

# Diversity Impact on Vaccine Equity in Algeria

## Research overview and context

Minority Rights Group conducted research to monitor social media discourse around Covid-19 vaccination in Algeria, including access, confidence and uptake among the entire population, and with particular reference to the Amazigh community. Representing an indigenous people and an ethno-linguistic group with its own language, Tamazight, they belong to different linguistic sub-groups within the overall Tamazight grouping. However, Amazigh also often use Arabic and French. Estimates of the numbers of the Amazigh community vary widely, from 17 per cent to 55 per cent (depending on the source<sup>1</sup>).

The indigenous Amazigh populations had been and still are subjected to a long history of discrimination in Algeria. The Tamazight language was prohibited until the creation of the *Haut commissariat de l'Amazighité* (High commissioner for Amazigh language and culture) in 1995. This came in response to decades of demands for the recognition of the cultural and linguistic rights of the Amazigh in Algeria, but also marked the beginning of government attempts to centralize and control Amazigh organizations, while labelling some of them as separatists (e.g., through a 2021 terrorism-related offence against the Movement for the Self-determination of the Kabylia,<sup>2</sup> an area largely inhabited by Amazigh). Tamazight became an official language

alongside Arabic in 2016; however, French remains widely used.

Generally, the Algerian authorities impose limitations on public speech. This is also seen in their fight against fake news, related to Covid-19 in particular. After two years of peaceful protests known as *Hirak* (Arabic for 'movement'), and a presidential election in December 2019 characterized by a low turnout of 40 per cent, the authorities struggle to get their message heard. On 22 March 2020, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune prohibited any dissemination of country statistics on Covid-19, except from the Ministry of Health. This sowed doubt about the government's willingness to manage the health crisis in a transparent manner.<sup>3</sup>

The vaccination campaign in Algeria started on 29 January 2021 and as of 9 February 2022, Algeria had fully vaccinated around 15 per cent of its total population.<sup>4</sup> The findings of this study are drawn from social media monitoring of Facebook conducted through CrowdTangle, based on tracking keyword combinations, between January 2021 and January 2022. The findings are also based on the monitoring of the official Algerian news site, Algérie Presse Service (APS) through **the social media listening software tool**.

For this short report, a sample of 395 Facebook comments were analysed with respect to their sentiments on: (1) Covid-19 vaccine confidence, (2) reservations towards the vaccine, (3) access to vaccines, and (4) distrust in health and other government authorities regarding the

administration and dissemination of information related to the vaccine.

Facebook comments were selected for evaluation if evidence of sentiments relating to the factors mentioned above was found and was later disaggregated based on either language and/or ethnicity. However, an extremely low proportion of online comments in Tamazight compared to Arabic and French (since both Arab and Amazigh communities are often familiar with both languages), and difficulty in identifying the ethnicity of the user, as most Algerians do not have different names based on their ethnic identity, with only a few exceptions, imposed certain limitations to the research.

The social media findings are also being triangulated by introduction of four focus group discussions (FGDs) in Algeria or with diaspora representatives. This research selected three specific sub-groups, Kabyle (the largest Amazigh group living mostly in northern Algeria), Chaouis (mostly eastern Algeria), and Mozabite (mostly central and southern Algeria, who maintain separate religious traditions and follow Ibadism) to highlight differences or discrimination in access and confidence in Covid-19 vaccination by language, ethnicity, region and socio-economic conditions. Central and southern regions mainly populated by Amazigh are disproportionately least served and have limited and remote healthcare facilities. To this date, two FGDs were conducted with Amazigh people in November (Kabyle) and December (Mozabite) 2021.

