



Introduction

The Communication and Community Engagement Working Group (CCEWG) is an initiative bringing together humanitarian partners in South Sudan to harmonize community engagement activities, discuss and develop best practices related to communications with communities, and to address issues pertaining to accountability to affected populations. The CCEWG is coordinated by IOM and co-led by Internews and the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster.

In the context of the Covid-19 response, the CCEWG contributes to the Risk Communications and Community Engagement Technical Working Group (RCCE TWG) and co-leads the Rumor Tracking Subcommittee along with UNICEF.

The Rumor and Perceptions Tracking Overview 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 overview highlights the recently-collected rumors, perceptions, and concerns on a state-by-state basis.

Methodology

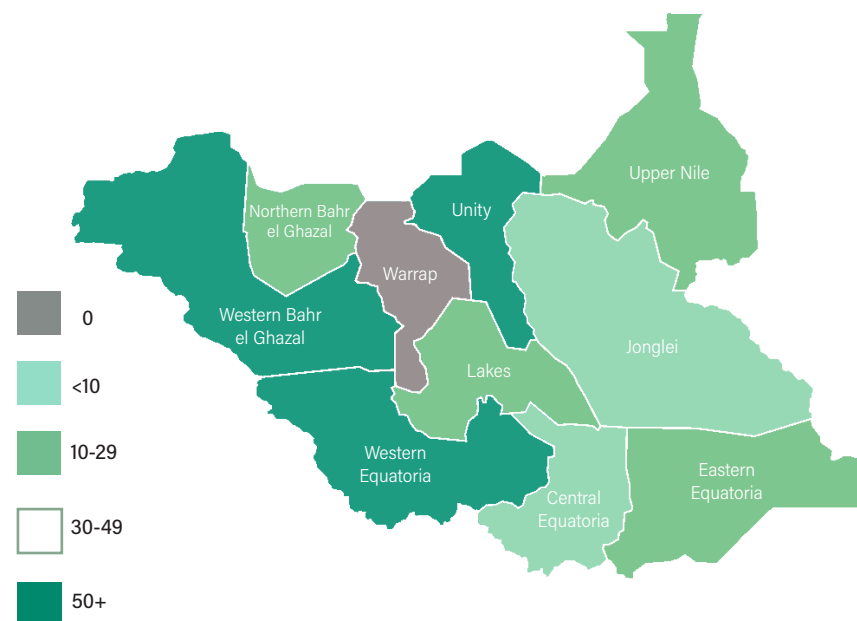
Qualitative data for this overview is drawn from three primary sources: Internews, REACH, and IOM CCCM.

Internews routinely gathers data via its Rumor Tracking Methodology. REACH data for this round was collected via field officers in nine states using a semi-structured interview tool. IOM CCCM data was derived primarily from Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites in Wau and Bentiu, and was collected via focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and regular community engagement activities. The data was entered into a rumor and perceptions tracking tool approved by the CCCM Cluster. CCCM data was also provided by the Danish Refugee Council, and was collected via the same tool.

All corresponding data was then thematically coded and analyzed under particular categories. The information reported in this overview is only indicative of the rumors, perceptions, and concerns present in the areas in which data was collected and is not representative of South Sudan as a whole.

The reporting period covered by this bulletin is June 1 - 30, 2020.

Fig 1. Sources of tracked rumors, perceptions and concerns



** Note: 292 rumors, perceptions, and concerns were collected in nine states from the period between June 1-30, 2020. Figure 1 indicates the states where Internews, REACH, IOM and other CCCM partners were able to collect information during the reporting period based on their ongoing activities and respective capacities, and does not capture all locations where community messaging and feedback collection on Covid-19 is occurring.*

State-level analysis

The below data provides a snapshot of trends reported in nine states of South Sudan during the reporting period.¹

Overall Trends

During the month of June 2020, **expressions of doubt or skepticism about the severity of Covid-19 and its presence in South Sudan were reported in some states**, including Unity, Western Bahr el Ghazal, and Western Equatoria, **although this perception seemed to be less common overall compared to May**. This suggests that, while the government decision to ease a number of key Covid-19 restrictive measures in early May possibly influenced community perceptions about the seriousness or existence of the virus in the country, subsequent developments, including an increase in confirmed cases, may have worked to counter this perception.

