

OVERCOMING THE TRUST DEFICIT

Community Engagement for Effective COVID-19 Vaccination

POLICY BRIEF | APRIL 2021

Overview

The development of several vaccines to combat COVID-19 marks an important milestone towards ending the ongoing pandemic. In addition to ensuring that vaccines are distributed equitably and efficiently across the globe, policymakers, public health experts, and humanitarians must also **overcome vaccine hesitancy**, especially in contexts where public trust in government institutions is weak and reliable information on the benefits of vaccination is lacking. Closing gaps in **government accountability** combined with **deep, inclusive, and sustained community engagement** can generate trust among communities in vaccines and vaccination providers.

Humanitarian need has spiked by 40% globally since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Data Source: United Nations

Findings: Making Sense of Mistrust

Drawing on evidence from past vaccine rollouts and lessons-learned from Mercy Corps' programming during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as other public health crises, we find:

18 out of 20 of the world's most conflict-affected countries are unlikely to reach widespread vaccination until 2023.

Data Source: ACLED, The Economist Intelligence Unit

- 1) **Understanding and integrating community-level beliefs** about the disease and perceptions of vaccines is essential to stemming mistrust and safeguarding effective interventions. This is especially relevant for uplifting historically underserved or excluded populations.
- 2) Vaccine shortages, logistical challenges, and unclear implementation decisions can **undermine public confidence in the government** and contribute to mistrust of vaccination programs. This is heightened in places where delivery of public services is generally ineffective and amongst communities that have faced state repression.
- 3) Top-down monitoring and feedback systems may not adequately and accurately capture misinformation and negative views on the vaccine. **Civil society organizations and community healthcare workers** are well placed for bottom-up monitoring, which is central to incorporating people's concerns, leveraging local knowledge, and building grassroots trust necessary for mass vaccination.

Recommendations: Addressing Mistrust

Enabling the widespread uptake of vaccines will be key to **preventing future disease spread** and **mitigating the secondary impacts** of COVID-19 on socioeconomic inequality, food insecurity, and violent conflict that threaten lives and livelihoods. Mercy Corps offers the following **recommendations to the Biden-Harris administration** for overcoming the trust deficit and building public confidence in vaccines:



- Obligate funds expeditiously for foreign assistance in the American Rescue Plan to trusted local civil society organizations and locally-trusted international non-governmental organizations to conduct context-specific, comprehensive community engagement programs. Equipping trustworthy organizations will be key to raising public awareness about the importance of vaccination and building public confidence in vaccine providers in the lead up to and during vaccine rollout.
- Rely on evidence-based approaches to deepen community engagement, expand local participation in vaccine rollout efforts, train grassroots healthcare workers, and sensitize relevant government agencies or decision-makers.
- Maintain and increase investments in governance, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding programs that build trust between the government and local residents.
- Fortify local health systems by investing further in the [Access to COVID-19 Tools \(ACT\) accelerator](#).
- Coordinate with and encourage the World Health Organization and other multilateral institutions to integrate a diverse range of technical expertise into planning exercises and ensure that Ministries of Health include vulnerable and marginalized groups in vaccine distribution.

The U.S. Congress also has a critical role to play in helping to overcome the trust deficit. Congress has taken important steps to address the pandemic globally, including in the American Rescue Plan, but funding still falls far short of global needs and no supplemental resources have been provided for long-term development and conflict prevention efforts. Mercy Corps offers the following **recommendations to Congress** to strengthen the U.S. government’s capacity to end the pandemic, prevent the recurrence of disease, and build resilience in the worst-affected and most vulnerable settings:

- Invest in humanitarian assistance by increasing funding to the International Disaster Assistance and Migration and Refugee Assistance by at least 20% in fiscal year 2022.
- Invest in long-term economic recovery by increasing funding to the Development Assistance and Economic Support Fund by at least 20% in fiscal year 2022.
- Invest in peacebuilding by increasing funding to the Prevention and Stabilization Fund (\$200 million), Complex Crises Fund (\$50 million), and the Multi-Donor Fragility Fund (\$25 million) to implement the Global Fragility Act in fiscal year 2022.

The Bottom Line

Thorough community engagement is crucial to overcoming the trust deficit necessary for mass vaccination against COVID-19 and, therefore, to ending the pandemic and addressing the myriad vulnerabilities it has exacerbated in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.