



# UNDERSTANDING TRUST

Global Conversations & Local Realities  
during the COVID-19 pandemic

## INTRODUCTION

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic is a unique global moment in many ways. First and foremost, this crisis has shed a harsh light on how many around the world have come to distrust information shared by ‘institutions’, on the pandemic and beyond, and on how little we understand about how trust works.

At Internews, we think about trust in information a lot. From working with communities, media and NGO partners around the world over the past 40 years, we know that information is power, and that information can change lives. **We also understand that what shapes people’s relationship with information is a complex and dynamic equation. Trust is driven by a multiplicity of factors, not only by accuracy or authority.**

None of this is new. Researchers have long highlighted how trust and distrust shape not only the effectiveness of public health response but also governance and social cohesion. Misinformation and communities’ (lack of) trust in information was a defining challenge of the response to the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak.

**What is new is the shared experience. Distrust in information and seemingly irrational behaviors are not the preserve of developing countries.** During previous large-scale health emergencies, analyses often included references to low literacy levels, underdeveloped media ecosystems and so-called primitive belief systems. This pandemic has shown these explanations fall short to explain the lack of trust in many information channels, the hesitance and the resistance vis-

à-vis institutional guidelines, or the spread of rumors. While some persist in patronizing those “deplorables” that “don’t get it”, overall, this crisis makes it difficult to shy away from taking a more sophisticated look at what generates trust and distrust in information.

In this paper, we share selected insights from our work across seven countries facing complex and often protracted preexisting humanitarian crises before the pandemic. Over the past nine months, with Internews’ Rooted in Trust project, **we have worked to understand the role of rumors and misinformation in the pandemic and to support humanitarian and media communicators to listen, engage and respond to community information needs.** Many of the insights we offer here are derived from our research to map the Information Ecosystems in seven geographies, drawing from extensive qualitative and quantitative data (more than 2,400 survey respondents, 230 qualitative interviews and 130 focus groups). We hope these will contribute to move the community of information, public health, humanitarian aid and government practitioners towards a more sophisticated understanding of what drives and solidifies trust and away from the all too frequent dismissive judgements that played a central role in the breakdown of trust.

## TRUST IS NOT THE SAME AS RELIANCE OR INFLUENCE

Some information sources are unmissable, especially in context where information is rare and access to information constrained. If people use them, it's not so much because they trust them, but because **even poor and biased information seems better than none**. Take rural Central African Republic for instance: with few ways to access information, formal and informal leaders in the community are a predominant information channel used by

community members. However only a third of respondents in our survey declared having 'absolute trust' or 'good trust' to get information about COVID-19 from these leaders, one of the lowest among all categories.

Let us also consider the use of official sources during the pandemic. Many across all geographies eagerly access statistics from the Ministry of Health while being deeply suspicious about the reliability of their data.

Figure 1. Preferred channels and most trusted sources

|                                  | Most frequently used channels to access COVID-19 information | Most trusted sources for COVID-19 information |
|----------------------------------|--|---|
| Afghanistan                      | TV   | Friends and family                            |
|                                  | Face to face   | Health workers in the community               |
| CAR                              | Radio  | Religious leaders                             |
|                                  | Religious places   | Health workers in the community               |
| Colombia (Venezuelans in Nariño) | Social media   | International aid organizations               |
|                                  | Messaging app(s)   | International media                           |
|                                  |  | Friends and family                            |
| Lebanon (Syrian refugees)        | Media  | Health workers in the community               |
|                                  | SMS from Ministry of Health                                  | International aid organizations               |
| Mali (urban)                     | TV   | Health workers in the community               |
|                                  | Radio  | Religious leaders                             |
| Philippines (BARMM)              | Social media   | Health workers in the community               |
|                                  | TV   | Friends and family                            |
| Sudan                            | Online media   | International media                           |
|                                  | TV   | International aid organizations               |

\* Source: Internews Rooted in Trust surveys, 2020-21. Respondents were asked to rate their usage of the following channels to access COVID-19 information: Face to face (friends & family); community events or platform; religious places (Mosque/church); radio; TV; newspapers; online media; social media (Facebook/ Twitter...); YouTube or similar; messaging apps (WhatsApp...); others. Respondents were asked to rate how much they trusted the following sources: friends or family; health workers in your community; religious leaders; community leaders; local government/officials; national government authorities; international aid organizations; international media; government media; community media; other sources.

Among scores of anecdotal evidence, a large share of the Syrian refugees we interviewed as part of our research in Lebanon mentioned seeking information about COVID-19 from the Ministry of Public Health and from the WHO despite simultaneously having little trust in these sources. In fact, Syrian refugees appear to cast a wide net to access the information they need, incorporating a variety of sources—trusted and non—into their decision-making repertoire.

