

Judith Kahamba and Victor Mollel

Aligning with the state's COVID-19 narrative in Tanzania: insights from the tourism sector in Arusha

Tanzania, a hybrid regime, was not immune to COVID-19. However, President Magufuli downplayed the virus's seriousness in the country, declaring Tanzania free of it in June 2020 and suppressing public discussion on the subject. No curfew was imposed, and citizens were ordered to continue their activities as normal. Despite this, global restrictions had considerable negative impact on the tourism sector, the second-largest gross domestic product (GDP) contributor in 2019. Using sensemaking theory and data from focus groups and interviews, this study investigates the influential information sources, sensemaking processes and alignment with the state narrative among tourism workers in Arusha, a city that has undergone complex, tourism-driven, urban transformation. The findings reveal how various information sources led to different forms of conformity and alignment with the state narrative. The study contributes a more nuanced understanding of citizens' sensemaking during COVID-19 in a hybrid political regime.

Keywords: COVID-19, Tanzania, tourism, sensemaking, sources of information

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted lives and livelihoods across the globe, with the travel and tourism sector among the most severely affected due to widespread travel restrictions (UNWTO, 2020; Škare et al., 2021). In Africa, international arrivals declined by 44 per cent (Ayiine-Etigo and Amankwah-Amoah, 2021). As with any crisis, individuals and organisations engaged in sensemaking – negotiating meanings to comprehend uncertain events (Weick, 1988; Weick et al., 2005; Boin et al., 2017; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Government communications and interpretations disseminated through international media (Weick et al., 2005) were essential for enabling citizens to respond to COVID-19-related restrictions. Authoritarian regimes (Regilme and Parthenay, 2024), such as China and Vietnam, implemented stringent controls with minimal resistance (Cheng et al., 2020; Ha et al., 2021), whereas liberal democracies like the United States experienced significant opposition and public protests

Judith Kahamba is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Keskussairaalan tie 2, Jyväskylä 40100, Finland, and lecturer in the Department of Development and Strategic Studies, Sokoine University of Agriculture, Chuo Kikuu, Morogoro, United Republic of Tanzania; Victor Mollel is a doctoral researcher in Development Studies at the University of Jyväskylä, situated within the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, Jyväskylä 40100, Finland; e-mail: judith.s.kahamba@jyu.fi, judith.kahamba@sua.ac.tz; vicwilmo@jyu.fi.

(Beckett, 2020). Crisis narratives operate across multiple levels – from international to local – constructing meaning through persuasive accounts of events, motivations and actions (‘t Hart and Tindall, 2009). Empirical studies indicate that public understanding and responses during the pandemic were shaped by narratives propagated by state and political leaders (Mintrom and O’Connor, 2020; Sobral et al., 2020; Jing and Ahn, 2021; Mintrom et al., 2021; Lorenzetti, 2022). Consequently, examining how access to information within specific political contexts influences crisis sensemaking is crucial. In the spirit of Nyaluke and Connolly’s (2013) depiction of hybrid political regimes – systems with a combination of democratic and autocratic features – this study employs a sensemaking framework and, applying deductive reasoning, focuses on the period under Magufuli’s leadership from 2015 to 2021, deemed by Becker (2021) Tanzania’s ‘authoritarian turn’.

The literature demonstrates that citizens across the globe relied on diverse sources to comprehend the pandemic and determine their level of compliance (Kershner, 2020). The availability and nature of information were contingent upon regime type and the extent of freedom of expression, with governmental disaster responses influencing the potential for conflict (Mitchell and Pizzi, 2020). For instance, China faced criticism for suppressing early outbreak information, while Taiwan was commended for its transparency and democratic approach (Alon et al., 2020). Although governments commonly engaged in some level of data censorship to reduce misinformation (Eck and Hatz, 2020), citizens in democratic states had access to a broader range of sources, primarily via the press, internet and other media platforms (Wang et al., 2020; Umeta et al., 2022). In contrast, less democratic states such as Nicaragua, China, North Korea and Turkey maintained strict control over information and regulated media content (Burkle, 2020; Eck and Hatz, 2020; Regilme and Parthenay, 2024). Studies of these countries highlight widespread public distrust in authoritarian regimes due to information suppression and misinformation (e.g. Burkle, 2020); however, there remains limited understanding of how citizens in regimes with restricted information actually made sense of such circumscribed information as was made available to them.