In some states, such as Central Equatoria, **concerns emerged about the government's handling of the pandemic** that potentially indicate a shift from skepticism about the virus itself to the government's efforts in attempting to manage the crisis. In particular, **beliefs that government officials were vectors or criticisms of how positive cases were perceived to be handled** were reported during the month of June.

Rumors, perceptions, and concerns about communities' inability or perceived inability to successfully prevent the transmission of Covid-19 continued to be frequently reported across all states. These concerns included reports that people in towns and in rural areas were not observing preventative guidance and continued to shake hands and declined to practice social distancing.

A number of respondents indicated **frustration with others who were not heeding the suggested health measures, blaming "ignorance" or "cultural ignorance"** for this issue. Criticism of others' behaviour in relation to the virus may possibly lead to shaming or stigmatization of those who are unable or unwilling to follow suggested guidance, which is likely an area of concern for humanitarians responding to Covid-19 that requires additional engagement.

Lastly, rumors carrying protection implications, such as **a rumor that those with HIV are unable to contract Coronavirus** (as reported in Yambio, Western Equatoria), **a rumor that the virus causes infertility** (as reported in Maridi, Western Equatoria), and **a rumor that alcohol is an effective means of preventing infection** (as reported in Maridi and Tambura, Western Equatoria, as well as in Wau, WBeG) reappeared during the reporting period.

Central Equatoria

Number of rumors, perceptions, concerns: 5



"The virus keeps increasing but we don't see any good reaction from the government on where these people who are found positive are kept. Some of them are left to quarantine at their home, but they don't follow the rules correctly which keeps contaminating community members."

Male, Juba, Central Equatoria. June 11, 2020.

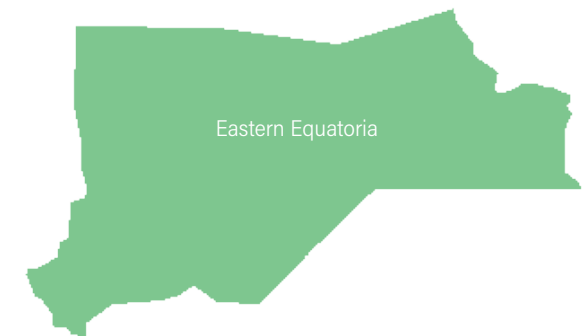
Rumors and perceptions recorded in Central Equatoria during the reporting period related primarily to how the government is handling the Covid-19 response. These included: a belief that government officers were vectors for the spread of the virus due to their perceived failure to comply with the measures they are tasked with enforcing;

concerns that the government was not properly isolating those who tested positive, which was perceived to place communities at risk; and a perception that the Covid-19 death total in South Sudan was incomplete due to the lack of available testing for all those displaying symptoms.

Taken together, these perceptions about the government's response to Covid-19 may suggest its capacity to manage the public health crisis is viewed by the community in Central Equatoria with skepticism, mistrust, and doubt.

Eastern Equatoria

Number of rumors, perceptions, concerns: 18



"People in the villages are not happy with people who always move to towns like Torit, Juba and Kapoeta."

Female, 36, Budi, Eastern Equatoria. June 8, 2020.

Rumors and perceptions recorded in Eastern Equatoria continued to be marked by expressions of fear of the disease, including mentions that the virus is "killer" and "dangerous," while **perceptions downplaying the seriousness of the virus were fewer** than those collected during the prior reporting period, suggesting the uptick in official case confirmations in May and June 2020 may have increased the relative importance of the virus in the eyes of the community.