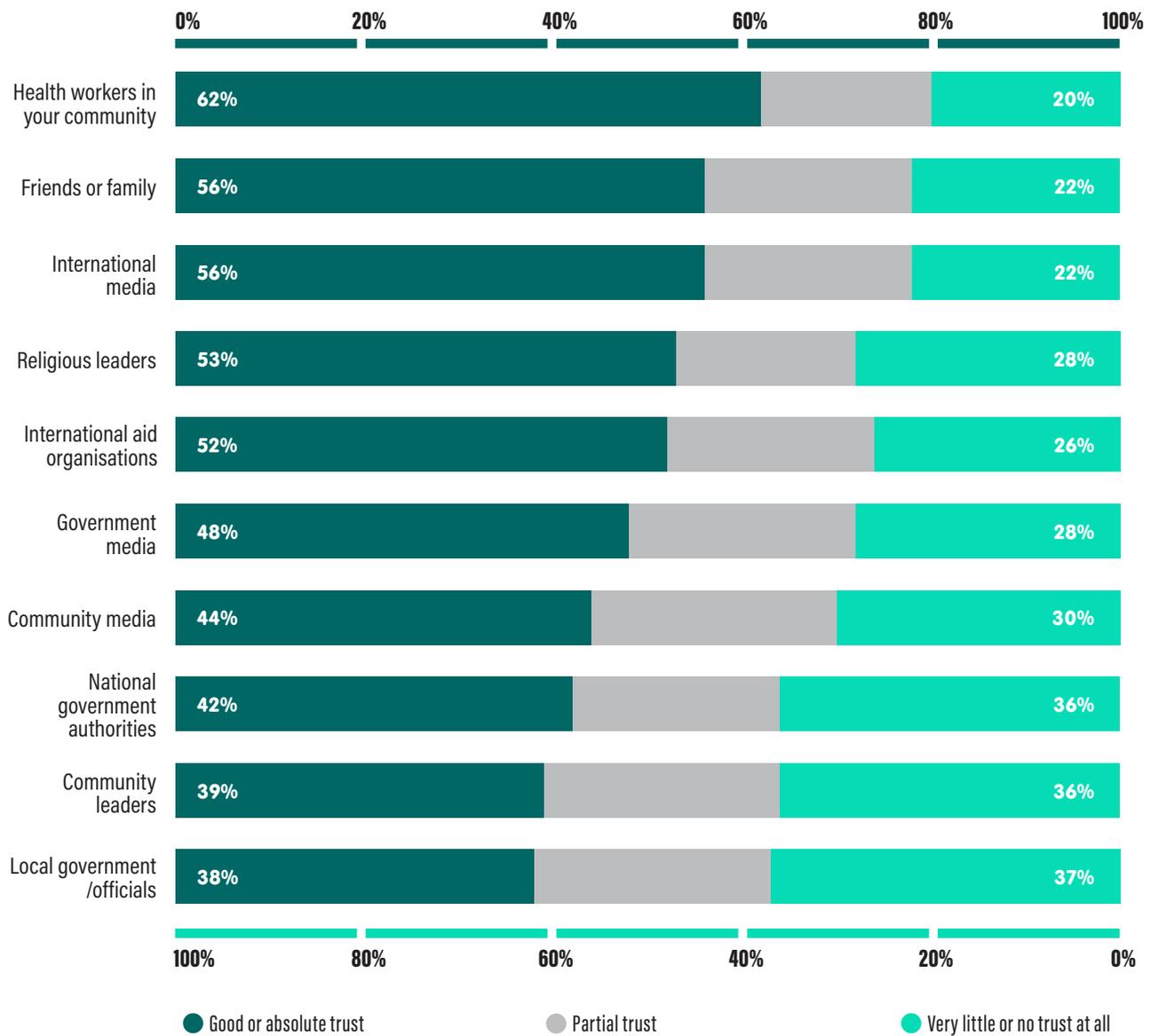
This distinction between reliance (frequently using a channel or source to access information) and trust has very concrete implications. **Reaching people through e but non-trusted channels provides little guarantee that audiences will believe the information received.**



An abundant literature has described the central role of trust in information in behavior change and our research yielded numerous insights into how **low trust in information channels drastically limits the influence of the messages they carry.** This anecdote from one of our researchers in Kabul provides a perfect illustration: *"I entered a shop to buy wood and the shopkeeper tried to shake hands, arguing COVID-19 would not harm the faithful. I tried to educate him to follow preventative measures but failed to convince him. I went back two days later to buy wood. The same shopkeeper avoided shaking hands and told me that COVID-19 was real as he had heard so from a religious leader during several radio broadcasts."*

