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Lack of trust in government, reliance on social media may drive vaccine hesitancy in Zimbabwe

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 500 | Jonathan Kugarakuripi and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

More than 3 million Zimbabweans are fully vaccinated against COVID-19, out of 10 million the government aims to vaccinate in a bid to achieve herd immunity in a population of more than 15 million (World Health Organization, 2021; Dzinamira, Nachipo, Phiri, & Musuka, 2021).

The government has pushed its ambitious vaccination campaign, launched in February 2021, with a “carrot-and-stick” approach that has included moves to deny civil servants their pay, COVID-19 allowances, and government-provided bus transportation if they don't take the jab (Reuters, 2021; Zinyuke, 2021a, b). In August 2021, Zimbabwe's largest workers' union took the state and several major companies to court for requiring vaccination as a condition of employment (Ndlovu, 2021), but the case was dismissed (Whiz, 2021).

As COVID-19 cases and deaths have increased – to more than 207,000 and more than 4,900, respectively, as of late December (World Health Organization, 2021) – President Emmerson Mnangagwa has stated that “no one can refuse” to be vaccinated (Sibanda, 2021).

How do Zimbabweans feel about COVID-19 vaccination? Among those who are vaccine-hesitant, what is driving their reluctance?

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey in Zimbabwe show that about half of citizens are reluctant to take the vaccine, an attitude that is particularly prevalent among the most highly educated and among supporters of the opposition MDC-Chamisa party.

Fewer than half of adults trust the government on two critical issues: its statistics on COVID-19 infections and deaths, and its ability to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe. As misinformation about vaccines continues to circulate on social media, survey findings suggest that vaccine hesitancy is particularly high among citizens who don't trust the government to ensure vaccine safety and those who use social media as a regular news source.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been conducted in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Zimbabwe in April 2021. A sample of this size yields country-

level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

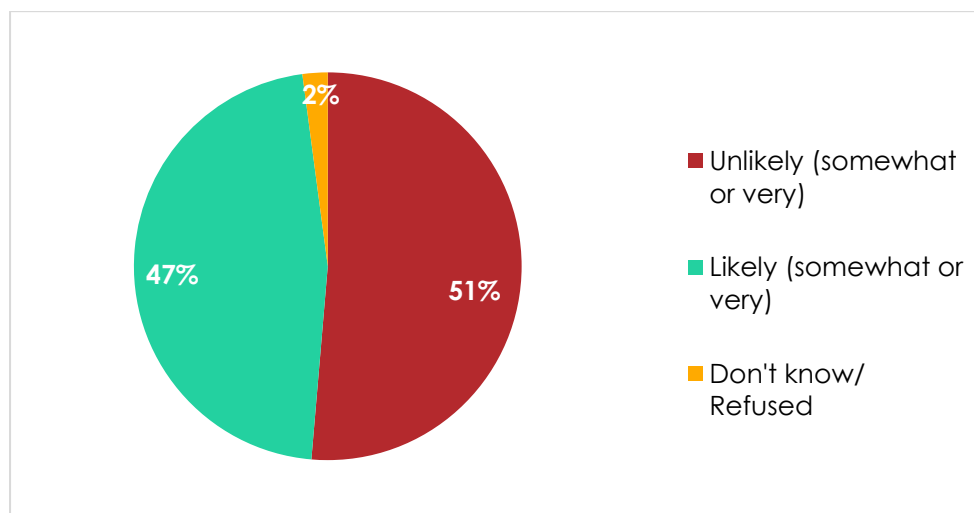
Key findings

- As of April 2021, half (51%) of Zimbabweans said they were “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely” to try to get vaccinated against COVID-19.
 - Vaccine hesitancy was particularly widespread among the most educated respondents (68%), urban residents (62%), and MDC-Chamisa supporters (66%).
- Citizens were evenly divided as to whether the government's COVID-19 statistics are reliable.
- Fewer than half (45%) of Zimbabweans said they trust the government “somewhat” or “a lot” to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe.
 - Distrust in the government's ability to ensure vaccine safety was especially high among people with post-secondary education (73%) and among MDC-Chamisa supporters (69%).
- Vaccine hesitancy was higher among citizens who expressed distrust in the government's ability to ensure vaccine safety and among those who regularly use social media as a source of news.

