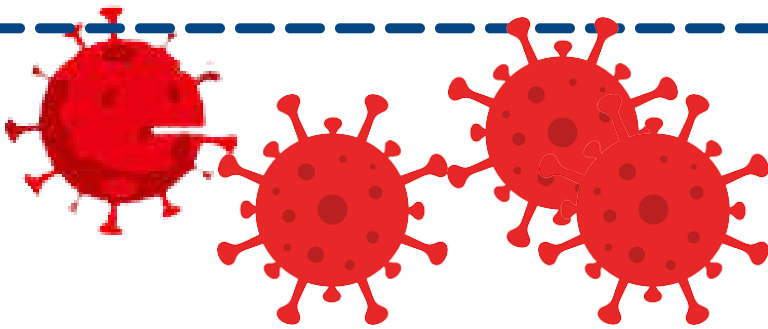


INTRODUCTION








Rooted in Trust 2.0 (RiT 2.0) is a global pandemic information response program funded by the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID-BHA) and implemented by Internews to counter the unprecedented scale and speed of the spread of rumors and misinformation on COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccines. Rooted in Trust 2.0 in Zimbabwe is working with media, community-based organizations, health, and humanitarian actors to build a healthier information ecosystem that is responsive to needs of migrant communities in Southern Zimbabwe, particularly in Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South, Midlands, Masvingo and Bulawayo provinces.



This flash report stems from the realization that political discourse is increasingly linked with the COVID-19 pandemic. This has resulted in the politicization of the pandemic in Zimbabwe as indicated by rumors circulating on social media and communities. COVID-19 rumors noted by Internews between March 1 and March 22, 2022 include claims that COVID-19 is being politicized by the government.

This Flash Report explores implications of such rumors on individual and community decision making in response to the COVID-19 crisis in Zimbabwe and proffers recommendations to various actors as action points in mitigating the spread and impact of rumors.

BACKGROUND

-  **All electoral activities** in Zimbabwe were suspended by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) following the outbreak of COVID-19 and the death of one person in March 2020.
-  **In March 2021**, ZEC lifted the suspension of voter registration activities while emphasizing that by-elections remained suspended in view of the COVID-19 pandemic.
-  **By-elections remained suspended** despite calls from political parties, civic society, and the diplomatic community to lift the suspension so that outstanding by-elections may be held.
-  **On January 6, 2022**, President Emmerson Mnangagwa proclaimed March 26, 2022, as the date for Parliamentary and Local Authority by-elections. This announcement came a few days after school reopening postponement due to increased COVID-19 cases.
-  **On January 29, 2022** the government relaxed COVID-19 lockdown regulations considering declining COVID-19 cases, signaling the tail end of the pandemic's fourth wave in the country.
-  **Since this relaxation of COVID-19 regulations**, Zimbabwe has reported an increase in COVID-19 cases with an average of 472 new cases per day. Despite this increase, the government has not expressed concern over the implications of electioneering on COVID-19 infections in the country.
-  **This silence may have resulted in a surge in rumors** in recent weeks suggesting that government actions around COVID-19 are political maneuvers which are not about citizens' well-being.

COMPLIANCE WITH COVID-19 PROTOCOLS DURING ELECTORAL ACTIVITIES



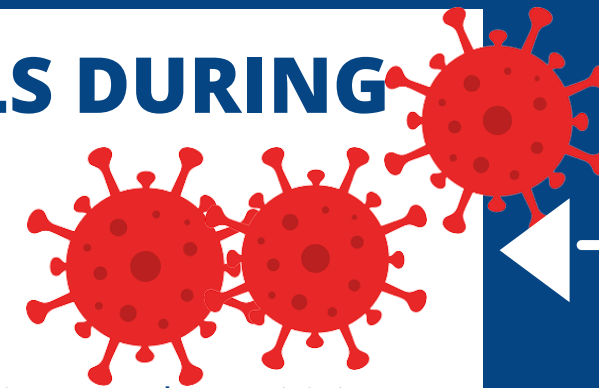
In February 2022, ZEC ran the first phase of its two phased voter registration blitz ahead of the 2023 general elections. The Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) and Election Resource Centre (ERC) observed this first phase of the registration blitz as independent and nonpartisan observers. ZESN and ERC noted the extent to which COVID-19 protocols were observed during voter education and registration activities.

Four hundred and fifty-four (454) observer reports were collected with over half indicating that ZEC and various stakeholders observed all COVID-19 safety protocols during voter education activities and voter registration exercises. Safety protocols included wearing face masks, hand sanitizing and social distancing among other preventive measures. In addition, information dissemination on COVID-19 was mainstreamed during various activities.