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## KEY FINDINGS

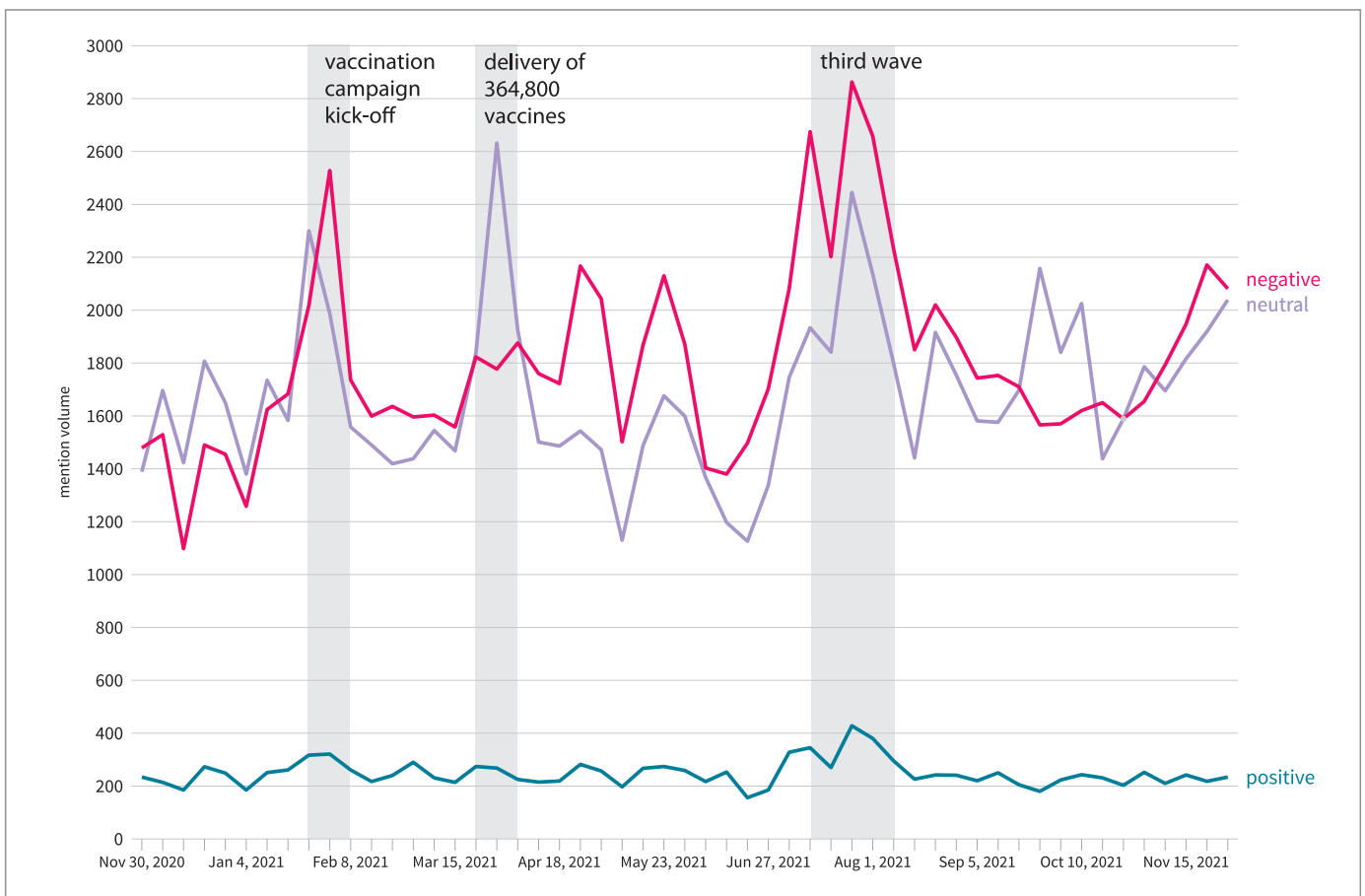
### Confidence in Covid-19 vaccination

Most information on Covid-19 vaccination is available through the APS website, which does not allow users to comment on the news. The Algerian government centralization and limited share of information remains a main challenge, with

the other main source of information being the WHO and UNICEF Algeria websites and their social media pages. The authority's general crackdown on civil society and fight against the spread of fake news around Covid-19 limit possibilities to find alternative online resources where communities can comment on access and confidence in vaccination, except for social media.

A search through **the social media listening software tool** on APS mentions indicated that there is widespread dissatisfaction about their publications on vaccination. The terms 'Covid-19', 'vaccine', and 'vaccination', as well as their equivalents in Arabic and French, were used to track conversations in the three languages from December 2020 to December 2021 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: General sentiments towards Covid-19 vaccination



The query identified a steady stream of negative and neutral sentiments in posts and comments about Covid-19 vaccinations in Algeria, with a few significant peaks around February, April, July and August 2021, connected to the kick-off vaccination campaign in Algeria on

29 January 2021,<sup>5</sup> delivery of 364,800 doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines on 3 April 2021 through the COVAX pillar,<sup>6</sup> and an upsurge in the number of Covid-19 cases in August 2021, which heralded the arrival of the third wave of Covid-19 respectively.<sup>7</sup>

Of the total sample of comments from the CrowdTangle search between January 2021 and January 2022, 93 per cent of the sample comments were related to conversations on Covid-19 vaccine

confidence and reservations about the vaccine, 13 per cent to access to vaccines, and 42 per cent were related to distrust in health and other government authorities. Out of the 395 comments analysed, 31 per cent showed high confidence (with no big difference between Arabic and French), while 49 per cent of comments in Arabic showed low confidence against 28 per cent in French. On the other hand, 21 per cent of comments in French showed no confidence at all against 15 per cent in Arabic (Figure 2).

