HUMANITARIAN BULLETIN #6
MAY 2023–YEMEN

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 May 2023. During this period 308 Rumors were collected as follows: face-to-face (28), Online (280). 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 “Vaccination Program/ Hoax/ Other”.

COVID-19 SITUATION IN YEMEN

Yemen’s health system is on the brink of collapse due to the conflict and economic collapse. 21.6 million people need humanitarian aid, while 46% of health facilities are partially functioning or out of service. 12.9 million Yemenis, including 540,000 children under five, require urgent healthcare. Insufficient international funding hampers efforts to address the crisis. Disease outbreaks like measles, diphtheria, dengue fever, cholera, and polio worsen the situation, with thousands of cases reported in the first quarter of the year.

From January 1 to May 20, 2023, IOM Yemen DTM recorded 3,222 households (19,332 individuals) that experienced displacement. Between May 14 and May 20, 2023, they tracked 30 households (180 individuals) newly displaced. The primary destinations for these displacements were Ta’iz (19 households), Ma’rib (7 households), and Al Hodeidah (4 households). Most displacements within Ta’iz and Al Hodeidah were internal. There were also 6 households previously identified as displaced.

As of March 2023, Yemen has reported no new cases or deaths related to COVID-19, indicating a slowdown in the spread of the virus.
Rumor #1
Theme: Other

"Qat has economic disadvantages, the rest are all benefits if it is used at times not exceeding six hours. The rest of the information is wrong."

FACT CHECKING

Qat is a plant that some people use, but it poses risks to our health. It belongs to a group of substances known as amphetamines, which can be hazardous. The World Health Organization conducted a comprehensive study and discovered that Qat contains substances similar to amphetamines. Consequently, Qat is internationally prohibited due to its potential harm to our bodies. Medical professionals also warn that using Qat can lead to issues with our brain and nerves. Therefore, it is crucial to avoid and refrain from using Qat.

Qat has direct negative effects on various organs of the body. Starting with the mouth and teeth, it causes cavities and mouth sores. The stomach and intestines are also harmed, resulting in loss of appetite. Dr. Mohammed Abdo Al-Mekhlafi emphasizes these damages, stating that they are all consequences of consuming Qat, which additionally has adverse effects on the liver. Qat contains accumulated toxins that lead to inflammation, cirrhosis, stomach ulcers, duodenal ulcers, bowel damage, and stiffness.

Chewing Qat can impair the proper functioning of body parts, including the reproductive system. It can cause the formation of stones and enlargement of the prostate. Qat also affects the heart and blood. When chewed, it accelerates heart rate and raises blood pressure. This poses a significant risk, particularly for individuals with pre-existing hypertension, as it can result in heart or brain strokes and cerebral bleeding. Additionally, Qat can contribute to respiratory difficulties and lung problems.

Qat is known to be a stimulant for the nervous system, increasing activity and reducing fatigue. According to Dr. Muhammad Yahya Al-Ashwal, a consultant in psychiatry and addiction, in an interview with the Al-Najat Foundation for Awareness of the Harms of Qat, Qat has a rapid effect on the body. However, it is important to note that Qat can have adverse effects. Dr. Al-Ashwal explains that some individuals may experience convulsions and clear psychosis, which are mental illnesses that can occur even with the use of a small amount of Qat. Symptoms of these conditions include severe anxiety, high blood pressure, sweating, increased heart rate, and delirium. Therefore, even a small amount of Qat can cause intense anxiety and fear.

Qat increases the release of dopamine in the brain, resulting in heightened activity of the nervous system. On a psychological level, Dr. Al-Ashwal states that Qat has negative effects on certain mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and mania. In patients with these conditions, Qat can raise dopamine levels, leading to increased suspicion and delusions.

Furthermore, the consumption of Qat can impact the effectiveness of psychiatric medications, particularly for individuals with schizophrenia and mania. Based on practical experience and real-world observations with patients, Dr. Al-Ashwal notes that those who cease Qat consumption tend to respond better to treatment and show greater improvement compared to those who continue using Qat.
"Qat has economic disadvantages, the rest are all benefits if it is used at times not exceeding six hours. The rest of the information is wrong."

What is behind the rumor?

The consumption of Qat holds great social and economic importance in the country, deeply rooted in Yemeni culture. However, Qat cultivation requires substantial water resources and agricultural land, resulting in environmental concerns and diverting resources from food production and coffee plantations. Understanding the significance of the rumor becomes crucial as it may suggest that limiting Qat consumption to a maximum of six hours could potentially mitigate the economic drawbacks while still allowing for some benefits. This rumor has the potential to influence the population’s attitudes and behaviors towards Qat consumption, shaping their choices and impacting the overall dynamics surrounding Qat in Yemen.

