Combating Disinformation and Misinformation

Analysis of INSPIRES Flexible Response Funding

December 2023

Rebekka Flam
Results for Development (R4D)

Combating Disinformation and Misinformation:
Analysis of INSPIRES Flexible Response Funding

About INSPIRES

The USAID-funded Illuminating New Solutions and Programmatic Innovations for Resilient Spaces (INSPIRES) program, led by Internews, has undertaken work to increase the understanding of the drivers of closing civic and political space and to strategically respond to the growing trend of closing civic and political space. Since launching in October 2018, the INSPIRES consortium (Internews, International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), DevLab at the University of Pennsylvania, PartnersGlobal, and Results for Development (R4D)) has undertaken work to contribute to three complementary objectives:

1. Develop Innovative Analysis to Deepen Understanding of Civic Space Drivers and Inform Programmatic Priorities for Civil Society
2. Test Resiliency+ Framework Interventions
3. Empower Local Partners to Address Civic Space Threats Effectively (Flexible Response Funds)

As the third objective of INSPIRES, the Flexible Response Funds (FRFs) provide support on emerging and urgent needs and opportunities for civic space protection and enhancement. The FRFs provide USAID missions and partners with easily accessible and flexible support in the form of technical assistance and subgrants to local organizations. It is intended to be both proactive, as warning signs of closing space begin to emerge, and reactive, as civic space begins to shift. The effort is built around ICNL's longstanding and successful Legal Enabling Environment Program (LEEP) but has been expanded under INSPIRES to encompass a broader array of common civil society needs in challenging environments, including capacities around information, finances, connectivity, and resilience. Since 2018, INSPIRES has led more than 75 FRF activities in 51 countries. The majority of FRF interventions have been between $10,000 to $70,000 over a period of up to 18 months, but there is flexibility to adjust those parameters based on identified need.

Combating Disinformation and Misinformation to Support Civil Society

In response to the urgent need to combat rising disinformation and misinformation, many FRFs were designed to support civil society actors in the media sector. In a digital age where information moves rapidly, preventing the spread of disinformation can safeguard the integrity of public discourse and ensure that fact-based, reliable information prevails. While the primary objective of these FRFs was the dissemination of critical COVID-19 information, the projects also worked towards enhancing capacity, fostering collaboration, and promoting sustainability to help civil society and media combat disinformation and misinformation more broadly. Moreover, several FRFs ensured that marginalized voices were heard, upholding principles of equity and inclusiveness. Ultimately, through combating misinformation and disinformation, local partners can continue to build public trust, advocate for local voices, and strengthen the resilience of civil society.

Combating Disinformation and Misinformation:
Analysis of INSPIRES Flexible Response Funding

As part of an evaluation of FRF activities, we undertook additional data collection for 46 FRFs (those completed before April 2023); eight of these FRFs were designed to combat disinformation. Data were collected using quarterly surveys, key informant interviews with consortium partners, local partners, and other key stakeholders, and documentation produced as part of the FRFs (including legal analysis, research, and training materials). We utilized qualitative analysis to answer three key questions:

- What **strategies** did partners apply to combat disinformation and misinformation?
- What **outcomes and outputs** did partners achieve as a result of FRF activities?
- What did stakeholders cite as **helping and hindering factors** in combating disinformation and misinformation?

It is important to note that the results shared in this brief are based on subjective data and thus reflect the perceptions and experiences of FRF stakeholders rather than objective data that can prove attribution between activities, outcomes, and factors. However, the large degree of independent verification for these results provides strong evidence of the validity of the outcomes and factors shared.

Structure of the brief

The remainder of this brief presents Results from each of the three key questions shared above (Strategies, Outcomes and Outputs, and Helping and Hindering Factors), followed by a Discussion of Synergies and Takeaways.

Figure 1. Fast facts on disinformation-focused FRFs

🌐	FRF Countries	***7***
👪	Number of people who attended FRF activities[1]	***1803***
📊	Estimated people reached through FRFs	***22,415[2]***
📦	Civic Space Dimensions	***Media and Information***
🗂	Consortium Partners leading FRFs	***Internews***

[1] *FRF activities include relevant trainings and events.*
[2] *This number is the estimated reach for online materials documented through the number of views and downloads. Informants estimated a potential wider reach of over one million people, including the number of radio listeners and viewers.*

Table 1. Geographic distribution of FRFs

- Central African Republic (CAR)
- Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)
- South Sudan
- Zimbabwe
- Indonesia
- Bolivia (2)
- Serbia

Results: What strategies did partners apply?

