 2.0 South Sudan is being implemented in six states: Central Equatoria, Eastern Equatoria, Unity, Upper Nile, Lakes and Jonglei states and the Greater Pibor Administration Area. Under the RiT 2.0 South Sudan project, Internews aims to address COVID-19 misinformation and rumors by collecting and analyzing feedback and concerns of communities; by helping humanitarian actors and health organizations to respond to these concerns by providing fact-checked information.

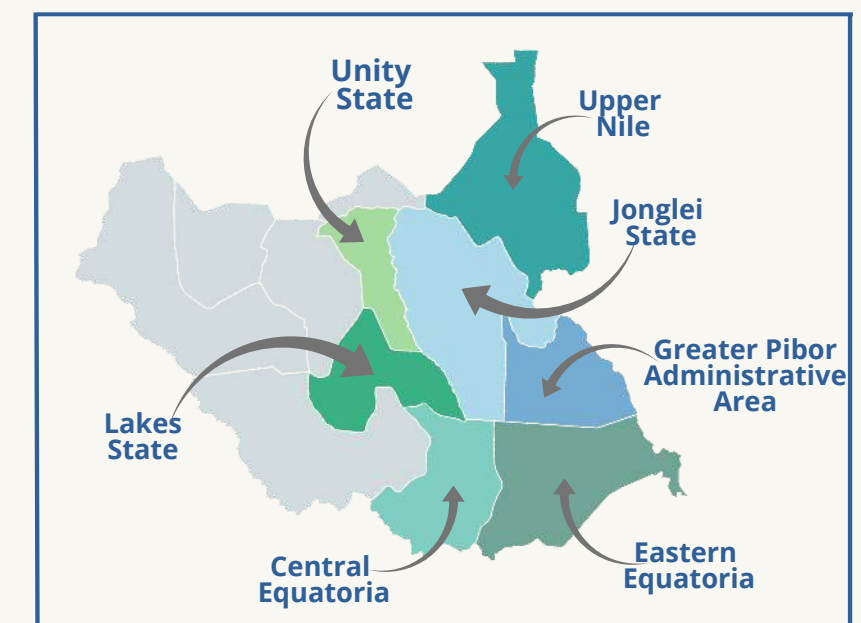
About this Lugara humanitarian bulletin

The Lugara Humanitarian Bulletin is an output of Internews under the Internews' Rooted in Trust (RiT) 2.0 South Sudan project. This bulletin is created to provide an analysis of COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccine related rumor trends and explores citizen concerns across the project's geographic locations in South Sudan it highlights the potential impacts of these rumors and concerns on communities and humanitarian and health programming. It provides contextual and deep analysis on the citizen concerns and rumors trends explains the "why" behind the concerns and the potential impacts for the communities and humanitarian programming.

It also provides practical recommendations on how humanitarian partners can better respond to these concerns and rumors in their existing and future programming.

