



Credit: Cori Fordham/Breakthrough ACTION

CASE STUDY

Beyond Outbreaks: A Mini-Series Revolutionizes Zoonotic Disease Prevention in Francophone West Africa



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Acronyms

DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
GHS	Global Health Security
EE	Entertainment education
RCCE	Risk communication and community engagement
ZD	Zoonotic disease

Executive Summary

Resilient health systems are essential for addressing global health challenges, particularly zoonotic diseases (ZDs), which make up three-quarters of emerging infectious diseases. Resilience is defined by the capacity of health organizations, communities, and networks to navigate crises effectively through cross-sector collaboration and dismantling traditional silos. Sustaining preventive behaviors is key to reducing future ZD outbreaks, requiring a shift from reactive, temporary measures during emergencies to proactive, long-term lifestyle changes. By embedding prevention into daily household and occupational routines, individuals create more resilient and safer communities.

In response to this need, Breakthrough ACTION, with support from USAID Global Health Security (GHS), launched *Strange Market*, an innovative mini-series designed to model and motivate behaviors to prevent, identify, and respond to outbreaks as they arise. The series addresses ZDs and other emerging threats by promoting preventive behaviors and fostering a culture of preparedness and collaboration.

Jointly designed by experts in six francophone West African countries—Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Senegal—the series integrates ZD prevention into everyday life, addressing behaviors linked to rabies and avian influenza (bird flu). *Strange Market* is designed to reach the average peri-urban household with a small number of poultry and livestock—often overlooked in

traditional interventions, which focus on farmers with larger flocks—by using relatable characters and engaging storytelling to present preventive behaviors as both practical and essential for improving health and building economic resilience.

This case study highlights the unique approach of leveraging entertainment-education (EE) to promote preventive behaviors for ZDs. By focusing on potential risks outside of large-scale health emergencies, the series aims to support long-term behavior change through strategic risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) that employs an EE approach. It personalizes ZD risks by framing prevention as both a health priority and an economic necessity for small-scale farmers.

Grounded in extensive formative research, the mini-series reflects the daily realities and challenges of the region's communities. Recognizing the importance of two-way communication, the series employs emotional storytelling to allow audiences to empathetically experience potential losses without directly facing them. Multisectoral collaboration was critical to its success, ensuring the series was culturally and contextually relevant while resonating across diverse audiences and country contexts.

Mini-Series Objectives

- Increase awareness of ZDs and their impact on human and animal health, as well as ways to prevent diseases and the socio-economic harm caused by them.
- Encourage sustainable behavior change by addressing underlying psychosocial drivers.
- Frame ZD prevention as a local issue, and a part of daily life.
- Strengthen community engagement through multisectoral collaboration.



Behind-the-scenes shot from *Strange Market*, a francophone mini-series modeling bird flu and rabies preventive behaviors. Credit: Cori Fordham/Breakthrough ACTION.

Introduction

ZDs, which transmit between animals and humans, pose a significant global health security threat, with risks amplified by climate change, urbanization, and increased human-animal interactions. In francophone West Africa, Breakthrough ACTION has prioritized strengthening proactive RCCE to enhance awareness and preparedness.

Strange Market—Drôle de Marché in French—is a mini-series that addresses two prevalent zoonotic threats in the region: rabies and avian influenza. It focuses on a frequently overlooked group—peri-urban households that keep small numbers of poultry and livestock. While they may not be seen as the highest-risk population, these households often have lower perceived risk, limited access to timely health information, and are less likely to adopt preventive practices compared to larger-scale farmers. As a result, they can unknowingly become key links in the chain of disease transmission within their communities.

The series is intended for younger men aged 25–34, aiming to reach them before long-term habits are formed and to shape positive norms early. Through culturally and linguistically tailored storytelling, the series bridges awareness gaps and models positive behaviors, promoting preventive actions well before a crisis hits. It emphasizes the deep connections between human and animal health, while introducing both risky and protective practices that support prevention and encourage early reporting

during outbreaks. This fresh approach reimagines RCCE not just as a response to emergencies, but as a part of daily life—empowering communities to be better prepared, informed, and resilient.

Storytelling and EE are at the heart of this approach, leveraging relatable narratives to engage audiences on an emotional level. EE is a communication strategy that aims to educate the public about a social issue by incorporating educational messages within entertaining media like TV shows, movies, or radio programs, thereby raising awareness, changing attitudes, and motivating people to take positive action on the issue while still being entertained by the content. Research shows that EE, through purposive storytelling, reduces resistance to behavior change by fostering connections with characters and scenarios, making complex issues both relatable and memorable ([Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2010](#); [Green, 2021](#); [Tran et al., 2024](#)). By presenting familiar behaviors and diseases in an accessible way, the *Strange Market* mini-series drives deeper understanding and inspires sustainable action.

Program Design and Development

Identifying Needs and Prioritizing Diseases

While the show’s designers initially planned to focus on cross-cutting behaviors of ZDs, they found that anchoring the story in specific diseases made it more relatable and impactful. Through a series of virtual meetings with representatives from each participating country, Breakthrough

ACTION and partners compared the priority ZDs from each country's RCCE strategies to ensure the diseases were present in all countries, combed through literature reviews and qualitative research conducted across the six countries, and discussed the key drivers of behavior associated with each disease. Because risk perceptions—whether tied to death or financial loss—strongly influence PZ behaviors, Breakthrough ACTION and partners chose rabies and bird flu as focal zoonotic threats, with rabies being a deadly threat to humans if untreated, and bird flu being a disease with serious economic and social impacts. These diseases serve as tangible entry points to model behaviors that are also relevant to preventing other ZDs, highlighting the shared pathways of disease transmission and prevention.

Insights from reports and stakeholder consultations identified behaviors that could mitigate disease risks while addressing underlying economic challenges and cultural beliefs. The research underscored the high value placed on animals as economic assets, revealing gaps in knowledge and preventive practices that extended beyond rabies and avian influenza. By focusing on behaviors such as monitoring animals for illness, talking to children and neighbors about ZDs, safe animal handling, hygiene practices, and early reporting, the show introduced practical strategies which not only addressed the featured diseases but also strengthened community preparedness against a range of zoonotic threats. Breakthrough ACTION and partners were also careful to avoid selecting behaviors that relied heavily on structural factors, such as access to vaccines or the resources needed to build separate enclosures for isolating new birds.

Behavioral and Socioeconomic Factors

- **Rabies:** Prevention and immediate care following dog bites are the most effective ways to prevent rabies, particularly in areas where access to vaccines—both for animals and humans—is limited. While rabies is widely recognized as a dangerous disease, reliance on traditional healers and limited awareness about proper wound care often delay or replace timely visits to health centers for effective treatment. Financial barriers and confusion about when and how to wash a wound, such as the importance of thoroughly cleaning it with soap and water for 15 minutes, further discourage preventive actions. While seeking post-exposure prophylaxis after a dog bite remains essential, these gaps in awareness and access can lead to fatal outcomes once symptoms of rabies appear, because intervention is ineffective by that point. Moreover, communication about rabies and dog bite prevention, the most common cause of rabies, is insufficient. Parents rarely talk to children about how to avoid dog bites, and children often hesitate to inform their parents when bitten, increasing the risk of exposure and delaying critical care. Addressing these behavioral and socioeconomic factors through improved awareness, timely health-seeking behaviors, and better communication strategies reduces rabies risks and saves lives.
- **Avian Influenza:** Small-scale poultry farmers, who often cohabit with their birds, underestimate the risk of

bird flu, a very contagious disease. Poor sanitation (e.g., handwashing, disinfecting areas where birds reside) and dismissing symptoms in sick birds, refusing to isolate them or to adopt other risk mitigation measures, are common practices which increase disease transmission risks. While the death of one or two chickens is not too costly or remarkable, many farmers neither take precautions to prevent additional deaths nor report suspected cases of illness until prevalence has increased and many birds in the flock are affected. Stigma further complicates early reporting, as poultry are viewed as a form of economic security, and farmers may avoid drawing attention to sick or dead birds for fear of harming their reputation or livelihood.

Content Development and Creative Process

Strange Market is a culturally resonant, character-driven mini-series developed by Breakthrough ACTION in partnership with government agencies, health experts, and EE specialists. Spanning 13 short episodes, the series merges compelling storytelling with scientific accuracy to promote behaviors that help prevent rabies and avian influenza.

The content development process began with global health and RCCE experts identifying key themes and priority behaviors to highlight. These insights were compiled into briefs outlining the essential messages for each episode. To build early audience connection, the initial episodes focused on relatable topics—such as aspirations for success and the dangers

of rumors and misinformation—before gradually introducing more complex health messages.

Creative teams received training in EE best practices and were briefed on the health content before developing character lists, episode guides, and scripts. These materials were then pretested across participating countries, with audience feedback used to shape and refine the storyline. Breakthrough ACTION collaborated closely with the writers and remained engaged throughout production, providing technical guidance and support on set to ensure both narrative quality and public health accuracy.

The result is a series that addresses stigma, fosters empathy, and promotes actionable behaviors—such as encouraging hand hygiene after handling poultry and teaching children about rabies risks. Given the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the team made a deliberate choice to avoid depicting a large-scale outbreak. Instead, the narrative emphasizes preventive behaviors that viewers can realistically adopt and control.

Set in a bustling, loosely regulated marketplace, *Strange Market* follows the lives of vendors and families disrupted by the arrival of a covert agent working for a powerful supermarket chain intent on shutting the market down. As tensions rise and secrets unravel, the community must unite to protect their livelihoods. Through themes of family, resilience, and economic survival, the series uses suspense and drama to promote small, everyday actions that can prevent disease and strengthen community well-being.

The series opens with relatable dilemmas designed to engage viewers. In the first episodes, we meet Aziz, a kind but financially struggling vendor whose wife dreams of an extravagant birthday party. Motivated by love and pressure, Aziz takes out a risky loan—only to have the debt collector arrive mid-celebration. This storyline sparked lively debate in pretesting: was Aziz’s decision romantic or reckless? These discussions echo deeper issues influencing zoonotic disease risks, such as household communication and economic strain.

