

## Combating misinformation to address COVID awareness and vaccine hesitancy in Bolivia

As part of the [INSPIRES project](#), Flexible Response Funds (FRFs) are designed to provide USAID missions and partners with easily accessible and flexible support in the form of technical assistance and subgrants to local organizations that can help address urgent and emerging threats to civic space.

In **Bolivia**, Internews collaborated with local partners Radio Santa Cruz, Salud con Lupa, Centro de Producción Radiofónica (CEPRA), Coordinación de Radio Popular del Ecuador (CORAPE), and Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Económica y Social (Chequea Bolivia) to mitigate mis- and disinformation targeting marginalized communities.

The activities were carried out in two phases – phase I (January to June 2021) and phase II (November 2021 – June 2022) and included support to Indigenous journalists and community media through the following activities:

- **Capacity-building of community radio communicators** to identify false information about COVID-19 and produce radio segments co-created with local communities in eight native languages (including Quechua, Guaraní, and Bésiro among others) about the importance of vaccination;
- **Support for Indigenous community journalists** to manage COVID-19 and vaccine-related information, support to strengthen skills in radio production, digital tools, media content production (including podcasts, infographics, and short videos);
- **Development of a ChatBot** to enable journalists and community members to access accurate COVID-19 information; and,
- **Delivery of story grants and fellowships for journalists** to develop audio or video stories and investigative reports on a range of topics from health-related issues (COVID-19, vaccination, diabetes, etc.) to environmental issues and

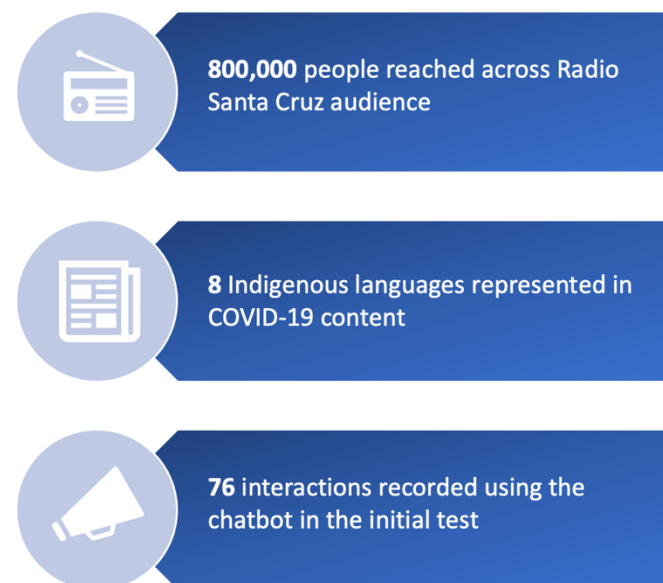
education issues (e.g. tackling forest fires or education during the pandemic).

In this summary, we share learnings and lessons from key informant interviews and reporting related to these activities.

### Outputs and Outcomes:

Based on interviews with key informants within Internews and its partners, we achieved several key outputs, as highlighted in Figure 1.

*Figure 1. Bolivia FRF Outputs*



Evidence from key informant interviews as well as documentation from partners suggest that the FRF activities contributed to several key outcomes.

**Increased capacity, skills, and interest in using journalistic tools to mitigate misinformation.** Both journalists and human rights activists highlighted the value of the trainings on topics

related to COVID-19 and misinformation. Participants noted the ease of using digital tools to detect fake images, the advantage of being trained by health journalists, and their increased interest in applying these tools for future reporting. Activists who participated in trainings reported that they learned the benefits of using a journalistic lens for their reporting and of incorporating more data into their work.

Overall, through both phases of the FRF, partners reported that training participants and fellowship recipients increased their skills and motivation in health journalism and began using new channels to disseminate content, such as social media. Informants noted how journalists found the work refreshing and walked away with a deeper understanding of health journalism, the importance of the fight against disinformation within their profession, and the value of being inclusive in their reporting.



*"We now have a group of communicators and journalists who are very aware that health journalism is a necessity within their line of work and that they have to implement it with a community vision."*

- Key Informant Interview, October 2022



### **Increased capacity and sustainability of local partners to conduct trainings on misinformation.**

A key point of success that informants highlighted was the opportunity that this FRF provided to build the capacity of local partner organizations who led the participatory trainings. Another partner shared that they gained the trust of the local community and were able to sustainably continue their efforts with the support of another international funder. An additional partner gained such valuable experience in leading the fact-checking and public health misinformation trainings that they are now the preferred trainers over international partners for this type of work, strengthening their capacity and sustainability.

### **Strengthened trust and engagement with Indigenous communities and the formation of an Indigenous information network.**

Through the activities conducted in Bolivia, Internews and partners were able to address an urgent gap in accessible COVID-19 resources and information for Indigenous populations in a timely manner. Partners worked together to produce radio content in key Indigenous languages as well as disseminate COVID information to the communities that received insufficient coverage in mainstream media or government communications, which were almost entirely in Spanish.

Partners received positive feedback and appreciation from community leaders for their efforts, which helped to strengthen relationships. Informants also noted that these efforts helped navigate issues of distrust and rejection of vaccines. Taking an inclusive and respectful approach, partners communicated information about COVID vaccines in native languages, while also respecting and highlighting traditional medicine and practices some communities used to tackle COVID via their radio segments. Community members responded positively and were grateful to hear this information shared on the radio in their own language.