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Only 42 comments expressed selective confidence, with 88 per cent comments being in French and only 12 per cent in Arabic. Of those, 31 per cent were against Sinopharm/Sinovac, 21 per cent against Sputnik, and 12 per cent were preferring Sputnik over other vaccines.

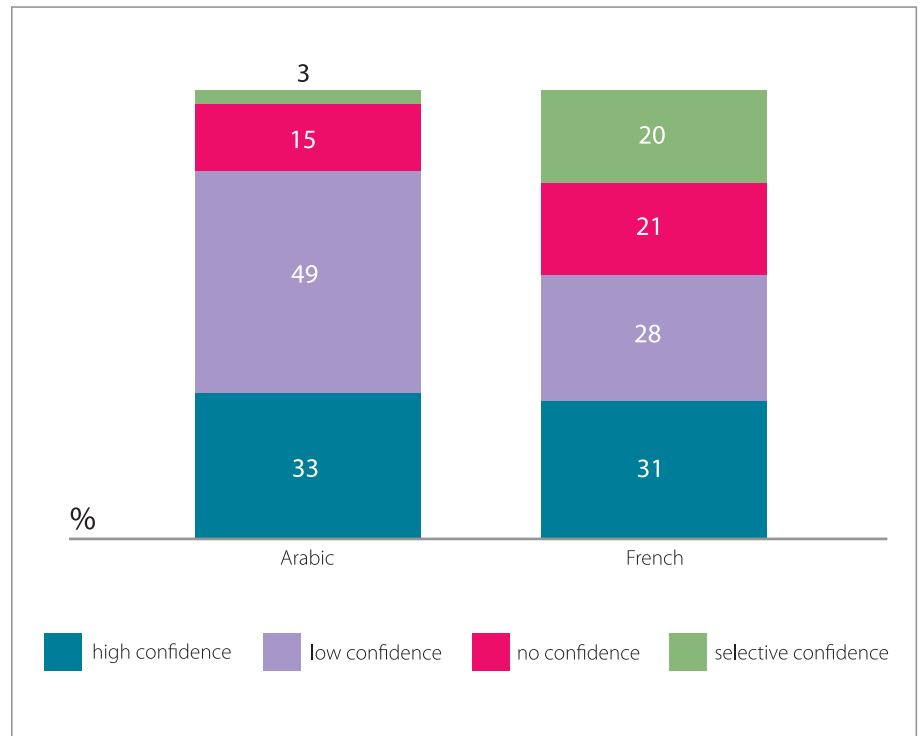
Ethnicity, inferred through personal names or the content of the comment, identified 13 per cent of the users as Amazigh, while the remaining 87 per cent could not be assessed. Only 1 per cent of the comments were written in Tamazight.

During the first focus group discussion (FGD), all representatives from the Kabyle community reported confidence in the vaccination campaign. However, some of them reported a lack of confidence in authorities in general as well as in the information and data they share, as described below.

