

## COVID-19 Infodemic Trends in ESAR – April 2022

### Scope

This report presents operational recommendations based on COVID-19 online and offline community feedback trends analysis in the East and Southern African Region (ESAR) for the month of April 2022. It aims to enable evidence-based decision-making at regional and national levels.

**Two key themes** related to COVID-19 emerged from social listening and community feedback:

1. Vaccine safety and efficacy
2. Vaccines are weakening immune systems

**The trend to watch** related to concerns over future COVID-19 issues:

Continued beliefs that the pandemic has ended.

### Key Themes

#### #1 - Vaccine safety and efficacy

**Botswana, Eswatini, Kenya, Lesotho, Namibia, Rwanda, Seychelles, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe**

- Users in the region question COVID-19 vaccine safety as conspiracies emerged around pharmaceutical companies covering up adverse reaction information about their vaccines.
- Concerns were also raised regarding whether vaccines are effective against new variants, and to what extent does immunity remain over time. Additionally, some social media and community members in the region questioned the need for boosters as they believe that effective vaccines should provide adequate immunity, therefore negating just one dose.



#### **Recommendations**

- Amplify fact-based information showing that the vaccine remains effective against severe disease and lowers the chances of new variants emerging.
- Promote opportunities for two-way communication with priority groups for vaccination through trusted channels to address concerns and dispel rumors on vaccine efficacy.
- Consider boosting social media messaging around vaccine effectiveness when news of variants and subvariants emerges to respond to possible questions and concerns ahead of time. (Viral Facts on vaccine effectiveness against new variants [here](#)).

#### #2 - Vaccines are weakening immune systems

**Kenya, South Africa, Uganda**

- Claims that vaccines have “backfired” and have started to weaken the immune systems of individuals that have received the vaccine were tracked. This claim



also stated that the weakened immune systems have led to an increase in severe cases, hospitalizations, and deaths as compared to those who have not been vaccinated.

- Some users responded to this claim by stating that they no longer trust any vaccines, and some responses revealed that their lack of trust and overall confusion regarding the vaccine has caused hesitation in having children receive routine vaccinations.
- A video was also popularized in social messaging apps (WhatsApp/Telegram) with data from countries across the world showing significant upticks in COVID-19 related deaths *following* “mass vaccination programs.” Responses to the video included expressions of relief for avoiding the vaccine and saving themselves and family members from the dangers of the vaccine.

### **Recommendations**

- o Misinformation is outpacing accurate information regarding COVID-19 vaccinations. Increase sharing of vaccine and vaccine safety information so as to counter the misinformation.
  - o Promote accurate statistics for COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths for non-vaccinated in comparison to vaccinated to debunk these claims and reiterate the positive impacts of vaccinations for strengthening immune responses.
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### **Trend to watch**

***Kenya, Ethiopia, Mozambique, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Zimbabwe***

As some African countries are facing an uptick in cases and are entering the 5th wave, there have been prevalent narratives around the belief that the COVID-19 pandemic has ended. Public health and safety measures that are still in place that continue to limit travel, commerce, and social interaction are being criticized in some communities in the region that are convinced the pandemic has ended.

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### **Methodology**

The report is based on online social listening feedback from UNICEF ESARO and AIRA, online and offline community feedback provided by a partner network that contributes to the ESAR RCCE Community Feedback Sub-Working Group, and radio listening feedback from UN Global Pulse. Monitored online channels include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, digital news, and WhatsApp messages forwarded to the researchers. Online and offline information is also obtained through the feedback form that RCCE partners fill out on a monthly basis and can be collected from partner feedback mechanisms including hotlines, community meetings, community feedback via volunteers, and partner staff. Currently, radio audio data is collected from five radio stations in South Africa by UN Global Pulse. For each trend, the report specifies the countries in which relevant content was tracked. This information may nonetheless be circulating in other African countries not mentioned in this report.

### **Report Focal Points**

[Africa Infodemic Alliance \(AIRA\)](#) • [UN Global Pulse](#) • [African Field Epidemiology Network \(AFENET\)](#) • [RCCE ESAR Community Feedback Group](#) • [RCCE Collective Service ESAR](#) • [UNICEF ESAR](#)