Likelihood of getting vaccinated

Fully half (51%) of Zimbabweans said they were “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely” to try to get vaccinated against COVID-19, even if a vaccine is available and the government says it is safe, while 47% expressed a willingness to take the job (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Likelihood of trying to get COVID-19 vaccination | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: *If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?*

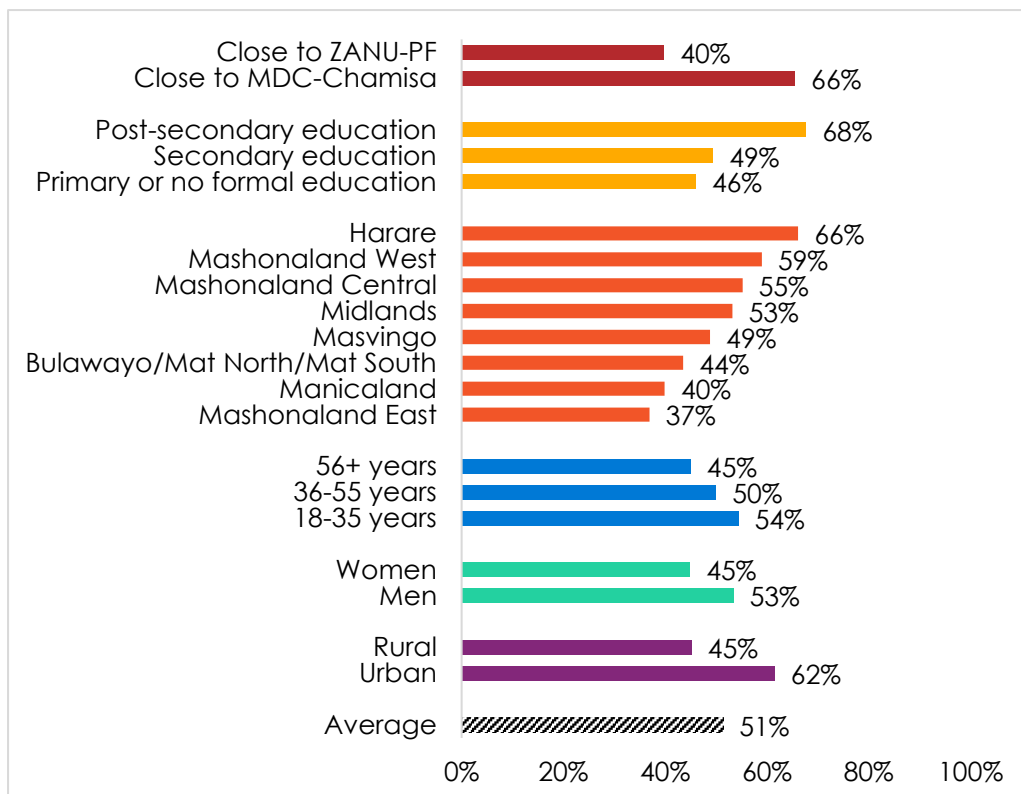
Vaccine hesitancy varied widely by demographic group. Surprisingly, the most educated respondents were most unwilling to be vaccinated (68%, compared to 46%-49% among those with less schooling) (Figure 2).

Reluctance to be vaccinated was considerably higher in cities (62%) than in rural areas (45%), and more men (53%) than women (45%) said they were unlikely to get vaccinated.

Youth (54%) were more hesitant than their elders (44%-50%), perhaps reflecting early data showing that older people were at greater risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19.

Views also differed sharply by province, ranging from 66% unlikely in Harare to just 37% in Mashonaland East. The partisan divide was equally sharp, with 66% hesitancy among MDC-Chamisa adherents vs. 40% of ZANU-PF supporters.

Figure 2: Unlikely to try to get COVID-19 vaccination | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: *If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% who said “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely”)*