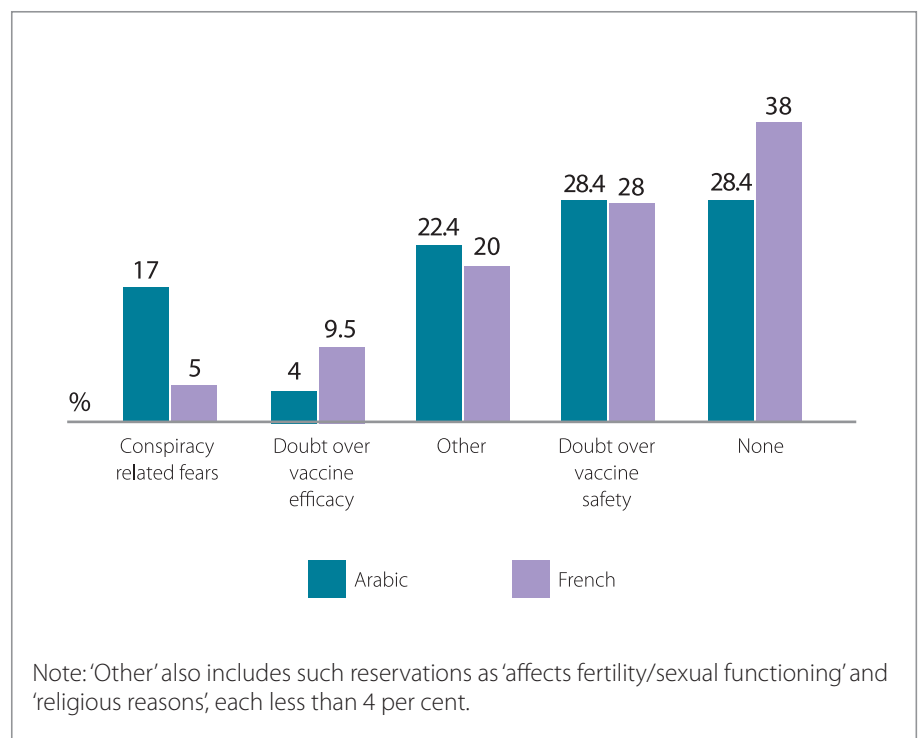
## Reservations towards Covid-19 vaccination

The majority of comments from the sample show that there are no reservations towards Covid-19 vaccines (32 per cent). The graph below (Figure 3) shows only the most common reservations, which are: doubt over vaccine safety (equally expressed in Arabic and French, 28 per cent); conspiracy related fears, significantly more present in Arabic comments (17 per cent while 5 per cent in French); and doubt over vaccine efficacy (9.5 per cent French and 4 per cent Arabic) (Figure 3).

**Figure 2:** Breakdown of vaccine confidence based on language



**Figure 3:** Reservations towards Covid-19 vaccines by language



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## Relevant qualitative findings (quotes from comments)

“ Il y a des médecins qui déconseille aujourd’hui le vaccin aux patients même sans antécédents faut dénoncer ça aussi. ”

Translation: **There are doctors who advise against the vaccine today for patients even without a history. We must denounce this too.** Facebook user, unknown ethnicity

حببت نفهم حاجة علاش مادرتوش سنتر كبير يتلاقاو فيه التلقيح وفيه كامل الإجراءات الوقائية وعلاه البلدان الأخرى تلقيح ديالهم مخالف علينا بالرغم من انو جرعة التلقيح يجب ان توضع في درجة برودة خاصة جدا.....!!؟”

Translation: **I want to understand one thing, why did you not set up a vaccination center with sanitary provisions, why the vaccine is different from that of developed countries, the vaccine should not be kept in cold places...!!?.** Facebook user, unknown ethnicity

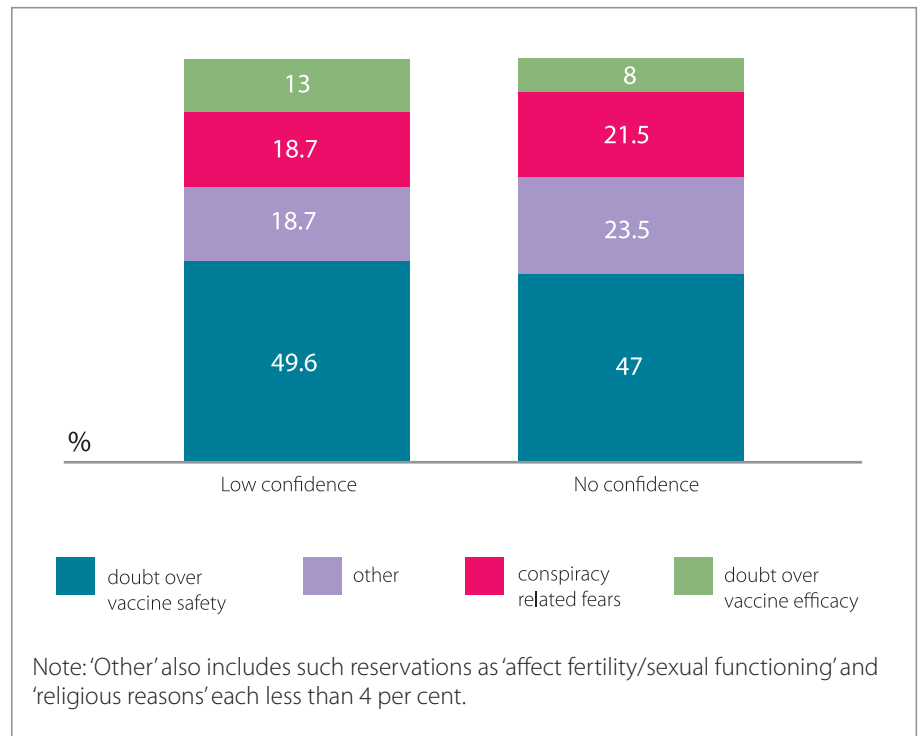
The majority of social media users with low or no confidence indicated concerns about vaccine safety (close to 50 per cent). The second type of reservation associated with low or no levels of confidence are conspiracy related fears (around 20 per cent each) (Figure 4).