Research on sensemaking related to COVID-19 is fragmented and varies across social groups. Caramia et al. (2025) observed that municipal auditors transitioned from promoting compliance to fostering collaboration. Misinformation and inconsistent health responses influenced social entrepreneurs’ understanding of the pandemic (Kročil et al., 2023), while information overload, including false or misleading information, also impacted citizens (Davidson Mhonde et al., 2022): for example, Finnish media users’ trust and perceptions were shaped by emotional responses to news coverage (Tuomola et al., 2025). Moreover, political messaging significantly affected public understanding and behaviour (Sobral et al., 2020). Nonetheless, empirical data on citizens’ sensemaking in regions with limited media coverage remains scarce.

This study draws on in-depth interviews to explore how tourism workers in Arusha interpreted Tanzania's COVID-19 response under President Magufuli. Tanzania exemplifies Sarpong et al.'s (2020) view of tourism's vital economic and social role in developing countries. Before the pandemic, tourism generated US\$6.7 billion, 10.7 per cent of the GDP, making it the country's second-largest income source (World Bank, 2021). During the first year of COVID-19, the sector was severely affected, with diminishing arrivals, closures and job losses, despite the government's refusal to follow WHO guidelines (Kideghesho et al., 2021). Tourism's GDP share dropped to 5.3 per cent, and employment fell from 6.2 per cent in 2019 to 4.5 per cent in 2020, as tourism revenues decreased by 72 per cent (World Bank, 2021). Although heavily dependent on Western visitors, tourism remains economically vital across the East African Community (EAC), generating around 17 per cent of export revenues and contributing an average of 10 per cent to member states' GDP (EAC, 2023; Michael et al., 2024).

This study focuses on tourism workers in Tanzania's Arusha region, located near Mount Kilimanjaro. As the gateway to iconic national parks such as the Serengeti and Ngorongoro, Arusha has experienced significant urban development driven by tourism, particularly since Tanzania's transition to a market-oriented economy (Muganda et al., 2012; Odhiambo, 2012). Tourism has reshaped the city through infrastructure investments in hotels, lodges, road networks, conference centres and transport systems. The sector has also spurred economic diversification, with a growth in services, tourism-related enterprises, hospitality training institutions and international investment (Kalume, 2022).

This article showcases Magufuli's statement of June 2020, when he declared Tanzania COVID-free, lifted restrictions, and limited media coverage (BBC, 2020; Reporters Sans Frontières, 2020). His presidency was marked by shrinking civic space, electoral suppression and increased repression (Becker, 2021; Paget, 2021; Cheeseman et al., 2021). Tanzania's World Press Freedom Index ranking fell from 71 in 2016 to 124 in 2021, and 143 in 2023 (Media Council of Tanzania, 2022; Reporters Sans Frontières, 2023). A deductive approach was adopted during research, one using Weick's (1988) concept of sensemaking to examine how restricted media shaped tourism workers' perceptions and alignment with the state's COVID-19 narrative, thus contributing to broader insights into citizen sensemaking in hybrid regimes.

The article begins by defining sensemaking, reviewing the relevant literature on citizen responses to COVID-19, and outlining the methodology, before summarising Tanzania's evolving official narrative. It then presents findings on tourism workers' information sources and interpretations, concluding with reflections on how hybrid regimes influence access to information, thereby shaping sensemaking and compliance during pandemics.

Conceptualising sensemaking in hybrid regimes

In organisational studies, sensemaking refers to how individuals interpret unexpected events, issues or outcomes (Weick, 1979; 1988; 1995). Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010, 551) define it as ‘the process of social construction that occurs when discrepant cues interrupt individuals’ ongoing activity and involves the retrospective development of plausible meanings that rationalise what people are doing’. Sensemaking is grounded in both social and individual ontologies: socially through narratives and conversations, and individually via cognitive frameworks (Turner et al., 2023; Golob, 2018; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). The sensemaking framework applied here comprises three core elements: enactment, selection and retention (Weick, 1979; 1995; 2012). Enactment involves mentally interpreting a chaotic environment (Weick, 1979, 112); selection refers to choosing ‘cause maps’ to reduce ambiguity and explain actions (Weick, 1979, 131); and retention is the process of preserving interpretations that help narrow down future options. Sensemaking typically begins when expectations are disrupted, prompting individuals to seek cues and construct intersubjective meaning through action (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014).