More surprisingly perhaps, it's not rare that some sources that have significant influence over people's behaviors can also be doubted or mistrusted. Trust matters, but often social pressure or authority carry even more weight. For instance, several interviewees in our research in the Philippines highlighted that while preventive measures had become general knowledge and widely practiced behaviors, these practices were less driven by trust in the underlying rationale or in the source that emitted the guidance, than by the fear of getting in trouble or receiving a fine from authorities. Authority and social pressure are powerful forces that shape behaviors without necessarily requiring trust. **Mistaking influence for trust is dangerous:** shaping public behaviors with limited individual consequences (such as mask wearing) is one thing, influencing personal intimate decisions such as getting a vaccination might be a very different one.

**Figure 2.**  
**Most trusted information channels for COVID-19 information**



\* Source: Internews Rooted in Trust surveys, 2020-21 (2,406 respondents across Afghanistan, CAR, Colombia, Lebanon, Mali, Philippines and Sudan)

**Failure to distinguish trust in information channels from reliance in these sources and from their influence potential can frequently explain, at least in part, why expected awareness raising campaigns fail to deliver behavior change.**

The graph above shows the level of trust various channels garner in providing access to COVID-19 related information across Rooted in Trust countries - information that should be central in designing further COVID-19 related risk communications.

### TRUST ISN'T ONLY ABOUT ACCURACY

**D**uring the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation has reached new heights. Often, when we speak with our media partners across the world, the first impulse to curb the spread of dangerous misinformation is to improve fact checking abilities. While that remains necessary in most contexts, and Internews supports dozens of factchecking organizations globally, our research highlights that **accuracy encompasses more than the true-false binary and that accuracy is not always as central as we might expect.**

#### **Accuracy is about a lot more than truth.**

Mal-information, information that is accurate but shared out of context to instill fear, is an important feature of the disinformation landscape. Exact but selective information can generate distrust as surely as incorrect data. Factual information released out of time or out of place will instill skepticism as people experience the tension between information they receive and perceived realities. Moreover, in highly uncertain contexts, accuracy can become somewhat of a relative concept when at times yesterday's absolute truth became today's misinformation as we've witnessed during the pandemic (e.g., on the absence of benefits of generalized mask wearing).

**Trust is not only about accuracy.** In our work in the Philippines, we strove to unpack

the drivers of trust and compare them across sources. The analysis shows clearly that **being a trusted information provider goes beyond the substantive information and support supplied to the community.** For example, international organizations are considered among the most informative and most 'helpful' actors in the ecosystem, far beyond community leaders who are nevertheless more trusted.

Another powerful illustration is that "information coming from a loved one" is the most frequently quoted criteria that positively affect the trustworthiness of information, over half (51%) of the respondents surveyed across various countries calling it either a 'central feature for trust' or 'important for trust'. This was the case for more than two thirds of respondents in Afghanistan and 80% of those surveyed in the Philippines.

Even when information is factually correct, it can create confusion and be met with mistrust. Accurate information shared in a language that is not well understood or shared by people who seem to have vested interests, but have done little for local families and communities in the past is more likely than not to be met with suspicion despite being verified. **Without some level of trust, factchecking and other vetting and verification processes can quickly appear as tools to manipulate and censor information.**

## PROXIMITY IS IMPORTANT

BUT NOT ALL WHO ARE NEAR, FEEL CLOSE

### PROXIMITY IS IMPORTANT, BUT NOT ALL WHO ARE NEAR, FEEL CLOSE

**F**or many communities, the sources they trust the most are either part of the community, or close to it. Proximity is often a key driver of trust. While geographic proximity is sometimes central, proximity can also mean shared language, shared belonging or peer status, and other markers of closeness with the community. External actors that hold long-standing physical presence in the community can come to be perceived as proximate. For instance, in Lebanon, Syrians have grown frustrated with the stop and go nature of humanitarian support and local and international charities with a physical presence where interviewees reside were more commonly referenced as a trusted source of information than official sources that did not have a direct presence in the community.

**With proximity often comes relevance of information, familiarity and identification (perception of shared interest or values), all powerful drivers of trust.** This comes with opportunities (after all, local actors usually know best their communities' information needs) and with tremendous risks: in contexts with limited locally relevant information available, rumors that speak the language of proximity, relevance and familiarity can rapidly gain enormous traction.

