

Promoting independent media during COVID-19 in Ethiopia

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 **Ethiopia**, Internews provided support to local journalists and media outlet to strengthen freedom of information and media space during the COVID-19 pandemic through four key activities:

- Media and information ecosystem mapping;
- Support for media organizations on innovative avenues to maintain financial sustainability;
- Training and stipends for journalists to produce stories for “sharing information that saves lives,” and,
- New research monitoring freedom of information and press space in Ethiopia.

Support was provided over the course of twelve months between October 2020 and September 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 Ethiopia were designed to produce outputs that include: information ecosystem assessment; subgrants to media organizations to support financial sustainability of independent media outlets; trainings and stipends for journalists to produce COVID-related content; and new research of freedom of information.

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

significant evidence that these outputs were achieved, as highlighted in Figure 1 (FRF outputs).

Figure 1. Ethiopia FRF Outputs



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

- **Increased evidence on information and media gaps in Ethiopia.** Several FRF activities focused on collecting data to improve how Internews and media partners understand the supply of and demand for information in different parts of the country and the pressures on media outlets, journalists, and freedom of expression. The evidence that was collected and compiled as part of this FRF provided actionable guidance that Internews is using to strengthen its training and mentorship programs and that journalists can use to better target their reporting. The information ecosystem assessment, for example, highlighted issues with both the supply

of information available for local communities (such as the lack of content in local languages) and the demand for information (such as topics

“There is not a lot of research regarding media so this was a huge contribution and eye opener ... We are now integrating this into our training and content.”

- Key Informant Interview (October 2021)

- **Increased funding for media during the pandemic.** Several informants noted the economic and financial strain that COVID-19 had placed on media outlets and journalists in Ethiopia, noting programs that had to be delayed or halted due to lack of financial resources. The FRF activities provided support to ensure the continuity of COVID-19 stories and content that provided critical information to the public. While the funding was still time-limited, due to the discrete nature of FRF funding and activities, respondents did note that they would not have been able to produce many stories and programs without their involvement in the project.
- **Improved public understanding of COVID symptoms, prevention and treatment.** As a result of the content produced through by subgrant recipients, people who had experienced COVID-19 and their communities reported having more knowledge about the spread of the disease and the precautions that could be taken to prevent it. This was especially important in parts of the country that had more limited access to media programming.

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

Helping factors include:

- **Journalist enthusiasm and motivation** – informants noted the importance of having

subgrantees and partners who were highly engaged and motivated to use FRF resources to increase knowledge and programming around the pandemic.

- **Trainers with knowledge of local context** – because of the complex and dynamic context in the country, respondents noted that it was critically important that those training, mentoring, and undertaking research were based in and understood the Ethiopian context.

Hindering factors include:

- **COVID-19 restrictions** – informants noted the challenges associated with virtual training sessions.
- **COVID-19 stigma** – for radio programs that sought to interview people who had experienced COVID, there were some challenges reported in which people did not want to admit that they had the virus due to stigma.
- **Prioritization of the pandemic in light of armed conflict** – several informants noted that, by the time the FRF activities launched, many people were more concerned about the conflict in Ethiopia than the pandemic.
- **Resources and time needed for sustained change** – informants noted that the resources provided through the project would have had a greater impact if they could be stretched over a longer period of time, due to the sustained nature of the pandemic.

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

“People were not aware about how COVID is, so just having such information about keeping distances and washing hands was important. [The radio programs] were full of direction and information to protect themselves. People who already got the COVID, they were calling to us: “Ok, is that how we survive from covid? Your story is helpful, now we understand how the diseases is.” That is the biggest change. People didn’t know the pain of the disease. So after listening to our programs, people start to know the characteristics of the disease. Even people with COVID, we were contacting them with hospitals and so on.”

- Key Informant Interview (December 2021)

