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Infodemic Management in Senegal: Processes, Results and Community Contribution

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Abstract:- This article examines Senegal's response to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic, with a particular focus on the management of infodemic, or the proliferation of rumours and misinformation.

The advent of social media has precipitated a surge in the proliferation of rumours, rendering it a significant challenge for effective management. In response, the Risk Communication and Community Engagement Commission (RCCE) devised a comprehensive rumour management guide and conducted training for key informants from the community.

The primary outcomes demonstrate an enhancement in rumour management and the accessibility of the rumour register. These outcomes were attained through robust community involvement in all processes and elevated mobile connectivity. Integrating the infodemic management mechanism into the national health and social information system remains a significant challenge, as does mobilizing resources for nationwide implementation. The principal insight gained is that effective infodemic management necessitates community involvement and coordinated multi-sectoral efforts.. (Abstract)

Keywords:- *Infodemic; Rumour; Community; Involvement;*

I. INTRODUCTION

The period between 2014 and 2024 is characterised by a series of events that present a significant risk to public health. These health events occur in the context of a highly diverse media ecosystem. In response to the resurgence of these events, the World Health Organization (WHO), through the International Health Regulations (IHR-2005), has introduced the management of the infodemic (rumours and misinformation) (1). It is essential that States Parties strengthen this aspect to facilitate community engagement in prevention and response strategies for public health emergencies.

Furthermore, with the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, dynamic listening and community feedback management (i.e., feedback from communities) were identified as one of five key areas of risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) that all stakeholders should prioritize.(2)

In the early stages of the global response to the pandemic, Senegal, established a dedicated team to coordinate its efforts. On 2 March 2020, the date of the country's first case, the health emergency operations center was activated. Senegal has made considerable investments to contain the spread of the epidemic, yet the virus has continued to proliferate across the country.

Field teams have encountered challenges in both the medical and psychosocial management of the disease, as well as in raising community awareness of the risks associated with its increased incidence. Through the implementation of risk communication and community engagement strategies, a range of approaches has been devised with the objective of fostering a deeper understanding of the global situation among communities, thereby motivating them to adopt behaviours that are conducive to their own protection and that of their loved ones.

In the context of the global spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, characterized by the rapid dissemination of information, some of which may be inaccurate or misleading(3), rumours have emerged and spread rapidly at the national and international levels.

The rapid dissemination of information via social media has the potential to disseminate misinformation and rumours in a relatively short period. They are web-based applications that facilitate the creation and dissemination of user-generated content and the development of online social networks by connecting users' profiles.

The number of social media users in Senegal has increased rapidly between 2020 and 2024. In January 2020, there were just over 7 million 600 thousand internet users in the country(4). By January 2024, this figure had risen significantly to 10 million 790 thousand (5), according to the data.

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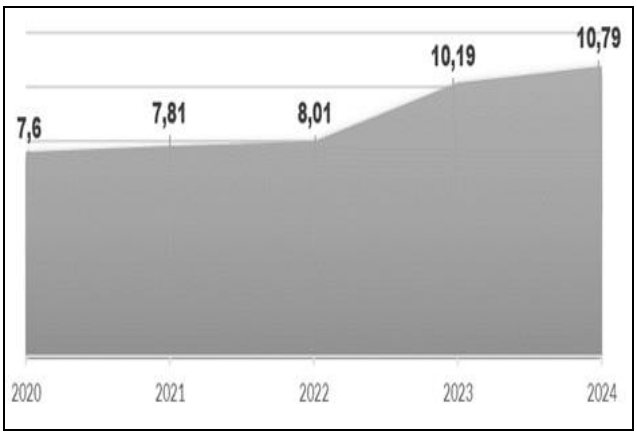

Fig 1: The Growth in the Number of Internet Users from January 2020 to January 2024.

II. INFODEMIC MANAGEMENT SYSTEM IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

The management of rumours and misinformation has been a long-standing tradition in the context of epidemics. Since the introduction of the expanded vaccination program in Senegal in the 1970s, rumours and misinformation have consistently posed a challenge to the effective implementation of prevention and health promotion interventions. In the absence of any documented process, ad hoc action was required to address these rumours and misinformation.

In order to address this issue, the RCCE commission of Senegal, with the support of technical and financial partners, has initiated the process of developing documents and tools for the management of the infodemic (rumours and misinformation).

The activity reports produced by the field teams were used to assess the necessity for the development of a strategic document with the objective of harmonizing the response to rumours and misinformation. At the regular coordination meetings of the RCCE commission, the issue of rumour management was frequently raised by stakeholders, who expressed the necessity for a more concentrated approach to this area.

In September 2020, Senegal produced its inaugural rumour Management Guide with the support of technical and financial partners. The strategic document was disseminated at all levels (central, regional and operational), which prompted beneficiaries to express a desire for training in rumour management.