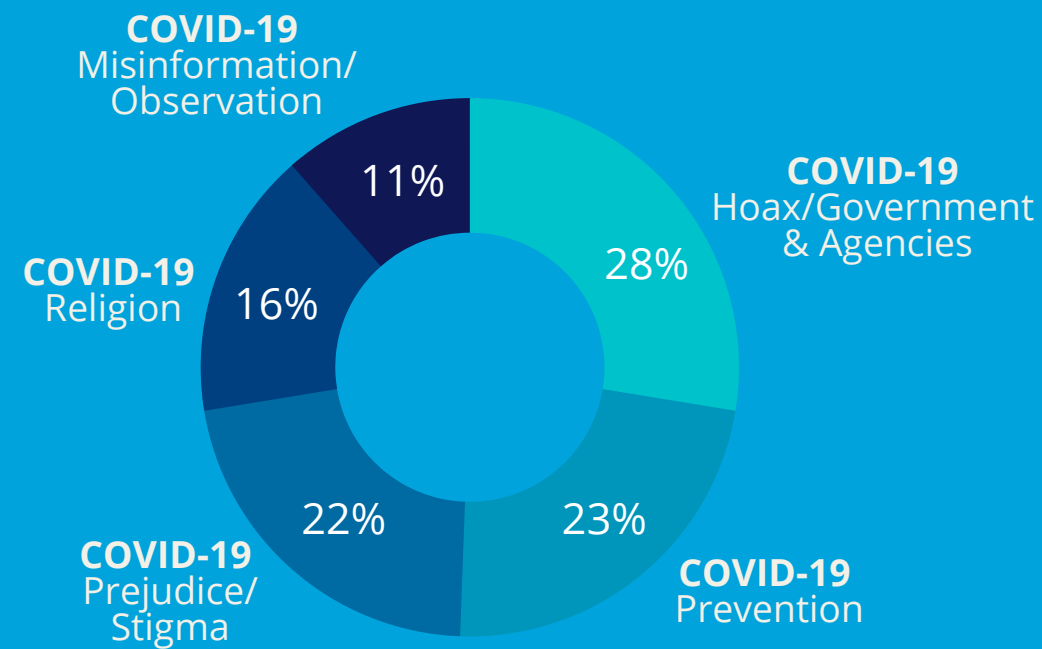
Methodology

For this bulletin, Internews in South Sudan analyzed a total of 200 concerns of community members, including feedback on aid activities of humanitarian actors and government policies and programs and rumors collected between 1 January and 31 March 2022. Citizen concerns were collected in focus group discussions (*with listeners of our partner radio stations*), by our community correspondents and via audience feedback through call-in opportunities in radio shows of our partners across South Sudan.

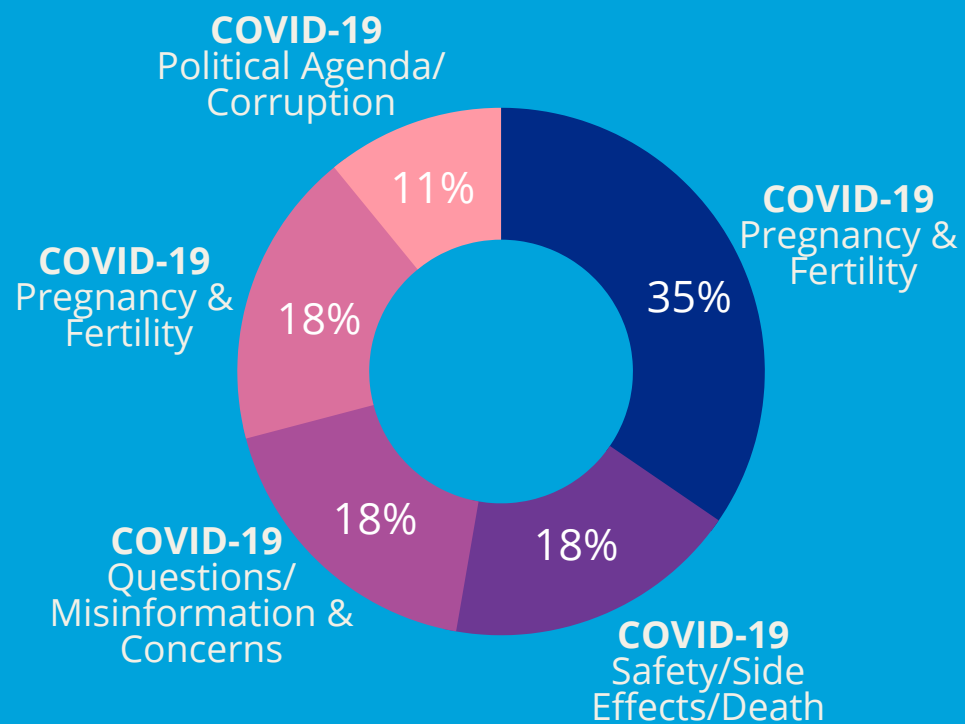


South Sudan Rooted in Trust 2.0 project areas

COVID-19: General - 122 Rumors



COVID-19: Vaccines - 78 Rumors



These community concerns, feedback and rumors were received from five media partners part of Internews' Rooted in Trust (RiT) 2.0 in South Sudan: Singaita 88.3 FM in Eastern Equatoria; Mingkaman 100 FM, in Lakes District; TRC Hub - Juba, in Central Equatoria; Advance Youth Radio, in Central Equatoria; Voice of Reconciliation 98.4 FM in Jonglei State.

