



Poster to promote routine immunization and the COVID-19 vaccine.
Photo credit: Hermes Communication

#EAWA

Campaign Increases Covid-19 Vaccine Uptake in Togo by Leveraging Methods Used to Fight HIV

#EAWA pioneers innovative approaches for increasing vaccine demand

MAY 2024

This brief outlines how the Ending AIDS in West Africa (#EAWA) project leveraged its expertise in engaging local communities to increase the uptake of COVID-19 vaccination in Togo. It describes the challenges, methods, and accomplishments of this remarkable public engagement campaign, aiming to overcome vaccine hesitancy and increase vaccine demand. #EAWA, a cooperative agreement funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/West Africa and the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), spans from 2017 to 2026. Its goal is to end HIV and AIDS as public health threats by 2030 in West Africa, and it is implemented by FHI 360.

TOGO'S MODEL FOR INCREASING COVID-19 VACCINATION

The Ending Aids in West Africa (#EAWA) project has played a pivotal role in fostering more effective health campaigns aimed at boosting the uptake of COVID-19 vaccines in Togo. This has been achieved by building trust at the community level through risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) activities. These activities are informed by local counterparts and implemented through grassroots level stakeholders.

The project has already demonstrated its effectiveness in combatting the HIV epidemic in Togo, while enhancing

access to quality health care services for HIV prevention, treatment, and care. This success prompted USAID to allocate \$300,000 in funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) in January 2023 for a 12-month public engagement and COVID-19 vaccine promotion campaign.

At the project's inception, low vaccination rates underscored widespread misconceptions regarding the COVID-19 vaccine's efficacy in preventing or mitigating the severity of COVID-19 infections. Although Togo recorded its first case of COVID-19 on March 5, 2020, in Lomé, by January 2023, vaccination rates remained very low, reaching only 27% of individuals ages 12 and above.



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To address this challenge, a new campaign was devised to bolster trust in the COVID-19 vaccination and vaccines in general.

Drawing upon deep-rooted connections and extensive experience working closely with target communities, #EAWA Togo crafted a mass communication campaign, advocacy strategy, and community engagement approach. Leveraging existing HIV partnerships, the campaign aimed to promote COVID-19 vaccines and disseminate other critical COVID-19 prevention messages.

CHALLENGES TO VACCINATING THE PUBLIC AGAINST COVID-19

Togo's Ministry of Health began conducting COVID-19 vaccine campaigns in early 2021, and despite great effort, they encountered challenges as vaccine acceptance remained marginal. In response, #EAWA devised a dynamic communication and social mobilization campaign to enhance acceptance and to dispel myths and rumors surrounding the vaccine. This comprehensive plan utilizes traditional community-level and digital channels, leveraging social media platforms to foster trust and debunk rumors through social marketing methods and behavior change communication.

However, these efforts encountered challenges, particularly in engaging local community actors such as implementing partners, health workers, and community focal points. Many expressed reluctance to promote the vaccine due to misinformation (highlighted in the text box above). To gain a better understanding of the challenges and barriers to vaccine uptake, #EAWA conducted a rapid assessment on the socio-anthropological determinants of vaccine hesitancy in July 2023. The study examined attitudes toward vaccines and documented examples of vaccine misinformation at community level through interviews and focus group discussions. A local firm was enlisted to conduct this research, and a protocol for data collection, transcription, analysis, and report writing was validated at a virtual workshop that included Ministry of Health (MoH) counterparts. Another workshop was held to validate the final report. Key findings are outlined below:

Vaccine misinformation cited by key informants

Causes serious side effects

- The vaccine causes heart attack, cerebrovascular accidents, paralysis, increased blood pressure, and swelling of limbs.

Has adverse effects on reproduction

- The vaccine makes men and women infertile.
- The vaccine makes men impotent.

Targeted to harm Black Africans

- Vaccinated people will die after three years.
- The vaccine kills the elderly.

Has vaccine quality issues

- Expired vaccine is injected into the population.
- The vaccine contains the AIDS virus.

Disease denial

- There is widespread belief that COVID-19 is a disease affecting primarily white people and could not exist in Togo, contributing to low vaccine acceptance.
- Some believe that COVID-19 does not exist in Togo due to the absence of visibly ill individuals or suspect that the government fabricated COVID-19 to deceive ordinary Togolese and enrich themselves.
- There is a prevailing belief that COVID-19 only affects individuals who travel frequently.

