



Introduction

The Risk Communications and Community Engagement Technical Working Group (RCCE TWG) was created in response to **COVID-19** in order to develop best practices around community engagement given threat of pandemic in South Sudan. This product is a joint effort between members of the Communications and Community Engagement Working Group (CCE WG) under the Rumor Tracking Subcommittee (RTS) of the RCCE TWG and highlights rumors and public perceptions recently collected across the country.

This initiative captures reported instances of unverified information being transmitted to and within communities, as well as community understandings and interpretations of issues related to COVID-19. This brief provides examples of rumors and community perceptions on a state-by-state basis.

Methodology

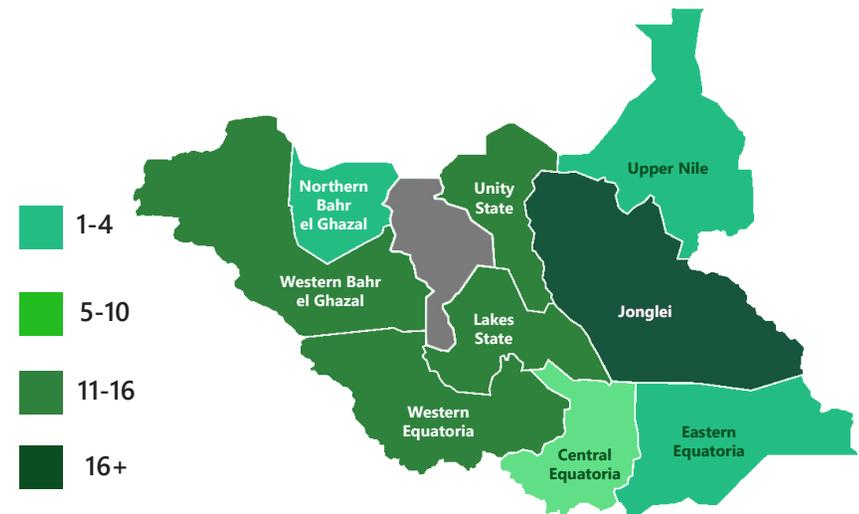
Qualitative data for this bulletin is drawn from a variety of sources, such as [Internews's Rumor Tracking Methodology](#), targeted interviews and focus groups with community members conducted by IOM Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM), and REACH field enumerators. **The reporting period covered by this bulletin is April 27-May 9 2020.**

IOM CCCM data focuses on rumor tracking in displacement sites – Protection of Civilian (PoCs) and Collective Sites in Wau and Bentiu. IOM 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. CCCM data was also provided by ACTED and Danish Refugee Council.

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

All corresponding data was then thematically coded under particular rumor, concern and perception categories. The rumors reported are only indicative of perceptions in areas in which they were collected and not representative of all rumors, concerns and perceptions held in South Sudan.

Fig 1. Source of tracked rumors and concerns*



*123 rumors and concerns collected in 9 states between April 27 and May 9, 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.

State-level analysis¹

The below data provides a snapshot of trends reported in nine states of South Sudan during the reporting period.

Overall Trends

During the period between April 27 – May 9, a number of key trends emerged in community perceptions of the virus across South Sudan. Perceptions about immunity to COVID-19 were reported during this period as in prior data collections, including the persistent belief that Africans or South Sudanese are somehow immune to infection or, alternately, unlikely to be severely impacted by the virus due to perceived superior immune systems. Such perceptions were reportedly prevalent in the Equatorias, where new variations on the 'African immunity' theme emerged.

Relatedly, rumors about hot weather and climate preventing the spread of COVID-19 continued and were supplemented by the emergence of a new rumor reported in NBeG that the relatively remote geography of the state would protect the population from the virus. While fears of cross-border movements have been especially acute in Jonglei and the Equatorias, in NBeG, population movement and fears about outsiders or returnees transmitting the virus as a result of travel were not reported, despite proximity to and known population movements from neighboring Sudan.

Religious and spiritual beliefs, especially the perceptions that God will provide protection from the virus or that God's plan will govern its spread, continued to appear in community perceptions, and were especially pronounced in NBeG and Jonglei during the reporting period.



