

Landmark alliance launches in Africa to fight COVID-19 misinformation

Brazzaville, 3 December 2020 - The World Health Organization (WHO) today launched a new alliance, the Africa Infodemic Response Alliance (AIRA), to coordinate actions and pool resources in combating misinformation around COVID-19 pandemic and other health emergencies in Africa.

Digital platforms have been inundated with COVID-19-related information since the pandemic began in late 2019. Information about the virus has been shared and viewed over 270 billion times online and mentioned almost 40 million times on Twitter and web-based news sites in the 47 countries of the WHO African Region between February and November 2020, according to UN Global Pulse, the United Nations' Secretary-General's initiative on big data and artificial intelligence.

A large proportion of this information is inaccurate and misleading and continues to be shared by social media users intentionally or unknowingly every day. The COVID-19 infodemic is amplified online through social media but health misinformation is also circulating offline.

Measuring precisely how much of what is circulating is misinformation is difficult, but fact-checking organizations in Africa say they have debunked more than 1000 of such misleading reports since the onset of the pandemic. Some of the widely shared misinformation include conspiracies around unproven treatments, false cures and anti-vaccine messages.

"In health emergencies, misinformation can kill and ensure diseases continue to spread. People need proven, science-based facts to make informed decisions about their health and wellbeing, and a glut of information – an infodemic – with misinformation in the mix makes it hard to know what is right and real. This crucial new alliance brings unique reach, knowledge and skills to help stop the impact of dangerous misinformation," said Dr Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa.

Among others, the Africa Infodemic Response Alliance will work collaboratively to counter false information around COVID-19 vaccines and complement on the ground public health awareness raising and community engagement efforts by creating demand for vaccines in the region.

The network is the first initiative of its kind and it brings together 13 international and regional organizations and fact-checking groups with expertise in data and behavioural science, epidemiology, research, digital health, and communications to detect, disrupt and counter damaging misinformation on public health issues in Africa.

The Alliance will encourage proactive disclosure by data holders and support journalists and media outlets to effectively share lifesaving information based on scientific evidence and debunk disinformation on health issues.

It also aims to support individual African countries in developing tailored infodemic management strategies, including analysing trends and behaviours, recruiting specialists and refining systematic engagement strategies rooted in research and analytics.

This initiative puts into practice key recommendations on infodemic management that were developed by over 1300 experts from across disciplines in early 2020 under the auspices of WHO's global Information Network for Epidemics (EPI-WIN).

The Alliance members are Africa CDC, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the United Nations Verified initiative, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and United Nations Global Pulse. Participating and supporting bodies include Africa Check, Agence France-Presse Fact Check, PesaCheck, Dubawa and Meedan.

Additional Quotes

Africa CDC

"Africa can only beat the COVID-19 pandemic and other disease outbreaks by relying on trusted information that is based on insights scientists bring to the conversation. To fight misinformation and mischaracterization, public health experts must work with the community and media consistently and continuously. This is the value that the AIRA partnership brings to the collective of responses in the continent," said **Dr John Nkengasong, Director, Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC)**.

United Nations (Verified)

"Working together to tackle misinformation around the pandemic is critical, particularly as we move closer to the availability of viable vaccines. We know that misinformation can cause serious harm and undermine trust in medicine and science when it matters the most, ultimately hindering any public health efforts to end the pandemic that continues to needlessly claim so many lives across Africa. That is why the United Nations' Verified initiative has joined the Africa Infodemic Response Alliance. Now we can put our hearts, minds and strengths together to help keep communities safe, healthy and equipped with life-saving information," said **Melissa Fleming, Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications, United Nations**.

UN Global Pulse

"We are seeing how online mis- and disinformation affects decision-making processes with immediate effects because of a lack of time to conduct quality control. Through our newly formed Crisis Insights Team, we are using advanced analytics, real-time data, and artificial intelligence methodologies to support UN partners' operational work to fight this pandemic and the infodemic that developed alongside it," said **Robert Kirkpatrick, Director of UN Global Pulse**, the UN Secretary-General's innovation initiative. "We are pleased to join the Africa Infodemic Response Alliance and lend our skills and expertise to keep people safe."