Potential factors contributing to vaccine hesitancy

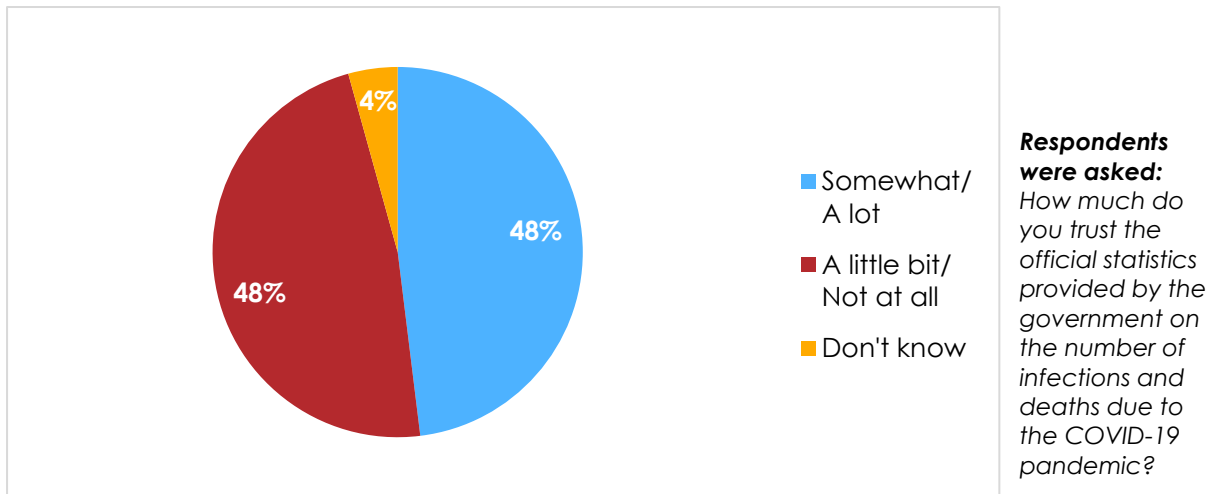
Among factors that could plausibly contribute to COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in Zimbabwe, we examine two: lack of trust in the government and reliance on social media for information.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation has circulated on social media questioning the effectiveness and safety of COVID-19 vaccines and suggesting that the government-led vaccination program was aimed at harming citizens. This might have affected citizens' reception of the vaccine.

Trust in government's COVID-19 information

Zimbabweans were evenly split when it comes to the government's COVID-19 statistics: 48% said they trust them “somewhat” or “a lot,” but just as many expressed just “a little” or no trust at all (Figure 3).

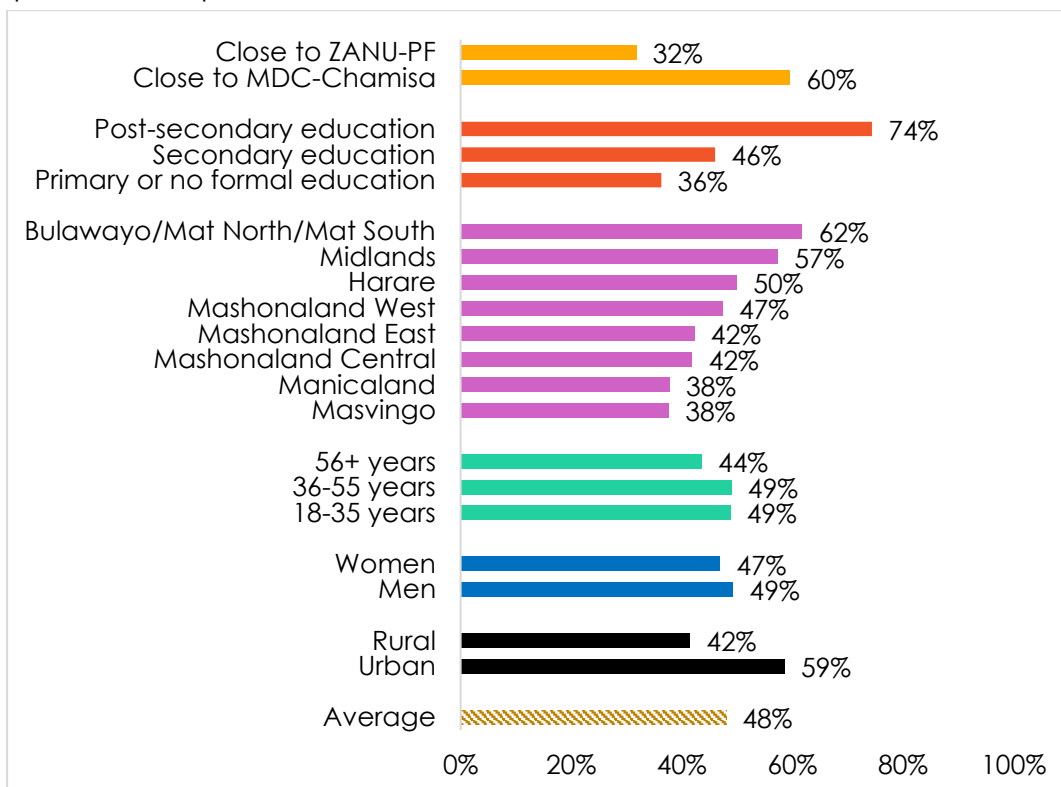
Figure 3: Trust in government COVID-19 statistics | Zimbabwe | 2021



Again a partisan divide is evident: MDC-Chamisa supporters (60%) were nearly twice as likely to doubt the government's statistics on COVID-19 as ZANU-PF adherents (32%) (Figure 4). Likewise, citizens with post-secondary education (74%) were twice as likely to distrust government statistics as those with primary or no formal schooling (36%).

