

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



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

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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.

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.

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.

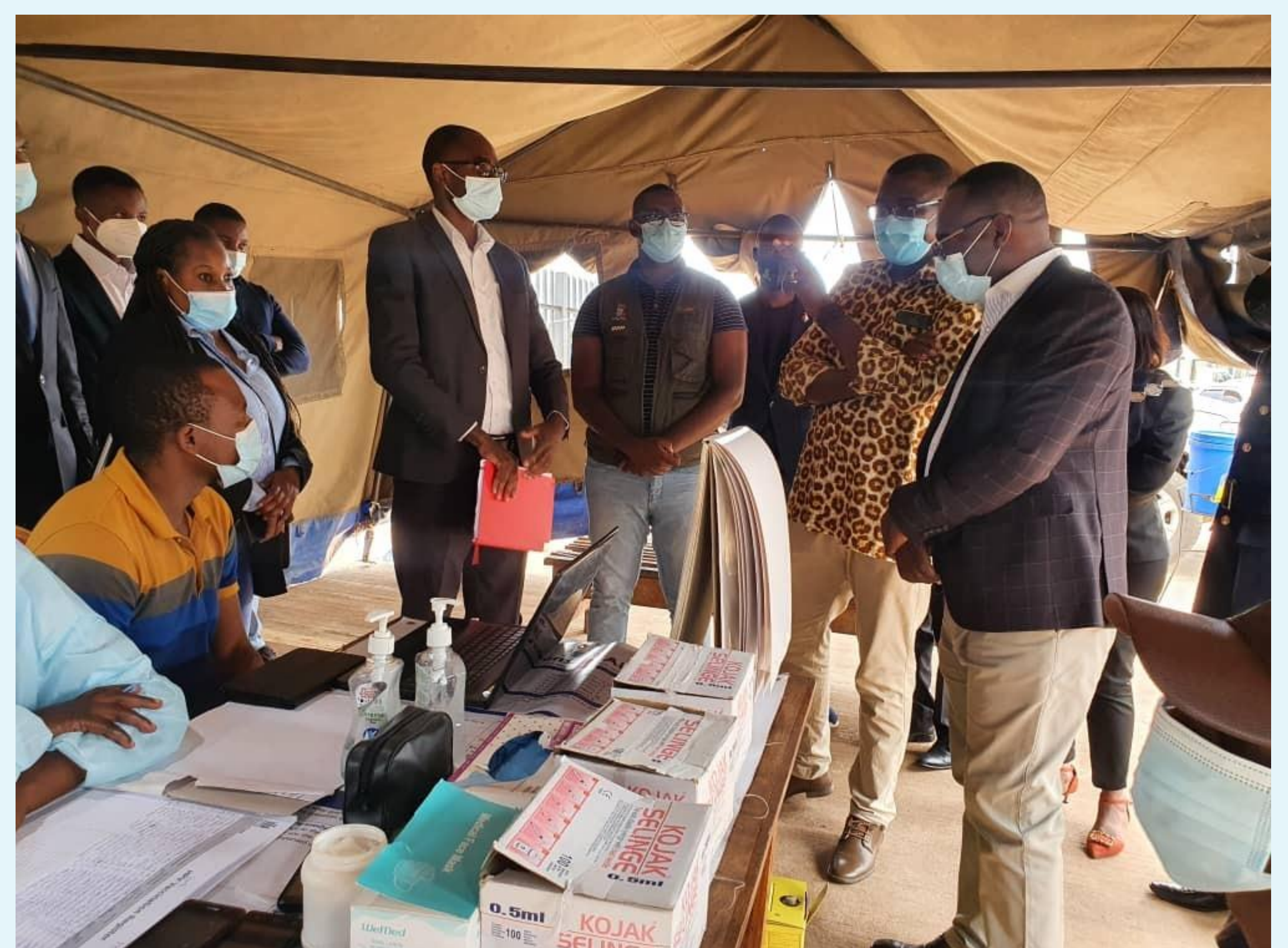
Conclusion

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.

- 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.



The COVID Czar addressing the media



The COVID Czar engaging with vaccinators