As the narrative unfolds, Aziz’s chickens begin showing signs of illness. Initially dismissive, he’s forced to take action after the death of his prized bird. Unbeknownst

to him, a rival has been sabotaging the market by poisoning poultry to trigger a false bird flu panic. In a desperate move, Aziz attempts to sell the dead birds on the black market but is caught by authorities tipped off by the mole. His stall is shut down, raising public alarm. A neighbor then shares her own traumatic experience with bird flu, revealing the emotional and financial costs of zoonotic outbreaks—conveyed without needing to portray a widespread health crisis.

The stakes rise further when Aziz’s child and a local resident, Jules, are bitten by a rabid dog—bringing the theme of rabies into sharp focus and adding another layer of urgency and emotion to the storyline.



Behind-the-scenes shot from *Strange Market*, a francophone mini-series modeling bird flu and rabies preventive behaviors. Credit: Cori Fordham/Breakthrough ACTION.

Challenges and Solutions

Addressing Complex Health Topics through EE

Effectively communicating complex health topics while keeping viewers engaged—especially those with low literacy—was a key challenge. The team worked to strike the right balance between clarity and engagement, avoiding overwhelming audiences or sounding overly didactic. Episodes were kept concise and emotionally resonant, using relatable characters and storylines to draw viewers in. To ensure accessibility and entertainment value, content was crafted to be roughly 80% drama and 20% education, with essential health messages seamlessly woven into the narrative.

The team had to put great thought into framing health topics—often only discussed during emergencies—as part of everyday life. This required identifying root causes of risky behaviors and spotlighting characters who overcame challenges or defied social norms, known as positive deviants, to tell authentic stories of change. With sensitivity to viewers' recent experiences with the COVID-19 lockdown, the team also found creative ways to explore the threat of outbreaks without depicting one directly, as audience interest in a show about an outbreak was low.

Coordination Across Sectors and Countries

Multisectoral collaboration across six countries posed logistical challenges, especially with funding cycles that

hindered long-term planning. However, the regional approach allowed Breakthrough ACTION to leverage diverse expertise and resources.

Some team members initially expressed concerns that a regional show would not be feasible, fearing that differences across countries—including religious and cultural variations that shape perceptions of ZDs—would make the story feel unrealistic or disconnected for certain audiences. The team debated whether to include characters from each participating country or create a fictional setting to bridge these differences. Ultimately, they discovered that specificity was more impactful than attempting broad representation. By anchoring the story in a rich, relatable context with strong, character-driven storytelling, the series succeeded in resonating across diverse settings—demonstrating that well-crafted narratives can transcend borders and connect through shared human experiences. Pretest results confirmed this approach: Audiences in all participating countries enjoyed the story, related to the characters, and felt inspired by its messages.



Behind-the-scenes shot from *Strange Market*, a francophone mini-series modeling bird flu and rabies preventive behaviors. Credit: Cori Fordham/Breakthrough ACTION.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The development and rollout of *Strange Market* offered valuable insights into how entertainment-education can effectively promote zoonotic disease prevention. The following seven lessons highlight what worked, what mattered most, and what future initiatives can build on to deepen impact and drive sustained behavior change.

1. **Embed prevention in daily life.** Audiences connected more with relatable, everyday challenges than with dramatized outbreaks. Framing prevention as part of normal routines made behavior change feel practical and achievable.
2. **Anchor messages in specific diseases.** Focusing on rabies and bird flu—rather than broad ZD concepts—made the content clearer and more engaging, while still modeling behaviors relevant to other zoonotic threats.
3. **Use emotional storytelling to drive action.** Viewers empathized with characters like Aziz, sparking meaningful conversations about risks, norms, and choices. Storytelling helped make abstract health threats feel real and relevant.
4. **Highlight positive deviants.** Characters who modeled smart choices despite adversity gave audiences realistic, inspiring examples to follow—reinforcing the idea that change is possible even in tough conditions.

5. **Prioritize authenticity over broad representation.** Instead of trying to represent all countries equally, a well-developed fictional setting with relatable characters helped the series resonate across borders.
6. **Plan for complex collaboration.** Multisectoral input enriched the content but required careful coordination. Future regional efforts should build in time for alignment and adaptation to local contexts.
7. **Pair storytelling with digital and community engagement.** To extend reach and impact, combine EE content with social media, mobile platforms, and local influencers—especially to connect with younger audiences and spark community dialogue.



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Conclusion and Next Steps

The *Strange Market* mini-series demonstrates the transformative potential of EE in driving sustained behavior change for ZD prevention. By blending compelling storytelling with actionable guidance, the series has shown how EE can effectively engage communities and foster resilience.

Building on its success, Breakthrough ACTION plans to translate the series into English as well as local languages for other regions, leveraging digital platforms to expand reach and impact. This initiative strengthens global health security by promoting resilience and preparedness in diverse contexts without requiring individuals to experience first-hand effects of rabies and avian flu outbreaks.