



“God protects us from death through faith and science”: A qualitative study on the role of the faith-leaders in building COVID-19 vaccine trust in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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Background

Despite the availability of the COVID-19 vaccines achieving high coverage in low-income countries was challenging due to social and spiritual reasons (1,2). Hence, faith-leaders have a significant influence within their constituency (3).

Specific Aims & Objectives

This study aimed to explore faith-leaders' perspectives on the COVID-19 vaccine and their role in building COVID-19 vaccine trust in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Methods

This qualitative study draws on in-depth interviews with twenty-one faith-leaders from the seven religious groups in Ethiopia. From the seven religions, one person per hierarchy was recruited purposively. Interviews were conducted by experienced research assistants using an interview guide. Qualitative thematic analysis was done using Atlas.ti software version 7.5.16.

Results

Three thematic areas were identified:

- Faith-leaders clearly understand the risks of COVID-19 pandemic, although most ascribed a spiritual meaning to the advent of the pandemic. They also indicated the pandemic seriously affected the faith communities in many ways; the financial losses were the most significant.
- Faith-leaders were important allies during the pandemic by closely collaborating with government and health professionals in COVID-19 prevention public health interventions, for which spiritual reasoning was ascribed. Faith-leaders actively informed the community about the importance of the COVID-19 vaccine and demonstrated their acceptance by being vaccinated publicly.
- Faith-leaders faced multiple questions from the congregation about the vaccine, including rumors, which they struggled to address it because of the lack of timely updates and the presence of overwhelming amount of misinformation.

Conclusions

Faith-leaders played crucial roles in encouraging vaccines use but were limited in their persuasion power because of intense rumors and misinformation. Empowering faith-leaders with the latest evidence and the skills to counter misinformation on vaccines should be prioritized for future pandemic preparedness.

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