Sensemaking becomes especially critical during crises such as pandemics, where ambiguity complicates interpretation (Weick, 1988). It requires navigating between risky actions that foster understanding and safe actions that may obscure it. The process involves assigning meaning to incomplete information to guide behaviour, what Weick (2012) calls ‘enacting’ sensemaking. Rapid crisis responses depend on swift decision-making and access to reliable information (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014), and restricted information and censorship hinder this process in authoritarian regimes, (Burkle, 2020; Christianson and Barton, 2021; Caramia et al., 2025). Weick’s concept of equivocality suggests that reducing uncertainty – by, for example, combating misinformation (WHO, 2024) – enhances crisis management (Davidson Mhonde et al., 2022). Thus, understanding COVID-19 decision-making requires acknowledging the role of uncertainty in sensemaking.

Numerous studies apply the notion of sensemaking to explore how individuals and organisations navigate complex situations, including chronic illness (Mamykina et al., 2015) and crises. The ambiguity of COVID-19 offered scholars a unique opportunity to examine sensemaking in extreme contexts (Christianson and Barton, 2021). Research in this vein spans diverse groups: women giving birth (Brann et al., 2024), Twitter users (Jafarzadeh et al., 2021), health experts (Rubin and de Vries, 2020), nurses (Sahay and Dwyer, 2021), youth (Procentese et al., 2021), auditors (Caramia et al., 2025), social entrepreneurs (Kročil et al., 2023) and media users (Tuomola et al., 2025), among many others. Studies in Vietnam (Trinh et al., 2022) and Denmark (Rubin and de Vries, 2020) highlight how collective sensemaking shaped pandemic narratives, emotions and actions; however, they offer limited insight into how citizens interpret government messaging across different regime types, yet socio-economic and political

contexts are crucial (Dougherty and Smythe, 2004). For instance, Sobral et al. (2020) found that authoritarian leadership often generated confusion and obstructed sense-making. Hybrid regimes blend democratic and authoritarian traits, holding elections while restricting freedoms (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Ishiyama and Breuning, 2010; Frantz, 2016). Although Tanzania is a multiparty state with regular elections, Makulilo (2012), Cheeseman et al. (2021) and Paget (2021) have claimed that the regime limits opposition and media freedom. Once Magufuli declared Tanzania free of COVID-19 in June 2020, the government ceased publishing data, tightly controlled information dissemination (Mugabe et al., 2022), warned against unofficial reporting (Makoni, 2021) and banned local media from using foreign content (Dambach, 2020; Reporters Sans Frontières, 2020). These measures were aimed at shaping public perception and response.

The study applies the sensemaking framework (enactment, selection and retention), (Weick, 1995; 2012) adapted to that comprising perception, influence and action, in the spirit of Mamykina et al. (2015). Perception involves evaluating new information and personal experience, inference activates internal and social representations to explain events, and action reflects behavioural responses based on these interpretations (Mamykina et al., 2015; Christianson and Barton, 2021). Originally developed in health contexts, the framework is reinterpreted in this study to examine a political setting, focusing on how information control and survival strategies influence alignment with state narratives.

We argue that citizens' alignment with the state's COVID-19 narrative can be understood through iterative processes of perception, inference and action, shaped by individual, social and political contexts. In hybrid regime settings, such as Tanzania, perception involved filtering pandemic information through constrained media, religious discourse and hearsay. Inference required resolving conflicting cues and state versus foreign sources, mediated by trust and survival needs. Action encompassed behaviours that either aligned with or diverged from official narratives, driven by self-preservation and livelihood concerns. Notably, alignment was voluntary, as enforcement was limited.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used to capture diverse experiences and to investigate citizens' nuanced sensemaking (Kvale, 2007; Creswell and Poth, 2018). Semi-structured individual and group interviews – conducted in Kiswahili by the second author who has experience in the tourism sector and is well-versed in the local context – ensured the capture of participants' voices and nuanced perspectives. Over two months in 2023, a total of 37 participants working in the tourism sector in Arusha, including tour guides, porters, drivers and chefs were interviewed, using snowball sampling. The data