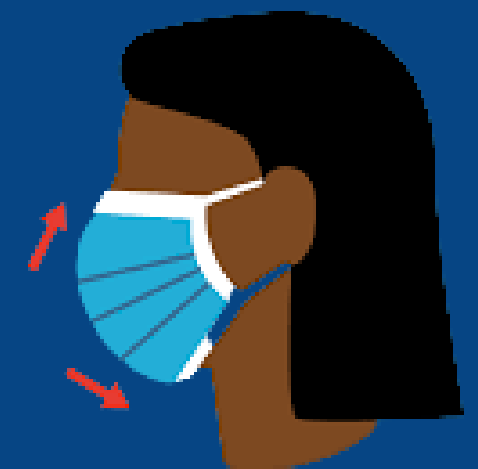
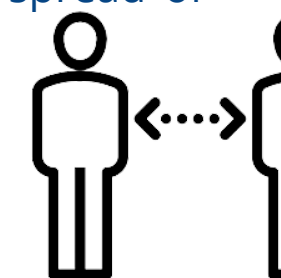
The reports noted that handwashing and sanitizing facilities were provided at 559 registration centers and ZEC officials used COVID-19 protective wear such as masks at 96.7% of the centers under observation. Social distancing of at least one meter was maintained at 550 centers during setup and 518 centers during the registration process. In 557 out of 581 centers, no one was turned away from registering due to failure to observe COVID-19 mitigation measures.

These statistics, while commendable, indicate the continued need for COVID-19 Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) to run parallel to voter registration and the buildup to 2023 general elections.

The proliferation of rumors claiming that COVID-19 related decisions in the country are politicized is an indicator that COVID-19 RCCE is necessary in the current national context. Relevant stakeholders need to mobilize around mitigating rumors and misinformation which may contribute to an increased risk of infection and spread of COVID-19 in communities.



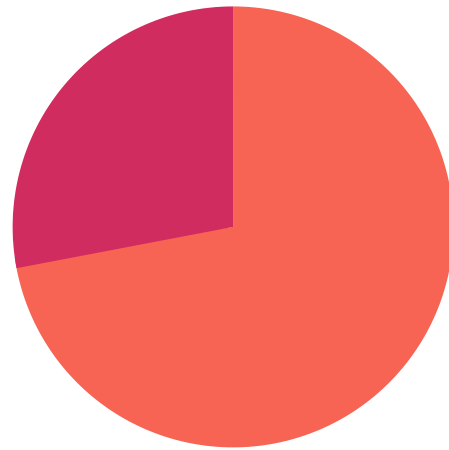
Information from this section was extracted from the Election Resource Centre (ERC) and Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) *statement on phase one of voter registration (1 - 28 February 2022)*



RUMOR TRENDS ANALYSIS



NON-
POLITICAL
28%



POLITICAL
72%

The chart illustrates the variance between political and non-political rumors identified between March 1 and March 22, 2022. Notably, 134 of the 187 rumors were politically related, translating to 72% of the rumors collected.

Visualization by Rooted in Trust: Data from Talkwalker

Trending Rumors

rumour #2

Tibvirei apo you want to stop the rallies covid all over its finish now all countries back to business as usual – Facebook, 9/3/2022

rumour #1

Covid-19 is an excuse inopiwa nesu ma Students kna tatadza kuMeeter ma deadline kuchikoro kwete a whole Electoral Committee – Twitter, March 3, 2022

rumour #3

It's because of ZANU of bussing people to it's rallies – Facebook, 10/3/2022

rumour #4

“Corona virus was never a pandemic... It was state capture. The whole thing just disappeared overnight, and the fake media has shifted their attention to other things. Lol... Plandemic”- Twitter, 4/3/2022



The four rumors illustrate public sentiment on COVID-19 data published by the Ministry of Health and Child Care (MoHCC) and COVID-19 restrictions in the country.

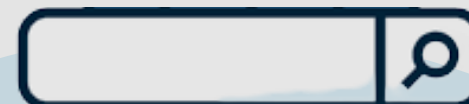
Sentiments indicate belief that the daily situation reports (sitreps) are inaccurate and that COVID-19 restrictions are a tool used to further the objectives of the ruling party ZANU PF.

Data analysed from Talk Walker shows that 78% of the reactions on COVID-19 related issues were negative and 12% were positive while only 10% were neutral.

COVID-19 is believed to be used as a political weapon to silence opposition parties and as a money-making scheme by the government.

FACT CHECK

COVID-19 Statistics



The Ministry of Health and Childcare (MoHCC) issues daily COVID-19 statistics. These statistics are corroborated by Reuters which tracks COVID-19 statistics from different countries across the world.

COVID-19 pandemic existence

Claims that the COVID-19 pandemic was planned are a rehash of conspiracy theories that have already been debunked by fact checkers such as Lead Stories scientific journal articles focused on addressing conspiracy theories.







COVID-19 eradicated

COVID-19 has not been eradicated as evidenced by reports of new infections in China, Germany and other parts of the world. These reports indicate that the pandemic is yet to run its course and talks of another COVID-19 wave demonstrate a need for vigilance. In Zimbabwe for instance, there has been an increase in new cases due to outbreaks of COVID-19 in schools.



RECOMMENDATIONS

-  There is need for a multi-sectoral approach to communicating COVID-19 statistics. While the MoHCC may be the primary source of data, it is important for other health actors, especially in the humanitarian and development sector, to play a leading role in disseminating statistics so that public trust grows towards information from the MoHCC.
-  Journalists need to be capacitated on their role in explaining to audiences how they source COVID-19 statistics as a way of reducing skepticism towards statistics.
-  Need for political and civic organizations to mainstream COVID-19 RCCE in their activities to avoid the impression that COVID-19 restrictions are a barrier to electoral processes when restrictions are meant to safeguard public health.
-  Journalists need to play an active role in providing factual and accurate information on the origin of the COVID-19 virus and the current status in the world and in Zimbabwe, so that myths and misperceptions are debunked.