COVID-19

SOUTH SUDAN RUMOR TRACKING OVERVIEW

Communication and Community Engagement Working Group

CCE Communication & Community Engagement South Sudan

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Introduction

The Communication and Community Engagement Working Group (CCEWG) is expanding on existing efforts by other humanitarians around rumor tracking and seeks to improve data quality on perceptions and rumor monitoring by systematically tracking COVID-19 perceptions and rumors.

This effort is key to understanding how South Sudanese communities perceive the virus—acting as a "check" on the humanitarian response—as well as providing a platform to capture their questions, suggestions and capacities. Building a nuanced understanding of how South Sudanese communities experience the crisis and securing the cooperation of an informed and engaged population is central to building resilience and ensuring the efficacy of any response.

This document contains rumor analysis with feedback from the community included at the end.

Methodology

Qualitative data for this bulletin is drawn from a variety of sources, primarily through Internews's Rumor Tracking Methodology and targeted interviews with community members conducted by IOM Camp Management Teams and REACH field enumerators between 21 March and 15 April 2020. For this overview, community data from Internews that includes rumors and feedback, was collected through open discussion in listening group and radio call-in shows.

IOM data focuses on rumor tracking in displacement sites – Protection of Civilian (PoCs) and Collective Sites in Wau and Bentiu. Camp management uses a rumor tracking tool approved by the CCCM cluster and data is complemented by the network of community mobilizers that engage leadership structures and the community on a regular basis.

REACH data for this initial round was collected by field officers in seven states using a semi-structured interview tool.

All corresponding data was then thematically coded under particular rumor and perception categories outlined in Figure 2. 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.

Figure 1: Rumors collected, by State
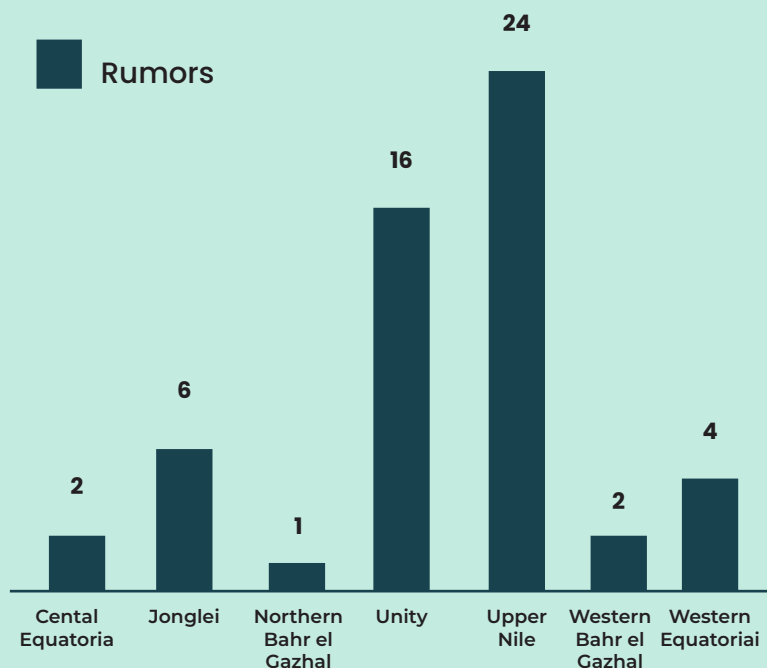
55 rumors collected in 7 states between 21 March and 15 April 2020. The locations in Figure 1 reflect the states where Internews, REACH and IOM were able to collect feedback during the assessment period based on their ongoing activities and respective capacities and is not intended to capture all locations where community messaging on COVID-19 is underway.