Qat, a water-intensive plant, consumes approximately one-third of the groundwater resources. This poses a significant issue since the groundwater supply is not infinite and is essential for various purposes, including drinking water and cultivating other food crops. While cultivating Qat can be financially beneficial for farmers, it occupies a considerable amount of land that could otherwise be utilized for growing nutritious food.

In Yemen, Qat consumption heavily impacts family budgets, with many spending a significant portion of their income on purchasing it. This expenditure surpasses even one-third of their budget, exacerbating the problem for the entire country. When individuals engage in daily Qat chewing, it consumes a substantial amount of their time, diverting their focus from productive work. Despite the enjoyment and social aspect associated with chewing Qat, it has adverse effects on the country’s economy. Additionally, the extensive cultivation of Qat occupies a significant amount of land that could be utilized for cultivating other essential crops. Approximately half to two-thirds of arable land is dedicated to Qat production instead of food crops.
Rumor #1
Theme: Other

“Qat has economic disadvantages, the rest are all benefits if it is used at times not exceeding six hours. The rest of the information is wrong.”

Why is this important?
The rumor surrounding Qat consumption in Yemen is influenced by several factors. One significant factor is the social connectivity that Qat chewing provides, as well as the perceived benefits of increased alertness and focus during and after chewing. However, it’s important to acknowledge that there may be additional motivations or beliefs that contribute to the spread of this rumor.

One possibility is that individuals who are passionate about preserving Yemeni cultural practices associated with Qat consumption may actively promote the rumor. They may consider Qat to be an essential part of their heritage and aim to maintain its cultural significance.

Furthermore, it’s worth considering the role of personal or financial interests within the Qat industry. Individuals with vested interests in the production and sale of Qat may promote its consumption, downplaying any potential negative effects and emphasizing the positive aspects. By understanding these underlying factors, we can gain insight into why the rumor persists and how it influences attitudes and behaviors related to Qat consumption in Yemen.

RECOMMENDATIONS
For The Humanitarian NGOs

- Livelihood Support: Provide vocational training programs and microfinance opportunities to Qat farmers and consumers. This will enable them to develop alternative income sources and establish small businesses in sectors unrelated to Qat production or consumption.

- Youth Engagement: Implement targeted programs that engage young people in constructive activities, education, and skills training. By offering alternatives to Qat-related activities and creating opportunities for personal and professional growth, it becomes more likely to reduce Qat consumption among the youth population.

- Sensitization and Policy Advocacy: Advocate for policies that regulate or restrict Qat production, trade, and consumption. Collaborate with government bodies and policymakers to introduce measures such as taxation, licensing, or public awareness campaigns to reduce Qat’s societal acceptance.
Autism is characterized by challenges in social interaction, communication, and the presence of repetitive behaviors. Delayed speech is often associated with autism as well. As symptoms can vary among children, it is crucial to consult a specialist doctor for an accurate diagnosis of the condition. It is important to note that vaccines do not cause autism; in fact, they can help prevent life-threatening diseases.

Vaccines unequivocally do not impact fertility, and it is important to emphasize that there is absolutely no evidence linking vaccines to any risk for future pregnancies.

For example, regarding the COVID-19 vaccine, a particular rumor emerged due to a connection made between the spike protein produced by mRNA-based vaccines and a protein called syncytin-1. Syncytin-1 plays a crucial role in maintaining the attachment of the placenta to the uterus during pregnancy.

While it is true that the spike protein and syncytin-1 share a few amino acids, they are not similar enough to cause significant immune system interference. Importantly, there is no evidence to suggest that any COVID-19 vaccine affects fertility.

Regarding the concern of experiencing dullness or lethargy after vaccination, it is essential to clarify that while there have been isolated instances of neurological conditions reported following COVID-19 vaccination, these occurrences are rare. The report in the link includes such cases to raise awareness about potential autoimmune reactions that may occur post-vaccination, specifically autoimmune encephalitis with short-term memory loss. The underlying causes of this condition are currently under investigation, and it is important to note that autoimmune encephalitis often goes unnoticed but can have a positive prognosis with timely treatment. It is crucial to emphasize that the benefits of COVID-19 vaccination far outweigh the associated risks, and widespread vaccination efforts continue to be highly recommended.

Why is this important?

- The spread of this rumor can have a profound impact on the population’s perception of vaccines and their willingness to be immunized. Yemen’s healthcare system already faces numerous challenges, including limited resources, ongoing conflict, and the prevalence of diseases. If this rumor gains traction, it could further undermine trust in vaccinations, resulting in reduced vaccine uptake and potentially leading to the resurgence of preventable diseases.

