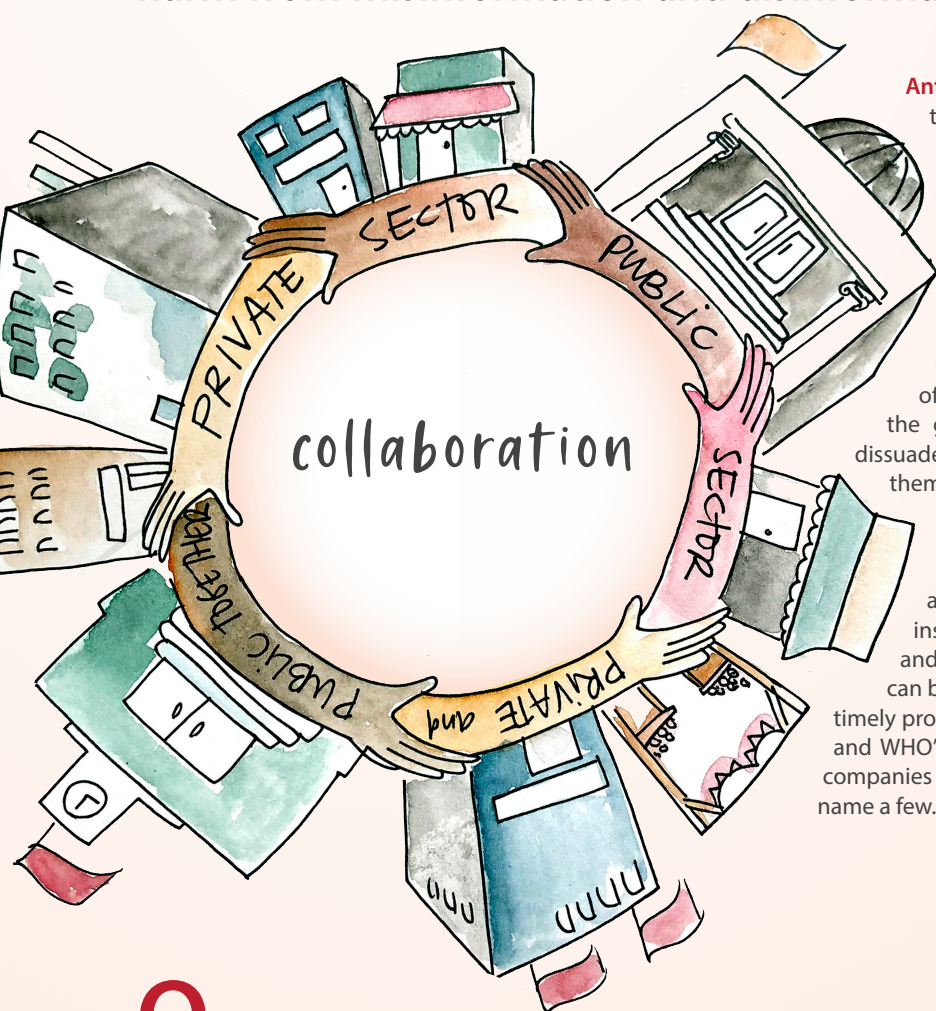


## SIDE EVENT SUMMARY

# Infodemic Management:

## Promoting healthy behaviors in the time of COVID-19 and mitigating harm from misinformation and disinformation



**António Guterres**, UN Secretary-General highlighted the need for the WHO and other institutions to show leadership in promoting science, offering solutions, and building solidarity in response to the global pandemic. As safe and effective vaccines for COVID-19 become available, the critical task of building public confidence to ensure sufficient uptake to protect populations lies ahead.

**Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus**, WHO Director-General discussed the potential dangers of rumours and disinformation. In the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, these may not only dissuade individuals from taking precautions to protect themselves and others and from seeking care, but in some cases may have encouraged some to attempt dangerous or unproven treatment methods, or even to perpetrate acts of violence. Misinformation and disinformation have eroded trust in public institutions and health systems at a time when trust and solidarity are most critical. However, effective action can be taken to combat infodemics, for example through timely provision of high-quality information to key audiences, and WHO's recent engagement with media and technology companies including Facebook, Tencent, Viber and LinkedIn to name a few.