Local partners utilized a range of strategies to implement their FRFs. While training and outreach were the most frequently applied approaches used by disinformation-focused FRFs, activities such as research, capacity building, and mentorship were also commonly used. Several synergies were observed among these strategies. For instance, all FRFs that provided mentorship also incorporated training on reporting and storytelling. Other FRFs integrated research efforts with their training and mentorship programs. The combined implementation of these strategies likely contributed to the success of their interventions. This section presents all strategies undertaken by partners, and the blue dots below represent the number of FRFs in which the strategy was used.

●●●●● **Comprehensive training**

Numerous FRFs actively engaged CSOs in combating disinformation through comprehensive training programs covering critical skills such as rumor tracking, effective reporting, data journalism, media entrepreneurship, capacity building, digital security, and digital literacy. Participants gained essential knowledge to identify and counteract COVID-19-related hoaxes, empowering them to disseminate accurate information, promote quality journalism, and enhance outreach activities.

●●●● **Outreach**

Partners leveraged an array of channels, including newsletters, stories, podcasts, and theatrical plays, to engage and inform their audiences. This multifaceted approach aimed to reach diverse demographics, fostering connections between the FRFs and their audiences and contributing to local voice, empowerment, public awareness, and media access.

●●● **Mentorship**

Participants benefited from ongoing mentorship and support programs, which covered a range of vital topics such as the creation of engaging stories, reports, or radio formats using Indigenous languages. These programs fostered a positive environment for skill development, ensuring that journalists received the guidance and assistance needed to excel in their work while preserving their local languages.

●●● **Digital connections**

Some FRFs fostered digital connections by establishing innovative chatbots or user-friendly websites, enhancing online engagement with participants. These digital platforms served as conduits for connection and learning, extending the reach of vital information, potentially creating stronger community ties, and ultimately amplifying the impact of the projects on both accessibility and media outreach.

Results: What strategies did partners apply?

●● Research

In a subset of FRFs, research and monitoring were used to gather essential insights on issues such as shrinking civic space and decoding sources of toxic narratives. This research provided a solid foundation for evidence-based interventions, informed project development, and enriched the collective knowledge on combating disinformation.

●● Capacity building

Initiatives aimed at strengthening the capabilities and resources of participants were also noted strategies for some FRFs. Capacity-building activities, such as workshops, equipped participants with essential skills to identify COVID-19 misinformation, enhance financial sustainability, and refine their digital engagement.

● Learning events

In one context, the strategic use of two virtual educational events emerged as a means to foster community among participants. These learning events not only served as platforms for the dissemination of information but also as spaces where individuals with shared interests and goals could come together.

● Distribution of technology

One FRF placed a strong emphasis on distributing radios and phones to generate better media access in remote areas. Recognizing the critical role that technology plays in bridging information gaps, this strategy aimed to equip marginalized and Indigenous communities with the means to stay connected and informed.

> *"After all this work, we managed to generate a lot of interest in the power of capabilities, because communicators said they didn't have the opportunity to receive this kind of training previously.*
> *They said there were no programs that specifically offered this type of support to communicators in those regions. After [ORGANIZATION's] work, we saw that it was necessary to continue strengthening their capacities, and we launched the call for scholarships."*

Results: What outcomes were achieved?

Through the implementation of these strategies, partners achieved various outcomes, as revealed in key informant interviews. Some of the notable outcomes included empowering local voices, fostering increased collaboration within the media sector, and enhancing the quality of journalism and research. Moreover, the projects led to significant outcomes related to improved access to media, increased capacity, and heightened public awareness. In this section, we share these outcomes, with the blue dots below representing the number of FRFs in which this outcome was reported.

●●●●●● **The dissemination of COVID-19 information**

Unsurprisingly, the dissemination of accurate COVID-19 information emerged as a vital achievement across the majority of FRFs. Informants highlighted how the projects effectively countered misinformation and played a pivotal role in advancing precise and reliable information about COVID-19. This concerted effort contributed to increased public awareness and education on the pandemic, ultimately fostering a better-informed society in the face of a global health crisis.