Vaccine hesitancy

- There are concerns regarding potential adverse side effects of vaccines, often fueled by rumors disseminated through social media.
- There is mistrust in government-sponsored campaigns to promote vaccines, with suspicions that campaigns mask ulterior motives or hidden agendas by the government.
- Some believe that Africans are naturally resistant to COVID-19.
- There is resistance to vaccines stemming from religious and/or traditional beliefs and practices.

STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT AND PRIORITIES FOR VACCINE DEMAND CREATION

Building upon the above findings, a comprehensive promotion and social behavioral change (SBC) strategy was formulated to enhance public demand for COVID-19 vaccination. This initiative was crucial as the vaccination rate remained stagnant at approximately 27%, despite the government's aim to vaccinate at least 60% of the population.¹ The strategy emphasized digital communication channels in promoting vaccinations and utilized Twitter (now known as X), Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp.

An additional innovation involved the establishment of a rumor management mechanism that engaged relevant stakeholders, particularly at the community level, recognizing that much of the hesitancy documented in prior studies stemmed from rumors originating on social media and disseminated within communities.

Demand creation efforts employed SBC and social marketing techniques to persuade individuals to adopt pro-vaccination behaviors, utilize available services, and pursue additional vaccine doses and boosters. These techniques included mass sensitization, educational talks, and interviews conducted within communities by community health workers.

The strategy also integrated methods and tools from health-related disciplines to influence community and individual attitudes and beliefs, provide accurate

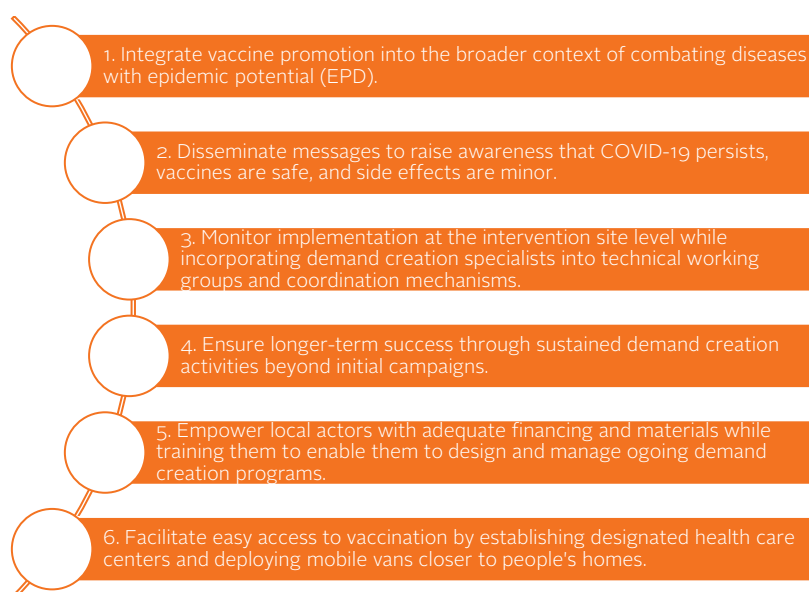
knowledge, and enhance self-efficacy in vaccine decision-making (Figure 1). Gender and social norms, as well as structural and policy issues such as vaccine accessibility and quality of care at vaccination centers, were carefully considered. A primary strategic goal was to empower individuals to make informed choices by ensuring accurate information was readily available and by attentively addressing their needs.

Communication channels employed in the strategy included informative video and audio broadcasts on social networks (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok), conventional media broadcasts (radio and television), posters, leaflets, individual or small group discussions, door-to-door visits, educational talks, and special events (e.g., fairs and sports including football matches).

Targeted audiences included individuals participating in the education system (e.g., teachers, parents, and students), organized groups like women's and men's clubs, trade associations, youth groups, and religious associations, as well as influencers such as religious and community leaders and media personalities.

The strategy outlined objectives, activities, communication channels, and key messages tailored to specific target groups. It also established coordination and implementation mechanisms, designed the institutional implementation framework, and devised indicators for monitoring and evaluation.

Figure 1. Strategic priorities for COVID-19 vaccination promotion by #EAWA Togo



¹ As of August 2023, the country had 39,510 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 39,219 recovered cases, 290 deaths, and one active case. A total of 3,407,277 doses were administered, with 1,784,323 people ages 12 and over receiving one dose; 1,478,104 receiving two doses; and 144,850 receiving one booster dose.

