INTRODUCTION TO ROOTED IN TRUST

Rooted in Trust (RiT) is a project run by Internews to support humanitarian and public health agencies strengthen information ecosystems. The project ensures that health agencies better respond to communities’ needs and manage the spread of rumors and misinformation about COVID-19. Additionally, the project tracks misinformation on diseases like malaria, cholera, and dengue fever in the affected areas of north and south Yemen with a focus on IDPs and marginalized people.

In this bulletin, Internews profiles commonly occurring rumors across Yemeni social media and through offline and face-to-face collection in the month of March 2023. During this period 447 rumors were collected as follows: face-to-face (55), Online (392). The rumor collection was done online on Facebook and Twitter accounts and offline via face-to-face and private in-person group activities, as well as other community engagement activities. Rumors were subsequently selected for this bulletin based on the recurring themes of “Post-vaccination Behavior/ Vaccination Programs/ Other”.

COVID-19 SITUATION IN YEMEN

A lack of access to healthcare in Yemen continues to contribute to the spread of disease within the country. As of March 2023, only 54% of healthcare facilities are fully functioning while 46% are partially functioning.1 This limits many Yemenis’ access to basic medical care and health information. Compounding this issue is the continued displacement of Yemeni families, particularly in Ma`rib, Al-Hodeidah, and Ta`aiz. Continued displacement of the population corresponds to the spread of disease from city to city and governorate to governorate.

By 2023, the spread of COVID-19 has slowed in Yemen with no new reported cases or deaths in March. While this is good news, there are still diseases that continue to spread throughout the country.

The cholera outbreak has decreased in part due to vaccination programs and international aid within the country. However, as of March 2023, the disease continues to spread. Since March 2023, Yemen has had the second highest number of measles cases in the world.5 A number of factors contribute to the country’s high rates. The Middle East Monitor reports that, in northern Yemen, Houthis continue to ban many vaccines, including the measles vaccine.6 They also note that ongoing malnutrition in the country and low rates of vaccination for young children likewise contribute to the outbreak.

Yemen continues to report new polio cases as of February of 2023.7 In response to this ongoing problem, Yemen announced a new polio immunization campaign in early March 2023.8 The campaign centered on door-to-door vaccinations, led by healthcare professionals and funded by the Saudi government.

Rumors Collected

447
An online collected Rumor

Flu viruses mutate regularly: Influenza viruses are known to mutate and evolve over time, leading to different strains circulating each year. This is why the flu vaccine needs to be updated annually to provide protection against the most common strains. [1]

The symptoms of the flu can vary from person to person and can range from mild to severe. Common symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, muscle aches, headache, and fatigue. It is important to note that the severity of symptoms can depend on various factors such as the person’s overall health, age, immune system, etc.

COVID-19 and the flu are different diseases: While both COVID-19 and the flu can cause respiratory symptoms, they are caused by different viruses. COVID-19 is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, while the flu is caused by influenza viruses.

Vaccines, including the flu vaccine and COVID-19 vaccines, are developed to help prevent infection or reduce the severity of illness. They are rigorously tested for safety and efficacy before being approved for use. [2]

Dr. Sahel Al-Eryani, a Yemeni epidemiologist says: Vaccines are safe, and their side effects are very simple and temporary. They are not related to immunity; the side effects of vaccines are even less than the complications of paracetamol. There is no drug without side effects.

What is behind this rumor?

- The lack of knowledge about the difference between COVID-19 and flu symptoms may lead to confusion between the two, especially in the absence of COVID-19 testing.
- The population’s exposure to misinformation on vaccines’ side-effects and people’s limited access to reliable resources of information.
- Communities observing the ease of contracting diseases, linking it to vaccinations and low immunity. Since 2015, access to health services has been limited, resulting in deteriorating general health of the population. Low access to nutritional food and basic water, sanitation and hygiene services likewise contributes to health risks.

Why is this rumor important?

