

IMPLEMENTING A COMPREHENSIVE VACCINE MISINFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM:

**Insights and Implementation
Details from UNICEF
North Macedonia**



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BACKGROUND

Vaccine hesitancy is on the rise globally. In fact, in 2019 the World Health Organization declared vaccine hesitancy one of 10 global health threats and noted that it could reverse essential progress in addressing vaccine-preventable diseases. North Macedonia is no exception. For example, the percentage of children receiving Hepatitis B vaccine fell from 92% in 2018 to 79% in 2021 (WHO and UNICEF).

There are many reasons for vaccine hesitancy, including the proliferation of misinformation spread via social networks and social media. Quickly identifying and addressing misinformation and information gaps regarding vaccination can help prevent the generation and spread of misinformation.

In 2022, UNICEF—funded by USAID—developed and implemented a vaccination misinformation management system to track misinformation, halt its spread, counter it with accurate information, and mitigate negative consequences on community health. The need for a misinformation management system was identified through two studies implemented at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in North Macedonia (a knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) study and a baseline study) meant to measure rates of COVID-19 vaccination. These studies were led by UNICEF and conducted in partnership with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

They focused on social listening as a capacity-strengthening activity for the Europe and Central Asia region, including North Macedonia. The findings showed a general lack of information about COVID-19 among communities and mistrust of current information due to contradictions. There was also a general sense of mistrust in the health system, with individuals wondering how the COVID-19 vaccine could have been developed so quickly, and questioning its safety considering the speed at which it was developed.

Given these findings, UNICEF North Macedonia implemented a vaccination misinformation management system to detect and address misinformation regarding COVID-19 vaccination and routine immunizations in communities funded by USAID.

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

VACCINATION MISINFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The misinformation management system was piloted for a six-month period and overseen by an expert panel developed in consultation with the North Macedonia Ministry of Health. The panel met weekly and included government representatives, including the President of the Infectious Disease Commission, representatives from the Ministry of Health, health workers, and communications professionals. During the pilot, a local company (Picasa) developed weekly social listening reports. These reports synthesized all information being shared regarding vaccines (routine immunizations as well as those for COVID-19) on public digital platforms such as local news websites, Facebook, and Twitter. Information was collected in multiple languages to reflect the many languages spoken in the country. The expert panel reviewed and discussed the social listening reports during its weekly meetings. From the reports, the panel identified additional keywords to include/listen for in the next report, depending on the type of misinformation circulating.

Skopje, 12 December 2023: At the conference Increasing trust in vaccines through strategic misinformation management and quality media reporting, health experts and partners from the Macedonian Institute of Media reviewed the activities implemented focusing on setting up a system for managing misinformation and support for quality media reporting on routine childhood vaccines and vaccination against COVID-19.



The group also worked to address the misinformation identified in the reports and through other informal offline channels. For example, a letter from a group of parents began circulating online asking questions—some informed and some not—about the safety of vaccines for their children. With this information, the panel compiled and published a set of responses to the concerned parents' questions, with links to credible information and resources. Many of the responses were also used to inform the content of an [e-health website](#) dedicated to immunization (discussed in more detail below).

The misinformation management system was implemented alongside separate but parallel activities focused on demand generation, such as vaccination caravans and other supply chain interventions to ensure vaccine availability. Through these and other efforts, routine immunization rates are beginning to increase again. For example, from 2021 to 2022, Hepatitis B vaccination rates among children rose 5%, from 79% to 84% ([WHO and UNICEF](#)). Increases in vaccine uptake cannot solely be attributed to the misinformation management system; however, the system contributed to identifying and filling information gaps among communities and health workers, creating feedback mechanisms to reveal information gaps, and identifying sources of misinformation.

“To increase vaccination uptake, you need a robust system with many pieces.”