Data collected from Eastern Equatoria in June contained a number of **concerns about others in the community failing to follow prevention guidance**. In particular, a concern emerged in relation to people moving from villages

¹ Data was not collected in Warrap during the reporting period.

to larger towns and then back again, movements that were perceived to put rural people at risk of transmission.

Jonglei

Number of rumors, perceptions, concerns: 9



"The usual talk about Coronavirus these days in Bor PoC is no longer intense and frequent as in the previous months when the virus had just penetrated into the country. Some people in the PoC believe some local herbs can do a great job in treating Coronavirus compared to the modern medicines. This perception was boosted by the announcement of the herbal medicine by the government of Madagascar in April."

Female, 29, Bor PoC, Jonglei. June 17, 2020.

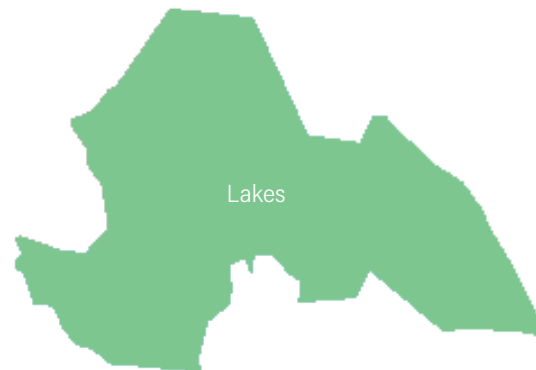
Rumors and perceptions collected from the Bor PoC in Bor South county suggest that **the significant confusion and skepticism about Covid-19's presence in the country as reported in the site during months prior has largely dissipated**. Rather, IDPs reportedly accept "the fact that it will take a while before the virus completely disappears," although **some misperceptions linger**, including **the use of traditional herbs for treatment** and **the belief that the virus was deliberately manufactured**.

Respondents in areas of Akobo continued to express a **belief that God would protect the population from**

the pandemic. Some articulated a general sense of helplessness in the face of the virus, including **concerns that rural areas lacked sufficient health care resources** or **beliefs that people in the area were "uneducated"** and therefore did not know enough about the virus to prevent the spread.

Lakes

Number of rumors, perceptions, concerns: 27



"People with blood group O are perceived to resist this disease as per rumors circulating around in Mingkaman."

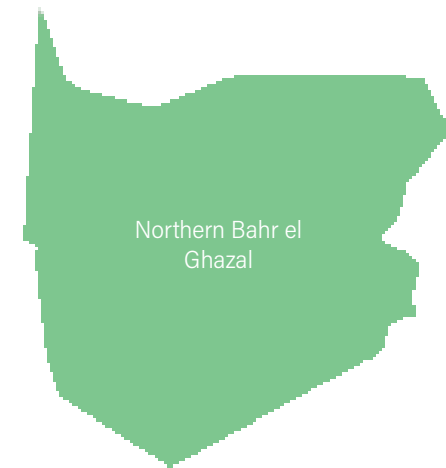
Male, 25, Awerial County, Lakes. June 25, 2020.

Data collected in Lakes in June indicates that **a number of common rumors continued to spread** in the area, such as **the myth of African immunity** to the virus, or **beliefs that Covid-19 cannot affect poor people or those living in warm climates**, possibly suggesting that further debunking of these rumors is necessary in the state. **One rumor emerged that persons with the blood type O are unable to become infected by Covid-19**, while a **respondent in Mingkaman reported that locals had given the virus the name "Nyacorona" due to the mistaken belief that the virus was for "women only and weak people"**.

Rumors recommending the consumption of particular herbs or teas as a preventative measure percolated as in other states, including recommendations to **consume the blood of livestock or to drink hibiscus**, the latter of which was reportedly announced by radio.

Northern Bahr el Ghazal

Number of rumors, perceptions, concerns: 28



"In our community, people are not respecting guidelines for controlling the spread of the Coronavirus because they say that they believe the food they eat will strengthen their immune systems to resist the disease."

Female, 32, Aweil South, NBeG. June 24, 2020.

