

Tackling COVID-19 misinformation in South Sudan

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 Sudan**, Internews collaborated with local partners Community Engagement Network (CEN) and Voice of Reconciliation (VOR), as well as radio partners Advance Youth Radio (AYR) and Pochalla FM, to understand and address misinformation around COVID 19. This was done through three key activities:

- Capacity building on COVID-19 programming;
- Distribution of radio sets and mobile phones; and,
- Capacity building for financial sustainability and digital engagement strategies.

Support was provided over the course of 10 months from April 2021 – January 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 South Sudan were designed to produce several key outputs, including tracking rumors and misinformation around COVID-19; producing radio programming and Public Service Announcements (PSA) in collaboration with the Ministry of Health's RCCE (Risk Communication and Community Engagement) initiative to tackle these rumors; distributing radios and cellphones for communities/audiences to engage with the program and bring in their questions; and training journalists on COVID-19 misinformation as well as strategies to engage with the public as well as digitally, to dispel

misinformation. Based on interviews with key informants who were involved in the program, the South Sudan 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:

Increased audience interaction and participation. Several interviewees spoke about being able to engage better with the community via the distributed radios and cellphones. Partners reported receiving positive feedback on their broadcasts and questions around COVID 19, and vaccines in particular, through calls with their listeners.

Reduction in misinformation. While harder to draw a direct, causal link, partners reported getting

positive responses from their audience and seeing misinformation slow down. Through live rumor tracking, they were able to encourage the government to immediately respond to emerging disinformation on the ground, often using the Ministry of Health (MOH) or influential local leaders for this. Interviewees reported audience members taking better COVID care measures and a reduction in hesitancy around the vaccine, among the communities they were engaged with.

"I think we basically got to understand that coordination with key stakeholders is something that is very important. Without this, the activity would have not been possible. Despite all these challenges, we were able to have deliverables produced."

- Key informant interview, April 2022

Successful training of media partners. Partners received positive feedback from journalists who attended the trainings, with journalists stating that they came away from the sessions with a better understanding of the science behind the vaccine as well as of COVID-19 in general, and were able to respond better to the community. There was also a demand for further training and assistance with their digital strategies.

Improved relationship between media associations and the government. Through the course of the FRF activities, partners felt the relationship and collaboration between the government, particularly MOH's Risk Communications and Community Engagement (RCCE) working group, and journalists were strengthened. As a result, there was an increased interest among media partners across the country to collaborate with the government. One partner organization reported a list of 87 media partners was shared with the government for future collaborations.

"...the biggest contribution was the strengthened feedback loop between media association and journalists on one side and MOH, WHO, UN partners, on the other."

- Key informant interview, February 2022

Helping and Challenging 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:

- **Internews support and training** was key for the network, particularly connecting partners to WHO and MOH officials across the country. Interviewees praised Internews' flexibility, project management, and guidance at HQ.
- **Partner flexibility and capacity:** Partners had a strong understanding of the overall purpose of the activities, were able to handle questions coming from the government, and worked well in light of delays. Strong field level partners with good relationships with local level government further enabled the activities to be completed successfully.
- **Choosing locals field staff for data collection** helped ensure good data, as people were more open and forthcoming with their thoughts and opinions.
- **Support from the Ministry of Health and South Sudan National Steering Committee** were helpful in moving the work forward, when activities slowed down due to local authorities.

Hindering factors include:

- **Language constraints** meant costly and time-consuming translations were needed for the programming. At times, translators were not always available. It was also particularly difficult to translate technical terminology around COVID-19, when the right vocabulary did not exist in the local language.
- **Limited buy-in** from the public initially.
- **Bureaucratic and administrative delays** both due to slow approval processes at the national and local government level, as well as delays around radio procurement and related tax clearances, further slowed things down.
- **Implementing partners** had limited network and connections with the local authorities, which caused delays.
- **Political interference at the state level** due to local governments delaying permissions for product clearance and authorization for whom partners can engage.

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