

Building Innovative Partnerships for Disability-Inclusive Risk Communication and Community Engagement in Mali

In a public health emergency, it is important to consider the needs of vulnerable groups who may face barriers to information, services and support in ways that most of the population does not. People with disabilities are among those with unique vulnerabilities. Their needs vary based on the nature of the disability. Communication materials may not be accessible (for example, for those who are hard of hearing or visually impaired) or they may face social isolation or other challenges that affect their ability to seek information or to find support. This disparity is a critical concern for health equity and effectively leaves people with disabilities behind.

Through its Global Health Security Agenda work, USAID's Breakthrough ACTION has been addressing risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) around priority zoonotic disease (PZD) threats (in addition to supporting responses to the COVID-19 and regional Ebola outbreaks). In considering the inclusivity of current RCCE efforts, the project identified this gap and reached out to the leadership of the Malian Federation of People Living with Disabilities (FEMAPH) to launch a strategic partnership to strengthen the active engagement and accommodation of people with disabilities in RCCE during public health crises.

These discussions ultimately led the project to produce disability- accessible materials for the PZDs (such as PZD-related video spots with sign language) and translating written resources (such as vaccine FAQs in braille for the visually impaired.)

Breakthrough ACTION also organized training session for 55 FEMAPH members (27 women) in Bamako to prepare them to effectively raise awareness of their peers on the PZDs as well as on COVID-19 prevention and vaccination. At the end of the session, the President of FEMAPH, Djiguignè Hatouma Gakou, shared her thoughts on the partnership in the following remarks:

"FEMAPH was approached by USAID's Breakthrough ACTION project because it understands the challenges faced by people living with disabilities. We often see ourselves excluded and marginalized from information that we need. When COVID-19 was on the rise in our country, when schools were closed, we approached the authorities to support us in communicating the risks. We felt outside of the information loop, especially for the hearing impaired, the visually impaired and the physically disabled. Breakthrough ACTION was among the first partners to have engaged us in risk communication efforts and adapted communication materials to our needs.



[Breakthrough ACTION] was kind enough to produce materials that consider the needs of those with disabilities, especially in Braille; and to interpret them in sign language.

This is the first time since the beginning of the pandemic that the 19 umbrella associations of the Federation have attended an activity of such magnitude. Moreover, we knew nothing at all about the priority zoonotic diseases in Mali. We had little knowledge of Ebola and COVID-19 and just followed rumors on social networks.

Thanks to the information that Breakthrough ACTION shared, we have learned that even domestic animals can be danger to our health if not properly monitored and cared for. For example, in a family, while the members are going about their business, their disabled child is left in the corner, where he plays with cats and dogs that can transmit diseases. We needed to be informed. This activity contributes to reduce exclusion and illustrates the respect of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which in Article 21 affirms our rights to freedom of opinion and to access to information.

We were honored and touched by this noble gesture of this project. This has given us a lot of value, because it has allowed us to know our roles and responsibilities in the fight against zoonotic diseases and in helping other vulnerable people to protect themselves and get vaccinated.



Group photo at end the FEMAPH training session. President Djiguignè Hatouma GAKOU appears in the front in bright red.

We expect that Breakthrough ACTION and other partners will continue to keep us in mind, so that we can make a full contribution in the development of our country.”

As the President’s testimony reflects, Breakthrough ACTION’s partnership with and support to FEMAPH beginning in FY21 represents only the beginning of what both expect to be an enduring fruitful collaboration to systematically improve disability inclusivity in RCCE in Mali.

To learn more about Breakthrough ACTION’s work in Mali, please contact Chief of Party Dr. Aoua Konare at akonare@breakthroughaction-mali.org.