- Such consequences would be particularly severe for public health in Yemen, especially among vulnerable populations such as children and individuals already struggling with malnutrition or other health conditions. It is essential to address and dispel this rumor to ensure that the benefits of immunization are understood and to safeguard the health and well-being of the Yemeni population.
Rumor #2
Theme: Vaccination programs

What is behind this Rumor?

The spread of rumors can be attributed to several factors, including limited access to accurate information, low levels of health literacy, cultural beliefs, fear, and a general distrust of institutions. It is crucial to recognize that individuals who spread these rumors may genuinely believe in their validity, influenced by their own experiences, anecdotes, or exposure to misinformation online or through social networks.

Furthermore, political or ideological motivations, personal biases, and even deliberate disinformation campaigns can also contribute to the dissemination of such rumors. These factors highlight the complex nature of rumor-spreading and the need to address not only the information gap but also the underlying factors that perpetuate these rumors.

By understanding the diverse motivations and influences behind the spread of rumors, we can develop more effective strategies to combat misinformation and promote accurate information to ensure the health and well-being of the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Communication and Education: Allocate resources to develop and implement comprehensive communication campaigns. These campaigns should aim to counter misinformation by providing accurate and easily understandable information about vaccines. Collaborating with local community leaders, religious figures, and healthcare professionals can help deliver clear and consistent messaging that emphasizes the safety and importance of vaccines.

- Training and Capacity Building: Provide training and ongoing support to healthcare workers and community health volunteers. This training should focus on equipping them with the knowledge and skills to effectively address concerns and provide accurate information about vaccines. By strengthening the capacity of healthcare workers and volunteers, trust in the healthcare system can be built, and vaccine hesitancy can be effectively addressed.

- Access to Vaccines: Ensuring equitable access to vaccines is critical. Humanitarian organizations should work towards providing vaccines to marginalized and remote areas of Yemen. This includes strengthening the vaccine supply chain, distribution networks, and cold chain infrastructure to ensure the effective delivery of vaccines to the population. By prioritizing access to vaccines in underserved areas, humanitarian organizations can contribute to reducing disparities in vaccine coverage.

- Surveillance and Monitoring: Establishing a robust system for monitoring vaccine safety and efficacy is essential. Humanitarian organizations should collaborate with relevant stakeholders to implement surveillance mechanisms that track and assess vaccine-related adverse events. This system can address concerns related to vaccine safety and provide timely information to reinforce confidence in the vaccine program. Regular monitoring and reporting of vaccine-related data can inform decision-making and ensure ongoing evaluation of the vaccination efforts.
“Mr. Ahmed, by God, if there were vaccines, they would not give them to us for free my children, who are 11 years old and 10 years old, are without vaccinations, and their health is better than their older brothers. I’m talking to you from experience before I’ve heard anyone’s statement.”

Text, reply to a tweet that includes a video of the DFA of Health talking about the issue of vaccines.

**What is behind the rumor?**
The rumor claims that there is a hidden agenda behind the free-provided vaccines. The popularity of such rumors can be tied to Due to low literacy rates of the Yemeni population, the mistrust in health technical bodies, and the spread of propaganda against the western world by the religious groups. The belief in hidden agendas behind free vaccines originated from conspiracy theories like this. Similar rumors include theories that the virus is a global experiment, that the vaccines in Yemen are of lower quality than those in the rest of the world, or that the virus is a biological weapon being used to depopulate countries.

Another factor, which could contribute to the spread of such rumors, is organizations implementing the vaccination campaigns. Such an organization might not take communication on immunization programs very seriously. This could exacerbate the existing mistrust and create a fertile ground for rumors. [8] [9]

**Why is this important?**
The spread of rumors claiming there is a hidden agenda behind the free-provided vaccines could contribute to lower vaccination rates. The Yemen population might defer or even build a solid opinion against taking vaccines if these rumors continue. A significant percentage of individuals not getting vaccinated, will likely increase the number of outbreaks, resulting in increased death rates.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- In collaboration with the Ministry of Health, humanitarian organizations can support vaccination awareness campaigns and propaganda to encourage vaccination. This is particularly important to explain the benefits of vaccinations for children. For example, they can stress through these campaigns the importance for families to take advantage of free vaccinations for children.

- Conducting community outreach and awareness programs can help to address any misconceptions or rumors regarding the availability and distribution of vaccines. These programs can also provide information about the importance of vaccinations and how they can help protect against diseases.

- Collaborating with local leaders and community members can help to build trust and improve communication between the humanitarian organizations and the community. It can also help to identify any specific concerns or needs related to vaccinations.

- The Ministry of Health and the humanitarian partners should ensure that free vaccines are distributed fairly and equitably, especially to health facilities in remote areas so as to guarantee access for all Yemeni children to the vaccines.
as they are the best judge of when antibiotics are truly needed. It’s worth emphasizing that taking antibiotics appropriately does not weaken our immune system.

