

African Voices of Science

Background

Innovations in medical research over recent years have led to incredible achievements for public health for Africa, and vaccination programs have played a vital role in advancing health outcomes. Factors such as improved vaccine financing, procurement and delivery have led to widespread uptake and access to vaccines in Africa. Routine immunization programs are the most cost-effective health interventions available; not only do they save lives, but also form strong foundations for national health systems.

However, vaccination programs and wider research and development (R&D) programmes have been victim to critical public voices in recent years. While morbidity and mortality have declined, so too has the African public's perception of the importance of some vaccine preventable diseases (measles is a notable exception). Fears of R&D programmes taking place on the continent and the long-term repercussions and side effects of clinical trials and vaccines have grown, while online misinformation has contributed to widespread mistrust of Western medical research. The current COVID-19 pandemic has seen Facebook, WhatsApp and other platforms swamped by messaging characterising potential vaccine trials on the continent as harmful. It is essential that the spread of misinformation is stopped. Increasing public awareness of ethical research being led and disseminated by African scientists, and focussing on scientific, evidence-led decision making could play a key role in rebuilding community trust and reducing resistance.

About the program

The «African Voices of Science» initiative aims to provide platforms for trusted African science leaders to share reliable information with African populations on research and development and health innovations. In the current COVID-19 context, Speak Up Africa believes that such communication from credible voices will be key in shifting the existing narrative and curbing the growing anti-health science/R&D sentiment. This will help ensure African communities have credible experts they can rely on to access reliable information based on facts.

Speak Up Africa's goal for the new African Voices of Science initiative is to create a positive public discourse on research and development in Africa and to:

- + Provide African communities with reliable information on the development of COVID-19 vaccines, treatments and diagnostics
- + Increase share of voice for credible African science leaders across traditional and social media
- + Increase positive sentiment of coverage on public health research and development topics
- + Shift the current narrative around research and development to focus more on the positive potential impact of increased investment in research and development sector
- + Amplify the voices of African science leaders on COVID-19 and research and development across Africa through building a bank of quality content

Speak Up Africa will engage with 10-15 scientists from Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal and South Africa over the course of one year, offering the opportunity to influence opinion and provide expert commentary and analysis addressing the following topics:

- + Research and progress on COVID-19 vaccines, treatments and diagnostics
- + Equitable access, affordability, availability and acceptability of COVID-19 tools
- + The social and economic impacts of COVID-19
- + The data and the modelling guiding the response
- + The trade-offs and the risks of mitigation measures

In addition, experts will be encouraged to identify their own topic areas where they can provide a distinctive and knowledgeable point of view that shifts the narrative to focus on the positive impact of increased investment in R&D.

This exciting new project will be the first in a series of wider initiatives by Speak Up Africa to promote R&D and encourage scientific innovations as part of public discourse in Africa.

About Speak Up Africa

Headquartered in Dakar, Senegal, Speak Up Africa is a strategic communications and advocacy organization dedicated to catalyzing leadership, enabling policy change, and increasing awareness for sustainable development in Africa – particularly around issues such as sanitation, immunization, malaria and Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs).