

COVID-19 certificate fraud and corruption risks: a TI-Z investigation

By Correspondents

In the ongoing global fight against COVID-19, vaccination is considered the most effective weapon. Yet, there are shocking reports emerging of individuals and groups taking advantage of the pandemic to make quick money by selling fake vaccination cards to those who have not received jabs. In Part I of this investigation, TI-Z delves deep into the seedy underbelly of this illegal trade, uncovering the individuals and organisations responsible for perpetuating this scam. Through undercover operations and research in some districts in Eastern and Lusaka provinces of Zambia, TI-Z brings to light the devastating consequences of this practice, which not only undermines public health efforts but also endangers the lives of millions of people in Zambia.

Shots for sale

We begin our investigation in Chipata at a small urban clinic called Kapata. According to sources, vaccination cards, which should be free nationwide, are easily sold here like the hot new pirated items they have become.

"Do you want to buy only the vaccination card, or the certificate as well," an impatient health worker asks us over the phone.

According to one of the nurses encountered during the walk-in, he is the go-to person for the 'private' consultations. He has direct access to Zambia's official vaccines data base, which produces a digital vaccination certificate.

"For both card and certificate, just do (pay) K400. If you want just a card, it's K350. You can give me all [your] details today, I enter, and then tomorrow everything will be ready. You can also deposit even half of it, then tomorrow as you get everything that's when you can finish," he concludes.

After a few days, we meet the health worker in-person to finalise the transaction. When asked how many cards he sells in a month, he reminds us that the cards are free... until one is desperate enough to buy them without getting vaccinated. He almost seems ashamed after stating this, but quickly straightens up and justifies his actions by insisting that he only commits this illegality to 'help' others. He dangles the vaccination card in his hand, waiting in anticipation for us to pay for it. The card is original, complete with a Chipata district health official stamp and Zambia's coat of arms symbol, well registered with an identification number from the vaccination register. It is almost as if the actual jab was taken and we completely forgot it happened.

"We don't sell, it's free. It's free if you are jabbed, not if you [are not], so if you have not been jabbed, [and] they ask you... don't tell them you have not been jabbed just say I was jabbed and this is the card. This is not part of my business; I just do it for the sake of doing a favour. Otherwise we are not supposed to issue this to those not vaccinated. Us we don't sell online unless someone is referred. A lot of people do call, especially those that we are together [with] in the Ministry of Health. They have their own people, even Indians," the health worker explains to us.

We move to Chipangali, a district in Eastern Province which was made independent from Chipata district in 2018, and shares a border with neighbouring Malawi. The brisk business of fake vaccination certificates thrives here as well, more so because it is a border town. We meet a female health worker from Vizenge Rural Health Clinic along Lundazi Road, a clinic accredited as a vaccination center. We ask her the same questions of possibly of obtaining fake vaccination cards. She refuses at first, saying it's not possible to obtain them because 'one needs to be entered in the system, and that takes a week'. But as she continues to speak, we see the screws turning in her head. She then gives in, and like clock-work, an offer is made.

"Maybe let me try to talk to X, but it's not possible to get a card today. It will require something. You need to pay something if you need it to be done today. It will cost K200. You need to give something to get something," she confidently says in a low toned voice.

X answers the call and agrees to 'help' us purchase a vaccination card. He asks us to provide personal details for inputting in the system. All the while, the female health worker orders one of the clinic staff available to document the fake vaccination report in the clinical document and give her a vaccine bottle to get the vaccine code. The vaccination card is then filled in, and stamped with a government stamp before we can even make any payment. We ask her what will happen to the dose, knowing fully well it will not be injected in any of us.

"We will know what to do. Don't worry about that; you just be concerned with the card," she says.

Still in Chipangali, we visit Kasenga Clinic where we meet an official who clearly indicates that vaccines are free but can be bought depending on the circumstance. While standing outside the government clinic, we ask him what it would take to purchase the vaccination cards.

"I can help you, but you just have to appreciate me. If you want [to appreciate me], I can expect anything, others even give live chickens," he says.

However, not every health worker falls prey to the temptation of earning fast money through selling vaccination cards. At Mshawa Rural Clinic, we meet a health worker who finds it abominable to even consider giving us a fake vaccination card, let alone selling it to us, without being vaccinated.

"I don't do that, I am a genuine person. What I'm trying to say is I cannot get money [and] then I don't give you the vaccine. Ok, why don't you want to get the vaccine? I don't like to compromise. Let's just do the right thing."

Purchasing a fake COVID-19 vaccination card is not only a criminal offence but also a grave public health threat. By falsifying vaccination status, individuals who use these fraudulent cards are putting themselves and others at risk of contracting and spreading the deadly virus. In the case of some highly contagious variants, such as Delta, this could mean a life-threatening illness or even death. Moreover, this deceitful act undermines the efforts of healthcare professionals and government officials who are working tirelessly to stop the spread of COVID-19 and get the pandemic under control.

On the streets of Chipangali, we converse with a few unvaccinated individuals who have fake COVID-19 vaccination cards. One resident says she has been vaccinated three times, yet, till date, she has not received any form of proof of vaccination. Baffled, we ask her how that was possible. In her explanation, she says she had to get vaccinated a third time in a different location in the hopes of being keyed into the system and given a vaccination card, without which, she was afraid would make her lose a chance of participating in the 2022 Census recruitment exercise. When asked why she could not refuse as she was already vaccinated, she responded saying she tried explaining to the health personnel but was not believed.

"Yes, I was vaccinated three times but I was not given the card. The first Astrazeneca vaccine was in 2021 at Mercy Clinic, second was in December at Mkanda Clinic. A third Astrazeneca vaccine (not the booster) was given to me at Eastern Girls during the Census training exercise because they could not prove I was vaccinated before, because I didn't have the card. Even though they told me they will give me a card, they have not given it to me. This time, I will not do it again," she says.

Another resident interviewed says he has a vaccination card but is not vaccinated. He further narrates that it was not his intention to get the vaccination card, rather, it was provided for him by his aunt who is a health worker in Lusaka.

"I was given the card by my aunt. It was not my intention, I didn't tell her, she suggested it herself. She told me that 'since I'm doing this for other people I want to make a card for you as well in case of whatever comes'. That's how I had to send details to her, and I went the other day to collect the card," he narrates.

Now, one would wonder how such corruption continues to thrive in Zambia's health sector. The Ministry of Health has been embroiled in a series of controversies and corruption scandals that have undermined its credibility and eroded public trust in the recent past. For example, two years ago, an investigation revealed that the Zambian government, through its Ministry of Health, awarded a US \$17 million contract for the supply of health center kits to a company called Honeybee Pharmacy Limited - which did not exist. Another issue was the alleged nationwide-supply of expired drugs, health kits and condoms worth \$3 million, putting the health of numerous people at risk. We eventually have a chat with a public health official, from the Eastern Province's provincial health office to ascertain whether he is aware of the dark market residing in the country's health facilities. He explains that the corruption of fake vaccination certificates is possible, but wonders why people would pay health workers for such services.

"They can happen; maybe at the time when people want to get tested or vaccinated, there are people who want to cut corners. But you see, most of these services we provide are free and for me I don't see any reason why someone should pay a health worker to be able to get a service. What we do [as government] and what we have done in the past is to write to our staff to warn them to avoid corrupt practices and do things correctly," he says.

Meanwhile, in Lusaka, the city hums with a frenetic energy that is impossible to ignore. From the moment you step out onto the bustling streets, you are swept up in a sea of people, vehicles, and noise. The constant beeping of car horns and blaring of sirens near the University Teaching Hospital (UTH) mixes with the chatter of vendors selling street food along the road. It is easy to get distracted by it all, so we enter the hospital premises, because we have a job to do.

In a named section of the hospital, we arrive at the reception and find the usual commotion associated with patients needing to be attended to. In a hushed tone, we ask the male at the reception where we can get 'express vaccination cards' citing our need to travel soon. He nods in clandestine understanding, directs us to an air-conditioned room a few metres away, and asks us to wait for him. "Busy day ka," we ask him. He responds in the affirmative. He comes back and asks us for our details. But before we can respond, he asks us if we know 'how these things work'. We say we do. He asks us how much we have, and we respond asking him how much it costs. He says a K1,200 will do. We are surprised by the amount, but remember this is Lusaka - Zambia's city of possibilities.

