Introduction

The Rumor Tracking Subcommittee was created in response to COVID-19 in order to develop best practices around rumor-tracking given the threat of pandemic in South Sudan. This product is a joint effort between UNICEF and the Communication and Community Engagement Working Group (CCEWG) under RCCE TWG and highlights rumors and public perceptions recently collected across South Sudan.

This initiative aims to capture reported instances of unverified information being transmitted within communities, as well as community understandings and interpretations of issues related to Coronavirus. This brief provides examples of rumors and perceptions in order to inform humanitarians of potential information gaps in affected communities.

Methodology

UNICEF data was collected via online and offline platforms from the period between 20-28 April 2020.

Qualitative data for the CCE WG portion of this brief is primarily drawn from REACH data collected via enumerators from 15 locations across South Sudan between the period of 15-25 April 2020. Internews collects data via its Rumor Tracking Methodology and IOM CCCM uses a CCCM Cluster-approved tool for rumor tracking in Protection of Civilian Sites (PoCs) in Wau and Bentiu. All corresponding data was then thematically coded under particular rumor and perception categories. The rumors reported are only indicative of perceptions in areas in which they were collected and not representative of all rumors and perceptions held in South Sudan.

Theme 1: Sources and Transmission of COVID-19

Source and transmission rumors are those relating to how the virus spreads and where it comes from, including attitudes of discrimination. Data collected between 15-25 April suggests that rumors and perceptions of the virus as being unable to spread in warm climates continue, as does the belief that COVID-19 is a disease of the West and China.

“Many people were thinking that someone cannot get Coronavirus in a hot place like Akobo with temperature of 38-40 a day.” – Woman, 40, Akobo Town, Jonglei. 15 April 2020.

“Many people in the host communities are saying that the COVID-19 invasion is a punishment from God so people should not be scared of the virus, it is for the chosen ones, it is only for the whites.” – Woman, 45, Landizima, Maridi, Western Equatoria. 16 April 2020.

“The people believed that the disease cannot kill in Africa and or in South Sudan because South Sudanese believed that they have strong immune systems.” – Man, 28, Gudele 2, Juba, Central Equatoria. 20 April 2020.
Theme 2: Signs and Symptoms of COVID-19

Symptom rumors are those relating to perceived signs and symptoms of Coronavirus. During the period from 15–25 April, few rumors of this nature were collected, perhaps suggesting that symptoms are generally understood by communities. While there is relatively low frequency of symptom rumors reported, there remains a perception, as reported in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, that the flu-like symptoms already present in South Sudan may be cases of Coronavirus.

“The community said that the virus is just a normal flu usually experienced before.” – Woman, 27, Gakyuom, Bor South, Jonglei State. 16 April 2020.

“Many people claim that this Coronavirus has been existing with us since February of this year 2020 because these symptoms the scientists talked of are common but does not kill.” – Man, 20, Apada, Aweil Centre, Northern Bahr el Ghazal. 16 April 2020.

Theme 3: Prevention and Treatment of COVID-19

Prevention and treatment rumors are those relating to how people can protect themselves from becoming infected or how they may treat the disease. Among the data collected between 15–25 April, the most frequent rumor of this nature related to the consumption of food, mainly fruit, and natural drinks, such as tea, as a means of preventing transmission.

“People said that when you take ginger alone it will cure COVID-19 so many people are now finishing ginger from the market saying that it can cure COVID-19.” – Woman, 41, Maridi, Western Equatoria. 17 April 2020.

“People also should mix hot water with tea leaves, and this could prevent people from getting Coronavirus. People believed that, if you eat sour fruit and leaves also prevent Coronavirus.” – Woman, 37, Nyal Town, Panyijar, Unity. 17 April 2020.

Theme 4: Government and/or Humanitarian Response to COVID-19

Government or humanitarian response rumors are those relating to directives by government and humanitarian agencies, as well as perceptions regarding the sufficiency and insufficiency of the government/humanitarian response. Few rumors of this nature were collected between 15–25 April; however, some, such as one reported in the Bor PoC, suggest the perception of humanitarians as carriers of the virus, which may have repercussions for the COVID-19 response.

“Most of the people in the PoC have heard of Coronavirus and are deeply concerned about it. People are most afraid of the fact that it has no cure. The virus has dominated all public places as the main topic of discussion. Some people perceive that once they meet with UN workers, they are at high risk of infection for COVID-19, because they thought that the disease is being carried on by UN workers by importing it from other infected countries to South Sudan as first three cases in the country were identified from UN staff.” – Man, 28, Bor PoC, Bor South, Jonglei State. 16 April 2020.
Rumour Tracking and Management Updates From UNICEF
From 20th–28th April 2020
21 rumours tracked from 20th to 28th April 2020, out of the tracked rumours; 10 were false, 7 were true and 4 were not verified as indicated in below.

Example of rumours

- Corona Virus is an economic war tool created by America to destabilize China
  - FALSE (Conspiracy theory)

- I heard that COVID-19 vaccine will be out by November
  - FALSE (Vaccine)

- Breaking News, Israel has found a possible 100% cure for Corona virus. The Israeli corona virus drug reportedly with a 100% success rate even among severely sick patients is being tested in the United States for the first time
  - FALSE (Treatment)
Recommendations

- Increase awareness on known preventative measures, particularly the importance of social/physical distancing
- Emphasize that COVID-19 is transmissible to all people, regardless of age, race, skin color, nationality, gender, or religion
- Improve messaging to religious leaders to observe restrictions on social and religious gatherings, especially as many continue to open churches for services on Sunday as well as other days of the week
- Ensure that the transmissibility of the virus in hot climates is integrated into ongoing messaging to counter the perception that the warm weather in South Sudan will prevent the spread of Coronavirus
- Stress that Coronavirus is not a normal flu, although it may share symptoms with other diseases that people are familiar with.

Postscript

This brief relies on data collected by staff working with REACH, IOM, and Internews. Data is collected both manually and with the use of bespoke monitoring platforms. This analysis is designed to support communication and engagement strategies with affected populations through risk communication outreach and targeted COVID-19 program implementation.

If you are interested in further analysis or would like to provide any feedback to our service, please contact us at: ccewgss@gmail.com and patem@unicef.org