

Policy Brief 36

Improving Egypt's Access to Vaccines and Medicines, Communicating during COVID-19

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Executive Summary

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many authorities – including the Government of Egypt – have implemented several awareness/communication campaigns to inform citizens about public health developments. For the past year, governmental efforts have been focused on vaccinating the global population¹ in order to help minimize the spread of the virus and its variants, control the negative socio-economic impact of the pandemic and help bring back normal activities at a faster pace. However, a second type of danger facing governments has appeared and that is vaccination hesitancy, considered to be one of the significant obstacles to global health. Government communication is key to help fight off both COVID-19 and vaccine hesitancy, while increasing vaccination rates. Egypt is working diligently on all fronts to ensure the availability, affordability and attractiveness of vaccines. However, many Egyptians are still hesitant when it comes to receiving their shots. While this may be attributed to several factors, a “missing piece” in the current government’s communication strategy is apparent. Within the context of this paper, the authors suggest and recommend an augmented version of the current communication strategy, one that involves utilizing the “bottom/up” and “top/down approach” as well as mobilizing all relevant stakeholders in helping shape a campaign that helps raise awareness, dispels misconceptions and information about the vaccines and builds an open channel with the community.

The Government of Egypt adopted a centralized- top-down approach in tackling the COVID-19 crisis which was relatively successful in enforcing lockdown measures and re-arranging the healthcare entities to be able to respond to the COVID-19 as per the health needs of the society. In that regard, the Ministry of Health and Population utilized all available media channels in order to raise awareness and spread knowledge on the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent vaccination campaign that has been rolled out by the government in a bid to safeguard the population against the spread of the virus and its variants.

This includes several tools such as media campaigns (e.g., awareness info-graphs and videos), a specialized hotline 15530 (to respond to citizens' queries) and several published COVID-19 research material. Despite these exhaustive policies, vaccination rates remained low in Egypt compared to country peers: as of the 29th of November 2021, according to the WHO, a total of 36.9 million doses have been administered to the people, with an average of 384,011 dose administered each day (Reuters' COVID-19 Tracker, 2021). This translates to about 22.7% of the population having been administered the vaccine with 13.5% being fully vaccinated and 9.2% having received at least one dosage. According to Reuters, it will take the Government of Egypt around a further 53 days (less than two months) to administer enough doses for another 10% of the population.



Source: Data compiled by authors from Our World in Data website on COVID-19 tracking. Egypt's data is extracted from the Covidax Statistics Website (<https://covidvax.live/location/egy>) as of the 29th of November 2021. (<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations?country=EGY~JOR~SAU~ARE~NGA~BRA>)

Figure 1.0 Share of people having been administered doses of vaccine against COVID-19 as of November 29th 2021 (as a % of total population)

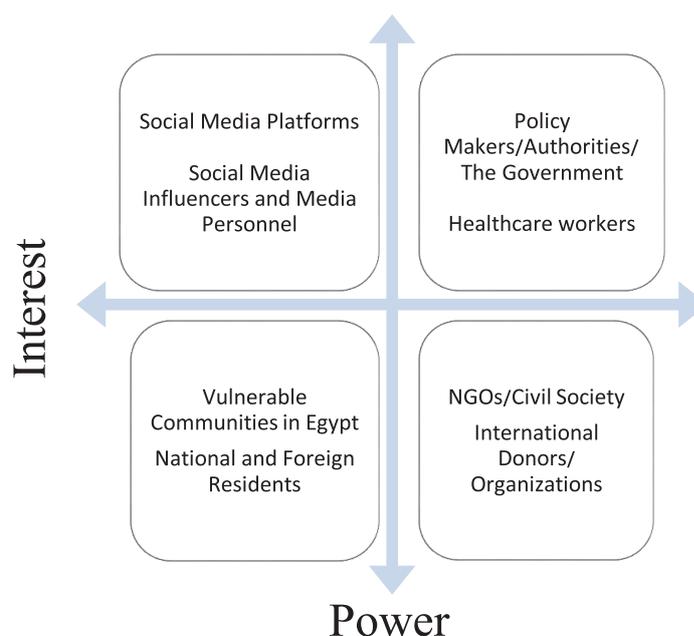
Problem Statement

Why are the Egyptian health authorities unable to fully address the issue surrounding “low vaccination rates” in its current communication strategy?