– UNICEF Communications Officer

E-HEALTH PLATFORM AND WEBSITE

Contradictory, incomplete, or missing information can negatively impact vaccination decision-making. Prior to this initiative, North Macedonia had three websites sharing essential COVID-19 information. While these sites included accurate information, users had to look for it in multiple places. In addition, the sites did not link to one another and were not streamlined, which led users to primarily use Google to find information. The lack of a streamlined approach and the information gaps identified through the social listening reports led UNICEF to publish a comprehensive one-stop-shop [e-health platform and website](#) for trusted information on vaccines. The platform sought not only to address misinformation, but prevent its spread by filling information gaps and providing reliable, credible information. The site includes information on the routine vaccination schedule, a Q&A on common questions related to vaccines, the benefits of immunization, information on various routine vaccines, immunization centers by region, and other essential information. The website improves transparency by providing links to official documents from vaccine suppliers, so users interested in reading about a given vaccine in more detail can do so easily.

JOURNALIST BRIEFINGS

In order to strengthen trust in current information, UNICEF conducted qualitative research to assess how media reporting could be improved to reduce barriers to vaccination and to inform the design of a journalist training and briefings. UNICEF then implemented a two-day training with 18 journalists. The goals were to provide the journalists with credible information about vaccine trends, support them to interpret medical and scientific data, help them better understand the obstacles to communicating effectively with health institutions, instill a better understanding of the media's role in encouraging vaccination, and support them to identify and address misinformation as well as disinformation.



Misinformation is false or inaccurate information. However, disinformation is false or inaccurate information that is deliberately intended to mislead or deceive.

The training also included a Q&A session with experts from the Ministry of Health and other organizations, including the National Immunization Committee and the National Committee on Infectious Diseases. The journalists appreciated this, as they felt health authorities did not communicate enough with them to inform accurate reporting on specific health issues, such as COVID-19. Political leaders were specifically not invited to participate, so that the data and information shared were not seen to be political. The training also covered how journalists can proactively respond to myths in real time as they circulate and discussed the potential consequences of clickbait headlines that can potentially reinforce rumors and disinformation.

After the initial training, UNICEF hosted four journalists' briefings on addressing information gaps, fighting vaccine misinformation, vaccination skepticism and the return of childhood diseases, the COVID-19 vaccine and chronic illness, and the procurement, storage, and access to information about vaccines. These topics were identified as priorities via the misinformation management system. Approximately 8–10 journalists from different national and regional media sources across the country attended each briefing. Expert speakers were also invited, depending on the topic. The goal of the briefings was to facilitate access to trusted health experts, introduce journalists to factual reporting techniques about vaccines and immunization, encourage quality reporting, and strengthen information exchange between journalists and health institutions.

The training and briefings were found to be very successful. The briefings accounted for two of the largest peaks in relevant media engagement, due to reporting on COVID-19 and routine childhood vaccines during the month the briefings were organized. In addition, journalists published 107 digital articles related to vaccination following the briefings. The articles published after the briefings showed a shift in focus away from the dangers of vaccine side effects towards the dangers of the virus itself. In addition, the content published after the briefings included more statistical data, reliable information, and a wider variety of sources.

“Some things you cannot predict. But some things are preventable and in doing so you can shape the narrative yourself, rather than letting the public [shape the narrative]. As we had the social listening in place already, we had the opportunity to bring on expertise from the health side and have them shape the narrative on the questions we knew people were asking and that would eventually lead to a crisis. It prevented misinformation and disinformation from spreading.”

