



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: TRENDS AND MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT COVID-19 VACCINATION AMONGST NATIONAL AND LOCAL MEDIA

Local Health System Sustainability Project: LHSS
Colombia

Task Order I, USAID Integrated Health Systems IDIQ

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Local Health System Sustainability Project (LHSS)

The Local Health System Sustainability Project (LHSS) is a USAID initiative being implemented under the Integrated Health Systems IDIQ. Its goal is to help low and middle-income countries move to sustainable, self-funded health systems as a means of supporting universal health coverage. The project works together with partner countries and local stakeholders to reduce financial barriers to health care and treatment, ensure equitable access to essential health services, and improve the quality of health services. Led by Abt Associates, the five-year, \$209 million project will build local capacity to maintain a strong performance of the health system, supporting countries on their path to self-sufficiency and prosperity. In Colombia, this project is known as "*Comunidades Saludables*."

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I. DESCRIPTION

Objective

Project Objective: Support the development of a communications strategy that will promote COVID-19 vaccination in prioritized regions.

Communications objective: Create a communications strategy focused on increasing community trust in the COVID-19 vaccination process.

Problem Description

The Government of Colombia announced that it had signed confidentiality agreements for vaccine procurement from several pharmaceutical companies on July 28, 2020. The National Vaccination Plan (PNV, in Spanish) was activated to immunize the country's population against COVID-19, within the framework of a global effort to combat the pandemic. On December 18, 2020, the Government announced a timetable for the PNV, starting on February 17, 2021. Vaccination formally began eleven months after the virus was first recorded in the country in March 2020 and was divided into five stages with the goal of achieving herd immunity.

On November 22, 2021, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MSPS, in Spanish) approved vaccination boosters for persons between 18 and 49 years old by groups and stages indicated under the COVID-19 PNV and six months after the receipt of the second dose of a two-dose vaccine or one dose of a single dose vaccine. By the end of February 2022, 76,120,209 doses had been administered in the country, and 33,183,721 individuals were considered fully vaccinated. 157,784 doses are administered daily according to MSPS figures.

Within this context, studies are needed to provide evidence of citizens' perceptions regarding the PNV as demonstrated in social and traditional media and to formulate recommendations for the development of a communications strategy to promote vaccination in the country with special emphasis on the regions prioritized by LHSS Colombia.

Methodology

A variable set was defined to classify information from the different media and to provide strategic meaning to the analysis process. The variables identify the person speaking/giving the message and the subject/content of the message. Using an analysis matrix, results were organized according to the topics of greatest interest around the PNV and the way they referred to the different types of vaccines. Findings were then used to formulate recommendations.



Medical topics

Messages: Phases, vaccine types, doses, effectiveness, effects, medical care, and the PNV.



Acquisition

Messages: Negotiation process, relationships with laboratories, successful dose management/purchases, and international context/scarcity.



Logistics

Messages: MSPS and Secretariat management.



Vaccination myths/concerns

Chip implantation, fertility implications, health restrictions, barriers to access/entitlement, vaccine composition, breastfeeding/pregnancy, religious beliefs, denial, alcohol consumption, and travel restrictions.



Vaccine brands

Pfizer, Moderna, Sinovac, AstraZeneca, Janssen



Communities

Entrepreneurs, citizens, media, journalists, experts, church, international organizations, national organizations, USAID, opinion leaders, national institutions, and local institutions.

Limitations

Due to the enormous amount of information, this analysis had to be performed using representative samples of media sources and messages. Although this methodology can be used to extract valuable information, it should be noted that this study does not consider the entirety of available information. Thus, when reviewing the most important media by region, remote areas of the country that use other types of media, such as community and more local media, were not necessarily included in the sample. On social media networks, the panorama is even more extensive. However, by relying on more repetitive and trending information, we have managed to identify the opinions, interactions, behaviors, and conversations that are relevant for the project's strategic objective and its target audiences.

Collaboration

This report analyzes behaviors and trends on traditional and social media networks from July 2021 to January 31, 2022.

Results from this work can be used by different stakeholders with responsibilities in communication, the MSPS, and different USAID programs to foster effective communication in the territorial entities and ensure that messages can be accessed by the entire range of communities.

This report contains changes, progress made, and obstacles encountered related to the identification of strategic communications actions, and opportunities to maintain the current COVID-19 vaccination agenda and to promote institutional vaccination efforts using messages that are simple and easy for citizens to understand.

2. MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings

The main findings for the period from October 2021 to January 2022 include:

- **Increased favorability in traditional media and on Twitter.** There was an average 20% increase in favorability towards the PNV in traditional media and on Twitter. Data shows greater support for vaccination, especially on Twitter, where users highlighted vaccine effectiveness and were grateful for their protection and reduction in intensity of symptoms from the Omicron variant. This is aligned with intensive care unit occupancy data, which, according to the MSPS, was approximately 81.4% on January 01, 2021, and 59.4% on January 01, 2022.
- **The community of "experts" plays a key role in increasing favorability.** During the previous period, the community of "experts" had a 1.5% participation in the media, compared to a 5% participation in this report period. Favorability related to this group's messaging more than doubled, increasing from 10% to 23%, where, despite using a scientific and informative approach, messages were forceful and easy to understand, resulting in changes in perceptions around vaccine effectiveness.

This community's leading role is vitally important, because, as the voice of the scientific community on this topic, they can help clarify and fill in gaps in the information possessed by citizens. They are naturally recognized as beneficial for society and have a reputation for acting transparently, which makes it easier for their messages to be considered factual.

- **Other networks show increased negativity in posts and comments due to an increased amount of misinformation.** Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube had a different dynamic than traditional media and Twitter. This was largely due to the fact that COVID-19 deniers are much more active on these platforms, disseminating messages containing disinformation that delegitimizes the PNV and can dissuade people from getting vaccinated.

Recommendations

- I. Communicating the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines is essential amid new variants. Reinforcing this content using real stories that provide evidence of the protection offered by these vaccines in situations where people gathered and resumed pre-pandemic activities, even when new variants started to appear, is recommended. Greater communication efforts are required in departments like Arauca, Caldas, and Antioquia, which the most negativity towards vaccination was identified. Likewise, a national strategy involving various national entities should be activated using hashtags on social media, inviting others to get involved in the conversation around vaccination and showing unity around a single cause: saving lives. Involving social media influencers with nationwide reach to support by sharing a message of trust in vaccines can encourage others to do the same.

2. Another recommendation is to bolster spaces led by the community of experts to facilitate ongoing dissemination of credible information and prevent the spread of false information. It is necessary to amplify the voices of experts on platforms (digital and traditional) where they can help respond to citizens' concerns using simple language and information that can be easily discussed in settings such as schools, workplaces, and among close friends, children, young people, and adults alike. For example, information shared by experts like Dr. Fernanda Hernández or Dr. Julio Durán on the national broadcast by Canal Caracol and RCN is heard by thousands of people every day. Partnerships should be sought with these mass media outlets to propose topics to share with Colombian homes without political connotations. Infectious disease and epidemiology experts like Jose Millán Oñate and Carlos Trillos also provide valuable, high-impact information that could be taken to regional radio stations.
3. On Instagram, we recommend making flashy, interactive content for the younger population to promote messages in favor of COVID-19 vaccination. It is also a platform where messages are easily shared, and influencers are constantly creating content.

On Facebook, we recommend both increasing the presence of expert arguments to combat disinformation and including testimonials from vaccinated people who share the positive effects of their decision. Publications by experts should be generated and shared to debunk myths, including, for example, those related to vaccine composition. Instagram should also be linked to this strategy, reposting content from networks like TikTok.

For YouTube, the recommendation is to try to mitigate negative comments on videos, pinning links to videos by official entities that redirect users to expert information debunking the most important myths (COVID-19 deniers, religious beliefs, and vaccine composition). For videos published by non-government entities, it is recommended to seek out media partners like Canal Capital Bogota or La W Radio to pin comments with these informational resources on their videos.

Content on TikTok should be included within the PNV communications strategy because it reaches a much younger age group. This is a short video network that easily connects to other networks like Instagram and Facebook, which can help expand the reach of individual pieces of content. Whether using challenges or short formats, this network can be used to mobilize hashtags that invite people to start conversations and share memorable stories. A hashtag like #YoSíMeVacunéPorque (#IGotVaccinatedBecause) can help attract content where citizens play a leading role in the message.

3. SUSTAINABILITY / DELIVERABLE USE

This document seeks to strengthen the communications strategy used by territorial entities, Health Secretariats, and other actors around the country whose activities include sharing valuable information for communities. This strategy should be revised and adjusted periodically, as positions, perceptions, and milestones change constantly at the national-level, and especially at the territorial level. The scope and content of vaccine-related myths must be analyzed continuously to strengthen content that will reduce the number of people that deny the virus's existence or believe false information about the effectiveness and safety of the vaccines. Tailoring this document to the regional level allows sharing the main myths

and trends occurring within the territorial media and can help to build, develop, and implement appropriate strategies.

Finally, a key part of this document's sustainability is to use its analyses, findings, and recommendations to develop a communications strategy that can be implemented both nationally and at the territorial level.

This deliverable will enable territorial entities to analyze current communications plans related to COVID-19 vaccination and provide inputs for updating them, so these plans reach the community at large with clear messages on the importance of vaccination as an effective public health measure to prevent fatal outcomes from COVID-19. This process was conducted with direct assistance from communications teams at territorial entities and local media, with whom the results were shared and to whom LHSS is providing a complementary training process to build local capacity.