- This rumor is particularly important because it creates further confusion for the communities between COVID-19 and the flu. It also spreads misinformation related to weakened immunity due to vaccination, and fuels health concerns among vulnerable populations that lack access to health services. Finally, the rumor ignores different factors that might have led to low immunity and increased symptoms.
- The main concern could be that misinformation like this can lead to vaccine hesitancy or refusal among those who have access to vaccines. This can have serious consequences for controlling the spread of COVID-19 in Yemen, where the healthcare system is already struggling to manage pandemics and other diseases.
Rumor #1
Theme: Post-vaccination Behavior

“You don’t notice that this year’s flu virus is different from every year!!! It depends on you how many times it lasts with you, your chest and throat, the fever, the headache, and the shiver of cold are something that is not normal. may Allah help. It seems that the virus has mutated to be more virulent, or that Corona vaccines have abnormally weakened immunity”.

Rumor collected online

RECOMMENDATIONS
For the Humanitarian partners

- In collaboration and support of humanitarian health partners, The Ministry of Health in Yemen can conduct a specific workshop on the differences and similarities between COVID-19 and seasonal and normal flu. They can also cover the new variants of COVID-19 for health workers. This will help them identify symptoms of the different viruses and provide better medical advice for patients.

- Humanitarian health partners in Yemen can include education programs about the importance and purpose of vaccinations in their programming for health projects.

- Health partners can provide individuals with professional medical consultation in humanitarian health clinics.

- Humanitarian partners can provide diagnoses and treatment for flu and other respiratory illnesses. This may include setting up mobile clinics, providing medical supplies and equipment, and training healthcare workers to properly diagnose and manage respiratory infections.

- Ministry of Health, in collaboration with humanitarian partners, can conduct frequent and seasonal awareness campaigns targeting the community about diseases and their symptoms. Campaigns can also cover the importance of good nutrition and hygiene and engagement in community communication and feedback collection to adequately address concerns and dispel misinformation.
Rumor #2
Theme: Post-vaccination Behavior

“...I agree with the fact that vaccines are harmful because of what I see from many children around me whose immunity has weakened and caused them diseases that did not happen to us, and this is due to the poor vaccines, poor storage and poor quality that they supply to Yemen.”

FACT CHECKING

- Rigorous studies of vaccines consistently show that they are safe for the population. Vaccines are tested and studied in multiple phases (phased testing) to determine if they are safe and will prevent illness. Before a vaccine is tested on humans, in the preclinical phase it is tested on laboratory cells or animals. These studies do indicate that the vaccines have side effects, but that those effects are generally not severe for the vast majority of the population.

- Dr. Sahel Al-Eryani, an epidemiologist states: vaccines are stored as per strict clinical international standards. With supervision from UNICEF, they have measuring devices and a chart for cooling vaccines from the time the vaccine leaves the factory until the time it is distributed to health facilities. This process is referred to as the 'cold chain.' If the cooling is interrupted for one hour and the chart is removed, the vaccine will be destroyed. The UNICEF chart shows that this vaccine cannot be distributed if it does not meet the chart indicator.

- To increase the capacity of vaccine handling, UNICEF provided cold rooms and installed solar-powered refrigerators. These interventions were necessary to keep the vaccines at a constant temperature. They distributed and installed 218 refrigerators powered by solar energy in 8 southern Yemeni governorates. In addition, three cold rooms have been installed in the governorates of Aden, Shabwa, and Al-Mahra, along with the construction of a series of new cold rooms in Al-Jumhuriya Hospital in Aden. There, all shipments of vaccines coming directly through Aden International Airport will be stored. This new cold room chain will enhance vaccine storage capacity across the country and facilitate the provision of life-saving vaccines to all provinces in the country. Cold chain is a controlled environment for storing, managing and transporting these life-saving products. Vaccines must be continuously stored in a limited temperature range – from the time they are manufactured until the moment of vaccination.