Figure 2: Typology of rumors collected
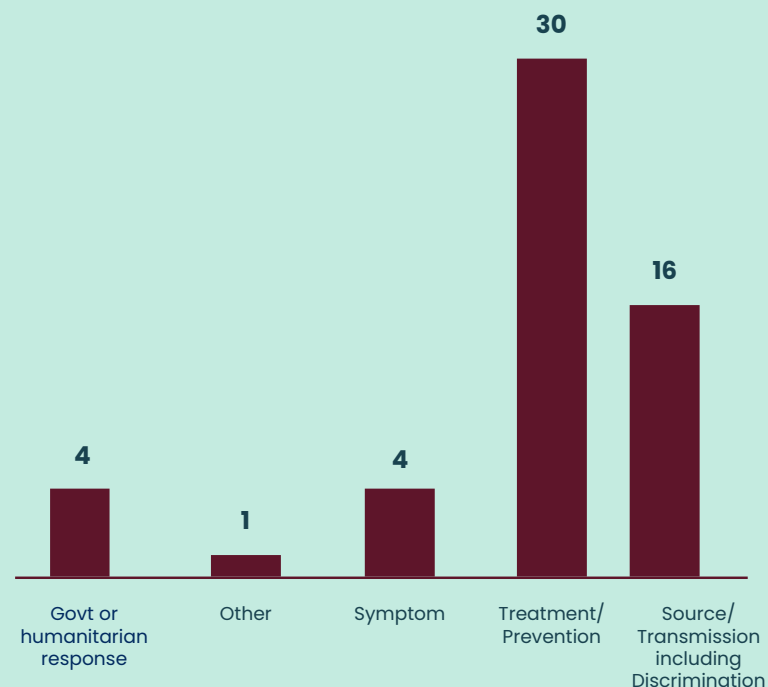
Definition of Rumor: A rumor is unverified information that is transmitted from one person to others.[1]

For the purpose of the analysis, rumors collected fall into the following four themes:

Sources/Transmission: Rumors relating to how the virus spreads and where it comes from, including calls of discrimination.

Symptoms: Rumors relating to perceived symptoms and signs of the coronavirus.

Prevention/Treatment: Rumors relating to how people can protect themselves from becoming infected by the virus.

Govt. or humanitarian response: Rumors relating to directives by government and humanitarian agencies, as well as perceptions regarding the sufficiency and insufficiency of the government/humanitarian response.

Theme 1: Sources and Transmission of COVID-19

Rumors related to the sources of Coronavirus and the modes of transmission accounted for 30% percent of rumors tracked. Community perceptions of where the virus comes from and how it spreads are crucial to understand as they may influence how the community responds to humanitarian preparedness efforts, whether they undertake preventative precautions, and how they may respond to those coming in and out of communities, particularly in camp or camp-like settings, such as the PoCs or IDP Collective Sites. Perceptions about transmission and who can or cannot become sick as a result of COVID-19, may also give rise to discrimination or targeting of those perceived to be more likely to become infected.

Interestingly, so far, **no rumors have been reported that contradicted the idea that Coronavirus spreads from person-to-person via direct contact or droplet**, as expressed by the comment, "We have been told that the virus spreads through droplets in the air and that we must stop handshaking to prevent the spread of the virus." *Woman, 19, Mayom, Unity State. 8 April 2020.* This may suggest that information about the basics of transmission are understood by the community.

Likely due to the fact that Coronavirus has not yet been as widespread throughout Africa in the same way it has affected Asia, Europe, and the Americas, it was rumored in Bentiu PoC that the ***virus cannot be transmitted to black-skinned people.*** There is reportedly a perception that the virus affects only white people. Relatedly, climate is perceived as a factor that reduces the transmission of COVID-19, the belief being that, ***in hot countries in Africa, the virus cannot survive and therefore cannot spread.*** These perceptions may be influencing the decision-making of IDPs currently residing in congested PoCs or Collective Sites. While many factors are relevant to an IDP's decision to remain or exit the site, **it is possible that families who would otherwise leave are opting to 'wait and see' due to a belief that the virus is unlikely to spread for the reasons mentioned above**.

Rumor Brief:

"The Coronavirus is composed of tiny black particles that move at the speed of a bullet from person to person." *Man, unknown age, Malakal PoC, Upper Nile State. 28 March 2020.*

Discrimination and Source/Transmission Rumors

An initial wave of anti-foreigner backlash, with a focus on the United Nations, followed the announcement that an international UN staff member was recorded as the first confirmed case of Coronavirus in South Sudan. **There remains a strong potential for the virus to engender an environment of fear, paranoia and confusion, in particular, in a racialized and discriminatory manner, with the potential to disproportionately affect marginalized groups.** While only seven of the collected rumors had a nexus to "discrimination," all the rumors focused on "outsiders" as being the purported vectors of the disease.

"Outsider" reflects a duality in this context: "foreigners" (in particular Ugandans, Kenyans and Caucasians, especially those that work for the UN) and those "others" from physically outside a person's residential community or PoC. At the moment, 'outsider' within the context of the POCs is not necessarily linked to ethnicity but is referring to individuals who are actually 'physically from outside' (i.e. new arrivals). This latter sentiment was particularly prevalent in **PoC settings, where camp residents were concerned about poor screening in PoCs** and new arrivals entering with camp leadership having minimal idea of their origins or medical history. This could also indicate that PoC residents are of the messaging around physical/social distancing, but in the congested PoC sites residents may be interpreting reducing risk as meaning keeping oneself and family separate from individuals who are newly arrived, even those who are family members. This is a trend that will be explored in future assessments.