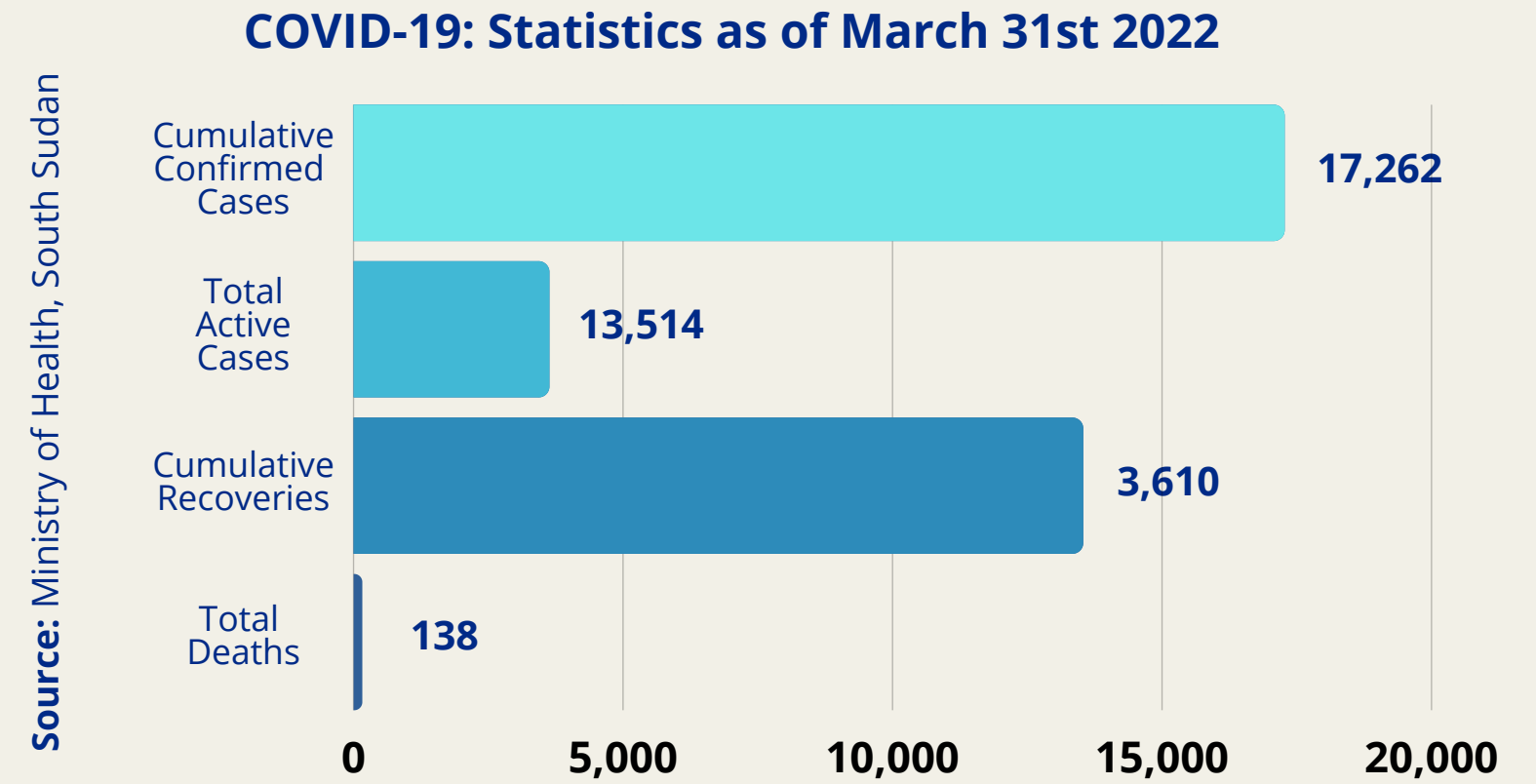
The feedback and rumors were first categorized by two main themes - COVID-19 general and COVID-19 vaccines. The feedback was further categorized by various sub themes – including, for example, transmission, denial, risk levels, fear for consequences of getting ill, fear for consequences of getting vaccinated, criticism of health programming, appreciation for work of COVID-19 response workers, etc. The analysis quantified the frequency of concerns and coded them thematically. Community concerns that were most frequently heard or were most concerning in terms of risk are highlighted below. The most concerning trends were selected, and detailed information provided on the potential impact of the rumor; and fact-checks were also provided.