consists of 17 individual interviews with tour guides, and four focus group discussions with up to five participants, each group containing participants with similar roles, such as lead guides, chefs and porters and demographic similarities, such as level of education. The majority of the participants (approximately 85 per cent) were male. Half were aged 36 and 55, while the rest were between 18 and 35. Nearly one-third worked as porters, and most (around 67 per cent) had completed only primary education.

A timeline of key COVID-19-related events in Tanzania was presented to participants prior to the interviews and referenced during them. This aimed to facilitate their memories of state messages highlighting Tanzania's unique handling of the pandemic globally. Transcribed interviews were thematically analysed, starting with systematic coding to identify patterns in responses (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Braun et al., 2016). Coding and theme development were performed deductively following Mamykina et al.'s (2015) adapted sensemaking framework, structured around three stages: perception (how participants viewed and trusted sources like leaders, media and hearsay); inference (how they reconciled conflicting narratives through personal experience, beliefs and social networks); actions (behaviours such as compliance, dissent, and their alignment with, or opposition to state narratives, influenced by access to information and survival strategies). However, since the data was collected in 2023, participants' stories might have been influenced by the changes in policies after Magufuli's death. We kept this challenge in mind, therefore, when interpreting such retrospective findings.

The Tanzanian state's COVID-19 narrative under President Magufuli

Tanzania, dominated by the Party of the Revolution (CCM) since independence and lacking a strong opposition (Dagne, 2011; O'Gorman, 2012), has been characterised as a hybrid regime (Ekman, 2009). The CCM was the sole legal party until 1992, when multiparty politics were introduced (Iliffe, 1969; Cameron, 2002). Magufuli's 2015 presidential election win with 58 per cent of the vote marked a shift in the CCM's dominance (Therkildsen and Bak, 2019). In 2020, Magufuli won a second term with 84 per cent of the vote, and the CCM secured a vast majority in the National Assembly and local councils (Collord, 2021; Minde et al., 2021). Magufuli's tenure was marked by the appointment of loyal officials and the enactment of laws curtailing freedom of expression, such as the Cybercrimes Act of 2015 and the Media Services Act of 2016, which ensured alignment with the state narrative during the COVID-19 pandemic (Becker, 2021; Gumede, 2022).

Initially, Magufuli's COVID-19 response included WHO-aligned measures like partial lockdowns, banning gatherings, face masks, screening at entry points, and quarantining international passengers for 14 days (Kombe, 2020; Kamazima et al.,

2020; Mumbu and Hugo, 2020). However, this scientific approach was short-lived, and the state narrative shifted after alleged false positive COVID-19 results from papaya and goat samples in May 2020 (Mtani and Ngohengo, 2023). The government then prioritised the economy, leading to pandemic denialism (Mugabe et al., 2022; Richardson, 2022). On 8 June, Magufuli declared Tanzania free of COVID-19 (BBC, 2020), travel restrictions were lifted (Mugabe et al., 2020) and Magufuli issued a warning against foreign medical donations, claiming they could transmit the virus (BBC, 2020). Opposition concerns were silenced by Magufuli and loyalists using government mechanisms (Kell, 2020). He emphasised the risk of starvation from lockdowns and argued that preventing hunger deaths through economic stability was more vital than preventing virus spread (Burke, 2020).

