

COVID Fact-checking and Journalism Training in Central African Republic

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 the **Central African Republic (CAR)**, Internews provided support to local journalists and partners to combat COVID 19-related misinformation and limited reporting to remote areas of the country, undertaking three key activities:

- Training of radio journalists on COVID 19-related issues;
- Providing stipends to journalists to create and broadcast content on COVID 19-related issues; and,
- Training and supporting story production by fact-checkers on COVID 19-related issues.

Support was provided over the course of six months between October 2020 and March 2021.

In this summary brief, we share learnings and lessons from key informant interviews and document reviews for these activities.

Outputs and Outcomes. The FRF activities in CAR were designed to produce several key outputs, including journalists and fact-checkers trained and COVID 19-related stories produced, and these outputs were designed to increase the reach of COVID-19 related facts and information (especially to rural areas), strengthen the quality of content available to the public, and ultimately improve the decisions and actions that the public undertook related to pandemic prevention and treatment.

Based on interviews with key informants who were involved in the program as well as a review of documentation from the FRF activities, there is

strong evidence that all intended outputs were achieved, as highlighted in Figure 1 (FRF outputs).

Figure 1. CAR FRF Outputs



While data is still being collected on higher-level outcomes, there is evidence from multiple sources that the FRF activities contributed to a myriad of key outcomes:

- **Increased availability of accurate COVID 19-related information to the public.** The project worked together with twenty-five radio stations, especially in rural areas, to broadcast evidence-based information on the pandemic that had not previously been available. There is evidence that the partnership contributed to decentralizing and widely disseminating previously centralized information from the Ministry of Health, providing greater access to a wide range of audiences. Further, the project ensured that COVID-19 stories, which were heavily reported at the start of the pandemic but were later usurped by coverage of the elections and armed conflicts, were produced after initial public interest waned.

- **Increased capacity for countering disinformation within the country.** Working with the Association of Fact Checkers, the project was able to train ten new fact-checkers, supporting an increased capacity for fact checking in CAR both related to COVID-19 and for future issues that may arise. Further, the reach of accurate information among reporters spread outside of the ten trained fact-checkers; the project's fact checking specialist created a WhatsApp group with 120 CAR journalists to share accurate information that could be further disseminated through journalists' networks.
- **Increased trust building, engagement, and feedback loops between rural and urban populations.** The project provided support directly to journalists to undertake field reporting in remote areas of the country, an activity that several informants noted is extremely unusual. By interviewing and reporting on the situation in remote villages, FRF-supported journalists were able to provide voice to communities affected by the pandemic to be heard by audiences including national policymakers.
- **Increased sustainability of the media sector in CAR.** Directly through the FRF activities, the support provided much-needed resources to media partners and journalists to continue covering issues, including COVID-19, during the tumultuous progression of the pandemic. In addition, the outputs and outcomes to which the FRF activities contributed resulted in further resources and recognition that has allowed Internews to continue supporting local journalism and fact-checking in CAR; this support includes: Internews's involvement in national sub-commissions on COVID-19 information (in partnership with the national government, UN bodies, and NGOs) and support from the UN to undertake two additional interventions to distribute accurate COVID 19-related information in the country.

Helping and Challenging Factors. Key informants were asked about factors that they perceived to help or hinder the outcomes of this work. Understanding these factors can help future activities leverage or mitigate factors to support the effective design and implementation of FRF activities.

"It is a bit exceptional that journalists can go far into remote areas and make interviews and give speech to people from the country's remote areas... It is a big success to even have the possibility to report and make interviews with people in the villages. And more over we have a kind of qualitative success because we have interesting reports from people who explain how they tried to deal with pandemic in these villages and consequences of the pandemic, especially economic like closure of schools and how people deal with these issues."

- Key Informant Interview (May 2021)

Helping factors include:

- **Will and Trust of media partners** – demonstrated through the continued motivation and interest of local partners, radio stations and journalists to maintain engagement in these activities, including during times of armed conflicts in parts of the country;
- **Flexibility** - in the design and implementation of the activities, adapting to new challenges and needs; and,
- **Collaborative spirit** of all partners, including journalists, fact checkers, and government resource people.

Hindering factors include:

- **Security issues** – including armed conflict in parts of the country which led to delays and challenges in partners and journalists being able to conduct field reporting; and,
- **Access to information** – limited due to the Ministry of Health stating itself to be the only source of COVID-19 information at the start of the project, limiting access for media and civil society.

While the hindering factors were shared by multiple informants, it is also important to note that the project team was able to apply strategies to mitigate and ultimately circumvent both challenges.

For more information about this FRF, please contact: info@inspiresconsortium.org.