Fig 2: Guide to the Management of Rumours Surrounding the Fight Against the Novel Coronavirus (Covid-19).(6)

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Thus, a structured rumour management system had to be put in place before training modules on its organization and functioning were developed. The risk communication and community engagement committee (RCCE) has this:

- Developed tools for collection, analysis and training on information management
- Supported the implementation of rumour management units in five pilot health districts
- Monitored and evaluated the pilot phase

III. MAIN RESULTS

➢ *The Implementation of the Infodemic Management System has Made it Possible to:*

- Strengthen human resources involved in rumour monitoring: training of just over 200 key informants, 22 call counselors and 35 members of the association of journalists in population health and development
- Establish (virtual) information sharing frameworks on rumours and the appropriate responses provided by experts.
- Have a rumour register (online) with 229 rumours shared on various themes
- Provide answers to certain rumours and misinformation that may have a negative im-pact on interventions or stakeholders.

The analysis of the data, obtained after discounting rumours and misinformation collected on the platform between April 2022 and July 2024, showed that involvement and collaboration with community members allows for better capitalization. The results show that just over half of the information in circulation (56%) was collected by members of the rumour management community (key informants).

Community capacity building (empowerment) remains a key element of community participation in the infodemic management process.

Table 1: Contribution of Each Stakeholder In Gathering Rumours

Profile	Nb. cit.	Fréq.
Key informants (from the community)	129	56,30%
Health worker (Nurse Head of Post – State Midwife)	64	28,00%
Health and Social Information Education Manager	13	5,70%
Member of the Risk Communication and Community Engagement committee	11	4,80%
Focal points Expanded Vaccination/ Epidemiological Surveillance Program	6	2,60%
Telephone advisors	3	1,30%
Press actor	2	0,90%
SNEISS digital cell agent	1	0,40%
Total	229	100%

IV. SUCCESS FACTORS AND CHALLENGES

The process of setting up the management system of the information media of Senegal, inspired by the approach proposed by the single healthiest approach to coordinate, communicate, collaborate, allowed to involve various stakeholders in the collection, Analysis, processing and response to rumours and misinformation. The involvement of members, representatives of their community, from the beginning of the development process of the infodemic management system, has facilitated its adaptation to the local socio-economic context and its adoption and acceptance by the various stakeholders. Based on the resources available at community level (smartphone, internet access, social media), the mechanism for collecting and transmitting rumours could be inserted into the daily lives of key informants. In Senegal, from January 2020 to January 2024, mobile cellular connectivity has seen a sharp increase from 18 million(4) to just under 22 million (+ 3 million)(5).

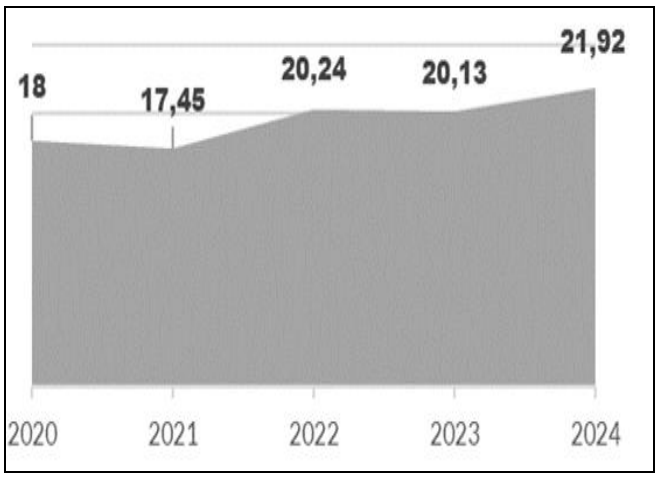

Fig 3: The Growth in the Number of Active Mobile Cellular Connections from January 2020 to January 2024 is Illustrated in the Following Chart, Which Shows the Number of Connections in Millions

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This makes it easy to build a rumour management system that is based on tools available and accessible to communities. One of the major challenges remains the integration of the rumour management system into the national health and social information system. This will make multi-sectoral collaboration effective in managing infodemic, particularly in public health emergencies, but also reduce the multiplicity of systems for greater effectiveness and efficiency.

Another challenge is the mobilization of human (including community) equipment and financial resources to ensure the continued operation of the system. Moreover, after the collection, analysis and processing of rumours and false information, it is still essential to provide an appropriate response in a timely manner.

V. KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- Community involvement throughout the process is essential to a functioning and effective infodemic management system.
- The one-health approach facilitates infodemic management and identification of contacts to respond to rumours and misinformation.
- The low level of dissemination of the infodemic management system does not promote its appropriation by other sectors, thus limiting their participation in the response.
- The lack of a standardized approach to infodemic management led to a poor inventory of rumours by stakeholders (key informants, members of the RCCE committee, technical and financial partners).

VI. CONCLUSION

The management of Infodemic, particularly rumours, is still a major concern for public authorities. Not only do they have a negative impact on interventions and stakeholders, but they also pollute the social climate and create mistrust among community health actors (sectors, partners, and populations).

The five districts' experience suggests that engaging multi-sectoral stakeholders in infodemic management can provide evidence-based decision-making to decision makers, taking into account community feedback.

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