Data collected in Northern Bahr el Ghazal during the reporting period indicates **confusion and concern about the signs and symptoms of Coronavirus**, namely, worries that **people are unable to differentiate symptoms of Covid-19 from other common illnesses**.

Respondents relayed that people perceive the virus as similar to the common cold, measles, typhoid, and malaria, in that the symptoms are similar and familiar to the population.

Rumors continued to circulate suggesting that **Black people are unable to contract the virus, and that Covid-19 is unable to infect younger people**.

Beliefs that **consuming certain foods, such as local teas, herbs, and fruits**, continued to be reported, as did an **emerging perception in Aweil South that people were less likely to become infected because they eat foods that ostensibly strengthen their immune systems to protect them from the virus**.

Unity

Number of rumors, perceptions, concerns: 60



"People say if others refuse to shake hands, they will say the person refusing has Corona themselves."

Bentiu Town, Rubkona, Unity. June 10, 2020.

Data collected in June in Unity suggests that although **doubt and skepticism about the seriousness of the virus continued, communities are increasingly concerned about their inability to undertake the suggested preventive guidance** due to a perceived lack of NFI materials (such as soap, mosquito nets, masks, etc), and are also **growing frustrated with those who do not follow suggested health measures**, with one respondent reporting that "cultural ignorance" is the root cause of this issue. The frustration expressed by some respondents about others' behaviour may indicate a crucial schism within the community that warrants humanitarian attention, as stigmatization and shame may be directed towards those who are unable or unwilling to adhere to prevention guidance.

Respondents in Rubkona and Panyijiar counties **drew comparisons between other known illnesses**, with some suggesting the virus was merely a flu that may be treated through traditional remedies, with others likening the pandemic to the onset of the HIV/AIDs crisis, adding the perspective that **Covid-19 is here to stay and "will continue to infect people just like HIV/AIDs."**

In Rubkona town, it was reported that **"elders have performed rituals against the virus to help find a solution."** While the nature of these rituals was not disclosed, it may suggest that communities in the area are actively relying on traditional religious or spiritual practices to help ward off the spread of Covid-19.

Mistaken beliefs about race and ethnicity in relation to susceptibility to the virus continued to linger in the Bentiu PoC, particularly beliefs that Covid-19 is either unable to infect Black people or those belonging to the dominant ethnic group in the site. It is uncertain whether rumors of this nature are actively circulating (as a few respondents reported hearing these rumors in April) or whether efforts to debunk this misinformation during the past few months have not been successful in reaching the population as a whole.

Upper Nile

Number of rumors, perceptions, concerns: 10



"Covid-19 only infects big people (people who have money) but not innocent civilians."

Female, 23, Renk, Upper Nile. June 3, 2020.

Rumors and perceptions reported in Malakal PoC during the month of June indicated that **many in the community were not undertaking preventative measures**, particularly given the impracticality of social distancing in the site and the need for many IDPs to exit the PoC in order to undertake livelihoods activities.

At least one perception reported suggested that **people viewed hunger and a lack of basic necessities as a more pressing concern** than the spread of Covid-19.

Misinformation that the virus was intentionally created to deliberately reduce the global population was once again recorded during the month of June.

Western Bahr el Ghazal

Number of rumors, perceptions, concerns: 64



"The information that Covid-19 is in South Sudan isn't true, but the government is using it as a tool to get aid from other countries."

Wau PoC, WBeG. June 9, 2020.

In Western Bahr el Ghazal, **perceptions of the virus as non-existent in the country were once again reported in June**, and were linked to the persistent and lingering belief that the government is reporting confirmed cases as a means of obtaining funding from the international community.

One rumor collected in the Hai Daraja area of Wau, relayed that, **if a person dies of Covid-19, the name of the deceased cannot be said aloud after the death, or else "the virus will infect that person who called the deceased's name."** This may indicate an emerging practice or the application of traditional beliefs about disease to the current pandemic; or may possibly suggest additional messaging about transmission would be helpful in this area.