Distrust also ran high in cities (59%) and in the provinces of Bulawayo/Matabeleland North/Matabeleland South (62%) and Midlands (57%).

Figure 4: Lack of trust in government COVID-19 statistics | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the official statistics provided by government on the number of infections and deaths due to the COVID-19 pandemic? (% who said "a little bit" or "not at all")

Citizens were also divided as to whether the government can be trusted to ensure the safety of any COVID-19 vaccine that is offered: 45% said yes, but 48% said no (Figure 5). Variations by demographic group followed a similar pattern as on the question of statistics, with high levels of distrust among MDC-Chamisa supporters (69%), the most educated respondents (73%), urban residents (54%), and respondents living in Midlands (60%) and Bulawayo/Matabeleland North/Matabeleland South (54%) (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Trust government to ensure vaccine safety? | Zimbabwe | 2021

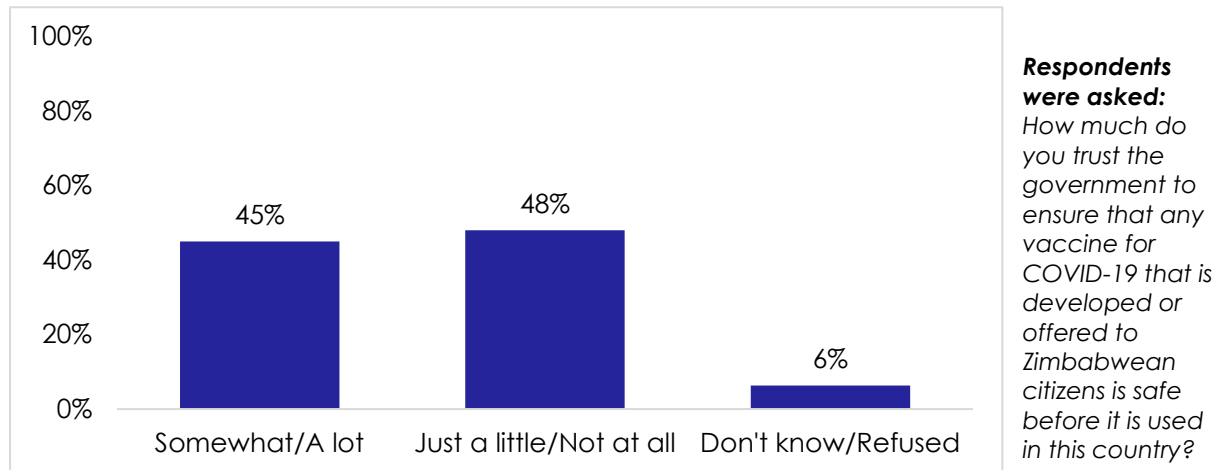
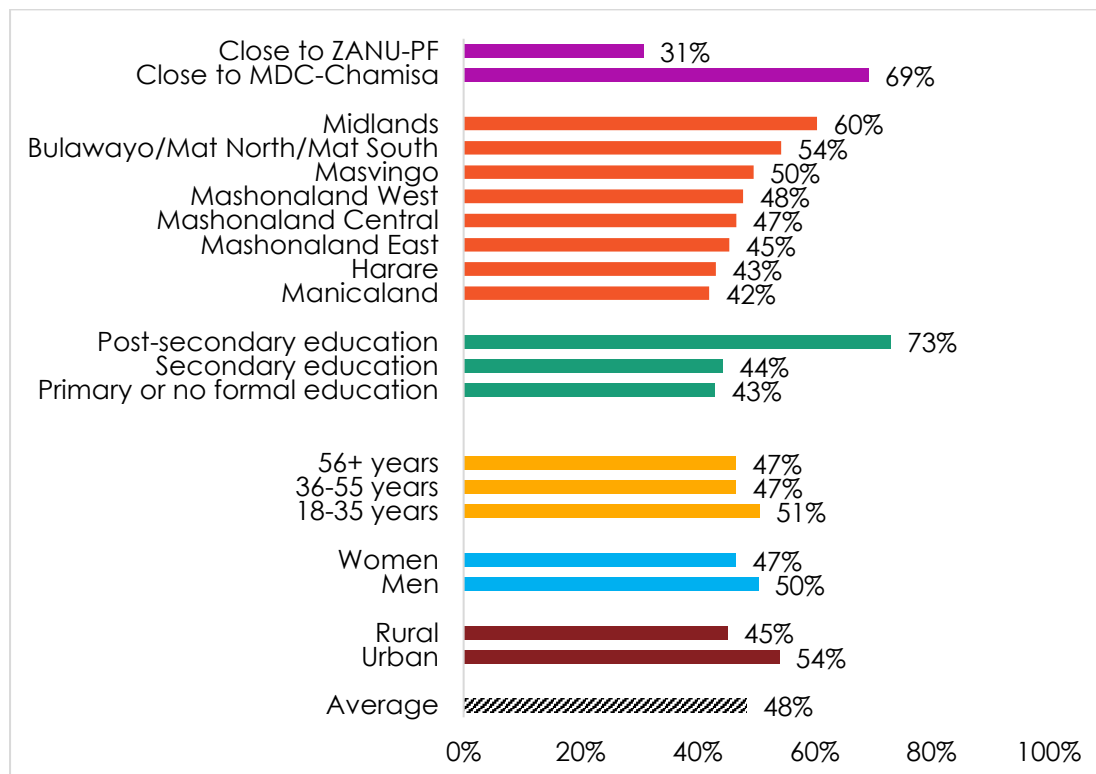