●●●●● **Local voice and empowerment**

The commitment to amplify local voices and empower communities was noted as a central theme in many projects. These initiatives focused on engaging diverse participants in remote areas, prioritizing local perspectives, and enhancing the relevance of interventions, thus contributing to a more inclusive information ecosystem. This approach also fostered a deeper connection to local communities, supported the use of local languages, and contributed to the dissemination of COVID-19 information.

"Yes, the process was slow, but it is also true that we acquired a certain legitimacy in the indigenous populations and their authorities when it comes to disseminating information that also matters to them. Indigenous organizations appreciate this type of initiative, and since some indigenous communities have their own radio, they reproduce the material in their communities. What seems most important to me is that the indigenous authorities fundamentally contributed to spreading the message in their own language and have therefore agreed to be vaccinated."

"A more inclusive communication, and more in line with the sociocultural realities of indigenous populations. It resulted in more plural communications, more democratic, more contextualized."

Results: What outcomes were achieved?

●●●●● Collaborative efforts with media and other stakeholders

Enhanced collaboration with the media and diverse stakeholders, ranging from health workers to local communities, emerged as a key outcome of these initiatives. Informants noted that partners recognized the multifaceted nature of disinformation challenges and forged partnerships across different levels of society. The collaborative approach helped foster a collective resilience against misinformation.

> *"We tried to collaborate with the health workers, local communities, and also with the stakeholders in the covid problem and addressing the vax hoax. We worked with every level of stakeholders – health workers, local communities, and even the representatives of the provinces."*

●●●●● Quality journalism, fact-checking, and research

The emphasis on reliable journalism was noted as a significant impact, with informants highlighting the importance of producing trustworthy news, conducting rigorous fact-checks, and undertaking thorough research to ensure the dissemination of accurate information to the public. This approach not only bolstered the resilience of civil society organizations against misinformation but also empowered them to disseminate accurate information and strengthen the integrity of journalism.

●●●●● Enhanced capacity and reach

Capacity building, specifically for journalists to help expand their reach, was a notable outcome described by informants. Through research, mapping, and distribution efforts, the projects demonstrated a clear commitment to enhancing journalists' capacity to reach a broader and more diverse audience. These concerted efforts strengthened their abilities and ensured that the information and resources they provided reached a wider segment of the population.

●●●● Greater access to media

Increased media access was noted as an outcome within several FRFs. Participants in these initiatives actively sought to leverage various media platforms as powerful tools for disseminating information, particularly in marginalized and underserved regions.

> *"In the end, we supported a chatbot which was the most popular online media in the DRC. This media also referenced as it is independent media. It is one of the main sources of information – so for us, this is a really great success. "*

Results: What outcomes were achieved?

●●●● General public awareness and education

Several informants noted that the FRFs contributed to a better-informed public, especially regarding COVID-19 and related topics. Through various strategies, the FRFs succeeded in raising awareness and providing valuable education to communities. This increased awareness played a crucial role in countering misinformation and empowering individuals to make informed decisions regarding their health and well-being.

> *"We know it was successful because we used to get feedback from communities who call into programs and say 'Oh, I have learned this today, something I didn't know yesterday'. They also ask questions in areas where they did not learn anything. So that impact ongoing."*

●●●● Better outreach and social media content

Partners utilized interactive strategies and harnessed the power of online platforms to effectively reach their target audiences. By actively engaging with communities through various digital channels, they effectively bolstered the resilience of participating organizations against misinformation and empowered them to disseminate accurate information themselves.

●●●● Improving hope and trust

Informants noted that projects resulted in positive social impact, hope, and an increased sense of trust in legitimate sources of information. Trust was also established between organizations and partners as a result of collaboration.

> *"This is kind of like building blocks in the sense that every FRF is getting us a step closer to working as a network in Bolivia. There is a lot of distrust among organizations, and it is difficult to navigate distrust – it comes from our political context and personal egos, but if you compare the work from FRF 1 to FRF 2 and do the same with DRL programming, you will see that working in a network is easier and easier because we are building trust which is very slow and goes beyond one single project."*

Results: What outcomes were achieved?

● ● ●   Sustainability and learning for future interventions

Beyond the immediate goals of combating disinformation, the FRFs also focused on building a foundation for long-term resilience. They aimed to ensure that the strategies employed during these projects could be sustained and adapted to address evolving challenges. Moreover, these efforts were seen as valuable learning experiences, with the insights gained serving as a valuable resource for future interventions. By incorporating lessons learned and fostering adaptability, these projects sought to create a lasting impact that extended far beyond their immediate scope.

