



Access to health information: How to improve the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in MENA countries?



Access to reliable information is one of the basic human rights. However, it is in many contexts restricted by the

Ta strona korzysta z ciasteczek. Dalsze korzystanie ze strony oznacza zgodę na ich użycie. Aby dowiedzieć się więcej, kliknij [tu](#).

Zgadzam się

Access to reliable information is one of the basic human rights. However, it is in many contexts restricted by the authorities, and the situation is further complicated by the spread of fake news. Access to information is particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic, because credible knowledge can save lives.

COVID-19 Disinformation and its Impact on the Democracy

Pandemic is a specific time when most of our activities: professional as well as private, move online. Thanks to social media, it is possible to keep in touch with the world, but at the same time to become a victim of misinformation about the epidemic danger.

The COVID-19 pandemic contributes to vaccine inequalities in the real world, but also creates new health dangers, which, in combination with traditional challenges, take a toll on the health – and lives – of the people.

From vaccine inequality to fake news

The world has been discussing for months how to stave off a pandemic in countries that cannot afford to buy expensive vaccines. WHO chief **Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus** pointed out at the end of 2021 that 92 of the organization's 194 member countries had not met their goal of vaccinating 40 percent of the population by the end of the year. The longer the coronavirus circulates among people, the greater the risk of new variants, the Ethiopian stressed, and the Omicron variant of coronavirus is proof of this.

The WHO chief's words are confirmed by statistics – which, due to political instability in some countries, may not be accurate after all. In Syria, the authorities have so far declared that 4.8 percent of the population is fully vaccinated. In Afghanistan it is 9.6 percent, in Algeria and Libya, 13 percent, in Egypt, 23 percent, and in Lebanon, 28 percent.

On the other hand, fake news spread about COVID-19 is no less of a problem than access to vaccines, and there is a strong consensus among experts that there is a close link between the impact of misinformation and, for example, the increasing number of people who are hesitant to vaccinate against COVID-19.

Decreasing public trust in state institutions is a common phenomenon throughout the world, but it takes on particular significance in countries where there is fairly low trust in public authorities due to government corruption or restrictions on civil liberties, as is the case in Southern Mediterranean countries.

Ta strona korzysta z ciasteczek. Dalsze korzystanie ze strony oznacza zgodę na ich użycie. Aby dowiedzieć się więcej, kliknij **tu**.

Zgadzam się

„Trust in public institutions is a very broad issue in these countries. Due to authoritarian rule of law, lack of rule of law, high corruption, frequent use of torture, ruthless struggle for influence and lack of adequate supervision of state apparatus, trust in authorities is at a very low level,” says **Łukasz Skoczylas** of Polish Humanitarian Action told EURACTIV.pl.

“The pandemic was met with disbelief from people in the in North Africa and Middle East as people do not trust their governments. In our monitoring, we collected thousands of rumors around COVID-19 that were common across the MENA. “They want to keep us home”, “The ministry of public health is exaggerating with the rates of Covid to receive aids and foreign funds”, these are examples of rumors reflecting distrust in governments in countries facing continuous unrest and conflicts”, said **Roula Mikhael**, Beirut-based MAHARAT Foundation executive director.

Information above all

The skepticism in Southern Mediterranean countries could be helped by transparent access to information, including public health information, according to the co-authors of the policy paper, produced in collaboration between MAHARAT Foundation and EuroHealthNet, a European partnership of health promotion agencies.

In a campaign supported by *Med Dialogue for Rights and Equality* – an EU-funded programme that aims to strengthen the role of civil society organizations working beyond borders in the Mediterranean space in advocating and in influencing policy-making – experts, journalists from local media and NGO representatives, stress that cooperation between government health authorities and the media or independent organizations can ensure that as much reliable information about public health as possible reaches as many people as possible.

Thanks to this, they will be able to make their own decisions about health and lives and, globally, reduce future epidemics.

Access to information is particularly important when national governments have sometimes restricted access to information on the grounds that new laws or measures are being introduced in the public interest, *ergo* to stop the spread of misinformation about COVID.

Unfortunately, in many cases in MENA countries, journalists, doctors or activists have been harassed under the new laws imposed by governments, and often without any transparency or public accountability. And after all, they are the ones responsible for providing verified information on critical issues for the public, like health issues.

Examples are provided by the Maharat Foundation, which has mapped the laws restricting access to information where some nations have regarded health security as analogical to national security, which has caused authorities to crackdown on freedom of expression and access to information.

Intimidation of journalists and doctors has contributed to the worsening of public awareness – the spread of misinformation about the pandemic, which has led to non-adherence to internationally recognized COVID-19 prevention practices, such as wearing protective masks, maintaining social distance, and trust in vaccination.