Rumors that drinking alcohol, specifically whisky, can prevent the virus continued during the reporting period,

as did **rumors about eating particular foods, including the local salt called kombo**. Concerns about how positive patients are treated in the area were expressed, including a concern that if those with positive cases are allowed to return home, they will spread the virus to others in the community.

Western Equatoria

Number of rumors, perceptions, concerns: 71



"COVID 19 doesn't kill poor people. Since the outbreak was declared in South Sudan, we have been hearing death of ministers, honourable members of parliament, and big people of the high level were also infected by Covid-19. Coronavirus doesn't come across those who stay in one place."

Male, 30, Yambio, Western Equatoria. June 17, 2020.

The perception of COVID-19 as a virus for "rich people" continued to percolate in Western Equatoria according to data collected in June, linked to misinformation that the only people dying of the virus in the country have been government officials or those with wealth in Juba.

Western Equatoria continued to be one location where **some respondents expressed doubt about the existence of Coronavirus in South Sudan**. In Maridi town, one emerging rumor suggested skepticism about the virus may relate to the **mistaken belief that women are not affected by Covid-19** and have not been among those who have reportedly died of infection.

Rumors that alcohol consumption will prevent transmission of Covid-19 continued, with one rumor reported in Maridi County suggesting that those who brew alcohol cannot become infected and another reported in Yambio that those who consume alcohol excessively have stronger blood that prevents them from infection. Such misinformation not only carries health implications for those who may drink excessively, but also carries an increased risk of community violence and SGBV.

The rumor that Coronavirus permanently affects the fertility was once again recorded in Western Equatoria, which may result in stigma or be associated with increased risks of SGBV or social ostracization.

The rumor that people with HIV cannot contract the virus reappeared in Yambio County, this time with the explanation that HIV positive individuals are unable to become infected "since they are already taking ARV drugs." During the two prior reporting periods, similar rumors were recorded in the same county suggesting that people with serious pre-existing conditions were somehow immune from Covid-19. These rumors represent a direct contradiction of the prevailing scientific guidance that people with certain conditions, especially HIV, are especially susceptible to the effects of the virus.

Lastly, Western Equatoria was one state where **a rumor emerged in relation to blood type and susceptibility to Covid-19**, with one respondent reporting that those with AB or O blood cannot become infected.

Recommendations

1. Rumors, perceptions, and concerns reported during June 2020 included a notable uptick in respondents expressing frustration about others in the community failing to heed preventative guidance. Humanitarian actors should continue to promote messaging of social cohesion and solidarity in the face of the pandemic, in order to stifle feelings of resentment or expressions of blame directed towards those who may be unable to follow suggested health measures.
2. Rumors that Covid-19 can only infect or seriously impact those of certain races, ethnicities, or nationalities, continue to be

reported in NBeG, Lakes, Western Equatoria, and Unity. Humanitarian actors should continue to debunk and counteract these rumors, as they carry the risk of reduced compliance with suggested guidance due to the false perception that certain groups of people may be immune or less at-risk for transmission.

3. Rumors that infertility is a consequence of Covid-19 infection have been reported in Western Equatoria, NBeG, and WBeG since rumor tracking began in March 2020. In June 2020, this rumor was recorded once again in Western Equatoria. Humanitarian actors should develop messaging to specifically counteract rumors of this nature, as they have implications related to stigmatization, social ostracization, and risks of gender-based violence, repercussions likely to have disproportionate impacts on women and girls.
4. Rumors that alcohol consumption prevents Covid-19 transmission continue to appear and were reported in Western Equatoria and WBeG during the reporting period. As this particular rumor 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.

Postscript

This bulletin was produced by the Communication and Community Engagement Working Group (CCEWG) and relies on data collected by staff working with Internews, REACH, IOM and CCCM partners.

This analysis is designed to support communication and engagement strategies with affected populations through risk-communication outreach and targeted program implementation.

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