UNESCO

“If disinformation disempowers, information empowers. It is the rights to freedom of expression and access to information that guarantee citizens the possibility to find relevant information for life-impacting decisions during these difficult times”, said **Guy Berger, Director for Strategy and Policy in the field of Communication and Information at UNESCO**. “Together with our partners in AIRA, UNESCO looks forward to continue supporting citizens with tools to easier distinguish facts from lies and rumours, encouraging proactive disclosure by data holders to make relevant information accessible, and empowering media partners to professionally report on COVID-19 and debunk disinformation.”

UNICEF

“We are pleased to join the Africa Infodemic Response Alliance network to support the communities we’re working with during COVID-19,” said **Mohamed M. Malick Fall, Regional Director for UNICEF in Eastern and Southern Africa**. “There is immense value in strengthening COVID-19 prevention by mitigating and debunking rumours so that families are empowered to make informed decisions. At the same time, the strategies and tools developed through this joint initiative can also be applied to our ongoing interventions in other public health emergencies.”

“Misinformation, fake news, or rumours undermine and weaken the national and global fight against COVID-19 and, threaten the rights of children”, said **Marie-Pierre Poirier, UNICEF Regional Director for West and Central Africa**. At a time when the perception of risks associated with COVID-19 and adherence to prevention measures are decreasing, collective and joint efforts are crucial to mitigate the effects of misinformation on the adoption of preventive behaviours and the uptake of services.”

Africa Check

“At its core, false and misleading health information is about issues that people care about. It is therefore our job as fact-checkers to recognise these motivations, understand the attendant narratives and to then cut through these insights in a way that has meaningful impact on public understanding and by extension, on the quality of life. At Africa Check we are acutely aware that we cannot do it alone; collaboration is crucial. This is why we are keen to be part of this multi-stakeholder alliance,” said **Lee Mwititi, Africa Check Chief Editor**.

Dubawa

“The Dubawa team, having participated in a number of collaborative fact-checking projects and being well aware of the importance of such efforts, even so at a time like this, is excited at the potential impact this project birthed in the spirit of collaboration, truth and public interest will have on the world as we continue to navigate through this current crisis, said **Deji Adekunle, Deputy Programme Director, Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism (PTCIJ)**

Meedan

"Close coordination among fact-checkers, public health institutions and other communications stakeholders is essential for addressing the unique misinformation challenges we face today, where informational ambiguity based on scant or conflicting evidence, or emerging scientific knowledge can exacerbate the spread of disease," said **Nat Gyenes, Director Meedan Digital Health Lab.**

PesaCheck

"Misinformation can kill. We are seeing increasing numbers of organised crime groups using misleading conspiracy theories and the resulting public fear to drive scams designed to steal banking details and other identity data. We're also seeing infodemic claims being used by xenophobia campaigners and other hate speech protagonists. This alliance will help us debunk false claims far faster, and get the message out far wider," said **Justin Arenstein, Chief Executive Officer, PesaCheck.**

Dr Moeti spoke during a virtual press conference today facilitated by APO Group. She was joined by Dr Adinoyi Ben Adeiza, Deputy Regional Director and Head of Health, IFRC Africa; Mr Guy Berger, Director for Strategy and Policy in the Field of Communication and Information, UNESCO; Dr Ahmed Ogwel Ouma, Deputy Director, Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention; Ms Natalie Fol, Regional Communications for Development Advisor, UNICEF East and Southern Africa Regional Office; and Lee Mwiti, Chief Editor, Africa Check.

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Please click the link below to access statements, audio files and soundbites as they become available:

https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1MYJDbxXC_rOVV4xyoKFxYIyiN48MtPSI

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