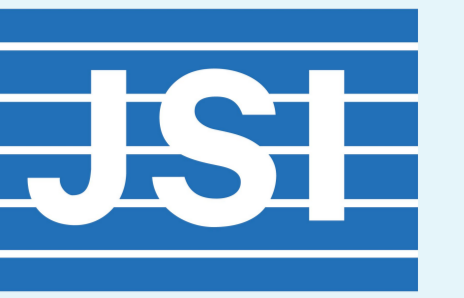


Let's talk! Harnessing the power and influence of the media to accelerate COVID-19 vaccination in Zambia



Authors: M.Njelesani,¹ J. Phiri¹, K.Kalangwa,² P. Bobo,² R. Chilengi,³ B. Siluanda,¹ S. Hatchard,¹ M. Nyumbu,¹ M. Paulson,⁴ M. Musonda,⁴ M. Chikuba-McLeod¹

¹ JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), Lusaka, Zambia
² Ministry of Health (MOH), Lusaka, Zambia
³ State House, Lusaka, Zambia
⁴ United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/Zambia Mission, Lusaka, Zambia

Track D-57: Social and behavioral aspects and approaches to COVID-19

Poster number: A-AIDS-2022-07699

Problem

In December, 2021, with a national vaccination coverage of 12.5%, the Zambian government launched a COVID-19 vaccination campaign to get 2 million doses in arms by the end of the year. In addition, the government introduced new COVID-19 vaccination guidelines, which included requiring vaccination proof for public-sector workers to access public buildings.

Response

When this unleashed a storm of protest from anti-vaxxers, the JSI-implemented USAID DISCOVER-Health Project supported the Zambian president's COVID-Czar who would address the media in all 10 provincial capitals and encourage vaccine uptake.

In a marathon project-supported tour, the COVID-Czar and senior MOH staff visited vaccination points to observe and learn about service-delivery experiences. In each province,

the team went on local radio/television stations, responded to audience questions, and dispelled myths/misconceptions about vaccine safety. The COVID-Czar visited 90% of media houses nationwide and directly engaged 650 people and religious, traditional, and civic leaders. His appearances were replayed nationally, reinforcing community-level vaccination efforts and significantly increasing vaccine uptake.

Results

- An informed and supportive media is a powerful tool for public health interventions.
- Public health officials who engage at the community level provide answers and guidance based on deeper contextual understanding of vaccine implementation challenges and have practical solutions to problems.

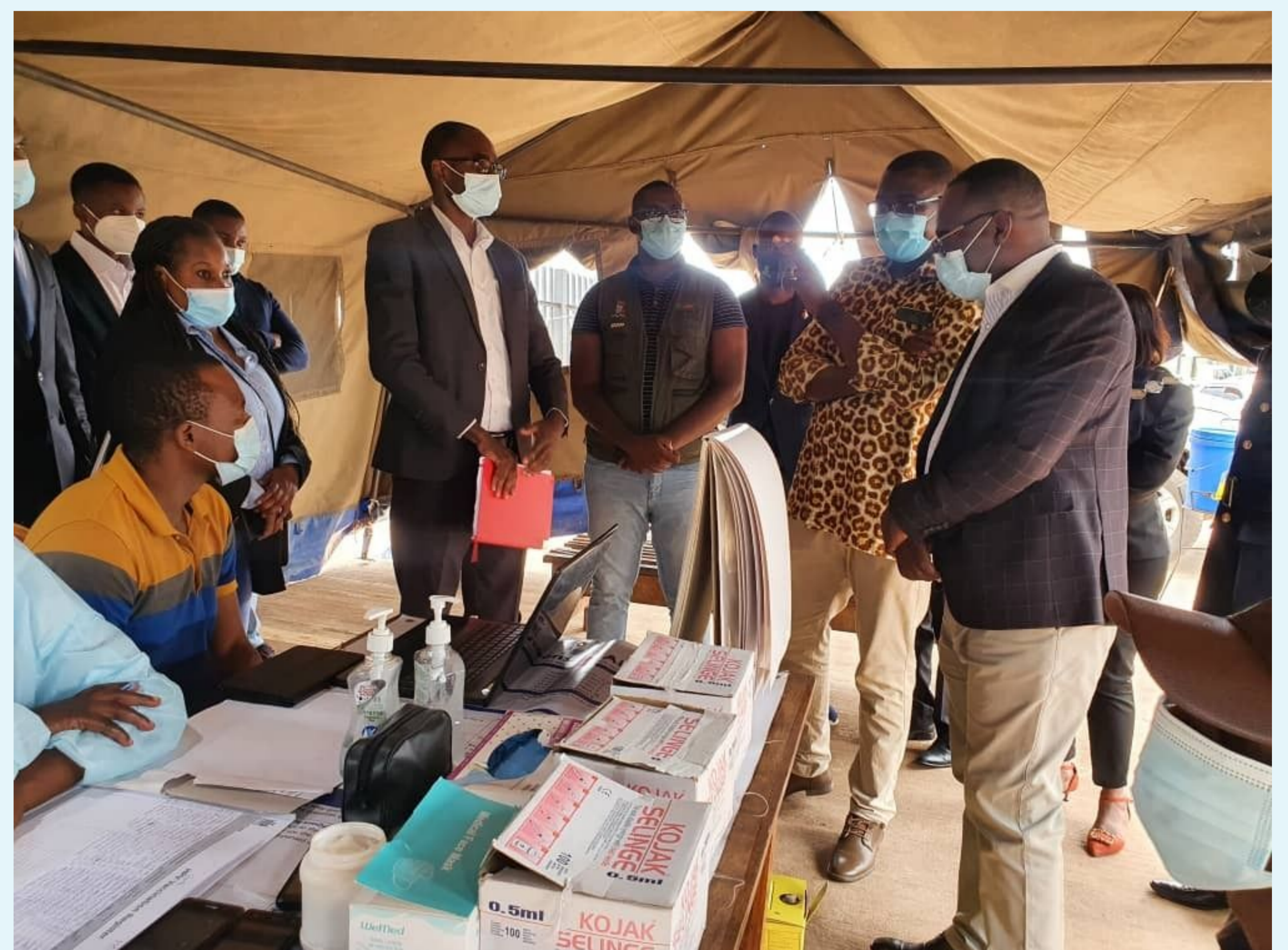
- Local civic, religious, and traditional leaders are community gatekeepers. Direct engagement with them revealed a range of concerns for the team to assuage.
- Vaccinating healthy adults requires consistent communication of vaccine information, and offering services where people are, not only in health facilities.
- Zambia reached its target of vaccinating 2 million people by the end of December 2021.

Conclusion

Meaningful interventions by technical experts and community leaders, such as the COVID-Czar, engaging and obtaining the buy-in of the media and influential leaders are a highly effective ways to communicate to the general public about COVID-19 vaccines and address people's concerns. This intervention helped temper the anti-vax movement but sustained engagement will be required to achieve COVID-19 vaccination goals.



The COVID Czar addressing the media



The COVID Czar engaging with vaccinators