"All I need to do is just input your names and you're good to go. Please also feel free to refer your friends or anyone you know. These processes are usually tedious, so we are here to help make them faster," he assures, like

the hero he believes he is.

COVID-19 vaccines intend to provide acquired immunity against the severe acute respiratory syndrome, coronavirus which causes the coronavirus disease, popularly known as COVID-19. Zambia, like any other country, implemented plans in May 2022 and embarked on countrywide campaigns to have the eligible population immunised so as to attain the 70 per cent herd immunity. By July the same year - barely four months after the pronouncement, the goal was said to have been reached. Whether or not the 70 per cent herd immunity comprises unvaccinated-holders of fake vaccination certificates remains a mystery.

Border-line insanity

Back in Eastern Province, we meet other vaccination card vendors at Mchinji and Mwami, two towns on the border between Zambia and Malawi. They seem guarded and hesitate to give out any information out of fear. After some probing, they reveal - off record - an urban clinic they get their cards from. "It's about who you know," they say. According to them, this business is now booming, because more and more travelers need to prove they are vaccinated - without actually being vaccinated, of course.

In a taxi, we meet a couple who do frequent businesses at the border and ask them if they are vaccinated. They say they are not, because 'it's pointless to have the vaccination card and still be paying officials at the border to get into Malawi'.

"We are not even vaccinated. Haaa! [The people at the border] they just want money. Whether you have it (the vaccination certificate) or not, they will try by all means to find an offence in you. Sometimes we pay free money twice. [They charge] four thousand Malawian Kwacha together. [Most recently] we also paid something in one of the Zambian offices but we were not availed with a receipt, every week we pay money. Every week, I usually go and order items for sale [at the border]," the woman says.

We arrive at the border at exactly 05:29am, and meet with a Malawian health personnel in charge of verifying COVID-19 vaccination certificates for travelers using a border pass from Zambia to Malawi. He asks us if we have COVID-19 certificates, saying if we don't, we must go back.

"If you don't have it, you will have to pay two thousand Malawian kwacha each (equivalent to 30 Zambian Kwacha)," he says.

After this conversation, two of us pay the said amount. However, one of us proceeds to the other side of the border for document clearance due to using a passport, as opposed to a border pass. Obliging, our team member presents their passport to a Zambian female immigration officer seated at the Zambian immigration booth. She stamps the passport, returns it and asks our team member to go to booth number 10, which is for the immigration of Malawi. Upon arrival, a man at the booth asks our team member about their COVID-19 certificate. They respond saying it is in their phone. When asked to open it, network challenges arise and the certificate cannot be viewed.

"How come you can't download it? Ok. Put something in the passport," he demands.

"Like what," The team member asks.

"A K2,000 (Malawian Kwacha)"

Once that is done, the officer stamps the passport and returns it to our team member. Reunited, we then proceed to the other side of Malawi. After hours in Malawi, Kamwendo to be specific, we travel back to Chipata through the border. This time we have to pass through the health desk where we were initially asked to provide a COVID-19 vaccination certificate. One of our teammates, (who had to buy the Covid vaccination certificate upon entry into Malawi earlier) and is not vaccinated, is asked to provide their newly acquired certificate. Once done, we realise that all details are verified in the system proving that they appear vaccinated, when in fact not.

This investigation, which is taking place in several other districts in Zambia, exposes a thriving underground market for fake COVID-19 vaccination certificates - a practice that puts the country's population at great risk. The ease with which these certificates can be obtained falsely is alarming and calls for an urgent response from the Zambian government in general and the Ministry of Health in particular. We recommend that the Ministry of Health sets up a task force to investigate and clamp down on the production and sale of these fake certificates. Furthermore, the government needs to increase public awareness of the dangers of using fake certificates, and provide clear guidelines and strict penalties for those caught engaging in this illegal trade. It is vital that we remain vigilant and take all necessary measures to prevent the spread of fake certificates, which threatens to compromise the country's progress in controlling the COVID-19 pandemic. Let us stand together and send a clear message that we will not tolerate the sale of fake vaccination cards. The health and safety of our communities depend on the integrity of our vaccination efforts, and we cannot allow greed and deception to jeopardise that. By working together, we can protect ourselves and our communities from the devastating effects of COVID-19 and ensure that justice is served for those who have been affected by this illegal activity.