**“We trust each other in our community. Someone in the village will help you or connect you with someone that can help.”**

- Interviewee in Lebanon

**“I trust my ulama over the WHO.”**

- Member of the community in BARMM, Philippines



## PROXIMITY IS IMPORTANT

BUT NOT ALL WHO ARE NEAR, FEEL CLOSE

### **Proximity does not equate trust, however.**

Population groups that feel stigmatized or marginalized in the environment they live in are unlikely to trust voices that emanate from the community that stigmatize them. Instead, they would often turn to actors that give them a voice - or at minimum - that they see as respecting them. For instance, our research with migrant and refugee communities in Narino, Colombia shows that members of this community are much more likely to trust international media than local voices from the host community. As our Colombia researcher put it: *“with xenophobia on the rise, it is not surprising that mistrust is perceived towards the dominant society”*.

Discourses around localization, the value of proximity and the need for humanitarians to rely more closely on influential figures in the communities they work with have been prevalent in the last decade. However, the practical implications derived from these have too often proved oversimplistic and frequently amounted to engaging closely with traditional community leaders (village chiefs, informal community representatives etc.) to ‘pass on messages’ to community members. But **not all local intermediaries and gatekeepers carry the same trust within the community. In many cases, large shares of the community targeted have little trust in the informal authorities humanitarians tend to rely on heavily.** In our survey, community leaders appear to enjoy little trust overall – at least as far as information on COVID-19 is concerned. In aggregate, across all seven IEAs, they rank last along with local officials among the sources respondents trust more to get information about COVID-19.

“In our culture, we trust a source first and foremost based on their integrity. Then we trust those we know. Here in the camp, there are people who help us with everything and don’t get paid for it. We trust these people since we know they’re not driven by self-interest but by the shared interest of the community.”

- Interview with a female respondent on an IDP site in Mali

Among a lot of anecdotal evidence, in Lebanon’s Syrian refugee settlements, the local “Shawish” (or camp coordinator) plays a central gatekeeping role (for information as well as for aid or access to jobs) but enjoys very little trust from many in the communities, as many female interviewees in particular highlighted during our research. In Mali, our research highlighted the critical role played by so-called ‘community caregivers’ among IDP communities while being most often overlooked by humanitarian actors in their search for local ‘correspondents’ (we call ‘community caregivers’ young people who have decided to stay with their family and their community and live within an IDP site, rather than move to the city or migrate abroad, and who voluntarily play a support and facilitation role in the community but do not hold a special social status like a traditional authority for instance).

### ONCE LOST, TRUST IS HARD TO REBUILD

**W**hen a serious lack of confidence exists (in a specific channel, in specific types of information, sometimes in the information ecosystem at large), it impacts the perception of COVID-19 related information. **Even verified information and transparency in reporting processes are unlikely to quickly shake-off ingrained distrust.**

Countries that have faced repeated and compounded crises over the years such as Central African Republic, Afghanistan or Lebanon tend to exhibit **generalized discredit towards elites altogether and towards government and media in particular.**

In Central African Republic, after decades of conflict and humanitarian and political crises, distrust appears to have permeated the entire information ecosystem. No information source enjoys absolute or good trust by more than half of the population for COVID-19 related information (except religious leaders with 52%). This generalized distrust even affects family and friends: about 40% of respondents in our survey declare they have no trust at all or very little trust in family and friends on COVID-19 information. In Lebanon, many Syrians and Lebanese have a complicated