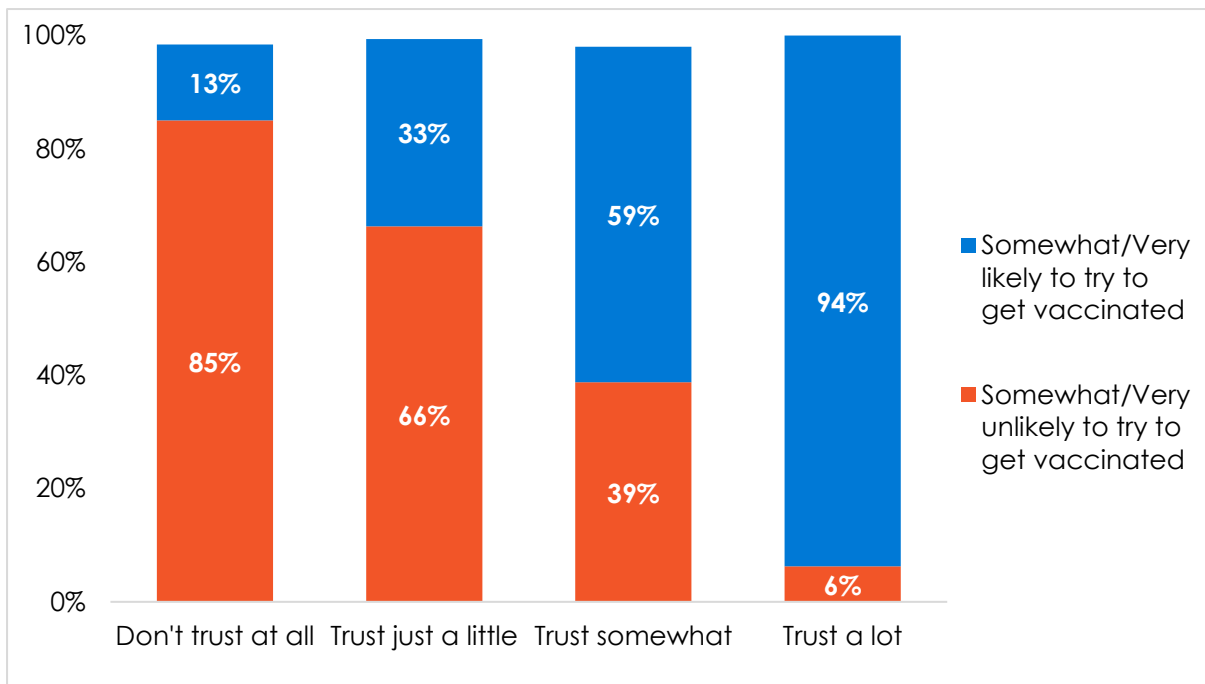
Figure 6: Distrust government to ensure vaccine safety | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to Zimbabwean citizens is safe before it is used in this country? (% who said "just a little" or "not at all")