> *"Although the project was short and is coming to end, the experience is huge. We are expanding our support on digital security, providing longer term interventions. The other advantage to this new activity is a longer time – 5 years. So, we could take our time, learning from what we learned on shorter term projects, designing sustainability initiatives that are broader in terms of scope – And supporting media in different forms and formats in terms of radio, online platforms, TV, and print media. We are designing long-term interventions using this experience."*

● ●   Media literacy through mentorship

In a small subset of FRFs, mentorship and training initiatives for journalists aimed at bolstering media literacy and fact-checking skills emerged as key project outcomes, fostering a better understanding of critical information among participants.

● ●   Local language preservation

Additionally, within a limited number of FRFs, the preservation and promotion of local and Indigenous languages took precedence during the dissemination of COVID-related information, guaranteeing their safeguarding and perpetuation. While the majority of FRFs focused on amplifying local voices, a smaller subset placed specific emphasis on language preservation.

> *"I also think it's important to emphasize that before this initiative, as [NAME] mentioned, there were few audio materials in Quechua or Aymara languages. In terms of COVID prevention strategies and linguistic accessibility, the focus of the content and the broad scope they had, those reached these communities at a critical moment, which I think is also important to highlight in terms of impact."*

Results: What outputs were achieved?

1 million+
estimated wider reach, including the number of radio listeners and viewers

22,000+
estimated minimum reach of virtual products as part of disinformation-focused FRF activities[3]

114
stories or articles produced

100+
blogs, vlogs, videos, podcasts or radio segments produced

36
trainings or learning events organized

1800
participants who attended trainings or events

54
journalists awarded grants

3
Chatbots or websites created

15
COVID awareness materials produced

103
weekly current affairs programs

60
public service announcements

[3] *This number is the estimated reach of online materials, including blogs, videos, and podcasts, documented through the number of views and downloads.*

What helped and hindered these changes?

In addition to collecting data on activities and outcomes, INSPIRES asked informants to answer a second learning question: **What factors helped to improve the effectiveness of FRF activities – and what factors hindered their effectiveness?**

The analysis of factors for all FRFs completed by April 2023 resulted in a four-component framework that may support or inhibit flexible and rapid response programming:

People Direct – Factors involving individuals and organizations directly engaged in the activities.

Local Partners	Consortium Partners	Donor Characteristics

People Indirect – Factors involving individuals and organizations external to activities.

Government Characteristics	Community or Public

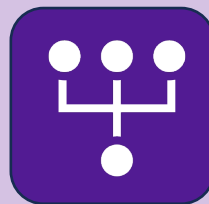| Political Factors	Other Events and Timing	COVID-19 Factors	Other Context

Place – Factors involving the context in which activities are taking place.

Program Structure and Resources

Process – Factors involving the FRF structure and resources.

In this section, we share helping and hindering factors that emerged as especially critical for disinformation-focused FRFs conducted as part of INSPIRES.

What helped and hindered these changes?

People: These factors refer to characteristics and behaviors of individuals or organizations involved in or affected by the design, implementation, and funding of FRFs. Specific factors in this component include: Consortium Partners, Local Partners, Donors, Government and Public/Community.

Number of FRFs Reporting the Factor

Helping Factor

●●●●●●
Local partner coordination including their capacity, communication skills, enthusiasm, extensive networks, reputation, leadership, and expertise, played a pivotal role in the success of these FRFs.

●●●●●●
Consortium partner support and management characterized by effective communication, relationship-building, provision of technical support, and a deep understanding of the local context, greatly contributed to the overall achievements of these initiatives.

●●
Effective government engagement played a pivotal role in aligning project goals with national strategies and ensuring the dissemination of accurate COVID-19 information to a wider audience in a subset of cases.

●●
Civil society collaboration fostered a collective effort to combat misinformation and empower local voices in a subset of cases.

Number of FRFs Reporting the Factor

Hindering Factor

●●●●●●
Local partner issues, including limitations in low-tech capacity and bandwidth and challenges in collaborating with government, media, and donor partners, hindered FRF effectiveness in some countries.

●●●●
Community resistance characterized by a lack of interest, low prioritization, and a deficit of trust presented significant challenges, with informants acknowledging that ingrained misinformation and stigma related to COVID-19 hindered effective communication and intervention efforts in some areas.