Northern Bahr el Ghazal State (NBeG)

Numbers of rumors/concerns collected: 9

As in most states, in NBeG **there exists a disparity in how respondents perceive the severity of the virus and their susceptibility to it.** Over half of respondents in the reporting period referred to common themes of "divine intervention" and "African immunity" as protecting them from the virus. The theme of "isolation" also emerged, whereby the relatively remote and isolated nature of NBeG was perceived to protect the population from the spread of COVID-19. Population movement did not appear to resonate as a concern in NBeG during the reporting period, despite extensive precedents of movement between NBeG and locations in Sudan. This suggests that perceptions related to *protection from God* or the perceived inability of the virus to affect Africans or to spread in remotes areas of NBeG, may be superseding other commonly held concerns around COVID-19.

In Aweil North county, a concerning rumor that potential COVID-19 vaccines could

result in infertility and will thus prompt an increase in sexual activity was recorded. Not only could an uptick in sexual activity lead to an increase in SGBV cases, especially with social-distancing measures confining families to their homes, but also signals that in some areas, **community trust in potential vaccines and/or treatments may be quite low.** Potential skepticism in vaccines may have serious implications for humanitarians, particularly public health actors, in the future responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- "There is a rumor that if you are... vaccinated from coronavirus, you can automatically end up not reproducing again, meaning you cannot produce child or even continuous pleasing you wife with sex. Many people are having extra sex to ensure they have sons for the future." Male, 50, Ahu Collective Site, Aweil North, Northern Bahr el Ghazal

In both Aweil East and Aweil North, two rumors tied to global conspiracies were identified. The first, that *wealthy Americans had manufactured the virus to control the world population* and the second, that COVID-19 could be prevented by "[consuming] disinfectant...like in America."

- "Some people perceived that corona virus was manufactured by some Rich American men like Bill Gate in order to reduce the population of India and china but not any other countries." Male, 38, Ahu Collective Site, Aweil North, Northern Bahr el Ghazal



Western Bahr el Ghazal State

Numbers of rumors/concerns collected: 16

Data from WBeG indicates a strong awareness of COVID-19 symptoms, transmission factors and prevention methods. **There is a reportedly robust understanding that the virus disproportionately affects the elderly and that social-distancing and hand-washing are currently the only effective preventive measures.** This awareness may indicate high resonance of public-health messaging campaigns, especially in urban and peri-urban areas around Wau town.

However, such awareness may also be linked to concerns about perceived deficiencies and limitations of the response. While there were reports that people were “talking about coronavirus all the time,” **some respondents linked poor health infrastructure and lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) to brewing fear in the community in the event of an outbreak.** Furthermore, references to distributions not operating “normally” due to COVID-19 may illuminate a broader concern that with an impending lockdown, access to services is likely to be severely curtailed. This concern may further be linked to disruptions in distribution cycles in the last six months, especially delayed distributions in Wau in October and November 2019 due to flooding on the Yirol-Rumbek

road. This underscores the critical importance of ensuring nuanced messaging of changes to GFDs and overall service provision during the COVID-19 period.

- *“The main concern for us here is the lack of testing kits, personal protective equipment (PPE). Therefore, if we get infected we easily die without medical [treatment] and it creates fear in the community.” Male, 37, Griniti, Wau, Western Bahr el Ghazal*
- *“Coronavirus has increased hunger in South Sudan...but now food distribution is not operating normally, like in December.” Female, 28, Nazareth, Wau, Western Bahr el Ghazal*



Lakes State

Numbers of rumors/concerns collected: 12

Data collected in Lakes State during the reporting period points to the perception that COVID-19 is of secondary or tertiary concern when compared to the more immediate threats of insecurity and economic constraints, a perception reported in many states in South Sudan. As intercommunal violence has flared in Lakes State over the last few months, respondents indicated that **border-closures prompted by**

COVID-19, coupled with violence, could prompt food and commodity shortages.

These concerns were especially acute in Cuibet and Rumbek Centre counties.

- *“People think now their main concern is intercommunal fighting as security situation between the nearby counties is getting worse. People feel concern about COVID 19 because hunger would be striking as the borders are closed.” Male, 46, Awerial, Mingkaman, Lakes State*

Numerous rumors continue to promote the consumption of wild foods, including extensive references to **bitter roots and leaves** and **aribe, gitar, lalob** and **lulub fruits**. While these rumors are present countrywide, **acuil, thou and diot** fruits were recorded multiple times in Lakes State.

