Mobilizing Communities: A Qualitative Analysis Of News Articles About How The Ebola Outbreak Informed COVID-19 Response In Five African Countries

Manon Billaud, MPH; Meredith Pinto, MPH; Alex Paulenich, MSPH; Rob Chew, MS; Zainab Alidina, PhD; Lauren Courtney, MPH

The Background: What We Know
Although the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented, prior experiences with disease outbreaks, such as Ebola, shaped many countries’ preparedness and response strategies [1-4]. Research suggests that these countries were better prepared to manage public health emergencies more effectively. Their investments in national and community health systems and their public health workforce strengthened their response coordination and supported innovation and infrastructure development [3, 4].

The Aim: What We Did
We used a novel data source—news articles—to explore how specific lessons learned from the 2014–2016 West African Ebola outbreak informed the COVID-19 pandemic response in five African countries.

The Method: How We Did It
We conducted a secondary qualitative analysis. The original dataset included 34,225 news articles published during the first six months of the pandemic. We filtered the dataset to include only articles that contained the keyword “Ebola,” resulting in 861 articles across five countries.

We used a machine learning text classification model to identify 442 articles that discussed clear and country-specific lessons learned from the Ebola response applied to the COVID-19 pandemic based on our inclusion/exclusion criteria. We used inductive and deductive coding to categorize and analyze the lessons learned, and identify emergent patterns discussed in the news articles [5]. Through our coding process, we excluded an additional 258 articles.

The Result: What We Found
News articles in all five countries highlighted the importance of mobilizing local leaders and community members in the decision-making and enforcement of mitigation measures. Involving trusted members of the community, such as traditional and religious leaders, led to better compliance and cooperation with mitigation measures.

Articles discussed how communities took the initiative to be more active during the COVID-19 pandemic because of their negative experience with Ebola. Communities still feared how their governments handled the Ebola response, especially the mismanagement of quarantine and lockdown measures by police. This fear, and a desire to avoid making the same mistakes during Ebola, prompted communities to take on more responsibility in responding to COVID-19.

The Contribution: Why Is This Important?
Governments should engage with and rely on local and traditional leaders throughout disease surveillance and response activities, as they have more immediate pathways to community members and can message effectively to them.

The Key Message
News articles highlighted the importance of empowering communities to take leadership and ownership of their local COVID-19 response to avoid a repeat of the Ebola outbreak.

For more Information:
Manon Billaud, MPH: mbillaud@rti.org
Lauren Courtney, MPH: lcourtney@rti.org

References:

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