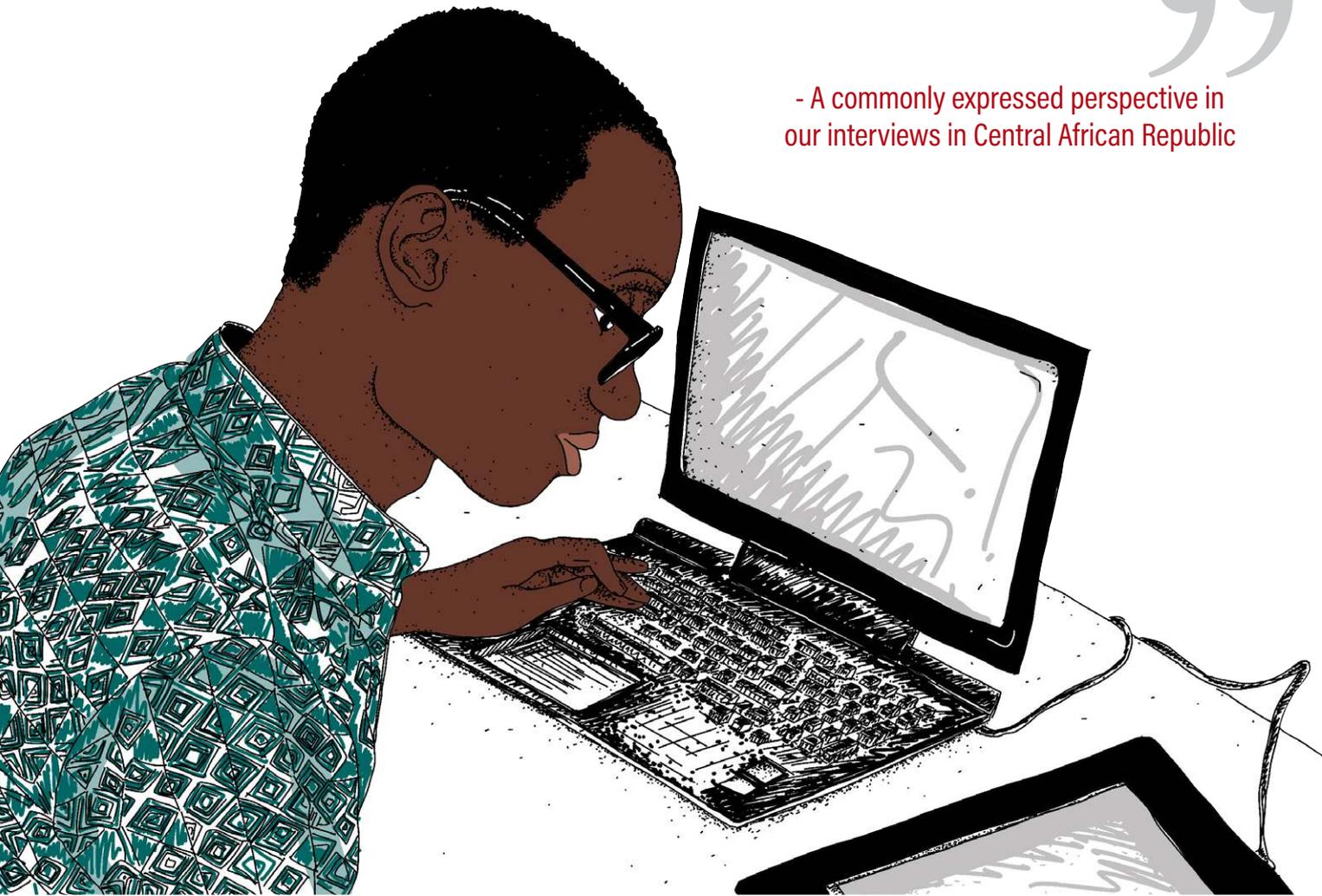
relationship with trust as both communities have experienced conflicts rooted in misinformation and constructed narratives as much as in armed aggression and ideology.

**Longstanding distrust particularly affects institutions.** Lebanon offers an illustration of this tendency: many appear to spontaneously distrust institutions, to more easily give the benefit of the doubt to individuals, and to favor unmediated content over curated content which becomes very quickly suspected of capture and bias. A journalist we spoke to in northern Lebanon articulates how these dynamics shift peoples' reliance towards grassroots civil society and personal networks instead of more established and formalized support systems: *"My friend is the head of one of the governmental hospitals. I trust the hospital because I know and trust him, and I'll refer people needing help directly to him"*

**Trust in health systems is also durably affected by the consequences of past and present weaknesses.** In Afghanistan, persistent distrust in a frail health system that has failed communities for so long prevents many from seeking assistance there, favoring instead the familiarity and geographic and financial accessibility of traditional healers.

“Information is altered to serve political interests.”

- A commonly expressed perspective in our interviews in Central African Republic



In Mali, like in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the heritage from a colonial medical infrastructure that often favored the requirements of European rulers rather than the needs of communities remain visible today. While health workers embedded in the community enjoy high levels of trust, doctors and hospital executives are suspected to inflate COVID-19 fatalities (and sometimes to willfully kill people to do so) as a way to pocket COVID-19 financing from government or donors.

While **trust is more volatile, it can prove sticky in specific cases, primarily when trust is anchored in a shared struggle or politicized worldview.** For instance, in Sudan, Resistance Committees gained popularity during the 2019 Sudanese Revolution and the political transition and have become trusted channels of information. They largely retain a high level of trust in the context of COVID-19 in spite of their now working hand in hand with a government that remains deeply distrusted.

## FEAR-INDUCING, HYPERBOLIC AND DEFINITIVE STATEMENTS

### SHORT-TERM BENEFITS, LONG-TERM COSTS

**T**hroughout our recent work on COVID-19, we have witnessed the temptation for authorities to resort to **overdramatized communication that spark fear in the community as a way to foster behavior change**. While this approach can prove efficient in the short-term (such as in enforcing lock down measures or other displacement restrictions), it **is almost certain to backfire and bear long term costs in terms of trust**. Hearing all day long about the threat of COVID-19 and about large number of cases detected in the country while witnessing few cases in your immediate community leads many to question the political, economic or personal motivations that might explain this gap.