For example, in Egypt, you cannot complain too much because you can end up behind bars for „spreading false

Ta strona korzysta z ciasteczek. Dalsze korzystanie ze strony oznacza zgodę na ich użycie. Aby dowiedzieć się więcej, kliknij **tu**

Zgadzam się

Sisyphean tasks?

Hence, the idea of transnational cooperation of journalists, experts and NGO employees from North Africa and Middle East. In the action coordinated by Maharat Foundation and EuroHealthNet they undertook the effort to develop recommendations for the future in the context of improving access to information in public health emergencies.

It is well known that – as the inhabitants of the territories that make up today's Mediterranean basin used to say two thousand years ago – *gutta cavat lapidem non vi, sed saepe cadendo* (eng. a water drop hollows a stone, not by force, but by falling often)...

The very fact of such international cooperation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic was not easy to carry out. The obstacles were the health risks associated with the virus and the restrictions put in place for the duration of the pandemic. Therefore, the meetings were held online.

But those aren't the only reasons. Civil society organizations in EU neighboring countries are facing increasing obstacles.

It should not be forgotten that in MENA countries there are situations when the authorities do not respect human rights or freedom of practice of journalists, doctors or NGO representatives.

Zeid Fetlawi, an Iraqi journalist said that Iraqi penal code defamation provisions (article 433) are used to silence journalists who publish information criticizing public actors. "The authorities are using these provisions in times of COVID against everyone criticizing health authorities and is impeding access to information under the pretext of national security."

The limiting space for civil society in partner countries has been brought to the attention of the European Commission, which announced €1.5 billion in December 2021 to support civil society organizations in partner countries. The aim is to build inclusive and participatory democratic processes and better development outcomes.

The meetings coordinated by Maharat Foundation and EuroHealthNet provided a platform to share the invaluable experiences of all those who work with great dedication every day to make the world a better place.

Reading the recommendations in each of the many areas analyzed is one big call for respect for the right of access to reliable information by national authorities, respect for civil rights, freedom of expression, and the adoption of clear and transparent policies to monitor and track the spread of COVID-19.

These issues – crucial to the fight against the pandemic – seem obvious when we consider the socio-political-economic context for countries in the region.

Strengthen the fourth estate and activists

Ta strona korzysta z ciasteczek. Dalsze korzystanie ze strony oznacza zgodę na ich użycie. Aby dowiedzieć się więcej, kliknij [tu](#)

Zgadzam się

In addition, according to the UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), there are about 1.5 million refugees from Syria in the country – the largest refugee community per population of any country in the world. Syrians escaping war are particularly vulnerable to poverty and most are dependent on international humanitarian and medical assistance.

Poverty, social and economic inequalities, limited access to information, armed conflict, and government corruption make it difficult for societies in MENA to effectively combat COVID-19.

In countries of the region, there is also no shortage of examples of a different approach – such as in Egypt – namely, the manipulation of data related to SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus infections. Egypt is doing “extremely well” with the COVID-19 pandemic so far. With slightly 420,000 cases and 22,000 deaths provoked by COVID-19 until the end of January 2022, the country ranks in an excellent position by international standards.

According to researchers from Germany and Israel who compared data on so-called excess pandemic deaths in 103 countries around the world, that’s thanks to creatively kept statistics.

Also, there are investigative reports how Egypt has been misusing a coronavirus antibody test to screen air passengers and medical staff for the virus. It’s quite crucial because antibody tests detect whether people have previously had the virus not whether they currently have it. And that understates the statistics and is ineffective against COVID-19.

There are other report on how the government provided N95 masks to doctors that were not compliant with standards.

As Med Dialogue campaigners emphasize, policymakers should ensure that citizens have the right to access information according to international standards so that they can make conscious decisions about their health, which is particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Policymakers should provide quality health services and strengthen efforts to improve the situation of people from the most vulnerable groups both financially and socially. And journalists, doctors, activists should be given freedom to practice their profession without the risk of harassment by the authorities. So that on the one hand it becomes possible to help those in need, and on the other to hold the authorities accountable for the results of their actions.

As Łukasz Skoczylas from PAH stresses, „all of the above activities, however, depend on the good will of the authorities, which is often an absent element,” and without it it will be difficult to bring about a fundamental change in the countries of the region. But – as we know – *gutta cavat lapidem non vi...*

© 1999 - 2022 | Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV |
Terms and Conditions | Contact us

Ta strona korzysta z ciasteczek. Dalsze korzystanie ze strony oznacza zgodę na ich użycie. Aby dowiedzieć się więcej, kliknij [tu](#)

Zgadzam się