



LIDE-N
Lite pou demen nou

Review the approach to raising awareness among the population for better handling of covid-19 in Haiti. The case of Jean Rabel.

This policy brief addresses the issue of raising awareness among the Haitian population about covid-19. It highlights the weaknesses of the authorities' approach in response to the denial shown by many Haitian, especially in the town of Jean Rabel. It suggests solutions for a better acceptance of the barrier gestures.

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Lite pou Demen Nou (LIDE-N) is an association created in June 2016. Its mission is to contribute to the autonomy of the Haitian population through a bottom-up approach. LIDE-N works in the municipalities of Ganthier and Jean Rabel through four areas of intervention: 1) Environment, agriculture and health; 2) Organizational and institutional strengthening; 3) Gender equity; 4) Artistic promotion and production.

In the context of the covid-19 pandemic, LIDE-N is taking action to improve the management of the disease and to meet the needs of the populations of Jean Rabel and Ganthier.

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This document was produced with the financial support of the AJWS. However, it does

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1. Introduction

Since March 2020, the covid-19 pandemic has been spreading in Haiti. On May 17, the Ministry of Public Health and Population reported 98 new cases of contamination. This would bring the total number of people infected with covid-19 in Haiti to 456. The rate of contamination varies from one department to another, from one municipality to another, depending on the level of population concentration and movement. The population of Jean Rabel has so far been very little affected: the number of cases detected in the commune would amount to 2

There is growing concern about the spread of the disease in Haiti. Overall, the health and economic situation in Haiti is likely to amplify the disastrous effects observed in countries that are well equipped in terms of infrastructure and technology. The lack of appropriate medical equipment, the inaccessibility of care and the population's inability to observe strict confinement are all risk factors for Haiti.

Especially in Jean Rabel, the only existing hospital faces a lack of basic equipment and resources. Relatives of patients hospitalized at the Notre-Dame de Jean Rabel Community Hospital even complain of difficult access to water. Most of the population live from their daily activities, including farming, fishing and commerce. The communal markets function without the prevention distance being respected. So far, only a tiny proportion of the population wears masks, especially after the confirmation of these 2 cases. Therefore, few institutions such as the Peace Court and credit unions require users and clients to wear masks. So far, Catholic schools and churches remain closed but other churches continue to function. Some operate in small numbers (two people per row), others operate as usual and even have night shifts.

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The picture thus painted is considerably aggravated by the denial that prevails among the population. Many people in Jean Rabel doubt the existence of covid-19. This situation complicates the management of the health crisis in the municipality. The stakes of the denial of the new coronavirus by the population constitute the object of this short reflection which is part of the intermediate evaluation of the actions of LIDE-N in Jean Rabel, in the context of the fight against covid-19. It aims to identify the factors explaining the existing denial and to suggest appropriate solutions.

2. Methodology

Two methods were used to collect the relevant information. First, we used direct observation of the behaviour of the population during our visits. We then carried out focus groups with our community partners who are involved in awareness-raising actions in various localities of the 7 communal sections of Jean Rabel. The focus groups were carried out with a total of 4 to 9 members of our partner organisations (list of organisations: Organisation paysanne pour le développement de Fond-Ramadou (OPDF) / Initiative des femmes haïtiennes (IFA in Creole) / Association de presse de Jean Rabel (APJ)/. Association des travailleurs de Roger-Bananier Blains (ATRB)/ Òganizasyon fanm vayan Mòn Pastè (OFVMP)/ Òganizasyon fanm peyizan pou developman Degonmye (OFPPD)).

By combining direct observation and focus groups, LIDE-N was able to determine different forms of covid-19 denial in Jean Rabel.

3. Forms and modalities of expression of covid-19 denial in Jean Rabel

The methodology adopted allowed us to conclude that a large proportion of the population of Jean Rabel present two forms of denial, expressed in two ways.

Complete or partial denial of covid-19

The results of the focus groups allow us to affirm the prevalence of covid-19 denial in the population of Jean Rabel. On the first hand, some people deny the very existence of covid-19 in Haiti. For this first group, it is a plot instigated by the government to enrich itself at the expense of the people and by "developed countries" to reduce the inhabitants of "poor countries". These people are in complete denial of the disease. On the other hand, another part of the population banalizes the high risk of contamination of covid-19 and claims to be free of contamination thanks to the protection of God. This is a partial denial of the disease.