When we analyze the likelihood of trying to get vaccinated by whether respondents trust the government to ensure vaccine safety, we find a strong correlation between vaccine hesitancy and distrust (Pearson's $r=.697$, $p<0.01$). Respondents who put "a lot" of faith in the government to ensure vaccine safety were almost unanimous (94%) in saying they were likely to try to get vaccinated. In contrast, among those who said they don't trust the government at all to make sure that the vaccines are safe, the overwhelming majority (85%) said they were unlikely to take the job (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Trust in government on vaccine safety and likelihood of trying to get vaccinated | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked:

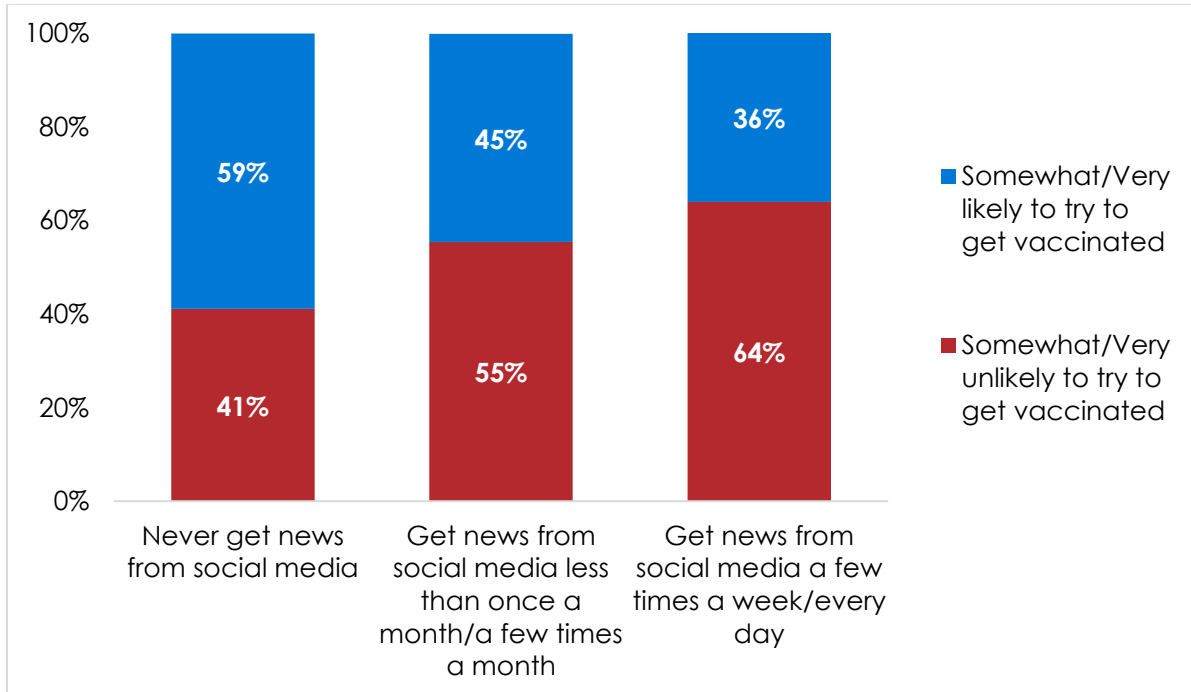
*If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?
 How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to Zimbabwean citizens is safe before it is used in this country?*

Reliance on social media

Given the widely noted role of social media as an effective vehicle for misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 (Baum et al., 2020), it seems plausible that exposure to social media might contribute to vaccine hesitancy.

Afrobarometer survey data support this proposition, showing that vaccine hesitancy tends to increase with the frequency with which people access news from social media (Pearson's $r=-.196$, $p<0.01$). Among respondents who obtain news from social media "every day" or "a few times a week," 64% said they were unlikely to try to get vaccinated, compared to just 41% of those who never use social media as a news source (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Use of social media for news and likelihood of trying to get vaccinated
 | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked:

If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?

How often do you get news from the following sources: Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp or others?

Conclusion

Misinformation circulated on social media and a lack of trust in the government appear to be stumbling blocks for Zimbabwe's drive for voluntary vaccination against COVID-19.

While the government has relied more on the "stick" than the "carrot" in its ambitious vaccination campaign, survey findings suggest that a successful strategy may require investing in building citizen trust. If they trust the government's information and competence, more citizens are likely to trust the vaccine as well. Ensuring that accurate information about COVID-19 and vaccines finds its way onto social media platforms may also help ensure that the government's aim of protecting the population is achieved.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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