CAMPAIGN DESIGN PROCESS TO REPLICATE THIS MODEL

To ensure maximum impact, the campaign to increase vaccine demand needed to work within the context and the practices of local communities and available resources such as partners and volunteers. In response, #EAWA Togo used the following process:

1. The project prepared a concept note for a community engagement plan, which was then validated with partners and stakeholders. It delineated the objectives and proposed activities, key evaluation indicators, and a detailed implementation schedule.
2. In collaboration with the Ministry of Health, the project conducted a comprehensive review of all COVID-19 vaccination activities in Togo, assessing actions undertaken thus far, their outcomes, and encountered challenges.
3. Based on the prior vaccine hesitancy research, a local consultant developed a strategy document in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and #EAWA technical staff. The community engagement campaign began after technical validation by all relevant stakeholders at an online workshop.
4. To implement the demand-creation strategy, a communications firm devised advocacy and communication tools and materials for COVID-19 vaccination, with particular focus on rumor management at community level. These materials included key messages, dissemination channels, and tools for community mobilization including posters and flyers, a vaccine promotion audio recording in French translated in

five local languages (Ewe, Mina, Ife, Kotokoli, Kabye), and a video spot in French. These products were finalized and validated in early October 2023.

IMPLEMENTATION IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES FOR UPTAKE OF COVID-19 VACCINATION

#EAWA implementing partners conducted field activities through three implementing partners — Ɛ Espoir Vie Togo (EVT), Force en Action pour le Mieux-être de la Mère et de l'Enfant (FAMME), and Action Communautaire pour la Santé (ACS) — in four intervention regions: Grand Lomé, Maritime, Plateaux, and Central. These partners, in turn, worked through community health workers and local health system actors.

Community-based activities included community mobilization through mass sensitization, education sessions, and individual interviews, supplemented with a voucher-based referral system for vaccination services (Table 1).

- Training sessions were conducted for 99 community health workers and health promotion focal points to ensure their understanding of the campaign and their roles in promoting COVID-19 vaccination at community level.
- Overall, 99,518 people were reached through community mobilization activities (Figure 2), and 9,440 (10%) were referred for vaccination, with 1,642 (17% of people referred) receiving the vaccine (Figure 3).
- Social media platforms also were used to disseminate accurate knowledge and counter rumors and misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccination.

Table 1. Results of community mobilization activities, June 1–December 31, 2023

Indicators	Annual target per NGO	ACS		EVT		FAMME		TOTAL	
		Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	#	%
# mass sensitization	7	24	343%	50	714%	7	100%	81	386%
# educational talks	7	19	271%	145	2071%	139	1986%	303	1443%
# individual interviews	5,000	5,770	115%	7,368	147%	3,058	61%	16,196	108%
# people reached through sensitization	10,000	49,467	495%	18,832	188%	7,658	77%	75,957	253%
# people reached through educational talks	140	545	389%	4,235	3,025%	2,585	1,846%	7,365	1,754%
# people reached through individual interviews	5,000	5,770	115%	7,368	147%	3,058	61%	16,196	108%
# people referred for vaccination	3,000	4,393	146%	3,633	121%	1,414	47%	9,440	105%
# people referred who came to a vaccination center		588	59%	854	85%	773	77%	2,215	74%
# people vaccinated	1,000	586	59%	637	64%	419	42%	1,642	55%

Figure 2. Number of people reached through all community mobilization activities, June–December 2023

