

Battling Health Emergencies Together: Collaboration Between Journalists and Public Health Professionals is the Key to Success

Context

Breakthrough ACTION is a global project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented by a consortium of international organizations led by Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs in Baltimore. Its scope includes ongoing technical communication support to the Ministry of Health, USAID implementing partners, and other stakeholders. Since 2018, the Breakthrough ACTION project in Guinea has focused on the Global Health Security Agenda through strengthening systems for coordinating infectious disease risk communication and emergency response at the national and sub-national levels, providing trainings and technical resources to improve the capacity of the Government of Guinea (GoG) and One Health Platform partners to design and implement infectious disease risk communication and community engagement activities through effective public communication and community engagement in prevention, mitigation, and response, and increasing Guinea's overall risk communication score for joint external evaluation.

As such, Breakthrough ACTION designed an adaptable training curriculum to train media professionals and government spokespersons in risk communication, so they are prepared to respond appropriately in the event of a health emergency.

Challenge

In 2014, at the beginning of the Ebola virus epidemic in Guinea—specifically in N'zérékoré—the community chased away health professionals. This situation was due to poor communication about the disease, which led to rumors and poor collaboration between the media and public health professionals, who did not facilitate the response.

In March 2020 when the first case of COVID-19 had reached Guinea, the need for collaboration between the media and public health professionals was more evident than ever. With misinformation and disinformation easily available and accessible, GoG recognized the importance of strong collaboration and partnership between media and public health professionals to prevent and mitigate public health emergencies. Breakthrough ACTION built on the challenges from the 2014 Ebola outbreak and worked closely with GoG to understand and meet current needs. While many people from these target groups



were used to working on health issues, including infectious diseases or with animals, they did not have any formal training on Priority Zoonotic Diseases (PZDs) and the One Health approach adopted and implemented by GoG.

The project created the forum needed for this partnership between public health professionals and journalists: a training that specifically ensures both groups have the same tools and the same information to handle health emergencies together.

Actions Taken

As part of Breakthrough ACTION's capacity strengthening work around risk communication for PZDs, the project designed and facilitated a three-day training curriculum to train media professionals and community-level health communicators such as government focal points and journalists working for rural radio stations to ensure they are prepared to respond appropriately to health emergencies. This training targeted media and community-level agents throughout the country by conducting cascade trainings, ensuring coverage across all intervention zones.

The objectives of the capacity building training included providing a common understanding of the concepts of PZDs in Guinea, the One Health approach, and a successful collaboration between media professionals and public health professionals.

In Labé, Breakthrough ACTION invited 51 media professionals and community-level health communicators to enhance their risk communication skills by focusing on two methods: theory and practice.

Participants ideally possess base knowledge before diving into practice. Breakthrough ACTION focused on teaching the foundational theory around the concept of the One Health approach, the PZDs of interest in Guinea, principles of risk communication, specifically within the One Health framework during health emergencies, collaborative approaches between public health and media professionals, and the propagation of rumors during health emergencies, including types of rumors and how to manage them.

After the participants understood the theory, the Breakthrough ACTION team then reinforced these concepts through practical working sessions. Participants identified the risk communication pitfalls to avoid during an emergency, such as identifying and mitigating misinformation and disinformation. Public health professionals learned the difference between a good press release and a bad one, how to prepare for journalists' questions, and what to consider when writing messages. All participants learned how to put themselves in community members' shoes when writing questions or answers. Perhaps the most critical practical session addressed effective coordination; this allowed each group (journalists and public health professionals) to identify and discuss the biggest challenges in working with the opposite group, what they like and dislike about the other, and how best to coordinate to work symbiotically, especially in the face of health emergencies.

Impact

Djénabou Bah, a journalist and Wild Chimpanzee Foundation (WCF) program officer, has been working with WCF for two years, reported she had learned a great deal:

I had no idea about zoonoses but at the end of this workshop I leave with a lot of knowledge about these diseases. During these three days, we felt that we were in a framework of exchange. I have been working with this institution for two years, but I had no idea that these animals that we protect could contaminate the surrounding communities, because it is a park [with] more than 36,000 inhabitants.

Sidi Diallo, Director of Radio Fraternité FM Mamou and main host of the health program “SOS Santé,” had a positive experience:

I have acquired a lot of knowledge that will allow me to improve my program, especially with regard to zoonotic diseases. [We began] hosting this program [three months ago] and we had not yet tackled such a subject. I think it is a good opportunity for us after having acquired all this knowledge on zoonotic diseases. I will do everything to not only develop this theme with health specialists but also to continue to raise awareness and inform citizens for a better public health. I leave with a list of themes and topics to develop.

Given the importance of what they learned, Diallo and other participants committed to make productions (programs, reports, awareness sessions) on zoonotic diseases to inform the community. Other participants recognized the importance of collaboration, such as **Ousmane Barry**, a public health professional:

Since I started practicing, [. . .] I had never worked with [journalists] unless friends or colleagues called on them, but I didn't. And with this workshop I was given a window into their world. Today if I have an opportunity to work with them, I will do so because I was shown how to do it.

Thanks to this workshop, **Dr. Mamadou Djouldé Diallo**, director of the Koundara prefectural livestock department, already has ideas for actions to take in Koundara to make One Health a reality:

There are questions that I was asking myself and that were answered during this workshop. I was wondering what the link was between public health professionals and media professionals. Because at the level of Koundara, there is One Health, but

generally I confess that we wondered how to work with the media. I [plan to] really give feedback to my colleagues and work with the journalists of Koundara. In Koundara, One Health is purely theoretical, but from now on, I believe that things will change on the ground.

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