A rural-urban divide was especially pronounced in Lakes State, **where rural populations, who may be less familiar with social distancing measures, a) have expressed anger/distrust at being told to alter deeply-ingrained cultural physical-greeting practices and b) indicate a perception that due to their isolation from urban centers, they are more protected from the virus.** This data suggests that messaging on physical distancing or the advice given not to greet by shaking hands may be perceived negatively by the community and may warrant alternative methods of greeting to be discussed and shared in communities.

- *“People in rural areas are not minding about the disease because they are saying corona is for people living in town and also saying that it is for educated people because they sit in... one place (office)” Male, 35, Awerial, Mingkaman, Lakes State*



Jonglei State

Numbers of rumors/concerns collected: 37

In Jonglei, data collected during the reporting period suggests that religion and spiritual beliefs are playing a key role in how the community perceives the virus, particularly in Akobo, and particularly in relation to how they see their ability to avoid infection. The belief that God will protect people, or that it is up to God whether people are spared from COVID-19, may be representative of religious beliefs in SSD generally, but is also likely tied to whether people have trust in preventative measures and/or their ability to undertake them given existing resources.

- o "People think Coronavirus is spreading through God's will so people should not fear death because no one will live forever." Male, 23, Nyikan, Akobo, Jonglei
- o "We only pray to God that there is no case in Akobo because we've got no option here, but God will protect us." Female, 26, Market Restaurant, Akobo, Jonglei

Data from Jonglei also indicates a noticeable division in community perceptions about how seriously to take the virus: while some reported rumors suggest that COVID-19 may lead to starvation or the end of the world given the gravity of the situation, others involve perceptions such as African immunity, hot weather preventing the spread of the virus, and even one reported rumor that the government

has exaggerated the number of confirmed cases in order to obtain money to fund the COVID-19 response.

- o "People think they will be safe with this virus because they are poor and it only kills the rich people." Male, 32, Borehole at Tungdol, Akobo, Jonglei
- o "Community views the virus as a dangerous pandemic, saying a person who tests COVID-19 positive and later recovered cannot develop antibodies of his own to fight re-infection again." Female, 31, Panyagor, Twic East, Jonglei



Upper Nile State

Numbers of rumors/concerns collected: 6

According to data collected during the two-week period in Upper Nile, **community perceptions were primarily related to concerns about the impact of government response to COVID-19,** particularly restrictions on the movement of people in and out of the PoC, and economic impact of prevention measures.

- o "Another threat is the criminal act demonstrated by government military at the gate to people who are going out to access livelihood. They know very many people are depending on livelihood activities conducting outside the fence while they are forcefully restricting them at the gate." Female, 25, Malakal PoC, Upper Nile



Unity State

Numbers of rumors/concerns collected: 12

Data collected in Unity during their two-week period suggests that rumors about prevention and treatment continue to spread and new rumors of this nature, such as the use of urine for handwashing as an effective protection measure, continue to pop up within the community. This is occurring both in Bentiu PoC and Bentiu town, as well as in other parts of Unity such as Panyijiar and Pariang, all of which have varying degrees of access to health information provided by humanitarians.

Since the CCE WG partners began rumor tracking, rumors related to the consumption of food, beverages and natural remedies have been highly varied in Unity State. **Rumors related to the consumption of alcohol-based substances as a preventative technique have been especially prevalent,** ranging from "locally-brewed gin" to "hand sanitizer." Rumors indicating a potential uptick in alcohol consumption may have serious implications for the community at large, including possible increases in instances of community violence, SGBV, and domestic violence.

- o "Rumor and misinformation indicated that COVID-19 infection can be treated like traditional way by covering him/her with a blanket and avoid coming into

contact with air” - Mixed gender group, Bentiu PoC, Unity

- “There is a rumor that if a person performs casual jobs that involve physical activities like digging, cutting poles, etc, one can’t get infected with Coronavirus.” Female, 27, Kollang, Pariang, Unity



Central Equatoria State

Numbers of rumors/concerns collected: 4

Few rumors/concerns were tracked in Central Equatoria during the reporting period.