One of the participants to the FGD with Kabyle representatives, who works in the health sector, mentioned that people were afraid of the vaccination because of the large amount of information that circulates on social media, including hearing of people dying as a result of vaccination. Doubt over vaccine safety was mentioned as a reason to wait before getting vaccination by one of the participants to the FGD with Mozabite from Ghardaia, while another respondent reported that most people went to get vaccinated during the peaks of crisis when they were hearing of people dying because of Covid-19 but were then not going when cases dropped.

## Access to Covid-19 vaccines, including access to information

Most comments (87 per cent) from the Facebook query did not touch upon the topic of access to vaccines and therefore

Figure 4: Reservations towards Covid-19 vaccines by 'low'/'no' confidence levels



## Relevant qualitative findings (quotes from comments)

“ Algérie pays de cobayes. Vaccin refusé dans certains pays européens. Et la chez nous il est le bien venu. ”

Translation: **Algeria country of guinea pigs. [AstraZeneca] Vaccine refused in some European countries. And here it is welcomed.** Facebook user, unknown ethnicity

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could not be assessed. However, those who expressed concerns indicated that vaccine was not available in the area (3.5 per cent), a lack of information on vaccine distribution (3 per cent), or limited options for vaccines (3 per cent).

The first FGDs with representatives from the Kabyle and Mozabite communities identified no manifest discrimination against the Amazigh population in accessing Covid-19 vaccines. Respondents in Kabylia, however, reported low availability in the initial stage of the vaccination campaign, and a limited choice of specific brands in small cities compared to bigger ones, such as the capital Algiers. Representatives of the Mozabite community reported availability of vaccines, yet indicated existing hesitancy to get vaccinated as a main problem in the community.

The Algerian official news site, APS, is accessible in French, Arabic, English and Tamazight, the last being available in the three different alphabets: Arabic, Latin and Tifinagh. APS provides information on the number of doses distributed for each governorate (*wilaya*). However, there are no official numbers of inhabitants per wilaya since the last census was carried out in 2008, and there is no disaggregation by ethnicity or language to understand whether some areas are privileged or underprivileged in distribution.

In order to examine APS online information about vaccines in the three languages, MRG collected social media posts from all APS official Facebook pages (French, Arabic and Tamazight) that included the words 'vaccine' or 'vaccination' in French, Arabic and Tamazight, using CrowdTangle, for the period from 1 December 2020 to 23 December 2021.<sup>8</sup> The search showed that information about Covid-19 vaccines in the

three languages is not equally available: 111 posts with 21,184 interactions, consisting of 55 posts in Arabic, 56 posts in French and zero posts in Tamazight.

Despite a lack of information in Tamazight online, participants to the first FGD shared that local radio stations regularly broadcast awareness messages on Covid-19 and calls for vaccinations in the Kabyle version of Tamazight. According to them, messages are accessible to different social and age groups; however, radio is the main source of information for the older population. Some participants pointed out that general news in Kabylia is often in French, a language in which they say fake news often circulates on social media. In the second FGD, two respondents reported that the access to information in Tamazight is still not equitable, due both to national radio stations broadcasting mostly in Arabic, and to local doctors expressing themselves primarily in Arabic and/or sometimes in French, leaving some people, especially older women, without accessible information.