While incorporating nutritious foods such as lemons, oranges, turmeric, and black caraway seeds into our diet can provide essential nutrients, it’s crucial to understand that solely relying on these foods will not grant our bodies invincibility against COVID-19 or other illnesses. A strategic approach to overall health includes a combination of various factors. This involves maintaining a balanced diet, practicing good hygiene, getting sufficient sleep, exercising regularly, and following official health guidelines. By adopting a holistic and comprehensive strategy, we can enhance our overall well-being and fortify our immune systems against potential health threats.

Coronaviruses belong to a large family of viruses that can cause a range of illnesses, ranging from the common cold to severe respiratory conditions like Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). In the case of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV), common symptoms include fever, cough, and shortness of breath. While pneumonia is frequently observed, not all MERS patients develop this condition. Some patients with MERS have also reported gastrointestinal symptoms, including diarrhea.

It is worth noting that approximately 35% of MERS cases reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) have resulted in death.
Rumor #3

(There is only a fever that affects people who are sensitive to mosquitoes and to malaria, and its symptoms are fever and infections. As for corona, it is only complications of fevers, and it is a lie. We no longer take antibiotics because it is a trick. They want to weaken our immunity, and it is not useful at all. Therefore, we only eat lemons, oranges, turmeric and blackseeds to strengthen our immunity)

What is behind the rumor?

- There are several factors that can contribute to the spread of rumors, including misinformation, limited access to reliable sources, cultural beliefs, and a general distrust in official channels. When it comes to the person spreading this particular rumor, it is possible that they have limited access to accurate health information and rely on anecdotal experiences or personal beliefs.

- It is important to approach such situations with empathy and understanding, recognizing the significance of providing accurate information to address misconceptions. The individual spreading the rumor may have a distrust of conventional medicine or be influenced by alternative health practices. They might not have access to reliable sources that can provide evidence-based information.

- To effectively counter the spread of this rumor, it is crucial to prioritize the dissemination of accurate information through trusted channels. This can involve engaging with community leaders, healthcare professionals, and other trusted sources to address the concerns and provide clear explanations based on scientific evidence. By fostering health literacy and empowering individuals to make informed decisions, it becomes possible to tackle misconceptions and promote the importance of reliable health information.

Why is this important?

- By recognizing the underlying reasons behind the rumor and the mindset of the person spreading it, humanitarian organizations can develop targeted strategies to combat misinformation and bridge the information gap. This includes building trust, promoting access to reliable sources, and fostering an environment where accurate information can prevail.

- In Yemen, where the healthcare infrastructure has been severely affected by conflict and humanitarian crises, access to accurate information about health and diseases is of utmost importance. Rumors and misinformation can quickly spread, leading to misunderstandings, fear, and potentially harmful practices. If this specific rumor gains momentum, it could mislead people into believing that COVID-19 is solely a complication of fevers and that conventional medical treatments are ineffective.

- Such beliefs could lead individuals to neglect proper medical care, exacerbating the impact of the virus and undermining public health efforts. It is crucial to counteract this rumor by disseminating accurate information that emphasizes the severity and complexity of COVID-19, the importance of seeking appropriate medical treatment, and the effectiveness of established healthcare interventions. By doing so, we can help ensure that individuals receive the necessary care and support, thereby safeguarding public health in Yemen.)
Rumor #3

There is only a fever that affects people who are sensitive to mosquitoes and to malaria, and its symptoms are fever and infections. As for corona, it is only complications of fevers, and it is a lie. We no longer take antibiotics because it is a trick. They want to weaken our immunity, and it is not useful at all. Therefore, we only eat lemons, oranges, turmeric and blackseeds to strengthen our immunity.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- Prioritize Accurate Information: Humanitarian organizations, partners, and the Yemeni government should prioritize the dissemination of accurate and evidence-based information regarding COVID-19. This can be achieved through targeted public health campaigns, awareness programs, and the utilization of trusted sources to counter misinformation effectively.

- Engage Community Leaders and Local Healthcare Providers: It is crucial to engage with community leaders, local healthcare providers, and influential individuals to actively disseminate accurate information within their communities. By involving trusted figures, the message can reach a wider audience, build trust, and ensure that reliable information is accessible to all.

- Strengthen Healthcare Infrastructure: Investing in rebuilding and strengthening healthcare infrastructure in Yemen, particularly in regions affected by conflict and humanitarian crises, is vital. This includes improving access to healthcare services, training healthcare workers, and promoting regular communication with communities to address their health concerns effectively.

- By implementing these recommendations, humanitarian organizations can play a crucial role in combating misinformation, building trust, and promoting accurate information about COVID-19 in Yemen. These efforts will contribute to improving public health outcomes and increasing the resilience of communities in the face of health crises.

Sources