

Producing COVID-19 and civic freedom media content in Zimbabwe

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 **Zimbabwe**, Internews collaborated with the Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE) to provide accurate, timely, and widespread information on the COVID-19 pandemic and civic space to the public through seven key activities:

- Technical assistance, training and mentoring for journalists on rumor tracking and investigative reporting;
- Weekly COVID-19 stories;
- Monthly story grants to journalists;
- Weekly public affairs program focused on COVID-19 and related issues;
- Weekly podcast production;
- Weekly fact-checking stories; and,
- COVID-19 awareness information.

Support was provided over the course of eleven months between December 2020 and October 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 Zimbabwe were designed to produce outputs including those noted above: online stories, public affairs programs, podcasts, fact-checking stories, and information on COVID-19.

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. Zimbabwe FRF Outputs



Note: Minimum reach is the highest number of views/downloads for one product or story. As such, these are likely to be significant underestimates for actual reach.

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

- **Improved quality of reporting in Zimbabwe.** The story grants that CITE and Internews awarded to local journalists not only provided support to write and publish stories; journalists also received training and mentorship from CITE to improve their reporting and fact-checking skills. Several informants noted that the quality of content from the story grant recipients improved over the course of the project, a

change that is likely to be sustained after the FRF activities are completed.

- **Increased access to COVID-19 information in marginalized communities.** Several FRF activities were designed to ensure that information on the pandemic was being delivered outside of urban areas of the country. Information materials were produced in many formats, including video, audio and infographics. Further, CITE produced podcasts in several local languages to ensure that marginalized communities that do not always have access to critical information about public health and related issues are not left uninformed by media coverage of the pandemic.
- **Improved access to timely and accurate information across the country.** The wealth of information and content produced as part of the FRF activities ensured the wide reach of accurate information. In particular, the focus on fact-checking stories helped to combat misinformation that was being shared widely via social media. Beyond the significant reach of stories shared by CITE during the project timeline, the content has also been picked up by the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, a national broadcaster that is likely to further expand the reach of these important stories.

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.

“The podcasts were also done in local languages. We realized that we operate in an environment with several minority languages, and because the podcasts were produced in local languages, they were able to reach many people including people who otherwise could not access information normally. It was successful because, normally when ... something interesting shared, more people than the recipient will have access. The idea is that not everyone in marginalized communities has access to a smartphone – but by sharing in local languages, people in a family will have access to the information.”

- Key Informant Interview (October 2021)

“On the issue of fact checking, it became our daily thing. So we did rumor tracking and fact checking, and it became a very useful resource, looking into what was going on at that time. We had weekly programs talking to survivors of COVID, so it dispelled a lot of risks. We worked with local authorities, finding patients who used their facilities. Because there was a time when people didn’t want to go to the hospital because they were told they would die ... people would try to do home remedies and only go to hospital when critical and die. So there was a need from authorities to let people know to go to hospitals and seek early treatment – and our programs got testimonies and helped explain to people what was going on – and this was huge..”

- Key Informant Interview (October 2021)

Helping factors include:

- **Partner engagement and ownership** – because the design was led by a partner with knowledge and experience with what was needed in Zimbabwe, the activities were locally relevant.
- **Flexibility** – informants noted that they had the flexibility to adapt to changing needs and gaps they observed.
- **Focus on and experience with digital media** – the team’s experience producing and delivering content via digital platforms was critical, especially during lockdowns.

Hindering factors include:

- **COVID-19 stigma** – many people did not want to go public with their COVID experience due to perceived stigma.
- **Government responsiveness** – informants noted that it was challenging at times to get updated information and statistics on COVID from the government.
- **Resources and time needed for sustained change** – informants noted that changes in the spread of misinformation and public health behavior take time, and the short timeline of the FRF activities may have limited the sustained impact that this work might have on the population.

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