Changes in common social practices, such as shaking hands, also has the potential to fuel distrust and discrimination, particularly between rural populations, who may be less familiar with prevention measures or social/physical distancing. This may cause offence or exacerbate tensions, as those individuals or communities that have been more exposed to prevention messages adopt these measures and are reluctant to shake hands, touch or embrace.

Many of the COVID-19 prevention practices touch deeply on South Sudanese cultural and social practices that reinforce community ties. **Fear and uncertainty around COVID-19, combined with underlying tensions, have the potential to exacerbate existing tensions.** Monitoring rumors around COVID-19, in particular those that could incite discrimination of a particular group or community, will help the aid community to adjust messaging to better address the concerns being expressed through rumor or innuendo.

Rumor Brief:

"Rural people are upset with town residents who refuse to shake their hands, claiming they won't do it because they think "rural people are dirty and smell bad"
Man, 27, Renk town, Upper Nile, 4 April, 2020

"Many people are entering Bor PoC saying they are coming from Juba, but there is widespread belief that they are coming from Kenya/Uganda."
Man, Unknown age, Bor POC, Jonglei State. 30 March 2020

"Sudanese and Ugandans are running away from their countries to South Sudan and may be carrying the virus with them."
Man, 27, Wau Town, Western Bahr el Gazhal. 30 March 2020

"The virus is only for whites and foreigners."
Man, 34, Bari Center, Western Equatoria. 4 April 2020

Theme 2: Symptoms of COVID-19

While there was a relatively low frequency of rumors regarding symptoms, in Bentiu PoC, it was noted that there was an unusual cough and flu going around. Some members of the community believed that these symptoms were due to COVID-19, **but that the population has strong immune systems that prevent them from showing severe symptoms.** As well, it was reported in Bentiu PoC that a normal **flu and cough will progress and develop into Coronavirus if people sleep outside at night.**

Rumor Brief:

"The unusual cough and flu in PoC now may be the Coronavirus itself but it's just weakened by our strong immune systems."
Unknown, Unknown Age, Bentiu PoC, Unity State. 7 April 2020.

Theme 3: Prevention and Treatment of COVID-19

Of the 55 rumors collected, 30 (refer to Figure 2) were focused on perceived cures, prevention methods and treatment options for the Coronavirus. **Considering the amount of misinformation, fear and paranoia associated with the virus and the prevalence of rumours about prevention and treatment, addressing these rumors will likely be at the forefront of community concerns.**

The theme of "heat" was widespread, with many rumors including the word "hot" or "heat." Many of these rumors refer to one of two interrelated topics: a belief, widespread in many tropical countries, that the **Coronavirus does not survive in the hot, humid and/or dry environment of South Sudan**, leading some respondents to remark "there is no point in social distancing if the virus will not even [have] strength here." However, in reality, the virus has appeared in countries with a wide range of climates, including hot humid ones. The WHO offers this guidance on the issue.

The second prevention related-rumor refers to an apparent **prophecy that South Sudanese can immunize themselves against Coronavirus by "taking tea with salt".** The details of this remedy have many variations: ensuring the tea is brewed between 2 and 4am, that it is consumed before sunrise or that neither salt nor sugar is necessary, hot water suffices. The source of this "prophecy" was reported as a mystical newborn child in Khartoum or Darfur (accounts differ) who dispensed this advice before passing away.[2]

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[2]This rumor was also tracked by Internews in several Southeast Asian countries.

"Taking tea" is a core social and cultural norm among all South Sudanese communities. One **potential implication of this rumor is that people may continue to defy social distancing directives to drink tea with their friends and neighbors.** Furthermore, the persistence of social gatherings while taking tea or sharing of cups could contribute to the potential spread of the virus.[3]

A series of rumors also advocate for **the consumption of certain foods and use of traditional healers and natural remedies,** advocating in particular for the consumption of raw garlic, onion and neem, lulub and ardibe fruits (either raw or brewed withtea). While some plant-derived medicines and traditional healing techniques may have health benefits, there is no evidence to suggest that their use can prevent or cure Coronavirus, and there is reportedly no communication of such information by health partners who are responsible for dissemination of COVID-19 information to the community.

In Bentiu PoC, a rumor emerged that **the smoke from burning cow dung can inculcate a person from the virus**. While cow urine and the ash from burned dung are often smeared over the body for their anti-mosquito and antiseptic properties in Niolotic communities across South Sudan, there is no scientific evidence to suggest cattle dung has anti-viral characteristics.