Magufuli framed the COVID-19 response in terms of natural remedies, advocating the remedial use of local herbs (Kamazima et al., 2020; Richey et al., 2021) and religious practices, and urging a reliance on prayers (Salehe, 2020; Mfinanga et al., 2021). Tanzania stopped releasing COVID-19 data, and the Minister of Health warned journalists against reporting unofficial figures (Makoni, 2021). Media restrictions were reinforced by new regulations requiring approval for publishing information on contagious diseases (Media Council of Tanzania, 2022; United Republic of Tanzania, 2020). The Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority also banned local media from broadcasting foreign content without approval (Dambach, 2020). Consequently, Tanzania was the only country on the continent as of December 2020 without statistics for the Containment and Health Index of the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (Hale et al., 2021). This, along with Magufuli's unscientific statements and silencing of public discussion, affected Tanzania's credibility, globally. Rumours, such stories of secret night burials, persisted (Mutahi and Mtulya, 2020) and in early 2021, Magufuli warned against rushing to acquire COVID-19 vaccines, questioning their rapid development (Oduor, 2021).

In an unprecedented move in February 2021, Catholic church leaders urged the Tanzanian public to observe scientific health measures, noting a significant increase in requiem masses in urban parishes (BBC, 2021a). The WHO head reiterated the need for robust action, highlighting that Tanzanians travelling abroad had tested positive for COVID-19, and emphasising the requirement for national safeguarding measures (WHO, 2021). Consequently, Magufuli (re)acknowledged the presence of COVID-19 in Tanzania on 21 February 2021, following criticism by the WHO (Aljazeera, 2021b), which had noted the recent deaths of high officials, including Zanzibar's vice president, who died on 17 February 2021 after contracting COVID-19 (BBC, 2021b). Magufuli blamed a new variant on citizens vaccinated abroad (Dahir, 2021), urging preventive measures, but insisted on the use of locally made masks and continued to advocate prayer (Olewe, 2021). He then disappeared from public view for over two weeks, and his death was confirmed on 17 March 2020 by Vice President

Hassan who succeeded to the presidency (Aljazeera, 2021a). Hence, we contend that the ambiguity surrounding COVID-19, the inadequacy of scientific backing for the measures suggested and the limitations on public discussion tested citizens' sense-making in an exceptional situation of state-restricted information dissemination and censorship. For tourism workers, the direct impact of international guidelines on their livelihoods contributed to the overall uncertainty.

Findings and discussion

Participants relied on various sources of information, including local/national media, houses of worship, family, neighbours, acquaintances, local authorities and foreign networks to understand COVID-19. Radio, however, was the most accessible and important source, with some mentioning newspapers and TV while others only checked headlines occasionally. This implies that radio was a key source for understanding the factors influencing meaning-making beyond just the transmission of information. However, media content was uniform due to censorship, which limited pandemic-related information that lacked government approval, including international reports (Dambach, 2020; Media Council of Tanzania, 2022).

Information was available in churches and mosques, although participants rarely mentioned these as sources of new information. Local government leaders (mjumbe) provided limited information, mainly reflecting the central government's narrative. Most people were aware of Magufuli's order, which limited COVID-19 updates to the president, prime minister and minister of health, thereby preventing local officials from speaking. As one participant said, 'We did not expect messages from local leaders to be any different from what was being said by Magufuli'; another added, 'There was no expectation of receiving novel information from local leaders'. Family, neighbours and acquaintances relied on hearsay with variable credibility for information, mostly about respiratory issues and deaths, not just COVID-19. Foreign networks, including media, social media, family, friends, colleagues and former clients abroad, were accessed by the more educated and highly ranked lead guides, who organised tours and served as primary contacts, providing diverse, uncensored information from beyond Tanzania.

Perception: navigating information, suppression and trust

The perception stage refers to how individuals assess and classify newly received information in light of their individual experiences (Mamykina et al., 2015). Almost all participants cited mainstream national media, such as radio, newspapers and television, as reliable sources of information about COVID-19. However, it is essential to note that, due to censorship and control of mainstream media, these channels consis-

tently echoed the state's narratives, portraying the country as COVID-free despite global critiques. This information ecosystem played a significant role in creating and nurturing the perception that Tanzania had been saved from COVID-19 and had no alarming health crisis. As one participant questioned, 'Why would Magufuli lie to his people?'; another added, 'Magufuli had more knowledge about the status quo in the country than doubters who just speculated'.

