

Building capacity for COVID-19 reporting in South Africa

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 **South Africa**, Internews worked with local partners the South African National Editors Forum (SANEF), Adamela Trust, the Mail & Guardian, Fray College and Association of Independent Publishers to improve the coverage and quality of COVID-19 reporting through two key activities:

- Providing support to freelance journalists to report on COVID-19 related stories; and,
- Producing and disseminating a guide on pandemic reporting.

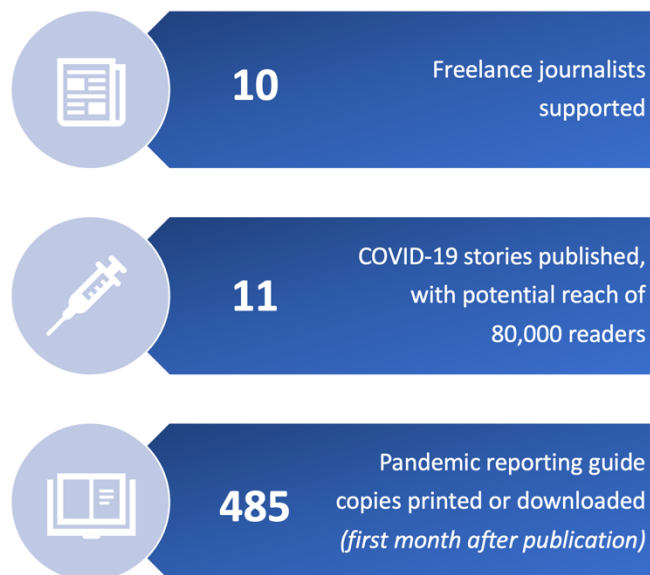
Support was provided over the course of seven months between January and July 2021.

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 South Africa were designed to produce several outputs including COVID-19 focused stories to be published in South Africa and across the continent and a guide for journalists on reporting on pandemics and other public health emergencies.

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 the activities in South Africa led to several key outputs, as highlighted in Figure 1 (FRF outputs).

Figure 1. South Africa FRF Outputs



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

- **Increased financial support for freelance journalists.** Freelance journalists have faced unprecedented challenges during the pandemic, including the strain of working under lockdowns and obstacles in getting assignments due to the economic strain on media outlets. In addition to providing more widespread and accurate information about COVID-19, the stipends provided to freelance journalists as part of the FRF activities helped to ensure that more journalists were able to weather the storm of fewer jobs and assignments available during the worst period of the pandemic.

- **Improved tools and resources for science and public health reporting.** Journalists face unique obstacles in reporting on health emergencies, including challenges in presenting technical information to the public. The development of the pandemic reporting guide provided a new resource to help journalists and media outlets be better equipped to tackle these challenges during COVID-19 and in the future. Informants noted that the demand for this guide exceeded expectations, and partners ultimately decided to print an additional 300 copies of the resource to ensure that reporters in rural areas could have access to the guide to help with their reporting.
- **Improved mental health support for four journalists.** In addition to addressing the professional challenges to pandemic reporting, the guide produced as part of the FRF activities included a chapter on supporting the mental health of journalists who are facing stress as well as illness and death among their own families and friends. Several informants noted that this component of the guide was the most surprising and the most useful for journalists who are still working under difficult and stressful conditions as the pandemic continues to spread and evolve.

"In the manual, we have a chapter that came out that had not been planned for – but came out because as editors talked to people, journalists said 'we are getting emotional strain, we are seeing colleagues dying.' So, there was an element of mental health, depression experienced by colleagues but also identifying that journalists have a tendency for not wanting the world to know they are human, that they feel scared. Some are dying in silence, some are being brave as journalists interviewing people who are sick, but endangering their own families. So, we had this additional chapter, looking at the psyche of journalists. Of all the stuff we have written about, it is this one making most journalists appreciate the manual. The one looking at mental health of journalists – we needed to deal with mental strain of what journalists facing."

- Key Informant Interview (November 2021)

"We worked with a government agency that funds community media establishment, like a radio station in a town that might be struggling. They have a tremendous list of contacts of these small community media establishment of small remote towns ... Most have gone online because of COVID, others have shut down. In their list, they have over 2,000 but the active ones are less than 1,000. But we did manage to get even those guys to see if they want to participate and share their experiences. They got the manuals we talked about from the additional 300 printed. We could have easily printed 3,000-4,000 copies and sent to people."

- Key Informant Interview (November 2021)

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:

- **Reach of partners** – partners were able to have a wide reach to both get feedback and input from journalists and to disseminate the guide and stories from the project.
- **Enthusiasm of partners** – informants noted that several journalists and editors were willing to volunteer their time for this work because of the value they saw.

Hindering factors include:

- **Attitudes of journalists related to COVID** – while journalists were very willing to give their time and energy to support this work, the stigma of COVID meant that many were not willing to admit the personal struggles they faced in their work.
- **Resources and time needed for sustained change.**

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