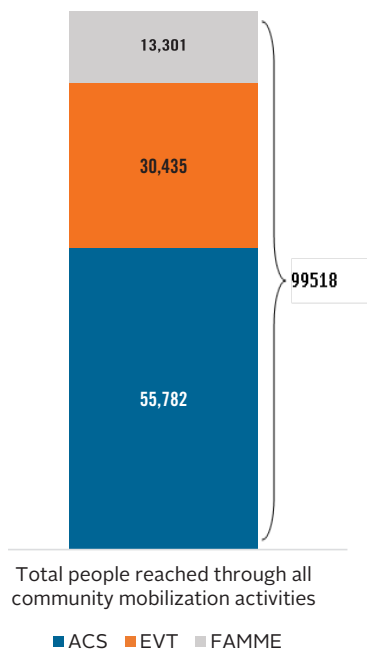


Figure 3. Overall vaccination cascade, June–December 2023

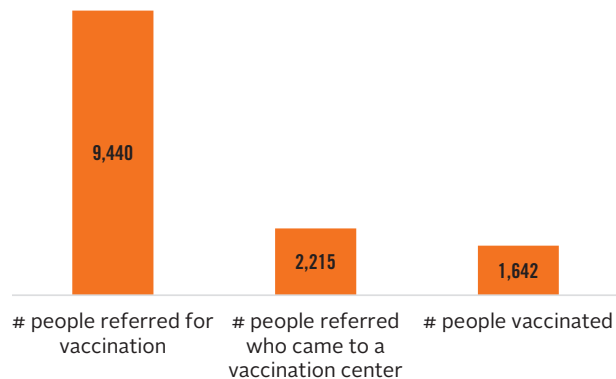
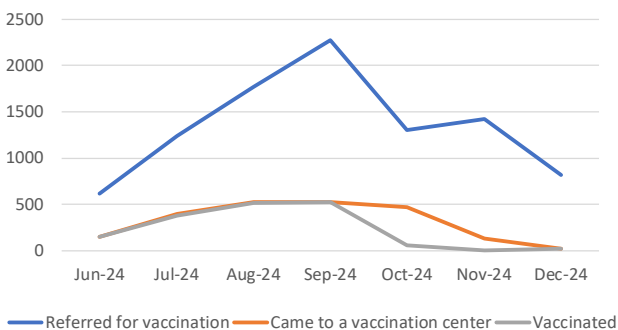


Figure 4. Evolution of references, facility attendance, and vaccination, June–December 2023



Unfortunately, a vaccine stock-out in September 2023 resulted in only 2% uptake of those referred, compared with an uptake of 27% before the vaccine stock-out. Both references and vaccination declined after the vaccine stock-out (Figure 4). The decrease in references was due to people being less willing to be referred, although they were willing to be vaccinated, because they were aware of the vaccine unavailability. Community health workers kept a list of referred people so they could reach them when the vaccine is available again. Although the supply situation slightly improved during the final quarter of 2023, by the project's end, insufficient resources remained to relocate those initially referred and to encourage their vaccination at health facilities.

CAMPAIGN ACHIEVEMENTS



Health staff provide information on COVID-19 vaccination to address vaccine hesitancy in Togo. Photo credit: Espoir Vie Togo

1. Vaccine promotion messages reached millions of people.

Media broadcasts on TV channels, radio stations, and social media in Greater Lomé and other regions in November and December 2023 reached approximately 6.6 million people. Audio spots were broadcast in French, Ewe, Mina, Ife, Kotokoli, and Kabye on 20 national radio stations, reaching around 4 million people, while videos were broadcast on two national television channels, reaching around 1.3 million people. Additionally, in collaboration with the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), a mass sensitization campaign was conducted in four cities (Lomé, Kpalimé, Aného, and Vogan), reaching about 1.3 million people. Finally, a traveling vaccine promotion caravan was organized that reached about 1 million people in Greater Lomé and nearly 300,000 people in Aného, Vogan, and Kpalimé provinces.

2. Advocacy and capacity-building workshops promoted COVID-19 immunization.

In August 2023, four training sessions on RCCE were conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Health. These involved 112 participants, including community leaders, health promotion focal points, and health system actors involved in COVID-19 vaccination in the four regions covered by #EAWA.

3. Monitoring and evaluation reinforced interventions.

Specific data collection tools were developed to monitor monthly activity including referrals and counter-referrals and the completion of awareness-raising activities. These M&E tools were developed, printed, and deployed in the field through the implementing partners themselves. Additionally, the #EAWA team organized monthly monitoring meetings with the NGOs to discuss the results and challenges encountered.

LESSONS LEARNED AND FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES PLANNED IN 2024

#EAWA's communications campaign in Togo to increase uptake of COVID-19 vaccines uncovered key lessons about the role of local community beliefs and individual attitudes in fueling vaccine reluctance and the importance of disseminating accurate knowledge early to motivate behavior change.

The following key lessons were identified:

- 1.** Of paramount importance is involving community-based actors and leaders and prioritizing deep engagement with communities and their daily circumstances, particularly in smaller or isolated communities. Messages should facilitate informed choices by addressing doubts and providing easy access to accurate information.
- 2.** The significant influence of social media in spreading misinformation highlights the need for accurate online methods to combat misinformation, especially among young populations.
- 3.** Developing demand creation messages that extend beyond COVID-19 vaccines specifically is important.
- 4.** It is critical to ensure the availability of immunization services and supplies to support demand creation activities effectively.
- 5.** A rumor management mechanism is central to the success of demand creation for COVID-19 vaccines, including mapping all community actors and target groups involved, and training or briefing them on community engagement and addressing rumors.

For more information about the #EAWA project, please email eawainfo@fhi360.org

This document is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The contents are the responsibility of FHI 360 and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, PEPFAR, or the United States Government.