– Social and Behavior Change Officer

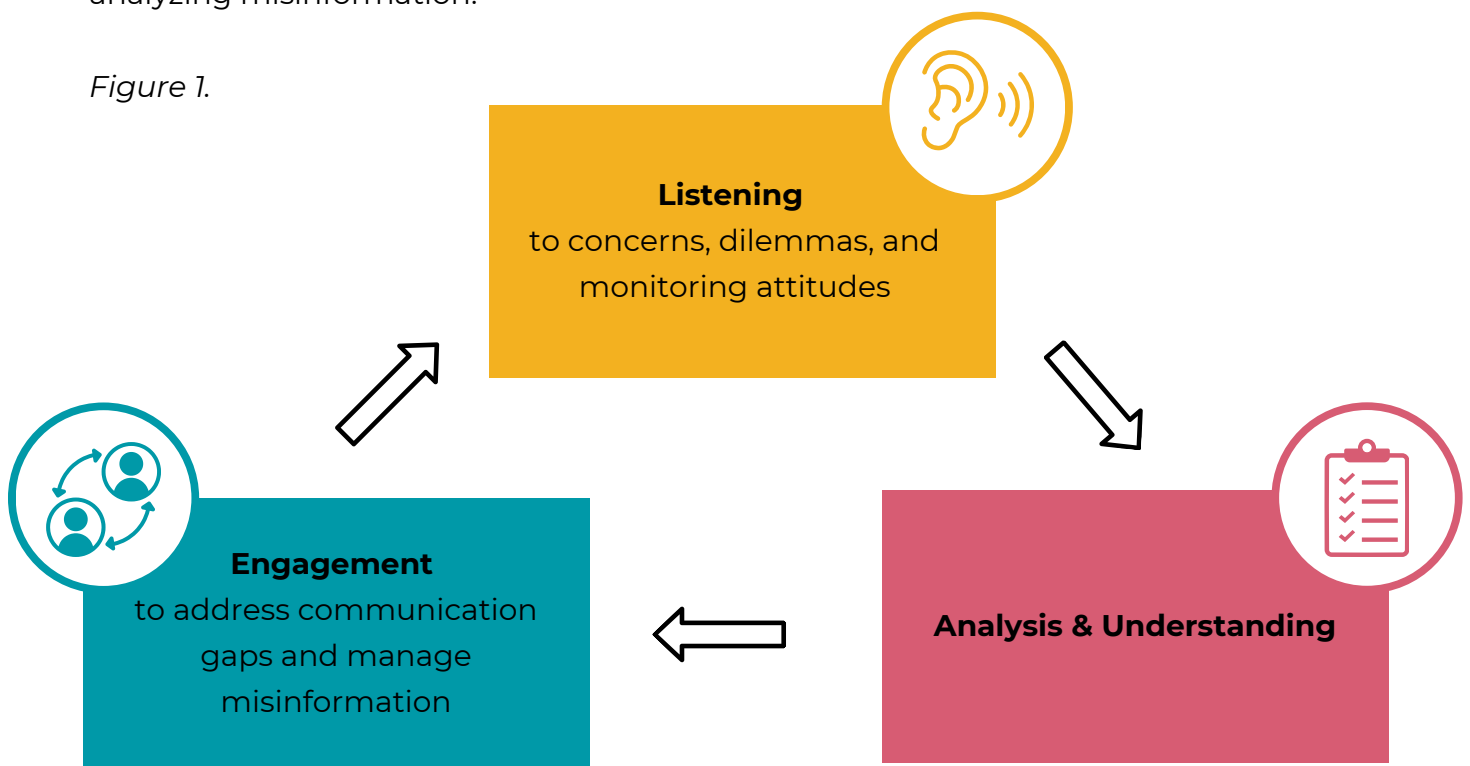


Skopje, 6 September 2023: A series of four journalist briefings were organized in partnership with the Macedonian Institute of Media to strengthen the capacity of journalists to engage in factual reporting around COVID-19 vaccines and routine childhood immunization. The Minister of Health Bekim Sali and UNICEF Deputy Representative Artur Ayvazov talk with media representatives at the first journalist briefing.

STRATEGY FOR ESTABLISHING A VACCINATION MISINFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

UNICEF North Macedonia also collaborated with the Macedonia Institute of Media to create a strategy for managing misinformation. Establishing a misinformation management system involves not only addressing misinformation, but also making an effort to “address information gaps” in order to prevent misinformation from becoming a more serious issue. The strategy offers an outline of recommended practices, methods, and guidelines for establishing a vaccination misinformation management system, led by the Ministry of Health. It includes three main phases for misinformation management: listening to concerns and monitoring attitudes, understanding findings, and engaging audiences to address communication gaps and counter misinformation (Figure 1). The strategy outlines a proposal for establishing North Macedonia’s vaccine misinformation management system, with the intention that the Ministry of Health will eventually assume leadership. It also discusses various stakeholders that should be involved in each phase, including medical teams, community leaders, and an expert body. Finally, it highlights potential activities to implement under each phase, along with information regarding the methodology and platforms to use for monitoring and analyzing misinformation.

