



CASE STUDY

Learning from Each Other: Facilitating Multisectoral Preparedness and Response in the Francophone West and Central Africa Region

Credit: Breakthrough ACTION.



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Background

The One Health approach recognizes the inherent interdependence of the health of humans with that of animals and of the ecosystem, and prioritizes collaboration across multiple sectors to prevent, mitigate and respond to complex public health risks. Breakthrough ACTION, which leads USAID’s social and behavior change efforts around the world, serves as a knowledge broker within the growing One Health space. The project provides critical, on-demand learning opportunities for multisectoral preparedness and response to priority zoonotic diseases and other infectious disease threats within the francophone West and Central Africa Region, which has been home to numerous zoonotic outbreaks. The Regional Learning Exchanges activity began in 2020, stemming from the need

to operationalize and strengthen country and subnational One Health platforms to address the evolving challenges posed by infectious disease outbreaks in the two regions. While the concept of One Health was not entirely new, its operationalization presented common challenges, especially in integrating various sectors such as health (human and animal), environment, and agriculture into a cohesive response framework. The learning exchanges sought to fill a gap in providing a regional forum for One Health practitioners to discuss and address these challenges.

While Breakthrough ACTION originally conceived the Regional Learning Exchanges activity as a two-country in-person study tour, the context of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated its adaptation. This led to a virtual format and the inclusion of multiple countries beginning in 2021. The initiative evolved from a modest beginning, averaging



Credit: Cori Fordham/Breakthrough ACTION.

Behind-the-scenes shot from *Drôle de Marché*, a francophone mini-series modeling bird flu and rabies prevention behaviors.

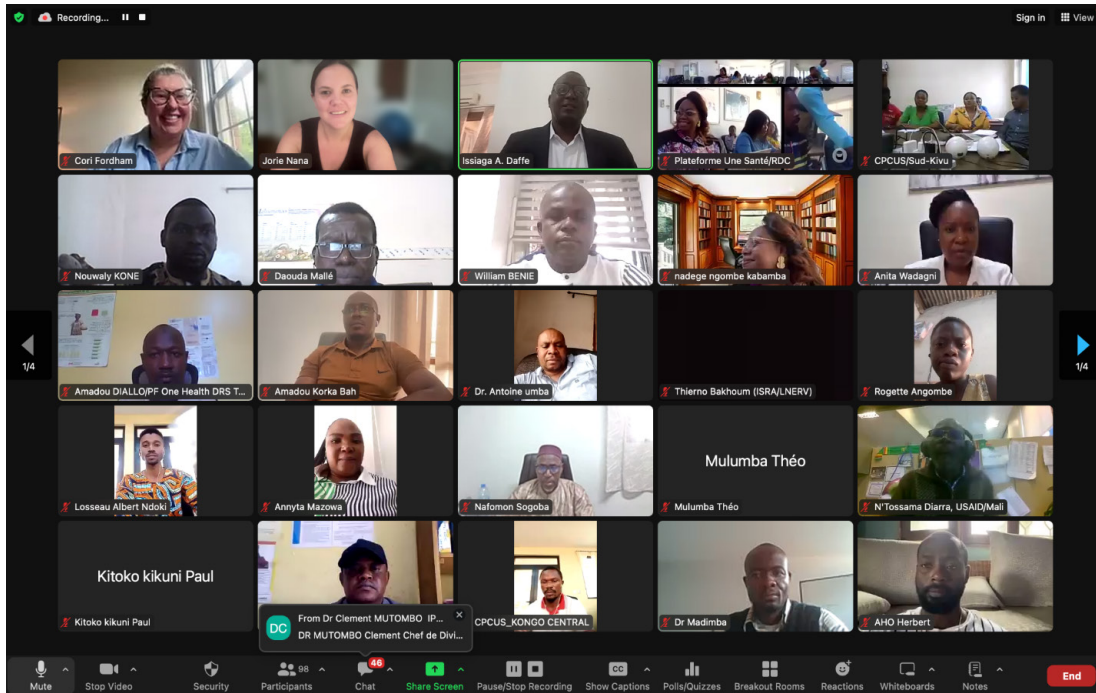
40–50 participants per virtual session (comprising Breakthrough ACTION staff, One Health government representatives, and Global Health Security (GHS) partners) from five countries participating. It grew organically from 2020 to 2024, now including eight countries: Benin, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Senegal. Benin is the newest country to join in 2024. While individual session participation has varied based on the availability of platform members and partners across the countries, the four exchange sessions held so far between 2023 and 2024 have averaged 187 participants each—more than three times the number of participants seen in the first year of the initiative.