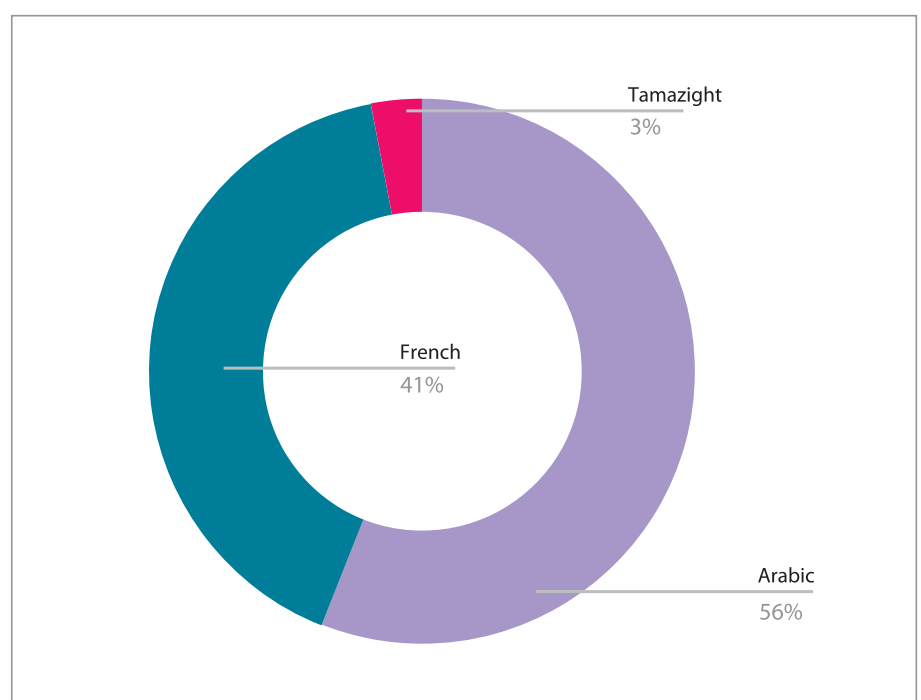
When it comes to TV stations, although there are some official channels in

Tamazight, respondents felt awareness raising about Covid-19 was insufficient. Yet locally managed radio stations in Ghardaia with programs in Tamazight filled the gap left by official media. Importantly, the main source of information in Mozabite is the local council of Aayane. Consisting of religious leaders, doctors and businessmen, the council of Aayane is respected by the community and unofficially accepted by the state. Its members have their own channels for sharing information in the local variety of the Tamazight language, on which people rely.

## Distrust in authorities

More than half the comments (54 per cent) could not be assessed with regard to distrust in authorities; however, less than half the comments expressed distrust (42 per cent) and a small proportion indicated some trust (4 per cent). Of those that expressed distrust, 56 per cent were in Arabic, 41 per cent in French and 3 per cent in Tamazight. It is important to note that the Tamazight comments include a combination of Tamazight and French and consist of only 10 comments of the entire sample (*Figure 5*).

Figure 5: Breakdown of distrust in authorities based on language



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## Relevant qualitative findings (quotes from comments)

“ Mais rien n'est clair sur la vaccination, aucune stratégie, on nous parle d'acquisition mais où est la vaccination de ce pauvre peuple !!! On ne comprends rien. ”

Translation: **But nothing is clear about vaccination, no strategy, we are told about acquisition but where is the vaccination of these poor people!!! We don't understand anything.**

Amazigh Facebook user

Several attendees to the first FGD underlined a general socio-political context in Algeria, with a significant part of the population mistrusting authorities, especially in Kabylia, a region historically rebellious towards official discourse. In both FGDs, people reported that they have limited trust in the information shared by the authorities when it comes to official data, in the way authorities are facing misinformation or simply the amount of information shared. However, the level of distrust towards official figures on Covid-19 cases and death rates seemed higher in the first focus group, which may be heightened by socio-political reasons. Respondents claim the existence of a gap between official figures and reality, mainly due to the relatively low number of tests which may contribute to an underreporting of cases and deaths in the country. As for the second FGD, respondents rather seemed to indicate that official communication was lacking and that they relied on local resources and semi-official authorities instead.

Overall, comments from established Amazigh social media users only constituted 50 out of the 395 that were collected. The number could potentially be higher since many Amazigh use French and Arabic quite regularly, especially on social media where they also communicate with Arab Algerians, and since only a few have personal names with a clear reference to Amazigh history and culture. Therefore, more research into social media as well as data triangulation are required to analyse the existence of potential trends, attitudes and rumours concerning Covid-19 vaccination that are specific to this community.



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## Minority Rights Group International

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MRG works with over 150 organizations in nearly 50 countries. Our governing Council, which meets twice a year, has members from 10 different countries. MRG has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and observer status with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). MRG is registered as a charity and a company limited by guarantee under English law: registered charity no. 282305, limited company no. 1544957.

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