Overview of concerns, rumors and feedback data

Many concerns related to COVID that were shared by both men and women across four states during the reporting period focused on questioning the existence of COVID-19 or how COVID-19 was no longer a “*disease to be worried about*”. Some people believed that the pandemic had come to a halt now or believed “*COVID-19 is over*” and that COVID-19 is a project or business for government and agencies to mobilize resources and donor funding. The analysis also showed existence of frequent rumors with xenophobic, racist or prejudicial content about a particular group spreading the virus. The claims that COVID-19 is a disease of, or spread by whites, educated people and travelers; and that COVID-19 doesn't affect black people, Africans or Christians.

The other frequent collected related to COVID-19 prevention were claims that it is possible to prevent getting ill with COVID-19 infection by eating certain foods (*wild fruits, fish cow's milk*) or doing exercise. Religion-related rumors were also common: they say that COVID-19 is devil's work, attributed to the call center 6666, and prayers can protect from COVID-19 infection or can heal.

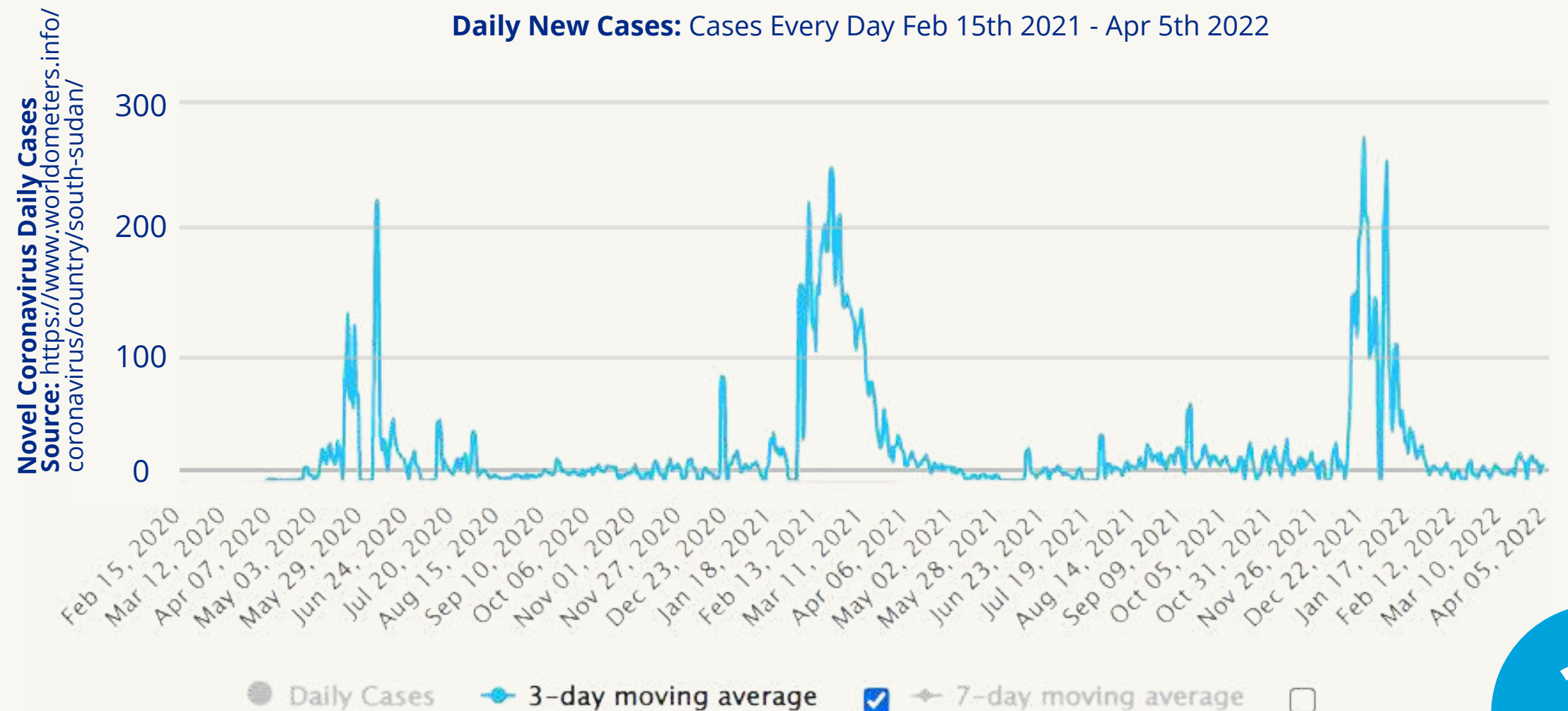
Regarding COVID-19 vaccine rumor trends, many rumors, feedbacks and sentiments were also shared with our partners. The most frequent rumors and feedbacks focused on the beliefs that COVID-19 vaccine causes infertility in both men and women; and many people expressed fear for taking the vaccine. The concerns over the safety of COVID-19 vaccine and claims of potential for harm were the second most frequent feedback collected by partners. The rumors focused on claims that the vaccine causes harm, reduces sexual performance and that vaccinated people will die after some years. Some people have questions as to why there is a need to get vaccinated considering the low number of cases and that because they feel that young people who are strong are less prone to infections. The rumor data analysis also revealed many positive sentiments about COVID-19 vaccination. Many people reported that vaccinations work, save lives and shared encouraging remarks for people to be vaccinated.



