

Battling COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation Through Targeted Community Dialogues

Context

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, Breakthrough ACTION leveraged its success as a lead risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) partner in Guinea to provide technical guidance and support for COVID-19 prevention and uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine. Building on past successes and understanding the needs of Guinean communities, and in partnership with the National Health Security Agency (ANSS), Breakthrough ACTION endeavored to launch COVID-19 vaccine focused community dialogues. The objective of these dialogues was to establish trust through dialogue and exchange to dispel rumors and provide accurate and up-to-date information to those reticent and reluctant of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Challenge

The first cases of COVID-19 in Guinea were recorded in March 2020. At the time, little was still known about the virus and the uncertainty of the situation created space for false information about the disease in Guinea and around the world. After the COVID-19 vaccine became available in the country nearly a year later (January 2021), misinformation spread exponentially with the help of social media, leading to an infodemic.¹

In such a context, the need to closely work with communities to combat false information and make accurate information available became evident as some communities showed strong hesitancy or opposition to the COVID-19 vaccine. Lessons learned from the 2014 Ebola Outbreak in Guinea showed that involving community members in tackling public health crises is a must for an effective response.

¹ An infodemic is an overload of information, true and false, during a pandemic making it hard for people to differentiate between what is fact and fiction. The term was created by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a response to the growing amount of confusing information, on media platforms and elsewhere, that was leading people towards risk taking behaviors threatening their health and that of others.



Breakthrough ACTION collaborated with the ANSS and the One Health Platform (OHP) to use these lessons and past achievements to build a strong community response against false information related to the COVID-19 vaccine and combat rumors in reticent communities. Together, this consortium decided that Breakthrough ACTION would support the ANSS' Communication Focal Points (CFP) in the planning and implementation of a series of community dialogues which would serve as a platform for exchanges, suggestions, and capacity building, as well as combat misinformation and rumors while sensitizing communities and encouraging the uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Actions Taken

Leveraging their strong relationship with the ANSS and the OHP, Breakthrough ACTION organized 30 community dialogues in reticent communities across the regions of Boké, Kindia, and Nzérékoré, reaching 637 participants.

In November 2021, Breakthrough ACTION developed the COVID-19 Vaccine Community Dialogue Guide, with inputs and suggestions from the CFPs. In January 2022, Breakthrough ACTION led a virtual orientation to train the CFPs on the guide's use and implementation during the dialogues. In February 2022, the CFPs set out to health districts, accompanied by local health officials and district level ANSS representatives to launch these community dialogues. The overall objective was to establish trust through dialogue and exchange to dispel rumors and provide accurate and up-to-date information to those reticent and reluctant of the COVID-19 vaccine. Each community dialogue brought together 20-25 participants and included community members (women, youth, men, traditional and religious leaders, etc.), grassroots community organizations, and local NGOs. They created an opportunity to understand community member's reluctance to commit and adhere to COVID-19 vaccine recommendations. The sessions focused on deconstructing and dispelling the rumors that fuel vaccine hesitancy, providing accurate information, and providing participants with knowledge and tools to combat rumors in their own communities. Together, CFPs created a space for participants to share testimonies about their experiences hearing about COVID-19 vaccine rumors in their community before proceeding to discuss and deconstruct them. After, participants were expected to relay their newly gained, or reinforced, knowledge to their communities and contribute to promoting uptake of the vaccine.

Impact

Experience in Guinea shows us that community dialogues have a significant impact when actively engaging the community and understanding their point of view. This was no different with COVID-19 vaccination. Beyond the information that the participants received, they came out of these dialogues equipped to discuss with and convince other community members to be vaccinated. The CFPs expertly deconstructed many of the rumors that participants face and provided them with tools and knowledge to do the same. The participants were now equipped to dispel rumors including that the COVID-19 vaccine causes disease, that the vaccine is a poison against black people, that the vaccine makes people sterile, and that the vaccine weakens men's virility.

Touma Zakaria, Health Worker from Friguiagbe, found the community dialogue very informative:



I was already informed, but today I am even more informed. I have tools now to convince people and bring them to their senses so that they accept the COVID-19 vaccine.

Mami Therese Bamba, a nurse in Friguiagbe, felt that she left the community dialogue better equipped to convince the members of her community to accept the vaccine, especially for children:



It's true that we've done a lot of training on vaccination since the pandemic, but there were always concerns on the ground. There are populations who revolted, especially against Pfizer for children. In schools, many children fled to avoid receiving the vaccine and their parents supported them in doing so. Every time the parents came to us to protest vaccination for their children, it was very difficult to make them understand that the child must be vaccinated, and that the vaccine is good for the child. However, with the arrival of this mission and through the community dialogues, I now have the answers and tools to convince the parents.

Mr. Nyan Konan Kpamy, first vice mayor of the commune of Bounouma, emphasized his gratitude to the project for the achievements of these dialogues:



We are very grateful to the Breakthrough ACTION Project for its technical and financial support in organizing this community dialogue, which helped us learn about the benefits of taking the COVID-19 vaccine.

Community dialogue in Bounouma

With more information and tools to fight rumors about COVID-19 and promote vaccine uptake, community leaders who participated in the community dialogues also made strong commitments to fight COVID-19 in their localities, especially around vaccination.

Community leaders across the regions pledged these commitments in the form of greater community engagement to dispel rumors and increase demand for the COVID-19 vaccine. Specifically, in Baguinet participants committed to accepting the COVID-19 vaccine and raising awareness while promoting the importance of COVID-19 vaccination in the community. In Bhéta, participants pledged to carry out door-to-door sensitization in all villages through teachers and community liaisons. Religious leaders who participated in the community dialogue committed to disseminate information about the vaccine and promote it through their faith-based communities and to invite their followers to attend their service with their vaccination kits. In Diarraguerela, participants urged greater engagement, awareness, and information sharing from local authorities. They expressed their hopes that authorities will continue making the vaccine available to prevent shortages, promoting educational messages encouraging people to get the second dose of the vaccine for full vaccination, as well as the enforcement of masks, social distancing, and hygiene to protect the health of everyone.

These commitments provide a strong testimony of the positive impact of the community dialogues in each locality and carry tremendous potential for effectively fighting COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in these communities and leading to stronger acceptance and adherence to the vaccine. Breakthrough ACTION, in part of supporting the ANSS and OHP, will continue supporting community dialogues to further the fight against COVID-19.

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