In Afghanistan, despite increased knowledge, in early 2021 populations do not necessarily apply protective measures as much as they used to do in the first months of the pandemic. This is partly due to the lack of trust in the COVID-19 numbers coming from the Ministry of Public Health and in information coming from the government more broadly. Our researcher in Afghanistan highlights that *“COVID-19 was first presented under the scariest of traits and it was quite widespread in Afghanistan, which generated a lot of fear. The realization of limited number of cases and deaths seen in communities, results in lower fear and in many people not*

*applying preventative measures anymore”*. This points to a particularly vexing conundrum. Official communications that aggressively emphasize the lethality and virality of COVID-19 to support the implementation of protective measures bear the seeds of future suspicions: well-implemented measures will limit the spread of the infections, creating a disconnect between the initial discourse on high danger and the reality witnessed by communities and ultimately fostering suspicions of manipulation.

The requirement **to simplify complex scientific concepts and uncertainties to communicate to populations with low scientific and general literacy is too often taken as a pretense to shy away from nuance altogether and to oversimplify**. In a context with such high uncertainty, definitive statements come with a high risk needing to be recanted later and ultimately jeopardize the value of the official word.

Because distrust is sticky and trust often easy to lose, the long-term costs associated with these approaches far outweigh their immediate benefits. For instance, in **the immediate future, awareness raising around vaccines and inoculation campaigns will now hit the wall of skepticism brought about by previous dramatic messaging**.

### NO TRUST WITHOUT GENUINE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Imagine you have been forcibly displaced from your village and now live in an informal settlement in Mali with poor access to clean water; or you are a Syrian refugee stuck in an overcrowded camp in Lebanon. Now, picture yourself being told several times a week (sometimes a day) about the need to wash your hands, to use hand sanitizer and masks you cannot afford to buy, to practice social distancing - and being warned that not following these measures would put yourself and your family at risk. Alternative prevention measures or treatments and even conspiracy theories or denial quickly become attractive pathways to escape the anguish of powerlessness. Even in less extreme cases, **the repeated sense that an information channel provides information that lacks local relevance (“information that is not for me”) sows the seeds of disengagement at best, and of distrust at worst.**

**In almost all geographies covered in our research, we have heard a profusion of anecdotes about how out of touch some of the guidelines and communications around COVID-19 have been.** Speaking about the guidance communicated to displaced

“UNHCR or any other NGO calls us and tells us how to wash our hands and sterilize—we don’t even have anything to sterilize with.”

- Interview with a Syrian refugee in Lebanon

communities in Mali, a humanitarian actor confessed: *“the behavior changes advocated by awareness raising campaigns on COVID-19 are at odds with the practices of daily life in IDP camps. Almost all of these are impossible to apply for displaced populations.”* In our Information Ecosystem Assessment for Central African Republic, our researcher highlights how *“top-down communications and the lack of listening to the community engendered a gap between the recommended actions and the capacity of communities to implement them, which contributes to discouraging populations and to diverting them from the information and the channels that distribute it.”*

“Radio dramas called ‘baronis’ attract large audiences as they’re fictions that are anchored in women’s and girls’ lived realities and mimic how people communicate and exchange information in real life.”

- Extract from Internews’ Mali Information Ecosystem Assessment



Many researchers and practitioners have documented the tendency of the international system to export blueprints and international best practices with limited local relevance and to produce practices or institutions that have the right shape (by international standards) but do not perform the intended function. **The response to the COVID-19 pandemic offers a stark illustration and sheds light on the consequences of favoring internationally established best practices with limited applicability over second-best locally relevant (and even locally grown) solutions.**

Acknowledging the realities faced by the audience is central to how media and other communicators can create content communities can relate to and trust. Distributing content through local channels and translating

into local languages is not enough for people to feel heard, seen and recognized for who they are. **Information about COVID -19 has proven particularly challenging in that a large share of the information tends to be produced from the center (or from abroad) and then pushed to other parts of the country.** This was both driven by the frequent approach of ‘controlling the narrative’ taken by government and international institutions in a rumor-rich context and by the additional restrictions (on moving around, on accessing data and sources, on making sense of highly technical information material) on local medias’ ability to produce content. Many interviewees, across all research geographies, have repeatedly highlighted that their information needs, and their daily lives were poorly reflected in most of the information they have access to through formal media.

