Researchers

James Riddell IV
University of Michigan

Tanya Rosenblat
University of Michigan

Dean Yang
University of Michigan

James Allen IV
University of Michigan

Arlete Mahumane
Beira Operations Research Center, National Institute of Health - Mozambique

Hang Yu
National Peking University

Timeline
2020

Sample Size
2,117 households

Research Implemented by IPA
Yes

The Impact of Informing People About Local Support for Social Distancing: Evidence from Mozambique

Abstract

Widespread adoption of social distancing can help communities and countries slow the spread of COVID-19. In Mozambique, researchers partnered with the Ministry of Health to measure the impact of informing people of high rates of community support for social distancing on the practice of social distancing.Results showed that informing people of the support for social distancing increases social distancing in areas where COVID-19 cases are high and decreases social distancing in areas where COVID-19 cases are low.

Policy Issue

The slow and uneven progress in vaccination, combined with the rapid emergence of new and more contagious variants of COVID-19, have brought a sense of urgency to finding evidence that can help encourage people to follow guidelines to minimize the spread of COVID-19. Support for preventive measures, such as wearing masks or social distancing, has varied greatly during the pandemic. For example, experts theorized that people relax these measures when local infections are low. If, by contrast, local infection rates are high enough, a perceived risk effect dominates, leading to an increase in the adoption of preventive

measures. However, there is a lack of rigorous evidence to support these assumptions and strategies to promote healthy behaviors in the context of the pandemic.

Context of the Evaluation

In Mozambique, there are 220 thousand confirmed cases of COVID-19, and the disease has claimed over two thousand lives.[1] Twenty-five percent of the population is fully vaccinated, higher than Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Tanzania, and just below South Africa.[2] Moreover, the aftermath of Cyclone Idai has laid bare the difficulties in combating COVID-19 in the face of worsening climate change. To prevent cases from soaring, the Mozambique government has kept in place rigorous health requirements, one of which is social distancing of 1.5 meters at all times. Individual Mozambicans overwhelmingly support social distancing as a public health measure, yet perceived collective support for social distancing is lower. This suggests information gaps about its popularity, which in turn has the potential to limit the likelihood of social distancing being practiced in the community.

Details of the Intervention

In central Mozambique, researchers partnered with Beira Operational Research Center of the Mozambique National Institute of Health to measure the impact of informing people of high rates of community support for social distancing on the practice of social distancing.

One member from 2,117 households across 76 communities was randomly selected to participate in three over-the-phone surveys to self-report their social distancing decisions and report others' social distancing decisions in correspondence to the government's guidelines.

The researchers divided the participants into the following three groups:

- **Social norms correction:** 628 people were first asked whether they supported social distancing and then asked to estimate the share in the community supporting social distancing on a scale from one to ten. Those who underestimated the share were given the actual share, those who correctly estimated the share were told they were correct, and those who overestimated received no information.
- **Leader endorsement:** 637 people were identified as official local leaders or nominated by others as best able to circulate information within the community. Leaders practiced social distancing, shared with their community members that they supported social distancing, and encouraged others to practice social distancing. This endorsement as well as the leaders' names were then shared to the other participants.
- **Comparison group:** 852 people received neither the social norms correction nor the leader endorsement information circulation.

Data was collected from self-reporting surveys and others-reporting surveys between July and November 2020.

Results and Policy Lessons

Researchers found that informing people of the support for social distancing increases social distancing in areas where COVID-19 cases are high and decreases social distancing in areas where COVID-19 cases are low.

The increase in social distancing in prevalent COVID-19 areas is related to increased perceived infectiousness, with higher expectations of future infection rates. Where COVID-19 cases are low, people have a lower expectation of future infection rates, leading them to reduce their own social distancing.

Individuals' perceived share of community social distancing support was 69 percent while the actual share was 98 percent.

Leaders' endorsement of social distancing had no impact on individuals' social distancing practices.

Sources

[1,2] World Health Organization, "Mozambique: WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard," World Health Organization, Date Accessed January 18, 2022, https://covid19.who.int/region/afro/country/mz

March 30, 2022