COVID-19 situation overview in South Sudan

On 31 March 2022 there are a total of 17,262 positive COVID-19 cases in South Sudan, 13,507 patients recovered from the virus and a total of 138 people died from getting infected with the COVID-19 virus, reports the Ministry of Health in South Sudan¹. The number of cases decreased significantly when the third wave was at its peak. As of 31st March 2022, 613,286 vaccine doses have been administered in South Sudan and 521,045 persons were fully vaccinated, reported South Sudan's Ministry of Health.

¹ <https://moh.gov.ss/covid-19.php>



Rumor Theme/Trend 1: COVID-19 and risk perception/prevention

“There's no COVID-19 in South Sudan anymore because people don't follow the measures like in the beginning of the virus”, a woman in her thirties from Bor Town, Jonglei State.

What is behind this rumor?

In response to this decline, the government in South Sudan lifted the partial lock down as of February 1, 2022. In the media, many people shared their observation that there is a less visible focus on COVID-19 response activities by the government and health & humanitarian partners. This may be risky, explains a woman in her forties from Juba: ***“Since the Ministry stopped announcing the COVID-19 positive cases, many people became reluctant to follow rules”***. Another woman in her thirties from Kapoeta, Eastern Equatoria, said, ***“I think COVID-19 is no longer there, the government has to create more awareness if it is still existing”***.

This concern also has to do with risk perceptions and prioritization. Some people who spoke with Internews compare the risk of COVID-19 infection with other competing priorities, needs and challenges and claim that COVID-19 is not a problem to worry about. A man in his forties from Bor town, Jonglei State, put it as follows: ***“COVID-19 doesn't matter anymore, what matters is the lack of food and treatment as many people don't have jobs”***.