- As for the brands and types of vaccines, Dr. Sahel continues: "vaccines have the same factories and grades in all countries. Vaccines are manufactured in specific factories for the whole world and distributed to all countries through the global vaccine program, which is called GAVI (Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization). It is not purchased from different factories, and no factory is allowed to manufacture vaccines. Each vaccine is manufactured in one or two factories for the whole world, there is no difference between vaccines anywhere in the world, same quality and same manufacturer".

- Yahya Bari, the Surveillance Coordinator of Khairan Al Muharraq Directorate in Hajjah governorate adds: “Now the cold chain system is excellent with the presence of solar energy, and each vaccine has a special indicator that determines the extent of its vulnerability if it is subjected to improper storage.

- There are supervisors in the directorates who follow up on immunization and check on the indication of the vaccine when it changes during the storage in the cool chain.

- Yahya also adds: “The Ministry of Health’s Immunization Department was directed to circulate the good cold chain mechanism and the indicators on all vaccines used in Yemen. Immunization has come a long way, but more awareness is needed for citizens about the importance of immunization to prevent diseases”.

- And talking about if vaccines are harmful as claimed in some rumors, he says "This is not true, as reality proves the quality of immunization, and the vaccinated children are old, healthy, married, and have children and such rumors can make it worse of bringing us back to ignorance and deadly diseases."
Rumor #2
Theme: Post-vaccination Behavior

"I agree with the fact that vaccines are harmful because of what I see from many children around me whose immunity has weakened and caused them diseases that did not happen to us, and this is due to the poor vaccines, poor storage and poor quality that they supply to Yemen."

What is behind this rumor?
- One of the primary factors behind this rumor is the deep-rooted belief that there is a conspiracy against Yemen. Specifically, many Yemenis deeply distrust anything coming from the West and feel that their country, and the rest of the developing world, is used as a testing ground for new ideas. This mistrust, combined with a lack of understanding about the global health system, has allowed rumors and conspiracy theories to spread rapidly. Political agendas have also contributed to the spread of conspiracy theories as some groups seek to exploit public fear for their own gain.

- Moreover, the commercial interests of alternative herbal medicine and pharmaceutical industries have played a role in spreading misinformation. The pursuit of profit often supersedes the pursuit of truth and can lead to the promotion of unproven or even dangerous treatments.

- Finally, the belief that older people have stronger immunity due to the absence of vaccinations is another common myth that has contributed to the spread of rumors and misinformation.

Why is this rumor important?
The spread of such a rumor could lead to a decline in public trust in the healthcare system, especially if people believe that their health is at risk due to the substandard quality of vaccines or storage. Moreover, spreading rumors about quality of vaccines may lead to vaccination refusal and result in lower vaccination rates and increased risk of outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases. This, in turn, could lead to public health crises and an increased burden on healthcare systems that are already under strain. Also, it could lead to the promotion of alternative and unproven remedies, which may be ineffective or even harmful. This can lead to the exploitation of vulnerable populations who may be seeking a quick solution to their health problems. Finally, the spread of rumors about poor quality vaccines and storage can lead to a general sense of confusion and anxiety among the public, which can further undermine efforts to combat the spread of infectious diseases.

RECOMMENDATIONS
For the Humanitarian partners
- The Yemeni Ministry of Health can conduct media and house to house awareness campaigns through the Health Education Center and the sub-ministry of health offices in the cities and districts around the country before and during the vaccination campaigns. Humanitarian partners can support the Ministry of Health with these campaigns and provide training for health workers that provide them with better information and community engagement techniques to educate the public about vaccines. The provision of cooling fridges, cold chain systems and cooling rooms similar to the ones provided by UNICEF to stress the importance of good storage for vaccinations. Also, provision of maintenance to guarantee proficiency and performance of these devices and equipment.

- The Yemeni Ministry of Health can ensure that workers in the health facilities can explain the vaccination storage procedures and safety measures to the community when people come for vaccination or through workshops.