### HUMANITARIANS: CHOOSING CONTROL OVER TRUST?

**W**hen observing how most international agencies, large NGOs and many national governments interact with communities and with local media, it is hard to shake the feeling that the information landscape has changed dramatically over the past decade, but the ways of working and communicating, have not kept up. Press conferences, spokespersons and ‘messages’ are still central to many institutions’ communication toolbox. Many journalists we work with emphasize the difficulties to engage in a meaningful dialogue with public authorities and humanitarian actors alike. For instance, one of them, in the Philippines, highlights that “most authorities do not take questions from journalists during press briefings (both online and in-person)”.

Humanitarians acknowledge the importance of communicating with communities. ‘Risk Communications and Community Engagement’ working groups have popped up in virtually every country with notable humanitarian presence, significant portions of program budgets (in particular in health

programming) are allocated to awareness raising and other communications with communities. However, too often these efforts struggle to lead to meaningful engagements with communities: in almost all countries where we have worked with Rooted in Trust, and in spite of growing creativity and experimentation, **a large share of humanitarians’ communication efforts fail to account for the genuine information needs of people, their preferred way of accessing information, and the elements that might elicit distrust.**

Perhaps the largest blocking point resides in how humanitarians engage with the information ecosystem at large and especially **how full and rigid editorial control (frequently seen as the number one rule) acts as a central barrier to effective engagement.** Communications through press conferences with established media and dissemination of messages and other fully finished materials does miss an opportunity to genuinely address people’s information needs and to reach them through channels and with formats that they will trust and engage with.

Humanitarian actors have gotten much better at listening, or perhaps at encouraging people to talk. When gathering perspectives from communities however, it often feels that this enhanced ability to collect feedback from them falls short of influencing what humanitarians do, both in terms of addressing communities' information needs and in designing their programming altogether. A particularly striking point was made in several countries around the poor follow-up given to feedback and complaint mechanisms set up with many humanitarian organizations. **Asking people to speak up and giving them the impression that their voice is not heard is very detrimental to trust.**

Humanitarians are somewhat obsessed about whether populations trust them, or at least trust them enough that they can do their job properly. Now might be the time for a moment of reckoning: **shouldn't humanitarians first start to think more about trusting these communities and the local partners they work with?**

**“Many humanitarians engage with media in the same way they communicate with beneficiaries: sending prefabricated informational materials for rapid dissemination with little bilateral communication or creative contribution from media to humanitarians.”**

- Excerpt from Internews' Information Ecosystem Assessment amongst Syrian refugees in Lebanon



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### For humanitarians:

**More trust, less control: provide ideas and support, let local actors shape it.** The quality of information matters, but a process fully controlled by outsiders provokes frustration, raises questions about agenda, often feels inadequate and ultimately feeds distrust. In particular:

- Avoid pre-formatted content, relinquish some editorial control and develop more open partnerships based on exchange of information, allowing local information providers (including local media) to produce content in their own style and that will resonate with communities.
- Make more expertise available without creating a bottleneck at your external communication department: make it part of the experts' mandate to interact with local media and other critical information channels and support them accordingly (media training etc.)

**Put acknowledgement of local realities front and center.** Second-best locally relevant solutions almost always beat internationally established best practices with limited applicability. Therefore:

- Create internal processes where data & feedback collection are tailored towards the needs of decision-makers – quantitative data where procurement is involved, but also qualitative data to support implementation and adaptation, throughout the life cycle of your projects.
- Communication and information activities should be directly linked with community engagement, communication and information efforts – when they are disconnected, it generates “survey fatigue” on one side and it risks to (still) result in tone-deaf communication on the other side.

### Avoid putting too much pressure on one channel to communicate with communities:

Move away from one size fits all solutions such as systematic reliance on ‘traditional’ community leaders – they have an important role to play, but they are under pressure both from their own community to represent them and from humanitarians and health actors to deliver to everyone; identify dynamics specific to the population group, the location, the subject matter and support them. Because not everyone has the same access or preferences, multiple channels will cater for a more diverse population.

### Coordinate information exchange but avoid creating common “messaging”:

final products needing to be signed off by multiple people across multiple departments and agencies, result in lengthy processes that risk creating outputs that are out of time, void of local flavor and potentially only addressing the most common, frequently asked questions. International humanitarian and health agencies should instead focus on making the latest reliable information available, but delegate content creation to individual agencies and local actors.

### Communicate ‘with,’ not ‘to’ communities.

‘Messaging’ and other forms of top-down communications are at best insufficient, and at worst, fuel for further skepticism. Invest in bi-directional communication and integrate communication activities within your broader programming rather than approaching it as a standalone activity. Create space to genuinely listen and to take in feedback to adapt your programming (humanitarians have gotten better at having people talk to them but face risks of significant backlash unless they find ways to adapt based on what they are told).