Figure 1.



MOVING FORWARD

UNICEF North Macedonia has now shifted its attention to the scale-up and sustainability of these activities. For the misinformation management system, it is developing standard operating procedures (SoPs), tools, and training materials while facilitating trainings, advocacy events, and meetings to support the government to lead and maintain this work moving forward. The SoPs include information on integrating the system into the government's routine functions and overseeing the work. The hope is that the misinformation management system will focus on all vaccines, now that the COVID-19 vaccine has been integrated into the standard immunization schedule. In addition, UNICEF created SoPs for managing the content of the e-health platform and website, so national authorities have a clear plan in place to ensure the website is maintained and frequently updated with the latest information.

Finally, UNICEF North Macedonia is in the process of establishing another partnership to continue the journalist briefings, including strengthening the capacity of national authorities and media personnel to fact-check data and collaborate with one another to strengthen reporting on immunization in the country. UNICEF is hoping to engage the Ministry of Health's communications team to organize and facilitate the briefings; to guide this process, UNICEF is creating a handbook.

LESSONS LEARNED AND CHALLENGES

Misinformation management systems and strategies

- Implementing social listening activities requires sufficient funding to produce the reports and support trained personnel to act on the findings, which can be a sustainability challenge.
- Expert bodies organized to review and respond to misinformation need an institutional mandate, recognition by a formal body, and some degree of authority in order to implement recommendations.
- Frequent government turnover can pose a challenge. Efforts need to be invested into building relationships with each changing communications team to ensure consistent and accurate messaging regarding health topics.

E-health platforms and websites

- Consistent priority needs to be placed on maintaining reliable resources of information and ensuring that content on e-health platforms and websites is continuously relevant.
- Building trust in health systems also means being transparent. Providing easy access to documents related to vaccine types and suppliers, although very technical, helps cultivate transparency.

Skopje, 24 April 2023: Representative of the electronic health service “Moj Termin”, presents the first web platform with information on health services and routine childhood immunization in one place developed to respond to a growing public demand for digitally available health information that is accurate, timely and transparent.



Engaging journalists

- During an emergency, there is such a critical need for information that journalists often feel pressured to consistently publish, obtain as many clicks as possible, and be the first to report something. Disregard for the consequences of bad journalism can lead to the publication of inaccurate information and the perpetuation or creation of misinformation among communities.
- There is a lot of competition in the media. It is fast paced, and especially during a public health emergency, there is often a perceived lack of time for quality assurance checks. In addition, journalists often lack expertise in health issues. Therefore, strong relationships need to be built with journalists to motivate them to participate in capacity-strengthening sessions, where they will better understand the complexities of specific health topics and also develop awareness of the potential consequences of their actions should they report potentially inaccurate information.
- Open dialogue with journalists during a public health emergency—and building and sustaining relationships with them before the next emergency arises—is critical.

“To do this work, we need to understand the complexity of how decisions are made. It’s not just about demand generation. It’s influenced by multiple factors. Having one thing out of place can impact someone’s decision. Addressing vaccine hesitancy needs to be seen within a bigger system of what is affecting someone’s decision.”
– UNICEF Communications Officer

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage and support the government to be forthcoming with the public when it does not know something, instead of sharing information that may be incorrect. This is vital for building trust during any public health emergency.
- Ensure that essential, up-to-date information is available in one central location, and that the site is maintained regularly to prevent users from seeking information from unreliable sources that could spread misinformation.
- Assess the capacity of the government and public health professionals to lead misinformation efforts, and provide capacity-strengthening opportunities as needed to support the quality and sustainability of misinformation management activities.
- Misinformation management efforts must be consistent. The anti-vaccination movement is an ongoing threat that requires continual efforts to address.
- When working with government or other stakeholders, seek out those who not only have the experience and authority to support the work, but also who are passionate about it, want to be engaged, and are changemakers.



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