



# Sustainable Media Engagement and Capacity Strengthening:

The Breakthrough ACTION–Nigeria Story



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# Introduction

Experienced social and behavior change (SBC) experts know that the media can be their biggest ally—or their greatest foe. In Nigeria, radio and television are trusted sources of information, news, commentary, and entertainment for millions of people. Unfortunately, these sources can also spread misinformation and suspicion about health practices. Although communicators can control health messaging through paid advertising and sponsored programming, these are expensive, less pervasive, and often not as trusted as the voices of popular media personalities. This situation presents the challenge of influencing media houses to endorse and offer correct information about health practices through their regular programming.

Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria, a project of the Johns Hopkins University with funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), met that challenge by forming lasting relationships among media producers and health experts. Traditionally, SBC projects and organizations have employed three strategies when partnering with media houses: (1) paying for broadcasts of health content that has already been created, (2) funding media house initiatives, and (3) training media producers to create health content. With all these strategies, however, media houses have stopped supporting health messaging once partner funding ended. Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria's media engagement approach transcended project timelines and fostered long-term partnerships that produce high-quality and relevant health programming.

## The Approach

From 2017 to 2024, Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria partnered with 140 government and privately owned media houses across 11 states and the Federal Capital Territory. This collaboration focused on building strong partnerships among government health experts and media houses, aligning technical support with media houses' objectives, and clearly demonstrating the value of the partnerships to both media representatives and government health officials. The project also strengthened media partners' health knowledge and technical skills so that they could effectively promote national priority health behaviors that would ultimately contribute to improved health outcomes across Nigeria.



The initiative based its design on findings from a 2015 media landscaping exercise conducted by the Health Communication Capacity Collaborative (HC3), a USAID-funded project implemented by the Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs, to learn about the operational status of various media houses and their existing health programming. The analysis found that most media personalities and producers had limited understanding of health issues, making it difficult for them to effectively communicate complex health information. At the same time, mutual distrust existed between media professionals and health technical experts, particularly within the Ministry of Health (MOH), who had the health information media representatives needed. Owing to this gap, media houses did not have access to correct and up-to-date information to share with audiences.

Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria's media engagement strategy focused on forging strong partnerships with media houses while strengthening capacity of media professionals and health experts. This approach addressed specific needs voiced by media houses for enhanced technical skills and content production methods, expanding their audience base and revenue while building trust and collaboration with health stakeholders such as the MOH. For health technical experts from the MOH, the project provided training and support to enhance their understanding of media production through an SBC lens, improve their on-air presence, and strengthen their ability to develop compelling health content.





## The Intervention

Based on the landscaping exercise, the project identified the media houses it wanted to work with and paid visits to the top management of each. During these meetings, the project team reviewed findings from the landscaping analysis concerning their health programming, pointing out what needed improvement, and what skills the project could build among staff to improve content, expand listenership, and ultimately improve the station's revenues. In most cases, station managers responded with enthusiasm.

The partnerships kicked off during five-day Thematic and Technical Training Workshops. Participants included one producer from each media house who either produced its health program or had an interest in health, plus representatives from the Federal and State MOHs. The purpose of the workshops was to strengthen media content production skills (technical skills), improve understanding of priority health issues (thematic training), and identify health content gaps that the media could meet and technical skill gaps that the project could help address.



The project utilized a blended learning approach to capacity strengthening, including workshops, WhatsApp communities of practice, and quarterly review meetings. This approach accommodated different learning styles and enabled ongoing learning, knowledge sharing, and adaptation to emerging issues and opportunities. The project also linked media efforts with community interventions, encouraging producers to visit locations where community-based activities took place and record what community members said. Bringing grassroots voices to a wider audience amplified the reach and impact of local discussions, while livening up media programs and boosting their popularity.

Quarterly review meetings provided an opportunity for ongoing, real-time technical and thematic updates, networking, and peer review of one or two productions. Meetings initially took place only once a year, which was too infrequent for them to have an impact. Quarterly meetings align with quarterly broadcast schedules, allowing producers to share 13 weeks of programming and agree with health stakeholders on where to focus during the next quarter. These sessions provided a platform for stakeholders to collectively agree on the content that needed to be



## What Was Unique about This Approach

Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria designed this intervention to last. Realizing that the sustainability of this partnership depended on shared success, trust, and collaboration among producers, media executives, the MOH, and other partners, the project cultivated these relationships and the processes to keep them alive. The project recognized that no one individual or organization has all the answers and emphasized the value of working together to achieve common goals.

Media houses joined the partnership because they saw it had value for them. The project learned about media houses and what motivates them and used this knowledge to market the partnership. The Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria media team saw the value of good content to media houses, understanding that it expands the audience base and thus improves internally generated revenue. By providing media partners with precisely what they needed, the project made collaboration irresistible, securing their enthusiastic participation and commitment.



Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria built capacity on health content and media production for both media representatives and health experts from the MOH. Using a combination of training, WhatsApp communities of practice, quarterly review meetings, and peer reviews, the approach fostered continuous learning, professional growth, and adaptation.





# Lessons Learned

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Conducting a media landscaping exercise is essential. Working from a list of broadcasters and their locations provided by the National Broadcasting Commission, HC3 learned that some media houses were only on paper and were not broadcasting. The landscaping exercise also provided important information about health broadcasting, the quality of broadcasting, staffing, and the needs of media houses.
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Corporate social responsibility (CSR) cannot serve as the primary pitch to media houses. CSR initiatives do not generate revenue or pay staff salaries. It is essential to understand the financial and operational needs of media partners and frame the value proposition in terms of tangible benefits that align with their business goals. Media organizations value their airtime and are hesitant to give it away without something in return.
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Building trust and rapport with media house managers and stakeholders is key. Regular personalized interactions and open communication laid the foundation for a successful collaboration and long-term partnership. When a new manager came on board, the project visited them to describe the partnership and get them on the same page.
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Technical capacity strengthening is a strong incentive for media organizations. Most media organizations do not have funds to build the capacity of their workers, so most learn on the job. But media houses do value content, which makes the offer of technical capacity strengthening powerful. After the first quarter of partnership, media house managers saw the improvement in their staff's capacity.

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One size does not fit all. It was essential to tailor the approach to the specific context and needs of each media house and State MOH. Providing partners with what they needed in a way that was valuable and compelling to them increased the likelihood of acceptance and cooperation. This approach ensured that engagement efforts were relevant, effective, and impactful.

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Strengthening the capacity of producers may mean they will move on to better jobs, disrupting continuity. To avoid this possibility, the project started identifying both a primary producer and an understudy for training. This approach ensured that if the primary producer moved on, the understudy would be equipped to take over, maintaining the quality and consistency of content production.





## By the Numbers:



Through intentional collaboration efforts, **over 500** media and government partners received on-going training and mentoring on media content production for maternal, newborn, and child health and nutrition; tuberculosis; malaria; and risk communication.



A total of **140 radio and TV stations and print media** across 31 states partnered and collaborated with Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria. Through this collaboration, they aired paid and complimentary programming and produced their own content.

# Contributors

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