- Ensuring that solar-power system, electricity generators and fuel are provided to all health facilities in Yemen to guarantee consistent cooling systems for the vaccines.

- The Yemeni Supreme Authority for Drugs and Medical Appliances may engage with humanitarian organizations and media outlets to explain and share information about vaccines supplied to Yemen and ensure that these vaccines meet international standards for safety, efficacy, and quality. This may involve conducting regular audits of vaccine storage facilities, monitoring the cold chain system, and ensuring proper vaccine transportation and handling practices.
Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that can cause a range of illnesses from the common cold to severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Typical symptoms of MERS-CoV include fever, cough, and shortness of breath. Pneumonia is common, but MERS patients may not always develop this condition. Gastrointestinal symptoms, including diarrhea, have also been reported in patients with Middle East Respiratory Syndrome. Approximately 35% of MERS cases reported to WHO have resulted in death. MERS-CoV is a zoonotic virus, which means it is transmitted between animals and humans. MERS-CoV has been detected and linked to human infection in dromedary camels in several Member States in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia. Human-to-human transmission is possible and has occurred primarily between close contacts and in healthcare settings. Outside healthcare settings, human-to-human transmission has been limited.

Of course, a person’s mental state can contribute to their health. Studies have shown that individuals with elevated levels of stress and anxiety can be more likely to contract COVID-19. We also know that COVID-19 has caused considerable fear and anxiety among populations throughout the world. However, the COVID-19 virus is not entirely caused by a person’s mental state. On the contrary, the virus spreads through the air and through particles on surfaces that can spread by being touched. While it’s important to have a positive mental outlook, COVID-19 has greater implications for physical health.

What is behind this rumor?

- Fear, anxiety, and cultural beliefs could have influenced people’s perceptions and led to the spread of this rumor, as Yemen has been facing a complex humanitarian crisis with ongoing conflict, limited access to healthcare, and economic challenges, which may have resulted in a lack of accurate information about COVID-19. Additionally, Yemen has a high prevalence of mental health issues, and individuals may have attributed COVID-19 deaths to panic attacks or mental illness due to a lack of understanding about COVID-19. The ongoing conflict in Yemen has subjected its people to a range of stressors, harms, and traumas. Despite limited research, it’s apparent that the war has had a significant and destructive effect on the mental wellbeing of many Yemenis. With the added impact of COVID-19, the already dire situation is likely to have worsened, compounding the mental health crisis in the country.

- Also, some obligatory prevention measures that were implemented in COVID-19 isolation centers by the authorities may have contributed to more panic and anxiety among the quarantined confirmed or suspected cases. For example, preventing people from leaving the isolation centers (sometimes using force).

Why is this rumor important?

There remains a lot of confusion over what causes COVID-19 and even whether the virus is real. It is important to be able to understand how the virus spreads and that its causes are not linked to mental capacities of individuals. This is to say, it is necessary to understand that the virus can affect all people regardless of their mental capacities, race, religion, nationality, etc.
Rumor #3
Theme: Post-vaccination Behavior

“Corona is a mental illness, not organic or viral, because the people who entered the quarantine had a panic attack, they died, and those who stayed in their houses, nothing happened to them.”

RECOMMENDATIONS
For the Humanitarian partners

- The Yemeni Ministry of Health in collaboration with health humanitarian actors organizations to provide training to healthcare professionals on disease prevention and control measures. These programs can also be extended to the community by engaging trusted local channels, such as community leaders, religious leaders, and local media.

- Ministry of Health can work with humanitarian partners to provide mental health support to vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and internally displaced persons (IDPs). There should be mental health units in the Yemeni health facilities with well trained and professional staff who can provide psychological support during pandemics and crises. This can be through: Providing counseling services, peer support groups, and self-help resources that can be found here: CCI - Self Help Resources for Mental Health Problems.

- Health workers at isolation centers must be provided with the needed trainings to handle panic and anxiety that comes with COVID-19.

Sources