The Intervention: Regional Learning Exchanges

As a trusted knowledge broker, Breakthrough ACTION plays a crucial role in facilitating the exchanges, providing logistical support and guidance to ensure the effectiveness of the exchanges, specifically working with country One Health platforms to identify the topics of interest and prepare their presentations. The annual exchanges include at least three to four sessions held over several months. Each session is planned for 90 minutes and is structured to allow two countries to present, focusing on a thematic area or topic determined in advance by the country One Health platform. At the start of each annual series, Breakthrough ACTION solicits topics from each country that they would like to share in implementing

their One Health platform and one that they are interested in learning more about. Then, Breakthrough ACTION pairs countries according to complementary themes, aiming to offer two distinct country perspectives on the given theme within each session. Over multiple annual exchange series, themes have varied widely, addressing issues ranging from decentralization of One Health platforms to gender and inclusion in One Health and to case studies of multisectoral management of real epidemics, such as avian influenza in Senegal or mpox in DRC. The project provides each One Health platform with a standard template to structure their presentation, with some flexibility for customization; the template ensures presentations follow a similar format in capturing the context, a key intervention or approach, results, lessons learned, and challenges. Each country’s presentation is intended to be only 15 to 20 minutes to ensure ample time for questions and/or contributions from other country representatives participating.

Breakthrough ACTION’s role is to facilitate, ensuring that the platforms themselves lead the discussions. This approach aimed to showcase the achievements and challenges faced by each country, fostering a collaborative peer-to-peer learning environment. Thematic grouping of presentations provides multiple perspectives and enables deeper exploration around specific topics, such as mobilizing subnational One Health activities around outbreaks, best practices related to how risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) and other areas of response work together, and gender and social inclusion in response efforts.



Screenshot from one of the learning exchange sessions from August 2024.

Who is Involved and Why

The virtual exchange participants primarily comprise government representatives from Ministries of Health, Animal Health, and Environment, reflecting the multisectoral nature of One Health. The involvement of USAID Mission activity managers underscore the commitment of USAID to this regional exchange as an important forum to share experiences, which may help countries to get to the next level of health emergency capacity, based on the [World Health Organization’s Joint External Evaluation tool](#) and its associated [Benchmarks for Strengthening Health Emergency Capacities](#), by learning from the successes and challenges and possibly adapting activities and solutions from one country context to another in the francophone West and Central African region.

Breakthrough ACTION disseminates the invitation to the learning exchange sessions to all One Health stakeholders within Benin, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, DRC, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Senegal. Participation fluctuates from session to session, but on average, about 23 participants from each country attend, representing stakeholders not only from the central or national level but also those working at the provincial, regional, and local levels. This diversity of perspectives is essential for identifying and addressing shared challenges in operationalizing One Health in regions or districts within a country, as personnel at the national level typically carry out platform design.

In 2023, the session titled “Decentralizing the One Health Platform” saw 296 people join. Although seeing this level of interest by stakeholders was exciting, accommodating very large numbers of

participants can hinder active discussion between those in attendance and the presenters; the proceedings can morph into something more like a webinar format instead of an in-depth exchange. Therefore, Breakthrough ACTION issues an open invitation to the sessions but strives to ensure presentations facilitate this exchange. As such, the project works very closely with the presenters to develop their presentations and facilitates those sessions with an expert moderator who is well-versed not only in GHS topics but also with the contexts of several countries in the region. Over time, as platforms have become more familiar both with the tight timeline and the exchanges' format, reserving time for adequate discussion

has become easier. Because the volume of participant questions nearly always surpasses the allotted time for discussion, even when the event is on schedule, facilitators share written responses to participant questions that could not be addressed during the session by email after the sessions.

Benefits of the Regional Learning Exchanges

The exchanges serve as a platform for inspiration and stakeholder engagement, fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in

Résultats: Inclusion PVH

- Conception, transcription et reproduction (1500 copies) de 09 supports de communication en braille sur les zoonoses prioritaires, dengue, Zika et Covid-19 remises à l'UMAV et aux écoles spécialisées.
- Conception et traduction de 13 spots, capsules-vidéos et microprogrammes en langage des signes et leur diffusion sur des chaînes publiques, privées et sur les réseaux sociaux.
- Sensibilisation des personnes en situation de handicap sur les MZP à travers la pair-éducation.
- Enseignement des Maladies Zoonotiques Prioritaires dans les Écoles Spéciales.



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Slide from the Mali One Health platform's presentation regarding disability inclusion in One Health, June 2024.