### For media actors

**Build around lived realities faced by the audience** to create content communities can relate to and trust. In particular: source news more from the community and less from press conferences; broadcast credible community-centered messages such as relying on religious principles in places like BARMM Philippines or Afghanistan to explain the importance of preventive measures; give space to popular opinions that contradict official guidelines or accepted truths rather than hiding them; create formats inspired by traditional or popular ways of sharing information among your target audience.

**Proactively engage actors that enjoy recognition and/or trust from community members.** In particular: feature recognized

personalities and elevate the voices of those who were affected first-hand by the issue (for topics that have a stigma component like COVID-19 and other health issues); build a network of local civil society actors in order to reality-check your reporting and collaborate in addressing misinformation.

Be more mediator and less reporter – not everything a politician says is news – not all data released by humanitarian and health actors is worth putting on your front page. And while rumors and misinformation might not be accurate, the concerns and fears that drive them are always real. Local media has an important role to play by connecting communities with relevant expertise, and experts across health and humanitarian actors (including government) with the communities they are trying to serve.



**For governments and public health agencies**

**Pursue accuracy in its broadest possible sense.** In particular: embrace transparency as a way to try and overcome frequently rampant distrust in official institutions (including making data available to media actors); don't be selective about the data you share (it will come back at you and jeopardize your efforts); ensure timeliness of information release to avoid mismatches with lived realities.

**Trust community members and accept the nuance.** Avoid overdramatized

communications that instill fear even if it looks like an attractive option in the short-term. Acknowledge the unknowns and the assumptions rather than contradicting absolute statements with other absolute statements which only generates further distrust.

**Proactively diversify channels and partnerships to allow people to access information in their preferred modalities.**

In particular: leverage information providers and channels that are present and trusted within communities; embrace the development of social media and produce appropriate formats.

**For civil society, communities and community leaders**

**Dare to say you don't know but refer to those who do:** Know your influence and take responsibility. Religious and community leaders in particular, but also all community members

with spheres of influence, must acknowledge the central role they play as information gatekeepers and intermediaries. They must develop their capacity to authenticate and verify information and to channel community feedback to external institutions and actors.

## WHY INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENTS?

The people we seek to reach often live in diverse, noisy, risky, and confusing news and information environments that present them with challenges - as well as choices - as to what information they access, what they trust and what they share and act upon. Internews undertakes Information Ecosystem Assessments (IEA) to better understand unique and localized information needs, gaps, sources and patterns of access and use. Information Ecosystem Assessments offer us an analytical framework to capture all dimensions of the relationship between information consumers and information supply. Gaining precise high-

quality insights into these interactions allows us to design truly unique projects that meet people where they are to deliver information through the channels, platforms, formats or people that they prefer and trust. Our IEA research is based on four key principles: (1) putting the community at the core of the research; (2) following a human-centered research design; (3) marrying qualitative and quantitative data; and (4) integrating research and action. If you'd like to learn more about our methodology and our various assessments, please visit <https://humanitarian.internews.org/information-ecosystem>

## Rooted in Trust Information Ecosystem Assessments - Sample

|                              | Surveys | Semi structured interviews | Focus group discussions | Notes   |
|------------------------------|---------|----------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| <b>Afghanistan</b>           | 650     | 46                         | 15                      |   |
| <b>CAR</b>                   | 460     | 14                         | 6                       |   |
| <b>Colombia</b>              | 221     | 18                         | 13                      | Focus on Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Nariño |
| <b>Lebanon</b>               | 78      | 44                         | 22                      | Focus on Syrian refugees                            |
| <b>Mali</b>                  | 460     | 25                         | 8                       | Focus on Internally Displaced Populations           |
| <b>Philippines</b>           | 278     | 25                         | 62                      | Focus on BARMM                                      |
| <b>Sudan</b>                 | 259     | 61                         | 8                       |   |
| <b>Total Rooted in Trust</b> | 2.406   | 233                        | 134                     |   |

This paper was authored by **Pierrick Judéaux** (Global Research Coordinator, Internews). It builds extensively on the research performed by the lead researchers who produced individual country Information Ecosystem Assessments (**Muhammad Riaz Shinwari** in Afghanistan, **Laurette Sokambi de Padou** in Central African Republic, **Natalie Tines** in Colombia, **Rayane Abou Jaoude** and **Haley Schuler McCoin** in Lebanon, **Fodie Maguiraga** in Mali, **Daryl Del Rosario** in the

Philippines, **Kholood Khair** and the **ISP team** in Sudan) under the research coordination by **Joaquin de la Concha** and **Pierrick Judeaux** and benefited from the insights of other Internews colleagues involved in the Rooted in Trust project, in particular **Stijn Aelbers** and **Irene Scott**.

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