Throughout the pandemic, religious congregations like churches and mosques remained spaces for meaning-making. Religious leaders reinforced the government's narrative, emphasising prayer and divine protection. Their messages intertwined with individual beliefs and state rhetoric, shaping trust in both sources. One participant noted, 'Tanzanians are religious people, and I do not remember anyone being unhappy with the possibility to meet with others for prayers. I did not feel that COVID-19 could affect us in houses of prayer'. Another participant in a group interview claimed

I held my own beliefs at that time since Jesus himself said that if you have even a little faith, you can uproot a tree, and so in my own way, I had uprooted COVID-19. I used to feel like the people who wore face masks had no faith.

Nevertheless, most participants reported relying on hearsay from neighbours, local leaders and acquaintances. While some rumours suggested disease and unreported deaths, these were dismissed or minimised because of the state's directives and restrictions on the sharing of COVID-19-related views.

The findings show participants' perceptions of COVID-19 and the state's narratives were mainly shaped by access to local information within mainstream media, religious institutions and community hearsay. A few also had access to diverse sources beyond local media, like family abroad and foreign media outlets. Analysing how these sources helped contribute to sensemaking beyond individual cognition (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010) means viewing sensemaking as a social process influenced by others' opinions (Weick, 1995; Dixon et al., 2017).

Inference: interpreting and reconciling conflicting narratives

Inferences activate internal representations to explain experiences (Mamykina et al., 2015) and engage social networks for insights (Davidson, 2010). The interviews illuminated how some participants processed conflicting information, amidst suppressed information nationally. First, most participants, based on their cognitive processes, justified the state's pandemic denialism by emphasising the power of religion and the need for economic survival. For example, they reasoned that acknowledgement would have led to lockdowns, negatively affecting the majority in the informal sector who must work daily to meet their basic needs. As a participant shared, 'We could understand why Magufuli felt the need to withhold the truth about the pandemic's

seriousness from the public, as subsequent lockdowns would likely result in people dying from hunger' (focus group interview, September 2023).

We also noted that trust in Magufuli and religious leaders, combined with fear resulting from state restrictions on reporting COVID-19 information, caused participants to simplify their interpretations. For example, one participant declared:

Until his death, I believed there was no COVID-19 because of what the president of my country told me. My religious leaders and church leaders, since I'm Catholic, also made me believe that COVID-19 did not exist. To feel free, I preferred to believe that COVID-19 didn't exist and that it would never harm me. (focus group interview, September 2023)

'To be honest, we used to have a lot of arguments [...] I used to be the leading supporter of the notion that there was no COVID-19. I was on President Magufuli's side', another participant added. These excerpts show how leaders' rhetoric influenced tourism workers' views of the health crisis, shaping public understanding, as Sobral et al. (2022) noted. Press releases like 'Magufuli wants Tanzanians to trust and put God first' emphasised that measures like masks and lockdowns were inadequate within Tanzania's context (Reuters, 2021). The belief that COVID-19 was just a form of flu can be explained by Weick's (2020) notion of 'partiality toward similarity', which highlights recognising similarities in understanding.

Second, we observed the influence of diverse sources of information in understanding the pandemic. All participants, through hearsay, were aware of at least one person in their network who had breathing challenges or flu-like symptoms similar to those of COVID-19. As a participant reported, 'We were aware that the countries that the tourists came from had high cases of COVID-19; we were thus duly instructed by our employers to take precautions by using masks, avoiding unnecessary physical contact, and the use of hand sanitiser' (focus group interview, September 2023). Additionally, participants with foreign contacts and access to international news and social media were more likely to question the government's narrative. As one participant said, 'My son resides in the USA, and we spoke often and discussed how it wasn't possible that Tanzania was immune to COVID-19'. Another participant noted:

My friends and I saw a video of what was reported as secret night burials of COVID-19 fatalities through social media. Though we initially thought it was a fake video, it emerged that there were several elements about the video which proved otherwise. This truly made me question what was being reported on local radio stations. (individual interview, September 2023)

People exposed to foreign media, diaspora networks and social media often engaged in non-collective sensemaking, despite sharing the same identity. While state leaders' speeches influence collective sensemaking (Sobral et al., 2020), our findings imply

that this influence is weaker when diverse sources are not accessible to everyone, and citizens are prevented from openly discussing the elephant in the room. This contrasts with studies emphasising collective pandemic sensemaking (e.g. Tran et al., 2020; Kročil et al., 2023; Davidson Mhonde et al., 2022). Our results support and build on earlier research (e.g. Mamykina et al., 2021; Christianson and Barton, 2021) demonstrating that inference during crises in authoritarian settings is influenced by information control and livelihood vulnerabilities. Access to foreign media and networks, despite the local censorship, allowed some citizens to develop nuanced and uncensored views, although these were often suppressed by immediate livelihood needs. The findings highlight that conflicting information from various sources created additional ambiguity during the crises.