Finally, in Maban Doro, both **cats and dogs were believed to be vectors of the virus**, which although rare, <u>might be possible</u>. This could be a particular concern in the densely-populated urban areas and camp-like or PoC settings where animals often mingle freely with people.

Rumor Brief:

"The community believes that COVID-19 does not survive in hot weather conditions and can be prevented by taking a hot bath when the sun is highest in the sky."
Woman, 29 years old Akobo Town, Jonglei State

"A common belief in our community is that drinking large amounts of locally-brewed gin will kill the virus."
Man, unknown age, Pariang Town, Unity State

"Some refugees in Doro Camp Zone A, are saying that there is newborn in Western Sudan. It spoke for two seconds, telling people that on Friday they should take tea without sugar to prevent the coronavirus. Then the baby died."
Woman, 36 years-old, Maban Doro, Upper Nile State

"Many of the youth believe that coronavirus is treatable with onions, salt and smoke that come from dry cow dung. Many of them would like the health cluster to provide an expert doctor to respond to these rumors."
Men, between 25-35, Maban Doro, Upper Nile State

"Many of the youth believe that coronavirus is treatable with onions, salt and smoke that come from dry cow dung. Many of them would like the health cluster to provide an expert doctor to respond to these rumors."

[3]This Bulletin is not designed to assess or address the social or economic implications or consequences of forbidding common income-generating activities, such as women from rural areas taking short-term casual labor opportunities in tea shops before returning to their settlements.

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

Community perceptions of humanitarian preparedness and response efforts are likely influenced by the initial cases of COVID-19 being confirmed among UN staff. In Bentiu PoC, it was reported that the community was growing apprehensive of interacting with UN and UNMISS personnel and going to UN facilities for this reason. This reality adds fuel to the perception that affected populations in South Sudan are at-risk due to 'outsiders' and may have negative repercussions for efforts to inform the population of the risks associated with the virus and measures taken to control the spread. In at least some of the PoCs, **rumors emerged that the PoCs were closing and that people were being forced to exit**. These rumors suggest that the official messaging presented– such as statements asserting that people have an option to leave but are not required to do so – may not have successfully permeated the community. Relatedly, **requests from the community to clarify health information – such as whether black people can get Coronavirus – suggests that additional health messaging in these sites is warranted.**

The fears and rumors expressed about incoming populations not being screened on arrival to PoCs are intrinsically tied to perceptions of how humanitarians are handling the response. If unaddressed, these concerns could escalate into situations of conflict or breakdowns in social cohesion between community members in the sites. In Bor PoC, for instance, the fear of outsiders coming in without screening, coupled with the rumor that those who are entering are coming from Kenya and Uganda and are being untruthful about their travel histories, may lead to discrimination in the site in the coming weeks.

During the period of data collection, few rumors emerged related to the government and COVID-19. However, in Malakal PoC, a rumor was reported that the virus was already widespread in South Sudan, but had not yet been confirmed or reported to the population.

Rumor Brief:

"Lockdown will never work with us in the PoC even if COVID-19 comes to the PoC. We must go outside the PoC to find our needs which are not being provided here and come back."
Unknown, unknown age, Bentiu PoC, Unity State. 4 April 2020.

"The fears are visiting the UN compounds or interacting with its staff because one can easily get infected by their Coronavirus."
Unknown, unknown age, Bentiu PoC, Unity State. 6 April 2020.

Feedback from the community

As heard in Bentiu PoC:

"Was the two-month food distribution meant to push people out of the PoC?"

Residents believed that the reason behind food distribution for two months was to push people out of the PoC. *"We now realized that the food for 2 months was meant to chase us out here."* They asked for more clarification from any concerned partners.

"I don't want my shelter replaced by someone else when I leave," A resident said that he can go out only if everyone leaves because no other person stays at his shelter. *"They may bring someone else to stay at my shelter once I leaved the PoC, so I don't want to leave."*

If the state government has not been formed, is it safe outside the PoC? Residents said that they cannot leave the PoC without the government formed in the state. *"We feel unsafe to go out of the PoC without state government formed."*

Residents of the PoC acknowledged understanding public health messaging that calls for frequent handwashing with water and soap, however, some members raised concerns due to shortages of soap and water in the PoC. They requested relevant partners to distribute more soap and water.

Postscript

This fact sheet relies on data collected by staff working with IOM, Internews and REACH. 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 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**