**“More than ever,  
the truth matters.”**

— WHO Director-General  
Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus



**O**n 24 September 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) held a side event co-hosted by the governments of Indonesia, Thailand and Uruguay as part of the 75th session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly (UNGA 75) entitled *Infodemic Management: promoting healthy behaviours in the time of COVID-19 and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation*. The event was viewed virtually by over 15,000 participants worldwide and simultaneous interpretation was provided in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. The session moderated by Dr Sylvie Briand leading the WHO Infodemic Management pillar for the COVID-19 response, focused on how global, national and regional partners can act together to mitigate the threat posed by misinformation and disinformation to efforts to respond to the global Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic in a new age of social media and overabundance of information.

The seeds to engage leadership were sown at an inter-agency call convened by WHO and partner UN agencies in Geneva only a few weeks leading to the 75th session of the General Assembly side event. A passionate joint initiative has since galvanized leaders across the globe into action.

**Dr Michael Ryan**, WHO Health Emergencies Executive Director reminded participants that infodemics are a feature of all health crises past and present. Drawing on his own experiences of the Ebola virus disease epidemic in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, he noted that despite the efforts of the international community in funding and developing interventions to prevent mortality due to the virus, the spread of rumours among local populations provoked anxiety, damaged confidence and prevented individuals from accessing treatment centres and life-saving interventions. With access to high-quality information, delivered in the right format and using the right tools, individuals and communities can build resilience and survive disasters.

**Dr David Nabarro**, WHO Special Envoy on COVID-19 recalled his own experiences in the field, which impressed upon him the need to understand differences in perspectives between providers and beneficiaries when delivering health interventions, and clinicians' position of privilege. The world has only known COVID-19 for around months and our



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knowledge is constantly changing; this poses a challenge for communication to populations as many uncertainties remain. According to Dr Nabarro, the **three key ways to bridge the gap between experts and the public** are to refrain from dismissing their fears or concerns as illogical, to engage with populations in a two-way dialogue, and to work in partnership with communities to empower them to take action and co-develop solutions relevant to their context.

The conversation between **Dr Wardle**, Director First Draft and **Dr O'Brien**, WHO Director of the Department of Immunization and Vaccines focussed on tackling vaccine misinformation and disinformation during the global COVID-19 pandemic. While rumours are nothing new, and appeal to the human need to seek explanations when confronted with novel and threatening situations, the social media age has created new global platforms for their dissemination and accelerated their spread across national borders. Even though no vaccine candidate has yet been licensed for mass distribution to the public, 90% of conversations on social media about vaccines are related to potential future COVID-19 vaccines. **To address misinformation and disinformation on vaccines, institutions must create engaging content to improve public understanding of the scientific process that underlies vaccine development, and build trust to reduce vaccine hesitancy and ensure herd immunity is achieved.**

Country representatives shared their experiences in confronting infodemics, including **His Excellency Johnny G Plate**, the Minister of Communication and Information Technology of Indonesia; **Semuel Pangerapan**, Director-General of Informatics Application; **Dr Supakit Sirilak**, Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Public Health of Thailand; and **Pablo Orefice**, Director of the Salud.uy Digital Health Initiative Uruguay.

The country experiences highlighted Indonesia's multi-stakeholder approach to developing digital literacy based on a "Pentahelix approach" involving a partnership with over 180 organisations across government, grassroots community groups, academia, business and media, and training for



community champions. Thailand has pursued a multi-pronged approach, involving dissemination of high-quality public health information through daily television briefings, alongside efforts to verify new information, and engage stakeholders to prevent infodemics. The government has worked hard to map information flow to different audience groups and the extent of the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and to develop an index to assess digital literacy. In Uruguay, priority has been placed on active transparency, with regular official communication through various media and government platforms, and the roll-out of a virtual assistant and telephone service to provide high-quality information on COVID-19.

The highlight of the event was the launch of a **Joint Statement** by nine organisations, **WHO, UN, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, UNAIDS, ITU, UN Global Pulse**, and **IFRC**, urging a call to action for member states and other organizations to listen to communities and empower them to develop solutions to counter the spread of misinformation and disinformation while respecting freedom of expression; to develop and implement action plans to manage the infodemic by promoting the timely dissemination of accurate information, based on science and evidence, to all communities—particularly high-risk groups.



**“Infodemiology is important to make interventions successful.”**

— WHO Health Emergencies Executive Director  
Michael Ryan

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