One rumor suggested that the reason some communities are not taking the threats of COVID-19 seriously is because people are “not dying” in South Sudan as they are in other countries, drawing a comparison between Coronavirus and the Ebola outbreak, and the perception that Ebola did not impact Europe. This rumor represents another variation on the ‘African immunity’ theme, whereby COVID-19 is perceived as a disease of ‘other people’ and not South Sudanese.



Western Equatoria state

Numbers of rumors/concerns collected: 15

While perceptions of the humanitarian response likely continue to be impacted by the initial cases of COVID-19 being confirmed among UN staff, in Maridi County, a rumor was recorded that NGO staff have already been vaccinated against the virus. This rumor is similar to perceptions recorded in Jonglei where the international community is perceived to be somehow financially benefitting from the virus.

- “Rumor has it that all the staff working for NGOs were vaccinated with Covid-19 vaccine and they are going in the community free confusing people. They are making money at the expenses of the communities by creating awareness in the communities yet there is no Covid-19 in South Sudan”. Female, 31, Hai Matara, Maridi, Western Equatoria

Since late March, **numerous rumors referenced a perception that the symptoms and treatment methods for COVID-19 did not differ from other common illnesses.** For instance, a rumor in Yambio was recorded articulating that “people have recovered from respiratory diseases without taking medicine,” suggesting that some communities do not believe COVID-19 should be approached any differently.

Rumors that *hot weather, hot tea (without sugar) and “African immunity”* prevent the spread of the virus remained prevalent; however, several rumors emerged that *“cool water” or “well-ventilated” rooms were key to stopping the virus.* This may relate to a widespread reported belief that *COVID-19 is only for “rich people”*, who have access to air-conditioning and refrigeration facilities.

A rumor was recorded that people with “serious” pre-existing conditions were somehow immune from COVID-19. This indicates a direct contradiction of the prevailing scientific guidance that people with certain conditions, especially HIV, are especially susceptible to the effects of the virus.¹

- *COVID 19 can’t easily kill people who had serious diseases like HIV or tuberculosis”. Male, 34, Guruba, Yambio, Western Equatoria.*



Eastern Equatoria State

Numbers of rumors/concerns collected: 6

Similar to Jonglei, **community perceptions reported in Eastern Equatoria either fall into one of two categories: either the perception that the virus will not affect them because it is**

¹ According to guidance from [WHO](https://www.who.int/)

a disease for 'others' and they are not at risk, or the perception that the virus will have severe and devastating effects. This divide may suggest that at least some members of communities may be receiving adequate information about the risks involved with an outbreak; however, the presence of deep fears about the end of the world or other severe repercussions could also point to lack of accurate health messaging or fear-based health messaging that leaves the community believing in the worst-case scenario.

- o "They are threatened by Corona, others have gone to an extent of thinking that maybe the world is coming to an end, since it is affecting people in a large number in the world." Female, 29, Katiko, Kapoeta South, Eastern Equatoria
- o "People always talk of the disease and others ignored [it], saying it is a disease of big people, rich people, and it is only for Chinese." Male, 29, Narus, Kapoeta East, Eastern Equatoria

Most Commonly Reported Communication Modalities for Rumors and Perceptions

The most commonly reported channel for sharing or receiving COVID-19-related rumors/perceptions was direct, in-person information sharing through friends or family, as highlighted in Figure 2. [!]NGO/UN workers and local authorities rounded out the second and third most common modalities. Taken together, these three options account for just over two-thirds of how COVID-19 rumors and concerns have been transmitted, indicating that verbal, face-to-face communication is reported to be most prevalent among assessed communities.¹

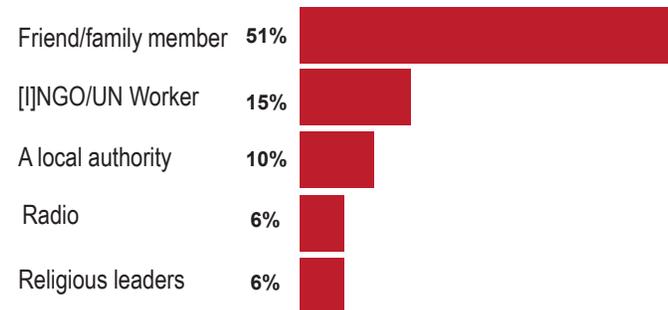
- o The fact that only 6% of respondents assessed for this brief reported hearing rumors through radio, could suggest a combination of two factors: that respondents have varying levels of access to radios and that broadcasts may not be transmitting high degrees of false information. From a risk-communications perspective, previous communications research conducted by REACH identified radios and loudspeakers as ideal supplementary methods of receiving information, but only when sufficiently buttressed with direct, in-person engagement.²

