



Impact of perceptions of COVID-19 vaccines on health-seeking behaviours in Sierra Leone

Background

By March 2022, one year after the start of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign in Sierra Leone, only 14% of the

population had been fully vaccinated (OurWorldinData.org). Vaccine hesitancy has been demonstrated to influence COVID-19 vaccine uptake in high-income countries (HIC) and there is growing evidence that it has also played a role in sub-Saharan African contexts. In addition, evidence suggests that since the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak in Sierra Leone, utilisation of health services, in general, and of the Expanded Program on Immunisation (EPI), in particular, suffered significant drops (UNICEF, June 2021).

Little is known about social perceptions of COVID-19 vaccines in Sierra Leone and how the population has received this novel vaccine. Moreover, the influence that COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy may have had (and continue to have) on health service utilisation remains unknown. The IPERVAC-SL study addresses this knowledge gap by generating up-to-date qualitative evidence with policy relevance. Study results, indeed, may provide valuable guidance to inform national vaccination strategies for COVID-19 and other vaccination efforts conducted within the context of emerging outbreaks. This brief outlines the key findings drawn from the IPERVAC-SL study.

Key highlights

Understanding social perceptions and attitudes towards COVID-19 vaccines is key to gaining deeper insight into vaccine hesitancy and adherence, and how this can impact health services utilisation

The IPERVAC-SL study explored the impact of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy on health-seeking behaviours in rural and urban areas of northern Sierra Leone

Fears and mistrust towards COVID-19 vaccines initially affected health service utilisation, including EPI

Influential and trusted actors at community level have contributed to COVID-19 vaccine acceptance

Health service utilisation has gradually resumed, together with an increase in COVID-19 vaccine uptake

IPERVAC-SL study at a glance

Type of study: Qualitative study

Rationale: Address knowledge gap in the study of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy

Study aim: To understand perceptions of COVID-19 vaccines among lay persons and healthcare staff in Sierra Leone and its implications on health-seeking behaviours

Duration: March 2022 - March 2023

Sites: Makeni city and Port Loko district (Rogbere, Masiaka, Lunsar)

Methodology: Individual interviews, Focus Group Discussions, and observations

Participant profiles: Caretakers of children under five years of age, Facility-based healthcare providers, CHWs, traditional health providers, community leaders, health authorities

Partners: coordinated by ISGlobal in collaboration with COMAHS-MOHS

Donor: Fundación Glòria Soler Elias

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Key findings

What do lay persons know of and how do they perceive COVID-19 disease?

- ⊖ Widespread belief that the disease does not exist in Sierra Leone, or that it is '**invisible**', or is not affecting black populations
- Knowledge of the **aetiology** is aligned with biomedicine but it often overlaps with that of Ebola, even among some healthcare workers.
- Perceived **risk** is low.

What are the factors influencing vaccine adherence?

- **Motivations** for vaccine acceptance:
 - **Overcoming** mobility **restrictions** and improving access to future job opportunities
 - Witnessing **influential actors** (politicians, traditional healers, chiefs, health providers) being vaccinated rules out its perceived negative effects
- Factors influencing **refusal** of vaccination:
 - Experiences with side effects after the first dose
 - Perception of vaccines as **unnecessary** or that one dose suffice
 - Unalignment with local **priorities**, in light of increased food insecurity and macroeconomic instability

How has the legacy of the recent Ebola epidemic shaped social responses to the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Initial reactions to the COVID-19 outbreak were marked by **fears** inherited from experiences of the last Ebola outbreak, and affected health service utilisation
- Narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic are often framed in **contrast** to experiences drawn from the Ebola outbreak (e.g. severity of the disease, governmental response)
- The notion that Sierra Leonean society and its health system have integrated **lessons** drawn from the Ebola epidemic is at times used to explain the low numbers of COVID-19 cases in the country

How do lay persons perceive COVID-19 vaccines and what are their attitudes towards them?

- ⊖ General understanding that COVID-19 vaccines prevent COVID-19 infection affecting black populations
- Extended **perception** that the COVID-19 vaccine **kills** at a later time
- Other **perceived effects** of the vaccine: causes infertility, activates illnesses, has side effects, leads to COVID-19 infection, has curative properties, is ineffective.

What is the role of trust in social responses to COVID-19 vaccination?

- **Mistrust in local authorities** underlies social responses to vaccination efforts
- Popular perception that the government and/or political authorities are reaping **financial benefits** from the international aid supporting the outbreak response
- **Mistrust in powerful external actors** (for eg. Western countries/agencies) shapes narratives around the **occult interests** behind COVID-19 vaccination
- The involvement of key influential actors has been a defining feature of successful vaccination efforts

What has been the perceived impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines on health-seeking behaviours?

- Before the arrival of COVID-19 vaccines, health service utilisation was significantly **disrupted** due to mobility restrictions and other measures, as well as users' fears of contracting the virus
- **Fears** among the adult population of being administered the COVID-19 vaccine when visiting the health facility affected service utilisation, including EPI. This was compounded by caretakers' fears of their children receiving a COVID-19 vaccine instead of the routine vaccines
- Most caretakers and health providers consider that, with time, uptake of EPI **has gradually resumed**

Conclusions & Lessons learnt

A combination of the existing mistrust in authorities and the low risk perception due to previous experiences with the Ebola outbreak, influenced adherence to COVID-19 vaccination. This indirectly impacted health service utilisation, including child immunisation programmes. Key influential actors have succeeded in facilitating COVID-19 vaccine uptake in Sierra Leone.

- ✓ Consider participatory strategies to design and implement outbreak responses
- ✓ Communication strategies should address identified population concerns regarding COVID-19 vaccination
- ✓ Strengthen involvement of trusted actors in public health campaigns
- ✓ Evaluate the adequacy of using EPI platforms for the delivery of novel (and contentious) vaccines for adults during disease outbreaks