The above observations, claims and rumors are further reinforced by other persistent rumors circulating in South Sudan which have for long been questioning the existence of COVID-19. Also, there are conspiracies that COVID-19 is a hoax, or a government agencies' plot to mobilize resources or prejudice and stigma that COVID-19 is spread by other specific groups. This includes racist and wrong notions that COVID-19 only spreads to black people.

Why is this important?

The above concerns are persistent rumors and very concerning as they are widely spread in South Sudan and are false. The rumors affect the public perception about the risk of COVID-19, its effect on health, and reinforce a wider low risk perception negatively affecting preventive measures or informed decision making on getting vaccinated. These have a direct negative effect discouraging people from observing the guidelines and practicing prevention measures.

Fact checks: COVID-19 is a real and ongoing community transmission

COVID-19 is still present in South Sudan as indicated by the daily COVID-19 updates issued by the South Sudan MoH. The statistics by MoH indicate 3610 COVID-19 active cases under follow up in the country as of March 31st, 2021.²

Between 15 December and 30 March 2022, more than 30% of all people who got tested on COVID-19 were positive, with 40-50% scoring positive outside of Juba.³ The fact that the COVID-19 reported cases are only from a limited number of facilities in the country doesn't represent a declining number of cases. In fact, COVID-19 statistics indicate there currently ongoing community transmission of COVID-19 in South Sudan. The World Health Organization (WHO) has also reiterated that the virus is still dangerous.

Source: <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/coronavirus-disease-covid-19#>

Recommendations for Humanitarian and Health Partners

COVID19 may not be a priority for communities, as we have seen throughout different African countries, and even more in this phase of the pandemic. Organizations should not ignore these conflicting priorities and we could recommend them to insert COVID19 prevention measures in their routine communication efforts on other health priorities, encouraging partners to have comprehensive campaigns that talk to all concerns from the community.

² https://moh.gov.ss/daily_updates.php

³ https://moh.gov.ss/daily_updates.php

Humanitarian and health partners could partner with local media partners in their operation areas and provide information on the local COVID-19 situation and response activities regularly. Furthermore, it will be important to focus on strengthening COVID-19 information and care into existing health and other services and to continue discussion with communities about the risk of infection.

Rumor theme 2: COVID-19 vaccines and safety/fertility

“I have not received the vaccine because they said when young people are vaccinated, they will become infertile, and I am still young. I don’t want to risk my life with this vaccine”, says a man in his twenties from Kapoeta South.

“I will never get vaccinated because it kills a person in five years according to what I was told by a lot of people”, says a woman in her twenties from Bor, in Jonglei State.

What is behind this rumor?

This rumor related to fertility can easily create fear considering the socio-cultural expectation for married people in South Sudan to have as many children as possible and a related high social status attributed to having a big family size. Not being able to have children or not to perform sexually is a serious societal taboo in South Sudan and can have a very real impact on a person’s social standing and ability to marry. The rumor that the COVID-19 vaccines cause infertility is persistent and spreading in various areas of the country and is frequently shared both on social networks and verbally.

Secondly, misunderstanding and limited knowledge on comprehension of the basic science behind how the vaccine works among community health and outreach workers as well as local media, continues to result in misinformation about COVID-19 vaccine safety. This has impact on uptake of life-saving vaccines.