In the following section, we describe how perceptions of conflicting narratives, shaped by plausible pandemic explanations (Mamykina et al., 2015; Christianson and Barton, 2021) influenced participants' actions, either aligning them or not with the state's narratives. These actions stem from their perceptions of accessible information, which varied, and what Weick (2012) refers to as the plausible maps of reality that guided their behaviour.

Conformity with the state narrative of COVID-19 denial

The majority of participants conformed with the state's COVID-19 denialism. They worked when possible, avoided open discussions of COVID-19, and followed the president's rhetoric promoting divine intervention and local herbs. Participants, particularly those with access to various sources of information, were generally aware of the COVID-19-related economic hardships faced in other countries due to strict lockdown measures, as reported in both local and international sources. For example, a participant mentioned during a group interview, 'I am not aware of Tanzania having a system for taking care of people in the event of a lockdown; people would have died from starvation; many of us don't have savings'. Another remarked, 'We could understand why Magufuli felt the need to withhold the truth about the seriousness of the pandemic from the public'. 'We used to do some other regular work. I'm a garage mechanic. So, I used to spend my time at my employer's garage', another added. Therefore, exposure to such information influenced their acceptance of the government's anti-lockdown approach as a practical necessity.

Generally, fears of lockdown in the commonly hand-to-mouth economy, which is based on unevenly distributed resources and opportunities across society, heavily influenced participants' understanding of what was perhaps the real reason behind Magufuli's stance on COVID-19. Magufuli's approach did indeed cushion the negative impact of COVID-19 on poverty, given that inequality and high poverty rates persist despite Tanzania's years of significant growth (Diwakar, 2025); the inter-

national income threshold rate still placed 79.3 per cent of the population in poverty in 2018 (UNCTAD, 2025).

The interviews also revealed that participants supported Magufuli's rhetoric on using local herbs to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As one participant reported, 'I used the steam from the concoction in the morning and evening. Because both my wife and I used to work, when we came back in the evening, we tried to prevent our children from catching COVID-19 by steaming the whole house' (focus group interview, September 2023). Magufuli pressured citizens to comply by opposing masks, therefore promoting his rhetoric of imperialism conspiracies by industrialised nations and doubts about masks and vaccines (Olewe, 2021). As one participant said, 'I never trusted the masks because they were made abroad. So, I never used them because I did not know where they came from' (focus group, September 2023). Some praised the religious framing of COVID-19 and prayer's role in keeping places of worship open, believing faith in God's miracles was the ultimate solution. Messages from places of worship focused on God's power and prayer, offering spiritual comfort and hope.

Generally, participants conformed to Magufuli's rhetoric based on plausible explanations from cognitive frames, opinions and media. Those aligning with the state's religious and traditional medicine narratives lacked crisis awareness, as Weick (1988) notes, disregarding science in favour of divine intervention. The ambivalence between belief and doubt is linked to sensemaking (Weick, 2020). In Tanzania, beliefs shaped sensemaking during COVID-19, mostly aligning with state religious narratives. Longstanding state-religion ties and warnings to houses of worship (BBC, 2017) ensured conformity, with no mention of dissent.