¹ This data was drawn from the question "how was the rumor transmitted" posed by field staff during data collection. These findings do not necessarily align with respondents' most trusted source of information. For more information on preferred communication modalities and trusted sources of information, please refer to REACH's "Accountability to Affected Populations: Community Perceptions of Humanitarian Assistance in South Sudan" and/or "South Sudan: Trends in Communication Preferences and Modalities".

² Data drawn from REACH's February 2020 report, "Accountability to Affected Populations: Community Perceptions Of Humanitarian Assistance in South Sudan"

According to [REACH's Landscape and Media Telecommunications Guide \(2017\)](#), 81% of respondents reported that their information sources do not change during an emergency, indicating the value of humanitarians leveraging existing communication structures.

Fig. 2 Top 5 most common modes of transmission for COVID-19 rumors/concerns identified during reporting period



Recommendations

1. Although the overarching concerns emerging from the rumor tracking data collected thus far is that communities across South Sudan may be underestimating the likelihood or impact of an outbreak of COVID-19, some rumors indicate a perception that COVID-19 will bring devastation. Actors engaged in risk communications should consider how to communicate accurate information about the risks while avoiding expressing despair, which may have mental health and psychosocial implications for the population.
 - For instance, humanitarians should continue messaging that highlights that the majority (roughly 80%) of people globally who do contract the virus end up recovering, but should still stress that it is still a serious threat for vulnerable groups.¹
2. In order to address the 'African immunity' myth, which serves to downplay the potential negative impact of COVID-19 in South Sudan, humanitarians should make efforts to reiterate that there is no evidence to suggest that race, nationality, religious beliefs, or climate impact the spread of the disease.
 - Furthermore, as many of these rumors have religious connotations, religious and spiritual leaders should be engaged in developing localized counter-messaging and highlighting the importance of abiding by social distancing and hygiene guidelines.
3. Rumors relating to COVID-19 and infertility have appeared in NBeG and WBeG since rumor tracking began in March 2020. Such rumors may carry risks of increased SGBV and warrant specific follow-up messaging from humanitarian actors engaging with communities in these areas.
4. While risk communications and health messaging may resonate more in areas with a large-scale humanitarian presence and frequent service provision, communities in these locations may require additional communication from humanitarian actors regarding changes to existing services, modalities, or distribution frequency as a result of the pandemic.
 - Furthermore, as numerous rumors, especially in WBeG, have indicated that communities are concerned that they will not receive adequate PPE, namely facemasks, to protect themselves against the virus, messaging should be developed that provides clear guidance for how communities could construct homemade masks using commonlyavailable materials.
5. As the consumption of alcohol as a preventative measure may lead to broader public health risks, such as community violence, SGBV and/or child protection issues, this particular prevention rumor should be specifically addressed and counteracted in regular risk communications messaging.
6. Messaging encouraging social distancing and prohibiting physical greeting has the potential to create serious negative reactions and heightened tension, especially among rural populations who have limited access to timely and reliable health guidelines, unless the content of this messaging is first discussed with community influencers and an alternative way of greatening and maintaining distance is discussed within the targeted community.
7. As COVID-19 prevention guidelines have ruled-out community meetings, partners have had to shift communication modalities to make use of non-group-interactions, including a transition to door-to-door, radio, cellphone and loudspeaker messaging. Previous research conducted by REACH found that assessed populations tend to significantly prefer direct, face-to-face communication when receiving information about humanitarian assistance and activities. Thus, humanitarian agencies should continue training mobilizers to conduct door-to-door messaging to align with preferred community communication modalities.

Postscript

This bulletin 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. Analysts for this bulletin were Zachary Nelson (REACH) and Devanne O'Brien (IOM).

If you are interested in further analysis or would like to provide any feedback to our service, please contact us at: ccewgss@gmail.com

¹ According to [WHO Guidance](#).