Overall, informants observed how partner organizations became better at connecting with and supporting Indigenous communities by translating their articles into Indigenous languages and being more mindful of how to best present and navigate their projects together.



*"We know better about communities – what the issues are and what they are thinking. We know better the connections and how we can talk to them, how to work with them. This is kind of like a building block in the sense that every FRF is getting us a step closer to working in a network in Bolivia. Working in a network is easier and easier. Because we are building trust which is a slow process, this goes beyond one single project."*

- Key Informant Interview, November 2021



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### The story grants helped expand the scope and reach of Radio Santa Cruz's and CEPRA's work.

One journalist who received the grant used her knowledge and experience from the support to interview doctors on radio programs. Radio Santa Cruz hosted a special program inviting the journalist to speak on issues raised in the investigative story that had been missed in other reporting.

The story grants also paved the way for CEPRA and Radio Santa Cruz to expand and create interesting audiovisual content, share traditional knowledge, and spotlight issues beyond COVID that needed attention and were missed by the government, such as the challenge of education access for children in Indigenous communities where there is no connectivity.

### Impact beyond FRF partners and communities, and sustainability of activities and lessons.

Informants observed that several of the activities and learnings from this FRF were shared through the partners' wider networks and continue to sustain after the completion of FRF activities. For example, content continues to be replicated and disseminated via CEPRA's network of community radio stations which have continued to produce materials bringing communities together, and informants believe that the reporting was shared at a national level.

The FRF also paved the way for partner organizations to apply these lessons and mechanisms to other areas outside of health reporting, such as Indigenous rights and environmental causes. Radio Santa Cruz and other partners have established health reporting as a core component of their work and created institution policies around this. Some of their journalists became very engaged in Internews' Health Journalism Network, and their increased focus on health reporting led them to receive support from UNICEF to continue providing health content in native languages.

CEPRA's network continues to develop and disseminate products and materials. Their network of community radio stations has produced programming as a continuation of the work started during the FRF, which has had national reach. CORAPE's chatbot design has pivoted and is now being used to send mass information to audiences.

**Helping and Challenging Factors.** Key informants were asked about factors perceived to help or hinder this work. Understanding these factors can help support the implementation of future activities.

**Helping factors** include:

- **Flexibility in support for minority language communities.** This FRF prioritized making accurate COVID-19 information accessible to Indigenous communities in their native languages as opposed to producing materials in Spanish to reach as many people as possible. Because of the flexibility from USAID and the INSPIRES FRF structure, partners were able to focus on accessibility and quality of reporting, catering to the specific contexts and needs of eight Indigenous language communities.
- **Collaboration among Indigenous and non-Indigenous civil society actors.** By working together, the partners with expertise in fact-checking and those with expertise in issues affecting Indigenous communities were better able to provide information in Indigenous languages that was respectful of communities' traditions and bring more attention to this work among a divisive spread of misinformation and disinformation in Bolivia.
- **Increasing training accessibility for participants.** The virtual nature of the misinformation trainings allowed participants from rural and peri-urban regions of Bolivia to join and build their own journalistic capacity. The FRF team also supported the registration, participation, and retention of training attendees through consistent outreach, encouragement, and follow-up to ensure the trainings were as accessible as possible.
- **Internews staff and processes.** Participants appreciated the support and openness of Internews staff throughout the process. They also highlighted efficient administrative and financial processes, as well as realistic timelines, as a key enablers.
- **Internews' openness to consultation and adaptability.** Partners appreciated openness and adjustments to proposals, as well as respect

for the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and medicine.

- **Partner reputation and networks.** Key partners like CORAPE, CEPRA and Radio Santa Cruz brought years of experience, trust, and relationships with Indigenous communities in particular, to this activity.

**Hindering factors** include:

- **Complexity of working with organizations of varying political opinions and navigating anti-vaccine sentiments.** Due to international sensitivities, diverse political views in Bolivia, and the politicization of public health, FRF partners had to be careful in choosing additional partners for these activities. Partner organizations faced complex issues in building trust, especially while navigating building relationships with Indigenous communities, working in media, and operating in their civic space context. This was particularly a factor when partners communicated material around COVID-19 vaccines. Anti-vaccination movements are strong in Bolivia, and this was a sensitive topic to navigate. Partners reported facing difficulties at times conducting in-person workshops as they ran into protests or blockades by activists opposed to COVID restrictions or vaccine mandates.
- **Ability to maximize reach of capacity building initiatives while upholding strong security and privacy protocols.** Internews and partners had to balance publicizing and running the FRF activities in a context in which some messages about vaccines were counter to what was being shared through some government channels. To meet this balance, their messages surrounding COVID-19 highlighted precautionary measures rather than denouncing any government actions, but it was still not possible to do much branding or marketing of the capacity building activities out of fear of the activities being halted.
- **Difficulty ensuring trainings are culturally appropriate and respectful.** For many Indigenous community partners, COVID-19 was not a priority issue, especially compared to other challenges in accessing land sovereignty and environmental rights. COVID-19 was often

treated with traditional medicine and practices, so information about the importance of COVID-19 vaccination had to be appropriately contextualized. It was critical to make connections among health, the environment, and Indigenous affairs in order to adequately address communities' concerns and vaccine hesitancy.

- **Lack of internet connectivity.** This made partners' work harder, particularly for CORAPE as they were designing a chatbot which uses Wi-Fi to operate. In general partners faced technical access and connectivity issues.

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