Non-compliance: (silent) dissent and private scepticism

Some participants privately doubted the government's stance, especially those exposed to foreign and social media, but did not express distrust publicly due to fear of state restrictions on spreading COVID-19 information. Many knew about Magufuli's public shaming of doubters, which further frightened those with uncensored information from open discussions on the matter. Their understanding of the crisis caused a split between outward conformity and internal doubts. Personal experiences with the pandemic and interactions with health experts also influenced non-compliance. As one participant shared, 'I never really wore a face mask at first, when Magufuli said there was no need for [them]. I only started wearing one when I got sick and had to go to the hospital [...] the doctor who treated me taught me a lot about COVID-19' (interview, September 2023). He added, 'As I work with tourists, I often listen to foreign radio stations. The news about the COVID-19 pandemic instilled a lot of fear in me and made me believe that COVID-19 was real' (focus group interview, September 2023). Thus, most participants whose sources of information were limited

to local media fully aligned with Magufuli's rhetoric, unlike those who did not fully align due to their internalisation of specific cues from diverse sources.

Conformity with scientific measures: the influence of cognitive processes and informal networks

Participants actively took health precautions based on their perceptions and information sources. They critically evaluated information and sometimes followed health measures, such as wearing masks and sanitising their hands, due to advice from health professionals or relatives abroad, despite their conflicting with the state's rhetoric. For instance, as one participant whose wife was a nurse told us, 'My wife worked at a local hospital, and she told me that we should protect ourselves because she was encountering several patients with respiratory complications'. Their decisions to blend state and scientific narratives demonstrate that sensemaking during the crisis was complex, influenced by beliefs, biases and normalisation, and resulting in either organised or implicit responses (Weick, 1988; 2020).

The findings reveal that during the action stage of sensemaking, participants primarily exhibited public compliance and private dissent in response to authoritarian approaches with restrictive measures, indicating that their sensemaking was influenced by considerations of survival and political pragmatism. This supports the view that sensemaking outcomes are not neutral (Schildt et al., 2020) but, rather, rooted in political influences (Weick, 1995).

Conclusions

This study has explored how diverse information sources influenced citizens' understanding and alignment with the Tanzanian state's COVID-19 narrative. Drawing on the concept of sensemaking – specifically focusing on the perception, inference and action framework – while researching a specific group of frontline workers, the findings revealed that sensemaking was shaped by state restrictions on information flow combined with citizens' experienced livelihood vulnerability. Acceptance of the state's COVID-19 denialist stance by workers was often pragmatic, motivated by fear and economic pressures. This highlights the influence of political and structural factors in sensemaking and informs us how authoritarian characteristics can affect the interpretations of those who are subject to such authority.

The evolving responses to COVID-19 by state governments have been extensively discussed by Tchouamou (2022), Ranke et al. (2023) and Zuilkowski et al. (2024), among others. This study adds insights to the body of literature on COVID-19 governance by demonstrating the effects of regime tools in influencing citizens' perceptions and actions during crisis. While other studies have documented Tanzania's policy

changes (e.g. Kahamba et al., 2025; Selenya, 2023), the research for this article offers a ground-level view of how citizens interpreted and/or resisted the resulting narratives, often aligning with state views as a form of pragmatic adaptation rather than due to genuine belief.

This study further advances sensemaking scholarship by examining processes in hybrid regimes, where information control, coercion and economic vulnerability shape perceptions and responses to crises. While traditional models focus on cognitive and social dynamics (Weick, 1979; 1988; 1995; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014), this study emphasises political embeddedness, particularly in terms of the influence of regime type on the sensemaking process. It demonstrates how economic survival, fear and conformity to state rhetoric act as filters and drivers in sensemaking stages, thereby further expanding Mamykina et al.'s (2015) model. Building on existing literature on sensemaking during COVID-19 (Angeli and Montefusco, 2020; Christianson and Barton, 2021; Sobral et al., 2020), the study demonstrates that authoritarian state leadership during COVID-19 resulted in citizens' sensemaking goals shifting from clarification to navigating ambiguity in order to promote survival. This ensured that Magufuli's narratives dominated, supported by state-controlled information channels, in addition to censorship mechanisms aimed at silencing dissent. For most, sensemaking was heavily influenced by state mechanisms, while others relied on conflicting information from media, foreign sources and personal experiences, resulting in non-collective sensemaking characterised by ambiguity (Weick, 1979). Moreover, it is important to note that, although the analysis mainly centred on the Magufuli period, the participants' accounts were collected in 2023. Their stories might have been influenced, intentionally or not, by the post-Magufuli policy environment and evolving perspectives on COVID-19 in Tanzania.

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