●●●●
Lack of government engagement, including slow or nonexistent responsiveness and a general absence or negative disposition towards civil society, proved to be an obstacle in some regions, impeding effective collaborative efforts and information dissemination initiatives.

What helped and hindered these changes?

Place: These factors refer to aspects of the external environment (enabling or restrictive) that affect the design, implementation, and/or success of FRF activities in achieving their intended results. Specific factors in this component include: Political Factors, Other Events and Timing, COVID-19, and Other Context.

Process - these factors refer to the structure, resources, and policies of FRF programming itself that affect the design, implementation, and/or success of FRF activities in achieving their intended results. Factors in this category have been combined into a single factor: Program Structure and Resources.

Number of FRFs Reporting the Factor

Helping Factor

Flexibility (Process) including the tailoring of approaches, the design process, and the acknowledgment of local knowledge and contexts by both local and consortium partners supported the success of several FRFs.

Sufficient funding and resources (Process) were also identified as significant contributing factors, ensuring the effective execution of projects.

Other program characteristics (Process) including timeline, consistency, feedback, open communication, and organization contributed to successful implementation.

Number of FRFs Reporting the Factor

Hindering Factor

Timeline (Process), specifically a slow approval process and short project windows, delayed activities within several FRFs.

Challenges of going virtual (Place), including no travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic was a major hindering factor; moreover, a few informants spoke of the difficulty in accessing information, delays, and the stigma around COVID-19.

Inadequate funding and resources (Process) were noted as a challenge in a subset of FRFs, hindering the effective implementation of initiatives.

Timing (Place) related to elections or COVID-19 also emerged as an impeding factor, complicating project logistics and resource allocation.

Discussion: Synergies and Takeaways

Through the implementation of diverse strategies, the eight FRFs showcased in this report achieved significant milestones in combating disinformation and misinformation. Local partners utilized a combination of strategies, recognizing that a multifaceted approach is often most effective. While training and outreach were central to the majority of FRFs, mentorship and the use of digital tools also played crucial roles, often guiding participants in producing content in local languages and fostering connections in online spaces.

The interconnectedness of these strategies became evident as all FRFs that offered mentorship also provided training on reporting and storytelling. Similarly, training and capacity-building activities were closely linked together. Among the various FRFs, 36 trainings or learning events were organized with over 1,800 participants in attendance. Furthermore, two FRFs combined research efforts with training and mentorship, reinforcing the development of evidence-based interventions.

A common theme throughout the FRFs was the emphasis on community engagement and inclusivity. Strategies like outreach, radio broadcasting, and the use of chatbots to build digital connections were frequently used to reach and involve communities directly. Many projects also focused on ensuring that marginalized and Indigenous communities were not overlooked. Local language preservation, the distribution of radios and phones, and mentorship programs aimed to make information accessible to a wider audience. Through social media engagement and the production of 114 stories and over 100 blogs, videos, and podcasts, local voice and empowerment emerged as a prevailing outcome, exhibiting a strong commitment to connecting with remote communities, fostering local agency, and ensuring that information was conveyed with their active participation.

Like other FRFs, local partner coordination, consortium partner support, and flexibility were cited as the key helping factors. The capacity, reputation, leadership, and expertise of local partners played a pivotal role in the success of these projects. Local partner issues including limitations in low-tech capacity and bandwidth, as well as challenges in collaborating with allies, hindered the FRFs' effectiveness in some places. Additionally, a slow approval process and difficulties of "going virtual" were commonly cited hindering factors. To address these issues, it is important for implementers to allocate sufficient time for local and regional staff to support FRF activities. Furthermore, donors should consider incorporating extra time into the work plan to accommodate potential delays in responses from government officials.

With an estimated reach exceeding one million and engagement with over 22,000 individuals through digital content, the overarching goal of these FRFs was to fortify information resilience within communities. Beyond addressing immediate challenges like COVID-19, projects also sought to amplify local voices and create lasting impact. Strategies such as training, mentorship, and capacity building aimed to equip communities with the skills needed for future challenges. These takeaways and synergies reveal that successful FRFs often integrate multiple strategies to create a holistic approach to information resilience. Community engagement, collaboration, and digital innovation emerged as key drivers of success, with a focus on quality journalism, long-term sustainability, and inclusivity as guiding principles.