The Ministry of Health and Population has noticed that only few people are applying to get the vaccine, and many people are hesitant, reluctant, distrusting, or otherwise not motivated with respect to being vaccinated. Others are convincing their families and friends not to take it as well. Such hesitancy could be due to several reasons among which we could mention that (i) the vaccine is politicized in many people’s views, (ii) some consider that not enough time was spent on developing the vaccine correctly for human use or, (iii) religious concerns. This paper is focused on the problem of communication in health crises, with a special focus on COVID-19 communication policy and strategy. The main spotlight of this analysis is to understand the bottlenecks in the communication strategy with the Egyptian public, in particular when it comes to vaccinations and general health guidelines. As far as we’ve come in this pandemic, the government concentrated its efforts mostly toward the affordability and availability of the vaccines but little to none toward acceptance.

Stakeholder Analysis

We identified several stakeholders for this paper and prioritized them according to a power-interest matrix, showing how influential each stakeholder is to proposed policies by the authorities. The power axis (Y-axis) shows the level of influence of a stakeholder whether in advocating or rejecting a public policy. The interest level (X-axis) depends on what the stakeholder aim to achieve on the economic, social, and power dimensions as well as how engaged said stakeholder will be in the context of a given policy. The higher the stakeholders are in the quadrant, the more powerful and interested they can be considered when it comes to proposed policies.



Source: Modelled after a power/interest quadrant model presented by Ari-Matti Auvinen in his paper “Understanding the Stakeholders as a Success Factor for Effective Occupational Health Care”, February 2017.

Figure 2.0 Power/interest matrix of relevant stakeholders

Policy Alternatives

The main purpose of the suggested policies is to sustain an adequate infrastructure of public health, through enhancing public acceptance of vaccines and promoting higher vaccination rates. The following four policy alternatives are set to guide policy makers in closing the gaps in their current communication strategy. These

policies are interlinked and interconnected, helping expand the scope and dimensions of current government efforts done to promote and encourage citizens to take their vaccine shots. These are not meant to replace current efforts but rather build on them in order to achieve the best possible outcomes.

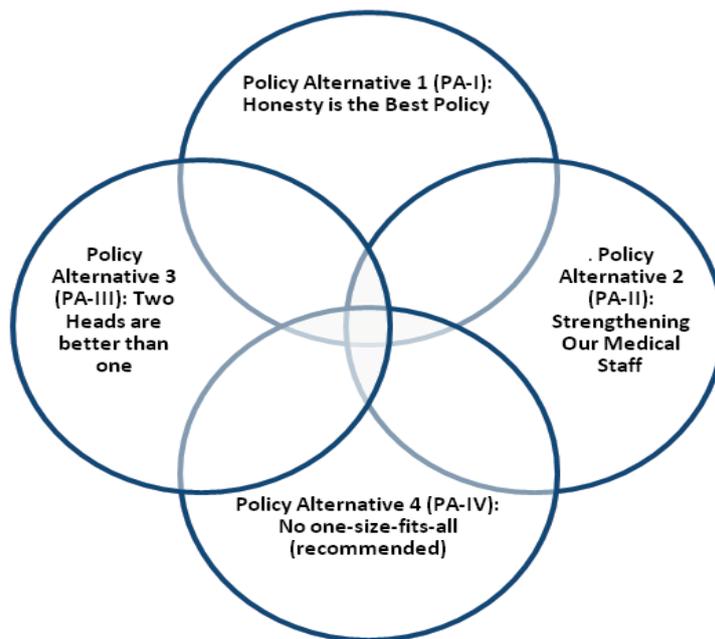


Figure 3.0 Policy Alternatives to Current Government Communication Strategy

Policy Alternative 1 (PA-I): Honesty is the Best Policy

This policy tends to adopt direct messages addressed by the government to the public audience. This encompasses disseminating precise and clear messages about the COVID-19 vaccines. The implemented policies should be articulated based on sympathizing with the skeptical people of the COVID-19 vaccines, and through formulating policies that fit all the people regardless of education, gender, nationality, and/or their socio-economic standards. Transparent communication involves monitoring the information shared on social media, hence avoiding polarization and rumors. Instead, the authorities might adopt post-vaccination surveillance techniques to mitigate the public's intimidation towards the vaccine.

