

Authors

Julio Saul Solís Arce
WZB Berlin Social Science Center

Shana Warren
Associate Director, Path-to-Scale Research & Research Scientist

Niccoló Meriggi
International Growth Centre

Alexandra Scacco
WZB Berlin Social Science Center

Nina McMurry
WZB Berlin Social Science Center

Maarten Voors
Wageningen University & Research

Georgiy Syunyaev
Columbia University

Amyr Malik
Yale University Institute for Global Health

Dean Karlan
Northwestern University

Michael Callen
London School of Economics and Political Science

Matthieu Teachout
International Growth Centre

Macartan Humphreys
Columbia University

Mushfiq Mobarak
Yale University

Saad B. Omer
Yale University Institute for Global Health

Andrea Guariso
Trinity College Dublin

Jakob Svensson
Stockholm University

Matthieu Teachout
International Growth Centre

Macartan Humphreys
Columbia University

Saad B. Omer
Yale University Institute for Global Health

Staff

Shana Warren
Research Scientist for Path-to-Scale Research

Samya Rahman
Research Analyst

Gloria Ayesiga Eden
Research Associate

Elliott Collins
Research Economist and Director of Poverty Measurement

Margarita Rosa Cabra Garcia
Senior Research Associate

Sofia Jaramillo
Senior Research Manager

Anthony Kamwesigye
Associate Research Manager

Gisele Manirabaruta

Field Manager

Jean Leodomir Habarimana Mfura
Research and Policy Coordinator

Fatoma Momoh
Senior Field Manager

María Juliana Otalora
Research Analyst

Béchir Wendemi Ouédraogo
Research Associate

Touba Bakary Pare
Senior Field Manager

Melina Platas Izama
New York University Abu Dhabi

Laura Polanco
Research Associate

Sarene Shaked
Research Associate

Achille Mignondo Tchibozo
Research Manager

Michael Callen
London School of Economics and Political Science

Mushfiq Mobarak
Yale University



OPEN COVID-19 vaccine acceptance and hesitancy in low- and middle-income countries

Julio S. Solis Arce¹, Shana S. Warren², Niccolò F. Meriggi³, Alexandra Scacco⁴,
Nina McMurry⁵, Maarten Voors⁶, Georgiy Syunyaev^{1,2,6}, Amyn Abdul Malik⁷, Samya Aboutajdine⁸,
Opeyemi Adejola⁹, Deborah Anigo¹⁰, Alex Armand^{11,12}, Saher Asad¹³, Martin Atyera¹⁴,
Britta Augsburg¹⁵, Manisha Awasthi¹⁶, Gloria Eden Ayesiga¹⁷, Antonella Bancalari^{18,19},
Martina Björkman Nyqvist²⁰, Ekaterina Borisova^{1,20}, Constantin Manuel Bosancianu²¹,
Margarita Rosa Cabra García²², Ali Cheema^{14,23}, Elliott Collins²⁴, Filippo Cuccaro²⁵, Ahsan Zia Farooqi²⁶,
Tatheer Fatima²⁷, Mattia Fracchia^{14,28}, Mery Len Galindo Soria²⁹, Andrea Guariso³⁰,
Ali Hasanain³¹, Sofia Jaramillo³², Sefu Kallion^{1,33}, Anthony Kamwesigye³⁴, Arjun Kharel³⁵,
Sarah Kreps³⁶, Madison Levine³⁷, Rebecca Littman³⁸, Mohammad Malik³⁹, Gisele Manirabaruta⁴⁰,
Jean Leodomir Habarimana Mfura⁴¹, Fatoma Momoh⁴², Alberto Mucanque⁴³, Imamo Mussa⁴⁴,
Jean Aime Nsabimana⁴⁵, Isaac Obara⁴⁶, Maria Juliana Otalora⁴⁷, Béchir Wendemi Ouédraogo⁴⁸,
Touba Bakary Pare⁴⁹, Melina R. Platas⁵⁰, Laura Polanco⁵¹, Javaria Ashraf Qureshi⁵²,
Mariam Raheem⁵³, Vasudha Ramakrishna⁵⁴, Ismail Rendrá⁵⁵, Taimur Shah⁵⁶, Sarene Eyla Shaked⁵⁷,
Jacob N. Shapiro⁵⁸, Jakob Svensson⁵⁹, Ahsan Tariq⁶⁰, Achille Mignondo Tchibozo⁶¹,
Hamid Ali Tiwaziz⁶², Bhartendu Trivedi⁶³, Corey Vernot⁶⁴, Pedro C. Vicente^{12,65}, Laurin B. Weissinger⁶⁶,
Basil Zafar^{67,68}, Baobao Zhang⁶⁹, Dean Karlan^{1,60}, Michael Callen⁶¹, Matthieu Teachout¹,
Macartan Humphreys^{1,6}, Ahmed Mushfiq Mobarak^{42,70} and Saad B. Omer^{71,72}

Widespread acceptance of COVID-19 vaccines is crucial for achieving sufficient immunization coverage to end the global pandemic, yet few studies have investigated COVID-19 vaccination attitudes in lower-income countries, where large-scale vaccination is just beginning. We analyse COVID-19 vaccine acceptance across 15 survey samples covering 10 low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) in Asia, Africa and South America, Russia (a unique middle-income country) and the United States, including a total of 44,260 individuals. We find considerably higher willingness to take a COVID-19 vaccine in our LMIC samples (mean 80.3%; median 78.9%; range 30.3 percent age points) compared with the United States (mean 64.6%) and Russia (mean 30.4%). Vaccine acceptance in LMICs is primarily explained by an interest in personal protection against COVID-19, while concerns about side effects is the most common reason for hesitancy. Health workers are the most trusted sources of guidance about COVID-19 vaccines. Evidence from this sample of LMICs suggests that prioritizing vaccine distribution to the Global South should yield high returns in advancing global immunization coverage. Vaccination campaigns should focus on translating the high levels of stated acceptance into acts of uptake. Messages highlighting vaccine efficacy and safety, delivered by healthcare workers, could be effective for addressing any remaining hesitancy in the analysed LMICs.

A safe and effective vaccine is a critical tool to control the COVID-19 pandemic. As of 21 June 2021, 23 vaccines had advanced to Stage 3 clinical trials and more than a dozen had been approved in multiple countries¹. The BNT162b vaccine from Pfizer-BioNTech, for example, has been approved in about 90 countries, while the ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 vaccine from Oxford-AstraZeneca has the most country authorizations at 117². At present, however, global vaccine distribution remains highly unequal, with most of the current supply directed toward high-income countries³. Although effective and equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines is a key policy priority, ensuring acceptance is just as

important. Trust in vaccines as well as the institutions that administer them are key determinants of the success of any vaccination campaign⁴. Several studies have investigated willingness to take a potential COVID-19 vaccine in high-income countries^{5–7}, and some studies have included middle-income countries^{8–11}. Little is known, however, about vaccine acceptance in low-income countries where large-scale vaccination has yet to begin. Understanding the drivers of COVID-19 vaccine acceptance is of global concern, because a lag in vaccination in any country may result in the emergence and spread of new variants that can overcome immunity conferred by vaccines and prior disease¹².

A full list of affiliations appears at the end of the paper.

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