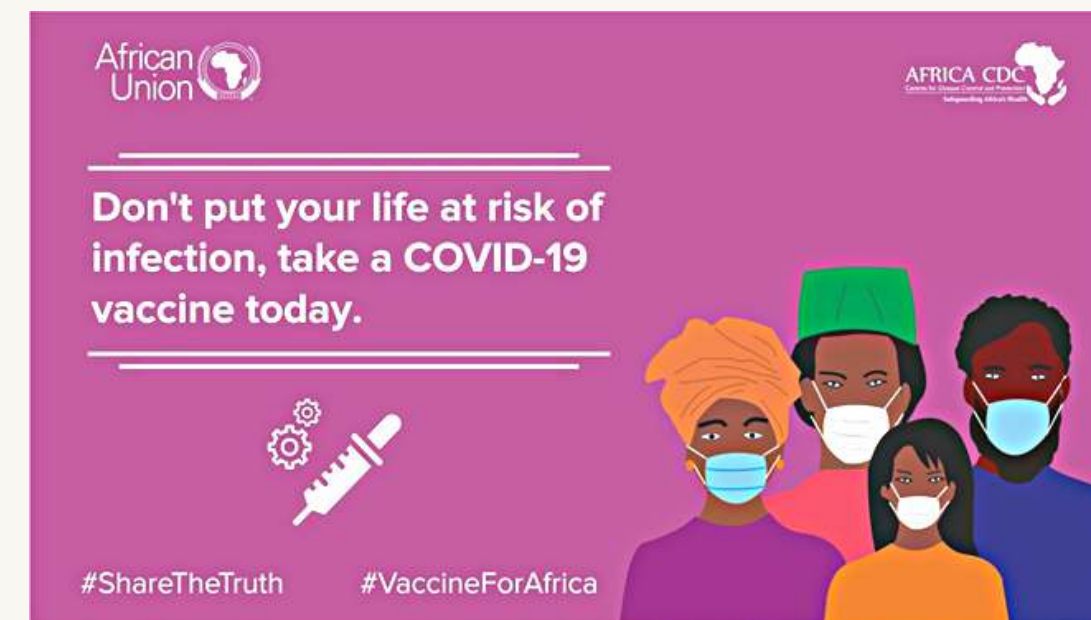
Fact Check: COVID-19 vaccines do not cause infertility

COVID-19 vaccines do not cause people to become infertile, say UNICEF and other scientists worldwide.⁴ COVID-19 vaccines are safe to use when trying to conceive and during pregnancy. In fact, COVID-19 vaccines will not make a pregnant woman any more likely to have a miscarriage and they do not affect the sperm count of a man. In fact, it is the other way around: recent infection with COVID-19 can cause lower fertility.⁵

As such, it is much better to get vaccinated for COVID-19 when you are trying to get pregnant. In a recent study from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in the United States, researchers analyzed data from more than 2,000 couples who were trying to conceive. They found that couples in which one or both partners had been vaccinated were no less likely than other couples to conceive. In fact, in some circumstances, people ill with COVID-19 were less fertile during and shortly after infection.

It is also much safer for women who are or want to get pregnant to get vaccinated. Pregnant people infected by COVID-19 are three times more likely to

need critical care than people who aren’t pregnant, say scientists who studied the effect of the COVID-19 vaccines. Death is rare in pregnant people, but COVID-19 causes a significant increase in that risk.⁶



⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/en/stories/vaccine-against-covid-19-does-not-cause-sterility>

⁵ <https://covid19.nih.gov/news-and-stories/more-evidence-covid-19-vaccines-do-not-cause-infertility>

⁶ <https://theconversation.com/why-pregnant-people-should-get-vaccinated-for-covid-19-a-material-care-expert-explains-176543>

Why is this important?

According to a study conducted in several countries, women are way less likely to get vaccinated and one of the reasons is their mistrust on vaccines. This puts them comparatively at higher risk, also when their access to health information and health services may be lower.

Source: <https://www.careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/Gender-gaps-in-vaccines-October-2021.pdf>

Recommendations for humanitarian and health partners

- Humanitarian and health organizations should continue monitoring the spread of these kind of rumors and the potential spillover to other vaccination efforts among women, especially women of childbearing age group.
- According to the 2021 South Sudan National Audience survey, radio is a preferred channel of communication that most women are using to access information. The findings of media ownership disaggregated by gender also showed that women are far less likely than men to own phones, while radio ownership does not vary substantially by gender.
Source: https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Internews_SouthSudan_2021-10.pdf
- Churches and other religious spaces as well as women leaders and religious are relevant ways to reach women groups to provide fact checked information and address concerns or questions.



Contact details

For more information about COVID-19 please call the toll-free number **6666**.

For more information, visit <https://moh.gov.ss/>.

If you want to contribute to or provide feedback on this Lugara Humanitarian Bulletin or have information to share, please contact:

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