Policy Alternative 2 (PA-II): Strengthening Our Medical Staff

Effective communication entails strengthening the ties between the government and the healthcare workers. The government should provide scientific assistance to the medical staff through enriching them with up-to-date scientific materials, and offline/online information sessions about the vaccine and COVID updates. In parallel with providing healthcare workers with the necessary tools to better engage in the vaccination process, their capacities would also be enhanced through creating transparent communication tools by the government that will promote the safety of the vaccine and mitigate its risks.

Policy Alternative 3 (PA-III): Two Heads are Better than One

This approach tends to create a successful vaccination campaign through fostering top/down and bottom/up communication methods. This includes having joint conversations between authorities, medical staff, and the citizens all together. The government should help in normalizing taking the vaccine, through providing the necessary advertising tactics that display real time developments in the vaccination process. Investing and empowering vaccinated people to share their stories will push the vaccination campaign forward, especially if the narrators are from the medical field and hence build public knowledge on scientific grounds. Collaborating with faith-based and community leaders, especially social media influencers is indispensable. This will build more trust and give credibility to this approach, especially while using commonly used terms from people's own slang language. This could also be implemented creating TV advertisements, posters, billboards, and YouTube and Facebook ads.

Policy Alternative 4 (PA-III): No One-size-fits-all

The objective of this approach is to build diverse communication channels that will suit the wide spectrum of people. Creating multiple forums to gather feedback from the public about the vaccination services provided by the government, and hence people could be able to raise their concerns through the government's websites, vaccination service portal, social media platforms and hotline. Disseminating data through a more appealing way will also raise people's awareness towards the vaccine. This includes using info-graphs, videos, or informative visualized cards. This will not only increase people's knowledge, but will also give insights about the reach of the information through analyzing the metrics and data on the government's related portals and websites.



Policy recommendations and conclusion

The aforementioned policy alternatives were assessed based on the following criteria: (1) effectiveness, (2) economic, (3) equity, (4) political and, (5) administrative. Based on the many elements researched and discussed within the aforementioned policies, this paper suggests the following measures:

- *The government should strengthen its presence on social media, given that it's widely used by all people, in parallel with continuing using TV advertisements and interviews with government officials to promote public awareness of the vaccine.*
- *The government is to take into account the needs of healthcare workers, through enhancing their potentials by providing them with medical research and address their concerns.*
- *It is important that authorities focus on peer-to-peer engagement (i.e., involving average citizens in disseminating the information). This will be the magic lamp that will light the way forward for the government in reaching higher vaccination rates and maintain public awareness of COVID-19.*
- *It is vital to assure an adequate dissemination of information through conducting periodical community meetings, webinars and holding forums between citizens and officials.*
- *Strengthening ties with key stakeholders and organizations is important if policies are to become effective, equitable and efficient to the greater good of public health.*

The Government of Egypt has clearly presented itself as one of very few governments which were able to implement a suitable and flexible emergency response plan to the spread of the virus. However, in the authors' analysis, little was made to address the public's awareness and acceptance of the vaccine as suggested by the low rates of vaccination. In that context, the authorities should focus on creating/disseminating simple and clear messages and actions that would appeal to a wide stratum of the people and help them understand the entirety of the process. This is done via several alternatives recommended in this paper that could represent an augmented version of currently applied strategies. In their core, it is important to have a high level of transparency and depth in communicating and disseminating the government's awareness campaign as they are successful factors in reaching citizens and playing to their empathic and emotional sides, and concern for their well-being and safety of their loved ones. Based on analysis and evaluation, the authors recommend a baseline function to the government's communication strategy: utilizing both a "top/down", "bottom/up" approach where an ecosystem between authorities and citizens is sustained. In such an approach, the government might have access to people's concerns and fears, might develop an important data base on information crucial to an effective vaccination campaign, and might be able to address them swiftly.

In all cases, we need to recognize the efforts done on the ground and the current modifications and policies being applied to address a curbed demand for better communication, stronger transparency, and improved service delivery to all those in need. With a better communication strategy – especially during these tough and uncertain times and one that involves the whole spectrum of stakeholders –we can expect a rapid improvement in Egypt's public health and a mitigation process against future pandemics and crises.

«All the academic references used in this brief are mentioned in the policy paper.»

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