Expression of denial: verbal and/or behavioural

Whether it is complete or partial, the people of Jean Rabel express the denial of covid-19 in their words and/or in their behavior. The first case is those who deny the existence or seriousness of covid-19 in their words while adopting safety measures. For example, during a visit, one man questioned two members of LIDE-N who were wearing masks, arguing that the disease was an invention. A few hours later, this man was seen carefully washing his hands using the hand washing device set up in the municipality.

In a second case, the denial that is verbally expressed has repercussions on the whole behavior of people. Thus, many people in Jean Rabel not only downplay or deny the

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existence of the disease, but they also reject the recommended protective measures, questioning their usefulness and realism. This type of denial of covid-19 is very dangerous because it is likely to accelerate the spread of the disease.

4. Reasons for the denial of covid-19 in Jean Rabel

Several factors can explain the denial of covid-19 expressed by the population of Jean Rabel.

Lack of trust in public authorities

One of the major factors explaining the denial of covid-19 in Jean Rabel is undoubtedly the lack of trust in the public authorities. They are seen by the people as corrupted. People assume the government use covid-19 as a pretext to enrich themselves at the expense of the population.

Lack of appropriate material conditions

Another possible and important factor in the denial of covid-19 is the lack of material conditions necessary for compliance with protection measures. The population of Jean Rabel lives mainly from agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, and trade. These activities do not allow them to build up sufficient savings that would allow them to drastically limit their movements. Furthermore, there is a lack of incentives on the part of local elected officials (social assistance, restructuring of public transport, signs of distancing, etc.).

Given that material living conditions make it difficult to comply with preventive measures, individuals unknowingly seek to dismiss the perception of threats that become unbearable to them without ignoring them. In this regard, Serban IONESCU et al. argue that "denial is more than mere negation, it is an attitude of

categorical refusal towards an unpleasant perception of external reality" (IONESCU et al., 2004: 167).

Religious beliefs and habits

The religion and habits of the population of Jean Rabel play a major role in their appreciation of covid-19. Many people see their religious faith as an effective cover against illness. The population's habits also explain the denial of covid-19 and the failure to comply with protective measures. It is difficult for them (even for those who are not in denial) to give up their usual lifestyle, especially regarding proximity habits that prevent protective distancing. This is also the case for those who accept the existence and dangerousness of the coronavirus. In this sense, for many, denial is the easy choice.

False information spreading

Misinformation plays a significant role in the denial expressed by Jean Rabel's population. Conspiracy theories have made their way among the population.

5. Recommendations

The denial of covid-19 in Jean Rabel is likely to have disastrous consequences for the town. It is therefore necessary for the actors to implement solutions to resolve it.

Communicating differently and demonstrating transparency

First, local authorities need to communicate differently on covid-19. A permanent presence in the media would be effective. For example, the mayor, together with the authorities of the different communal sections, could schedule regular radio broadcasts to inform the population about the progress of the disease, reassure them and remind them of the measures to be taken.

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There could even be a question and answer period for the audience. These interventions could be complemented by a visual communication campaign. Direct outreach tours to remote areas could also be considered to inform as many people as possible.

Using influencers as intermediaries

Given the level of mistrust of state authorities, it would be useful to use intermediaries whose authority is accepted and whose influence is proven in the community. These could include artists, religious leaders, and well-known personalities.

Involving local organizations

Civil society organizations play a major role in the fight against covid-19. Their actions make up for the near absence of the authorities. In a synergistic approach, organizations and authorities should collaborate to stop the spread of the coronavirus more efficiently in Jean Rabel.

Strengthen agricultural production by prioritizing short-cycle crops

In this specific context, the structural problems of the town of Jean Rabel are more obvious than ever. The population's poverty, the inadequacy and inaccessibility of public services (for example, the lack of access to clean drinking water, which hinders the principle of regular hand washing in the context of a pandemic) are putting the people's life at stake. More than ever, elected officials must assume their responsibility and work for the overall development of the municipality. In the context of covid-19, special attention must be paid to the food security of the population. Local authorities must commit themselves to strengthening agricultural production by prioritizing short-cycle crops, to prevent the famine that is approaching.

6. Conclusion

Handling the covid-19 pandemic around the world remains complex due to the limited knowledge scientists have acquired about the virus and the interests at stake. But this is even more complex in a country such as Haiti, where precarious material conditions of existence, complete or partial denial of the pandemic by large groups of the population and the illegitimacy of state authorities are combined. Hence there is a need to involve influential figures, local networks and local organizations firmly rooted in the population in the fight against the spread of the virus.

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