In August 2022, Internews collected 969 rumors, misconceptions, and community feedback from social media and via face-to-face listening groups about the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines in Sudan. During listening groups in Blue Nile, East Darfur, West Darfur, Central Darfur, South Darfur, North Darfur, Kassala, Al-Gedaref, and the Red Sea States, 711 rumors were shared by displaced and conflict-affected people. Also, 258 rumors were also collected from social media sources most commonly used in the country, including Facebook and Twitter. The community feedback and rumors were selected through a risk analysis that identifies misinformation that may potentially impact vulnerable people, which are the target communities of the Rooted in Trust Sudan project.

Most of the community feedback spoke of COVID-19 treatments, as well as some prevention remedies. The majority of the recommended remedies and protection methods that are plant-based, such as Acacia, Tamarind, bitter or unsweetened tea, Gum Arabic, millet, ginger, hibiscus, and guava leaves. Some remedies were more elaborate, such as “placing mahogany leaves in a zir (ceramic water pot) and drinking it”, while another said drinking a mixture of “bitter lupine with turmeric and camel milk” is the cure for COVID-19. It is worth noting that most of the treatments are rooted in popular medicinal herbs and local cuisine.
HUMANITARIAN SITUATION REPORT - AUGUST 2022
SOCIAL MEDIA LISTENING AND COMMUNITY FEEDBACK ON COVID-19 AND VACCINES

The rumor data illustrates that conversations on social media about the pandemic can differ from those taking place in listening groups. On social media, the conversation has shifted after the arrival of COVID-19 vaccines in 2021 to discussions about the safety of the vaccines and minimizing the severity/impact of the pandemic. It is likely that in humanitarian and rural settings, information about COVID-19 and the vaccines is arriving at a slower pace, as opportunities to access such information are much more limited for communities that are digitally disconnected or have unreliable internet access. In August, treatment rumors were especially popular in Central Darfur, West Darfur, and South Darfur.

Despite high risk rumors being the least common, they require our immediate response due to the potential harm they can cause. In August, one of the high risk rumors came from Alneem IDP Camp in East Darfur, citing that the vaccines are used to kill people living in IDP Camps.

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About 21% of the rumors questioned the safety of the COVID-19 vaccines. Some said it causes paralysis in children, blindness, cancer, and kidney failure. Some people said they took their first vaccination dose but chose to abandon the second dose as they experienced severe side effects, such as hallucinations. In Blue Nile, rumors speaking of harmful effects of vaccines on reproductive health were prevalent, such as vaccines affecting masculinity, fertility, and pregnancy. While a young woman in South Darfur said: “The vaccine targets Africa with the aim of reducing childbearing.” Also, a woman in Blue Nile said she was discouraged from taking the vaccine by a healthcare worker who said it was harmful. Some community feedback went so far as to say that the vaccines are deadly, and kill children, older people, internally displaced people, and those with diabetes.

Most rumors collected in August 2022, expressed apathy and indifference, especially for those sharing that COVID-19 is a hoax, others minimizing the severity of the virus by citing the availability of plant-based and localized treatments for COVID-19, and those citing religious rituals as a form of protection. Also, Fear was the second most expressed sentiment in rumors. All of the rumors speaking about vaccine safety expressed fear.
Meanwhile, there are people that continue to deny the existence of the virus. Some social media users said the pandemic is a political game to get funding from donors and gain empathy and attention from other states in a humanitarian manner. Others are also critical of the support Sudan gets through the pandemic response and think it should be shifted to help people affected by floods. Some have called on the health authorities to prioritize Malaria instead. While a few social media users have said both COVID-19 and Monkeypox are a hoax, and that we are now entering the Monkeypox era.

We aim to tackle misinformation and rumors about the pandemic and vaccines, to engage and support humanitarian, public health and media actors in responding to vulnerable communities' COVID-19 information needs.