Credit: Breakthrough ACTION.

Image from the Senegal One Health platform’s presentation on the multisectoral investigation and response to avian influenza in St. Louis region during the May 2024 exchange.

multisectoral collaboration. While some participants are inspired to involve more stakeholders in their response efforts, others gain a greater appreciation for the complexities involved in operationalizing the One Health approach.

Notably, as the One Health platform members themselves are always the presenters, rather than project staff, the exchanges also serve as a capacity strengthening opportunity. From year to year, different sectors have taken on the responsibility of making country presentations during the exchanges; some subnational platform members have also had the chance to be presenters, such as when a regional One Health representative from Côte d’Ivoire shared the country’s experience implementing community engagement for rabies control. The presenters collaborate with Breakthrough

ACTION staff in each country to develop, refine, and polish their presentations, focusing on the theme and staying within time limits. In a space with limited local conferences or other opportunities for One Health practitioners to practice these kinds of skills, the virtual exchanges provide an engaged, multi-country audience to do so.

Pépé Bilivogui, who leads the One Health platform in Guinea, highlighted the value of creating and sustaining such spaces for collaboration: “The virtual exchanges have enabled regional collaboration to develop, where stakeholders can exchange experience in implementing the One Health approach. Periodic meetings have kept each country on its toes in the promotion of One Health and the multi-sectoral response to public health threats, in particular the fight against zoonoses.”

Nadege Ngombe Kabamba of the One Health platform in DRC concurs:

“The themes addressed [in the exchanges] have enabled countries to exchange best practices [and] share effective strategies and successful experiences in implementing [One Health] and RCCE activities. This activity helped to strengthen communication skills through enriching discussions; representatives of national and provincial One Health platforms, ministries of health, agriculture, environment, fisheries and animal husbandry, [nongovernmental organizations], technical and financial partners ..., professional guilds, and health professional organizations ... took part in this series of virtual exchanges, fostering critical interdisciplinary dialogue. Through the series, participating countries are better prepared to meet public health challenges, and intersectoral collaboration is essential to building robust health systems responsive to emerging threats.”

Organizing Successful Regional Learning Exchanges: Tips and Tricks

Key steps and tips for organizing successful Regional Learning Exchanges based on Breakthrough ACTION’s experience over the last four years include the following:

- 1. Understand One Health Platforms:** Gain an in-depth understanding of the countries’ One Health platforms and develop close working relationships with government stakeholders involved in One Health. This understanding and relationship-building facilitate gaining trust and motivating participation, especially given the virtual format and the busy schedules and multiple roles of many One Health platform stakeholders.
- 2. Identify Relevant Topics:** Find topics that at least two countries can address and are of interest to other countries. Understand the priorities and challenges faced by various One Health platforms to suggest possible topics for their consideration, without forcing themes. Remain open to tweaking the theme in discussion with the platforms. The goal is to keep the exchange sessions interesting, varied, and thematically linked, focusing on practical knowledge beyond highlighting accomplishments.
- 3. Facilitate Knowledge Sharing:** Focus on extracting tacit knowledge that went into actualizing accomplishments. Government stakeholders may require coaching and pre-planning sessions to feel comfortable and ready to present openly around both successes and challenges to support richer exchange. A respected and skilled moderator ensures the Regional Learning Exchanges’ effectiveness.
- 4. Establish a Flexible Calendar:** Establish a calendar well in advance, with built-in flexibility, given government priorities are constantly evolving in response to the newest outbreak. Schedule the Learning Exchange sessions in Quarters 3 and 4, allowing One Health teams to progress towards their annual activities and goals.
- 5. Build the Activity into Each Country’s Work Plan:** Work towards getting the regional exchanges approved within annual national-level work plans. This ensures the sessions are well-planned and take place as scheduled.
- 6. Gather Participant Information:** Collect information about participants and their sectors to understand their backgrounds and experiences. Experiment with post-Learning Exchange surveys to gather more information, but avoid mandatory registration to prevent it from being a barrier to participation.

By following these steps and tips, organizers can ensure the success of exchange sessions, fostering meaningful dialogue and knowledge sharing among participants from various countries and sectors.

Conclusion

The Breakthrough ACTION-supported Regional Learning Exchanges exemplify the significance of peer-to-peer learning in fostering effective multisectoral preparedness and response. By providing a platform for sharing experiences, challenges, and best practices, the exchanges contribute to not only the participants' capacity to understand and address challenges related to One Health but also the advancement of regional collaboration in combating infectious diseases. The exchanges serve as a model for similar efforts across regions facing similar challenges.



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