

## Aligning COVID-19 response measures with human rights standards in Rwanda

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 **Rwanda**, ICNL collaborated with local partners Conseil de Concertation des Organisations d'Appui aux Initiatives de Base (CCOAIB) and Action Aid Rwanda to ensure that legislation and policies around COVID-19 in the country did not impinge upon human rights and civic freedoms of citizens and special-interest groups. This was done through six key activities:

- Developing simple briefers in local languages to raise awareness of COVID-19 policies and civic freedoms;
- Providing sub-grants to partners to conduct outreach and advocacy to communities;
- Tracking new and proposed legislation to analyze compliance with international norms and standards;
- Providing sub-grants to partners to increase participation of special-interest groups (including women, at-risk youth, and people living with disabilities) in pandemic response and management;
- Hosting end-of-project learning event; and,
- Producing a breifier with recommendations from the learning event.

Support was provided over the course of 26 months from October 2020 – November 2022.

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 Rwanda were designed to produce several key outputs, including briefers, tracking of new pandemic response legislation, and outreach products.

Based on interviews with key informants who were involved in the program, the Rwanda team and partners achieved several key outputs, as highlighted in Figure 1.

*Figure 1. FRF Outputs*



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

**Greater coverage of human rights implications of COVID-19 measures.** While ICNL and partners did not initially plan to work extensively with the media as part of these activities, they quickly identified the need to work with journalists to reach a wider portion of the Rwandan population. Media partners were able to take information shared in legal briefers and translate this into understandable messaging on key issues for the public. This increased coverage focused on COVID-19 measures as not just public health issues, but human rights issues, increasing awareness on the civic freedom implications of pandemic measures across the country.

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*“The media covered what measures were coming out and what implications are they having on different groups. And they were able to publicize and quickly picked up on interests. There was limited knowledge of measures in the public domain, so with the media, they were able to understand the connection that measures impact human rights and could now report on real-life experiences, not just relying on what international law says. What we are seeing on the ground now is this, and we are calling on authorities to perform better.”*

- Key informant interview, February 2023

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**Tangible changes to practices affecting human rights.** As part of their advocacy on ensuring COVID-19 measures did not impinge on human rights, ICNL and partners highlighted the specific experiences of special interest groups, such as children in school and prisoners. Their outreach included concrete recommendations for how policies and practices meant to reduce the spread of the pandemic could also be implemented to protect the rights of these different groups, and in several instances partners reported that decisionmakers whom they targeted were willing to engage and even adopt recommendations made as part of these activities.

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*“In our reports on prisoners, the norms were saying to avoid overcrowding, and states should consider releasing prisoners with petty offenses and also putting in place health protocols including facilitating visits where appropriate. And as the media made these reports, prison authorities made changes – so they reported some changes in their approach to prisoners. So the media partnership helped to build interest in understanding how covid measures impact real life and come up with recommendations.”*

- Key informant interview, February 2023

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### **Providing a platform for marginalized populations to share their views.**

In addition to providing increased reporting on special interest groups, ICNL and partners ensured that they were speaking with representatives of groups disproportionately affected by the pandemic measures and sharing this information back with policymakers themselves. Informants noted that government officials may not have otherwise had access to this information directly from marginalized populations and that this was a key contribution of the project.

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

### **Helping factors include:**

- **Reputation and reach of partners:** Both civil society and media partners had strong reputations and extensive networks that could help to amplify the evidence and recommendations generated by the project.
- **Support of some government agencies:** While not all government officials were responsive to requests from ICNL and partners, informants did note that offices like the National Commission of Human Rights were supportive and engaged in these activities, helping to ensure their success.

- **Strong internet access:** Because of challenges related to pandemic lockdowns, it was crucial that Rwanda has widespread access to the internet, making virtual engagement less challenging than in other countries in the region.

**Hindering factors** include:

- **Unsupportive authorities:** Despite some engaged government stakeholders, informants largely noted that most policymakers were difficult to reach and were not responsive to requests for meetings or information.

- **COVID challenges, including timelines and prioritization:** Informants noted several challenges related to the pandemic, including delays in activities due to lockdown restrictions and the de-prioritization of COVID policies as delays stretched the project timeline.
- **Resource constraints:** Several informants noted that they needed additional resources to be able to follow-up with stakeholders to ensure that they followed through on their commitments.

For more information about this FRF, please contact: [info@inspiresconsortium.org](mailto:info@inspiresconsortium.org).

